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*An Entrance For the Dead*

Mixed Media

My artwork reflects heavily on death, specifically focusing on the philosophical and mythological aspects. Buddhists have a quote central to their ideology “Life is uncertain, death is certain” why pursue a life avoiding the one inescapable aspect when there’s much more to experience? The Buddhist idea of uncertainty is reflected in the unstable design of my sculpture. A layer of clay above plaster cloth, two materials that adhere poorly creating the crumbled exterior with parts slowly falling away. The secondary theme is that of mythology. The body holds four locations from the ancient Greek afterlife: The gates of Hell, Elysium, Asphodel, and Tartarus. The gates of hell are located in the skull, symbolizing that the entrance to the underworld starts with mythos, which happens in the brain. Elysium is situated on the shoulders, the location representing proudness, one that the Greek equivalent of heaven holds as a key value. The location itself has an eye motif as to show judgment, a concept that has to exist for there to be good and bad (in addition to looking down on the lower areas of Hell.). Asphodel exists in the negative space where the guts are missing. Hanging globes with mysterious creatures represent the ideas of Asphodel, creatures cursed only to observe. Asphodel exists as a realm of detachment meant for the lost. Finally Tartarus exists in the lap, a hand-fountain leading into a lake of lava, trapping cursed souls within. Tartarus exists at the lowest point to show that its denizens are the lowest of the low. The piece attempts to capture the feeling of grief by intermixing the rationale of an afterlife with the physical aspects of the body.

The Absurdity of Death:  
The Rationale of Myth and Religion for People  
Struggling through Grief



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OS50

## The Absurdity of Death

### The Rationale of Myth and Religion for People Struggling through Grief

Death is a universal reality for every living thing. Nothing can escape death, and there's no way of knowing what happens after death, or when it will come. For what appears to be an absolute, with nothing additional to it, why are there so many theories surrounding death and the afterlife? For such an unknowable phenomena, there are a flummoxing amount of claims on its truth, with no evidence. This is because, as humans, we cling to curiosity like glue. Human psychology demands it. Our brains are answer-seeking machines, so when a question arises, we seek a solution regardless of validity. However as humans go about life, the questions we ask become more and more complex, to the point where there's no simple answer that will suffice. Ultimately, there are some questions with no real answers. Death is one of these questions. Grief causes these questions to arise and our brains helplessly try to answer them. Grief provides the most difficult questions, and myth and religion often provide answers and structure to those with grief.

Myths are stories passed down through generations that portray events that aim to reveal truths and beliefs on topics with no earthly explanations. Myth stems from the human necessity for answers, and out of that understanding comes a sense of control. Humans tend to create gods from profound ideas, like the weather, oceans, and death. These concepts are out of human control, but the humans have a direct relationship with gods, who do have control. Gods are worshiped for their power. While humans have no influence over the environment and events in their lives, the gods – who can be persuaded by humans – do.

Myths from many different cultures hold beliefs and desires of their respected people. Death is again, a universal concern to people. even thinking of the end is unsettling. Which makes it a common topic of myth. Countless afterlives exist within different cultures, and the afterlife can explain a lot about the insecurities and values of a culture.

The Greeks believed that the soul immediately left the body, out of the mouth, like a puff of smoke. Hermes, the messenger god, would guide the lost soul to the gates of the underworld, which was said to be at the edges of the world. Once past the gates and the guard dog Cerberus, there waited the ferryman of the river Styx, Charon. Charon would lead souls to their destination for the payment of a coin, coined an obol.<sup>1</sup>

In this myth, the achievements of a human's life would dictate their destination in the underworld. Those that led glorious lives, the fondly remembered, and soldiers dying in war, were promised a place in Elysium in which they could enjoy all earthly spoils and beauty for eternity. Those that were diabolical and hedonistic would be sent to Tartarus, an abyss at the deepest parts of the underworld, to receive divine punishment. Those in between the two extremes and the forgotten would be sent to wander Asphodel, a hazy limbo of nothingness. The Greeks believed the greatest reward in the afterlife was to remain in the memories of the living. This belief was said to be a gift from the gods.<sup>2</sup>

The Greek funeral ritual would begin with the closest member of the family cleaning and dressing the body of the deceased. The body would then be laid out and possessions would be gifted to

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<sup>1</sup> "Greek Mythology and Life after Death, The Collector.

<sup>2</sup> "Greek Mythology and Life after Death, The Collector.

the dead to accompany them on their journey to the afterlife. Of these possessions, a coin called an obol would be laid on the eyes or mouth of the dead. This would be used to pay the ferryman's fare in order for the dead to venture to their respected place. Otherwise the dead would be unable to cross into the underworld and would haunt the overworld.<sup>3</sup>

Glory and memory were the greatest priority to the Greeks. This is seen in Elysium, the greatest area found in the afterlife, which only the glorious and memorable could access. Hedonism and criminal behavior was punished in Tartarus, warning the Greeks to have self control lest they be punished for eternity. The Greeks also deeply respected and cared for the dead. This is seen in their funeral rituals, in which the deceased are given currency to pass into the underlife.

The Greeks believed in creating deep meaning from their short lives. The attribute held highest by the Greeks was memorability. The Greeks deeply believed in becoming profound heroes to be remembered for eternity. Being brave, being heroic, and being influential will promise a place in Elysium. Grief was mitigated by a different understanding of life. People would prepare their dead out of love and fear. The purpose of life made the weight of death lighter.

The Egyptians begin the death ritual by preserving the body. All organs are removed from the body except for the heart, which was considered the central and most important organ that held our humanity. (Similar to how we consider the brain having everything that makes us human.) Within the heart contained the emotional, intellectual and personal characteristics. The Egyptians believed these to be the central aspects of what a human is. The body is then wrapped in a cloth mixed with a resin, to

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<sup>3</sup> "Death, Burial," The Met.

keep the body in a state not acted upon by the elements. The Egyptians also believed in a return to the mortal world, but in an immortal vessel. This was the purpose of mummification.<sup>4</sup>

Egyptian afterlife revolved around Duat, their version of the underworld. The Egyptian underworld was far more reminiscent of Earth – a mirror of Egypt. It was different in that it held fantastic landscapes i.e. trees made of turquoise, and lakes of fire. The dead would have to navigate a desert full of strange monsters looking to devour the deceased's hearts, believed to be the core of a person, holding their values, their emotions, personality and intelligence. This is why at every checkpoint in Duat, every trial is a judgment of both the figurative and literal heart.<sup>5</sup>

The first trial is an interrogation from forty-two assessor gods, each a judge of a particular sin. After being deemed sinless by the assessors, at the next trial awaits Anubis. Anubis takes the literal heart from the body and weighs it against a single ostrich feather on a libra scale. The ostrich feather being a symbol for absolute purity gives the heart an ultimate judge of character. The heart must even out, or would be eaten by Ammit, who waits patiently by Anubis's side. If the heart were to be eaten, it would mean the mental death of a person. The body would continue to live without any trace of the person they previously were. However, if the deceased passes the trial, they are welcomed into Aaru, a field of endless bounty and harvest, where they will be able to enjoy a paradise with their mind and body intact.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Why was mummification," History Extra.

<sup>5</sup> "Journey to the Afterlife," The British Museum.

<sup>6</sup> "Journey to the Afterlife," The British Museum.

The Ancient Egyptians were another culture with short lifespans. A mixture of famine, sickness, and dubious medical practices led them to early graves. In addition they were a community that lived in the desert making hunger common and widespread. These shortages are reflected in their afterlife desires in Aaru, a paradise of endless and bountiful harvest. There are forty-two specific sins they considered dire enough to deny entry into the afterlife. There was a large emphasis on character, being intelligent, honorable and empathetic.

The myths that are analyzed here were once the religious works of their respected people, and while modern religion is far larger and differs from the myths, the fundamentals of myth are still there. Religion is a tool that informs a culture's beliefs and values, just as myth would. Analyzing modern religions also gives us the tools to understand the people that practice them. If the afterlife of certain myths shows what was lacking in life, then modern religion shows the same thing.

Buddhism has no supreme deity. It instead focuses entirely on the self and desire. Impermanence and change are central to the Buddhist belief and change is an absolute truth of the world. Another important point is that death is not an ending. Death is change. Buddhists believe that Man's true nature is that of no birth and no death. Their understanding is that life and death are related, cyclical, and of ultimately no true importance. Buddhists believe that desire is the stem of human suffering and to no longer desire is to no longer suffer. To deny death is to desire to live, which is a fruitless attempt and will only cause more pain.<sup>7</sup>

Buddhists hold a belief that doubts the existence of self entirely as well. They believe that no self exists in anything, and that belief in the self, or differentiation from all else is yet another cause for

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<sup>7</sup> Eva, Masel, Life is Uncertain Death is Certain, section 2

suffering. Buddhism is about the universe being a singular organism, and accepting the flow in which reality takes, any attempt to discern from it will only cause pain. It's important to also mention that the individual is part of a greater organism and that death is not true, life continues in varied forms after death.<sup>8</sup>

Buddhists don't find relief in an afterlife, they have a completely separate view on death. Instead of finding relief in a continued existence their relief comes from being a part of a greater object in constant transience. A life lost is like the death of a singular cell in a body. Instead of holding onto identity in death, they relinquish the idea of self entirely, because if someone doesn't truly exist, how can they die? Taoism strays from Buddhism in a few ways. Instead of a total disassociation of the self, Taoism is constructed on humans and nature being in conflict and finding balance.

Taoism is built on a balance between humans and the natural world. Human will and action are in constant balance with nature, and to attempt to be above the laws of nature causes an imbalance in the natural order. In Taoism, life and death are two halves of a cyclical whole, and that both must exist for anything else to. The act of dying is to reunite with nature, and return to a natural state. There is an emphasis on accepting the natural order – a far more stoic and understanding belief.<sup>9</sup>

This research has focused heavily on the analysis of beliefs surrounding the afterlife, but not on death itself. The truth is that only the physical aspects of death can be known.<sup>10</sup> Death is the absence of life from the body. There's not a lot of information on death. It's not known what death is but it is known why things die. The body requires some form of energy to live, and dies when there is

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<sup>8</sup> Shiah, Yung-Jong, Nonsself Theory, paragraph 3

<sup>9</sup> Exploring Perspective of Death According to Taoism

<sup>10</sup> Robert, Lanza, The Myth of Death



no longer enough to sustain the functions of the body. The brain stops functioning and the body no longer replenishes. The many opinions on the afterlife, or what death is, stem from how humans are unable to understand the psychical, or the non physical aspects, of death. We do not know if the mind dies with the body, we only know that the body ceases to function. Those unknowns spark many anxieties in people, anxieties that at times, myth and religion only seems to quell. Myth can provide an explanation for the end. It can make death have inherent meaning, help people grapple with loss, allow people to feel more comfortable in their lives, or provide structures in which humans can still care for the dead.

Human behavior is subconsciously informed by a fear of death.

In psychology, Terror Management Theory suggests that a large part of all human behavior is generated by unconscious fear of death. This fear generates a fundamental anxiety and unease, which we try to offset with behavior such as status-seeking or strongly defending the values of our culture. We feel threatened by death and so seek security and significance to defend ourselves against it. Studies have shown, for example, that when people are made more aware of their own mortality, they tend to become more nationalistic and tribal and more materialistic.(Taylor, The Psychology of Death, Paragraph 3)

Death creates a need for community, a need for importance and impact. Myth stems from a common desire to not die. However death is inescapable, so the definition of life expands past the point of death, It becomes an afterlife. This allows people to face death. Even if untrue, the human outlook is that they are no longer facing oblivion. In the same terror management study, the degree to which people have had to confront death changes the perspective.

To a large extent, it depends on the intensity of the encounter with our mortality. Anxiety usually occurs when we're *passively* aware of death, thinking about it in a vague way rather than actually facing up to it. There's certainly an important difference between being aware of death as a concept (as people were in the research for Terror Management Theory), and being confronted with the *reality* of it, and being forced to deal with it as an imminent prospect. When we face up to death actively and directly, there's a chance that we'll transcend anxiety and insecurity, and experience its transformational potential. (Taylor, *The Psychology of Death*, Paragraph 11)

Myth is a tool that gives a new way to confront death, and is the most common and accessible one to people.

Death by definition is the absence of life, however to maintain life, the body must eat, which requires things to die. For that reason death is more cyclical and intertwined than is believed. Life is fuelled by energy, food is eaten, digested and broken into ATP which fuels the individual cells of the body. The fundamental aspect to life is energy, and energy cannot be created or destroyed (as long as you believe the laws of modern physics). It is only able to change form. Life and death are cyclical in nature, death provides room and nourishment to those alive. Is it correct to isolate one from the other?

Ultimately there is no additional information that can be gleaned from death and myths aren't facts, they're theories. These beliefs don't serve the dead. We don't know what serves the dead, since it's impossible to know. The physical is all that can be seen. The only state that exists in the present and the objects that are there, that's all we know. These beliefs provide comfort and ease the feeling of loss

that death provides. Myth is not about correctness, it is about providing what's necessary for humans to continue to live.

### Annotated Bibliography

Fiske, Adele M. "Death: Myth and Ritual." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1969, pp. 249–65. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461655>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2024.

Rituals of kenosis, an emptying of the body, sacred rituals pertaining to the death and rebirth of shamans, afterlife and annihilation. The source is somewhat unclear on what specific things it's talking about, but it offers interesting ideas. There's very little information on the author, but they have a decent series of publications. The two ideas of kenosis and plerosis; emptying and filling, it's curious to think of spiritually becoming nothing in preparation for death and becoming full in rebirth- more interestingly these are parts of christian theology.

Okri, Ben. "FOOD, RITUAL, AND DEATH." *Callaloo*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2015, pp. 1034–36. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24738395>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2024.

Human life begins a mystery, we don't witness our birth, and we are absent at our death. Those two ideas shape human existence. The three fundamentals of human life. Food is sacred because of the nourishment it provides, death is sacred because it allows space for new things, and ritual allows for human time to create meaning. That last anecdote relates heavily to *Myth conceptions of death* by Glenn Vernon as it somewhat clashes with the previous ideas of Vernons. FOOD, RITUAL, AND DEATH is written by Ben Okri, a Nigerian novelist and poet; he is considered inspirational and a trailblazer for African Novelists. The source has many profound ideas on humans' continued existence, and while my research is focused generally on death, the ideas still inform well on the topic.

Vernon, Glenn M. "Myth-Conceptions Concerning Death-Related Behavior." *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1977, pp. 144–52. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505395>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2024.

The study of death related behavior, the study covers the perceptions of those involved in funeral ceremonies: clergymen, priests, officiants. It found that there is a clear delineation between life and death in the eyes of the subjects- despite the fact that no such evidence can be derived, and that living is always better than dying. Glenn M. Vernon graduated from Brigham Young University getting a masters degree in sociology. He then graduated from Washington state university with a Ph.D in sociology. He was a professor and the head of the sociology department at the University of Utah. The

study focuses on people who work around death, and their opinions on it are the most intimate, and clear.

The Collector. Accessed April 30, 2024.

<https://www.thecollector.com/greek-mythology-and-life-after-death/>.

"Death, Burial, and the Afterlife in Ancient Greece." The Met.

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dbag/hd\\_dbag.htm#:~:text=The%20Greeks%20believed%20that%20at.to%20the%20time%2Dhonored%20rituals.](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dbag/hd_dbag.htm#:~:text=The%20Greeks%20believed%20that%20at.to%20the%20time%2Dhonored%20rituals.)

"Exploring Perspective of Death According to Taoism." Universitas Gadjha Mada. Accessed April 30, 2024.

<https://ugm.ac.id/en/news/16451-exploring-perspective-of-death-according-to-taoism/#:~:text=In%20the%20perspective%20of%20Taoism,nature%20back%20to%20nature%20cycle.>

Journal of Pain and Symptom Management. Accessed April 30, 2024.

[https://www.jpmsjournal.com/article/S0885-3924\(12\)00262-X/fulltext#:~:text=Addressing%20death%20and%20the%20impermanence,no%20birth%20and%20no%20death.%E2%80%9D](https://www.jpmsjournal.com/article/S0885-3924(12)00262-X/fulltext#:~:text=Addressing%20death%20and%20the%20impermanence,no%20birth%20and%20no%20death.%E2%80%9D)

"Major Religions View on the Afterlife." *encyclopedia.com*.

[https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/how-major-religions-view-afterlife.](https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/how-major-religions-view-afterlife)

Shiah, Yung-Jong. "From Self to Nonself: The Nonself Theory." *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (February 4, 2016). Accessed April 30, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00124>.

Taylor, Steve. "The Psychology of Death." *Psychology Today*. Accessed April 30, 2024.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/out-of-the-darkness/201402/the-psychology-of-death#:~:text=In%20psychology%2C%20Terror%20Management%20Theory,the%20values%20of%20our%20culture.>

Lanza, Robert. "The Myth of Death." *Psychology Today*. Accessed May 1, 2024.

[https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/biocentrism/201312/the-myth-death.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/biocentrism/201312/the-myth-death)

Vernon, Glenn M., and William D. Payne. "Myth-Conceptions About Death." *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1973, pp. 63–76. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505159>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2024.

This source questions the importance of biological factors on death, it mentions that meaning is a human derived concept, that it can be challenged and changed, but despite that we apply meaning to things we are unable to derive it from (death being an example). Glenn M. Vernon graduated from Brigham Young University getting a masters degree in sociology. He then graduated from Washington state university with a Ph.D in sociology. He was a professor and the head of the sociology department at the University of Utah. The idea of meaning not certainly being true is interesting, in addition to applying meaning to death, it fits exactly what I am asking in my research.

Zou, P. H., & Priscilla, B. E. (2023). *Folklore: An identity born of shared grief*. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2249279>

The source speaks on folklore and a tool to unite people going through grief. The source concludes that folklore is an aid to holding onto identity, and that it allows shared grief within communities. P. Hoideiniang Zou got their education from Vellore Institute of technology in india. A researcher that specializes in indigenous tribal folklore, and North East Indian Literature. I found that idea of folklore- or by extension myth creating a community to support one another to be an interesting idea that relates to my topic.