



The Politics of Un-death: Reading the Graveyard as a 'Thanatotopic' Liminal Space

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Abstract

The graveyard has always remained a site of fear, the unknown and of phantasmagoria. In Foucauldian jargon it is a heterotopic space removed from the domain of ideology. But I find the graveyard to be a *thanatotopic* (my coinage) space that is inseparably associated with death and deathlessness. Even though the death does not take place in the graveyard, it is often subjected to thanatophobic meditations as though dead bodies not death, are the agencies of fear. With the gyral movement of human civilization, graveyard has been pushed far away from human habitats, may be because of the medical and scientific concerns (Foucault). However, death is perhaps the most forbidden, most abjected and most forgotten word today. The *Memento Mori* is buried under the neon lights of hedonistic narcissism. The chapter offers a chronotopic reading of the literary representations of the graveyard by the select British writers from Shakespeare to Philip Larkin to investigate the transformative nature of the graveyard as a cultural and liminal space.

Keywords: Thanatophobic, Graveyard, Space, Liminality, Foucault

From time immemorial, people's lives have been punctuated with celebrations. From the first walking steps to the first job, from weddings and anniversaries to birthdays and baby showers, cultures around the world welcome the milestones of life with enthusiastic festivity. Every culture has evolved detailed customs and traditions for various stages of life to help one live in the best way possible. However, when it comes to

the end of life, our celebratory spirits are faced with a dead end.
(Sadguru, *Life and Death in One Breath* 07)

Introduction

Thanatophobia is one of the oldest fears mankind has ever experienced. The beauty and comforts of the mundane world, the emotional ties, the fragile chains of love and friendship all seem to collapse before our eyes the moment we think of death. In human imagination, it is not always that death is a gentleman who kindly stops for us and journeys in the same carriage to Eternity¹. Death is neither ‘as sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle’ (Shakespeare²) to many of us. Since the time of Homer or may be before that, death and afterlife have gained literary intervention. Man’s attitude to death has undergone significant changes. The recognition of death as a phenomenon of loss and separation is exclusive to the homo sapiens. Death is a purely biological phenomenon; nevertheless, the subject of death has tantalized the philosophers, religious advocates, and literary geniuses from time immemorial. Death is inseparably associated with the funeral rites and places where those rites are performed for the dead. Graveyard is one such place. The present study offers a secular analysis of the literary representations of the graveyard. The graveyard has always remained a site of fear, the unknown and of phantasmagoria. In Foucauldian jargon it is a heterotopic space removed from the domain of ideology. But I find the graveyard to be a *thanatotopic* (my coinage) space that is inseparably associated with death and deathlessness. Even though the death does not take place in the graveyard, it is often subjected to thanatophobic meditations as though dead bodies not death, are the agencies of fear. With the gyral movement of human civilization, graveyard has been pushed far away from human habitats, may be because of the medical and scientific concerns (Foucault). However, death is perhaps the most forbidden, most abjected and most forgotten word today. The *Memento Mori* is buried under the neon lights of hedonistic narcissism. The chapter offers a chronotopic reading of the literary

representations of the graveyard by the select British writers from Shakespeare to Philip Larkin to investigate the transformative nature of the graveyard as a cultural and liminal space.

From Body to Bones

Death as a public and a personal phenomenon is inseparably associated with the ideas of separation, loss, melancholia and mourning. With civilization, death has acquired newer dimensions. The pre-historic man must have not taken death as seriously we do today. Death must have been as natural a phenomenon as birth. The primitive man must have been surprised to see somebody die. Put more simply, death must have been meant the suspension of the physical to him. But with the rise of more complex human civilization, with the formation of society and the institutions of marriage and family and friendship man has grown serious to it. Man recognized death as a phenomenon that results in separation, loss and disappearance. A person suddenly disappears after his death as though death were a sort of displacement or transportation. The disappearance of the dead makes his/her survivors wonder if he or she has visited somewhere beyond life-the *Great Beyond*³. This assumption naturally leads to the notion that man has come to this earth from somewhere-the *Great Before*!⁴ But man seems to have no intention of going beyond the threshold of life. He is afraid to leave this life:

It is certain that there is nothing in the idea of a pre-existent state that excites our longing like the prospect of a posthumous existence. We are satisfied to have begun life when we did; we have no ambition to have set out on our journey sooner; and feel that we have had quite enough to do to battle our way ever since ("On the Fear of Death," Hazlitt).

Martin Heidegger observed that though we consider death as inevitable, nobody is conscious of his own death. But death for him helps man develop his understanding of existence:

“...death is just a fellow Existence” (Heidegger 302). For Freud, *Thanatos* or death instincts co-exists with *Eros* or life instincts. For him, *Thanatos* is necessary to intensify *Eros* or man’s love of life. Death as a phenomenon of separation and loss is followed by mourning and melancholia. In some cultures, mourning has acquired ritualistic dimensions as well. For example, in the Celtic culture, keening is observed for the posthumous peace of the departing soul. Freud in his paper “Mourning and Melancholia” speaks of two possible responses to death and loss- mourning and melancholia. Mourning and melancholia may appear similar though they are different responses to loss. Mourning takes place in the conscious mind and melancholia in the unconscious mind. Public mourning, according to Gennep, presupposes a temporary suspension of social life: “During mourning, social life is suspended for all those affected by it, and the length of the period increases with the closeness of social ties to the deceased (e.g., for widows, relatives), and with a higher social standing of the dead person. If the dead man was chief, the suspension affects the entire society” (214).

The burial of the dead is supposed to be the earliest example of man’s religious submission. Death, deemed to be the portal to afterlife, was feared and respected. Different religions all over the world attest to that concern. Burial practices can be traced back as long as 1,00,00 years. Archeologists differ on the purposes of the burial; practices, though the most concluded view on the subject affirms that it was man’s faith in afterlife. The notion of afterlife is intimately tied to the humanist vision in the immortality of the human or the notion of eternal recurrence. Even in the oldest graves, bones were discovered in the company of various articles, mostly of metal. The burial practices run against the Hindu ways of the final rites that uphold the importance of cremation. The Christian doctrine of funeral services is backed up by the notion of Resurrection. The dead will rise from the grave at the summon of the Lord on the Doomsday. This asserts a humanistic fondness for the body that the bones should be

preserved to be resurrected. The Hindu doctrine of funeral services is related more to the soul than the body. The body is placed in the *Naraka* to be tortured with a vengeance. There are various types of burial practices adopted by different communities all over the world such as mummification, graveyard burial, sky burial, coral reef burial, sea burial and natural or eco-burial and so on. The principal purpose of most of the burial practices is the preservation of the bones. It is the love for the body that transcends the threshold of life and moves beyond death. The idea of the resurrection seems to have derived from the fertility myths:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images

(Eliot, *The Waste Land* 19-22).

Again, the dear body that is the locus of attachment and love functions as a site of fear too. The dead body is feared and abhorred. The following excerpt from Shakespeare testifies to the fear of the dead:

At whose approach, ghosts wand'ring here and there
Troop home to churchyards. Damnèd spirits all,
That in crossways and floods have burial,
Already to their wormy beds are gone.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.2.3 82-4).

The churchyard or the graveyard is the site of the fear and the deformed, ghostly, ghastly bodies are the objects of fear. This negative resurrection of the dead as ghosts challenges the teachings of religion and the ideologies of the burial services. The fear of the worm-eaten body to acquire its full form and visit the mundane plain to frighten the humble passersby has been registered in folklores, legends, and literature.

Liminality and the Graveyard

Since the primary template of this study is the theory of liminality, no literary discussion will be much relevant without a deep incision into it. The term 'liminality' is derived from *limen*⁵ (Latin) that means 'threshold.' Therefore, liminality refers to a transitional space in the rite of passage. Gennep in his phenomenal book *Rites of Passage* (1909) addresses the issue of liminality in a cultural, ritualistic context. For him, the liminal exists between the pre-ritualistic and the post-ritualistic spaces, between the present and the immediate future that will lead the participants of cultural and religious rites to move through transformation of a certain kind:

A betrothal forms a liminal period between adolescence and marriage, but the passage from adolescence to betrothal itself involves a special series of rites of separation, a transition, and an incorporation into the betrothed condition; and the passage from the transitional period, which is betrothal, to marriage itself, is made through a series of rites of separation from the former, followed by rites consisting of transition, and rites of incorporation into marriage. The pattern of ceremonies comprising rites of pregnancy, delivery, and birth is equally involved (Gennep 11).

Gennep's theory of liminality is a three-fold structure consisting of three rites or passages such as preliminal rites, liminal rites and postliminal rites. The preliminal rites are the rites of sacrifice of separation. Liminal rites are the rites of transition or transformation and the postliminal rites are the rites of incorporation. Gennep's tripartite investigation of liminality in the rites of passage is informed largely by the rites of death both literally and metaphorically. He referred to the initiation rites in different cultures and used analogies of death in the context. For example, the Brahman rites of *upanayana*, according to Gennep is one closely related to metaphors of death and rebirth:

The Brahman ceremonies include, first, a tonsure? a bath, a change of clothing, possession of the child's heart by the teacher who takes the responsibility for its guidance, a change of name, a handclasp-culminating in the child's ritual death. Once the child has become a novice (brahmachari), he is subject to all sorts of taboos he studies the Sacred. literature, learns formulas and gestures. His union with the teacher is identified with a marriage; the teacher conceives "at the moment when he places his hand on the child's shoulder, and on the third day, when the Gayatri is recited, the child is reborn (Gennep 105-6).

Liminality, according to him, exists between the passage to the new Brahminic identity which the participant acquires and his former identity, between death and resurrection. Gennep's theory of ritualistic liminality has been extended further and popularized by Victor Turner in his book *The Forest of Symbols* (1967). He has moved beyond Gennep's ritualistic passages and applies liminality to human experiences and behaviours. For Turner, the scope of liminality is broader than what Gennep has proposed.

The graveyards are 'thanatopic' thresholds that offer passages to both the dead and the living. They are the topographies and deathscapes that intersect with the human society through a liminal passage of dying and yet they are secular places. Julie Rugg in her paper "Defining the Place of Burial: What Makes a Cemetery a Cemetery?" observes that ownership of the graves is supervised by municipal authorities of private sector concerns (264). In "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault has argued that the cemetery or the graveyard is a heterotopic space which is unlike 'ordinary cultural spaces' (5). The cemetery, in Foucault's argument, is at once distanced from the 'ordinary cultural spaces' (5) and at the same time it is geographically connected with them. A cemetery is always 'located' somewhere, either in a city, town, or village. Besides, every individual has his or her relative there. Nevertheless, the

graveyard is distanced from the regular stream of human existence flowing silently outside its boundaries. Certain prohibitions are always implemented. Each and every visitor has to abide by some guidelines in order to prevent being 'disrespectful' to the dead. The marginality of the graveyard is very much palpable whenever we visit there. It is somehow 'located' beyond the threshold of our everyday life and practices.

Graveyard in Literature as a Liminal Space

In this paper, my primary focus, as already stated is the graveyard as a liminal place. Death, in both Gennep and Turner, is a liminality that is posited between life and afterlife or the ritualistic passage related to dying. From this standpoint, the graveyard is itself a liminal place. Traditionally, the graveyard has been associated with death both in metaphoric and metonymic ways. It is something removed from the 'madding crowd' (Gray) and at the same time very personally associated with every member of the society. Traditionally, the graveyard has been feared to be a place that can disturb the life of the living. It has been an eternal memento mori-a reminder of death and has triggered thanatophobia among the living. Interestingly, graveyard is a place devoid of death. It may contain numerous dead bodies in its womb but the incident of dying never takes place in the graveyard. It is always outside it. Evidently, the fear of death has been replaced by the fear of dead bodies. It is not death but the dead bodies that people fear. The graveyard is posited between the society of the living and the world of the dead since the dead is supposed to roam about in those unlucky places! The graveyard seems to be suspended in the initiation of the living to the dead.

Lorraine Evans in her exclusive study of the graveyards in *Burying the Dead: An Archaeological History of Burial Grounds* (2020) has shown how the burial practices evolved from the Pagan to the Christian ways. She has maintained an almost historical record of grave excavation in Europe since the early Medieval Period:

In truth, the archaeology of early Anglo-Saxon England is dominated by the cemetery evidence with around 1,200 individual sites and fifty or so large field cemeteries having been securely identified so far. It is generally accepted that the study of early cemeteries began in 1653, when workers near St Brice's Church, Tournai, Belgium, uncovered the treasure-laden fifth-century royal burial of King Childeric. However, the earliest record of an Anglo-Saxon excavation dates to the twelfth century, when several monks are reported to have dug up the burial mounds at Redbourne, Hertfordshire, in search of the bones of St Amphibalus (1-2).

Incidentally, death is both gruesome and fascinating to human consciousness and graveyards are those places where life trysts with death. A crucial example is Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia* or *Urn Burial* (1658). He rejoices in the fact that the burials often outlast the living. Death exists beyond life. The so-called immunity of death to time is celebrated by Browne: "Now since these dead bones have already out-last-ed the living ones of Methuselah, and in a yard underground, and thin walls of clay, out-worn all the strong and specious buildings above it; and quietly rested under the drums and tramlings of three conquests; What Prince can promise such diuturnity unto his Reliques, or might not gladly say, *Sic ego componi versus in ossa velim*" (Thus, when naught is left of me but bones, would I be laid to rest)." The romance of death and the burial practices have been subjected to fear psychology in religious books. The references to the painfulness of dying, of the disintegration of the beloved body and the prospects of posthumous damnation and infernal torture have always frightened man. On the other hand, death has been considered to be a respite to the ailing man, a promise of heavenly bliss to the religious and an enemy to lovers: 'Revenge triumphs over death; love slights it; honor aspireth to it; grief flieth to it; fear preoccupateth it' (Bacon, "Of Death").

The appellation 'Graveyard Poetry' came into being in the 18th Century when a group of poets pioneered by Thomas Gray composed gloomy meditations on mortality and graveyard. But long ago, graveyard had entered the literary space. Human attitude to the graveyard has remained both serious and sarcastic, religious as well as secular.

William Shakespeare and the Comedy of Dying

Many of the sonnets by William Shakespeare are meditations on the prospect of Mr. W.H.'s ageing and death. His longing for the means of immortalizing his friend's youth and fame has been triggered by his thanatophobia. But in his sonnets, grave is a cruel agency that will finally swallow his dear friend. It's no more a holy resting place for man. In "Sonnet 1," the grave is represented as a glutton who eats dead bodies curiously: "Pity the world, or else this glutton be, /To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee" (13-14). In "Sonnet 31," he compared the Fair Youth to a grave in whom his love lies buried: "Thou art the grave where buried love doth live" (9). In "Sonnet 77," the grave has been represented in anthropomorphic terms: "The wrinkles which thy glass will truly show, /Of mouthed graves will give thee memory" (5-6). In the Gravedigger Scene of *Hamlet* (5.1), the graveyard becomes the centre of Shakespearean jesting. What catches notice of the readers is the ambiguity regarding Ophelia's (*Christian*) burial. The gravediggers argue both in favour of and against the Christian burial of Ophelia because she has committed suicide:

Clown 1: Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?

Clown 2: I tell thee she is, and therefore make her grave straight. The crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial.

Clown 1: How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defense?

Clown 2: Why, 'tis found so

(*Hamlet*. 5.1. 1-4).

The Christian burial, evidently, is supposed to provide salvation to the dead. Suicide is a sin and therefore the dead must not deserve a Christian burial. Hamlet's speech holding Horatio's skull is replete with the Carnavalesque⁶. That death is a great leveller and there is no way to distinguish a lawyer's skull from that of Yorick! His skull mocks at his jesting self at the court:

Hamlet Let me see. (takes the skull) Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio – a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. (to the skull) Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?

(Hamlet 5.1.169-76).

Shakespeare's satire hangs on the ambivalence of death. Suicide presupposes death (with certain exceptions) and therefore is not different from normal death at least in defining the fate of the dead because in both cases death takes place. Therefore, Ophelia deserves Christian burial as much as Yorick does! Yorick's skull that Hamlet juggles in his hand acquires a liminal space. It is suspended between two passages-the passage of life and the passage of posthumous silence or in that case state of salvation in Heaven. But the irony hinges on the fact that Ophelia's dead body is as much dead as Yorick's skull. Both are posited beyond the threshold of life. Shakespeare's Menippean sarcasm on death reveals the Carnavalesque dimension of his plays. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the comedy of dying acquires the centre stage. In Cleopatra's rhetoric 'death' and 'dying' are some of the commonest terms. Death is given an erotic dimension, but the eroticism is a means of transcending the mundane precincts. In "Immortal Longings:"

The Erotics of Death in *Antony and Cleopatra*,” Lisa S. Starks aptly comments: “Cleopatra performs her suicide as an act of passionate love and erotic release—not as a sacrifice, like Antony, but as a transfiguration into an immortal goddess” (252). In the play, Antony’s suicide is a masochistic act of self-annihilation: “... Shakespeare’s Antony becomes instead a kind of gothic antihero”—the tortured lover, the martyr, the masochist” (Starks 244). Cleopatra’s death is dramatized by Shakespeare as an erotic courtship—a toxic tryst. Cleopatra’s suicide is part of her military strategy to defeat Caesar’s final victory over her. The dramatization of Cleopatra’s courtship of death represents death not as a frightful agent of extinction but a gentle lover who kills by pinching amorously:

The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
Which hurts, and is desired
(Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.294-5).

In the play, death is no more a great leveller but a healer as in *Macbeth*.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the graveyard is no more the final resort for the dead since both Antony and Cleopatra surpass the grandness of the comedy of dying. No grave is fit for them: ‘No grave upon the earth shall clip in it/A pair so famous’ (*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.358-9). Their greatness surpasses the grandeur and pride of death and the graveyard.

In Shakespeare, the graveyard is a liminal space that is hinged between the passage from life to death. In his tragedies, death, as mentioned earlier, is a carnivalesque, a rescuer that releases man from the ‘life’s fitful fever’ (*Macbeth* 2.3. 28). In *Macbeth* death is sought to gain the kingship and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is to evade the same. In both plays, death and the grave are placed beyond the locus of power.

The Graveyard School

The graveyard became the centre of literary meditation when a group of late 18th Century British poets introduced a new genre of poetry, called the Graveyard poetry. The most important exponents of the Graveyard School were Thomas Gray, Edward Young, Thomas Parnell, Robert Blair and so on. Their poems are gloomy meditations on death and the posthumous life. Young's "Night Thoughts" (1742-1745) offers a series of pensive meditations on death in which the poet reflects on the death of his family over a period of nine nights. In the poem, Young's asserts the importance of the grave:

How populous, how vital, is the grave!
This is creation's melancholy vault,
The vale funereal, the sad cypress gloom;
The land of apparitions, empty shades!
(116-9).

The graveyard is presented as man's final refuge where man lives a life beyond and yet death for Young offers 'prescription' to man to be conscious of the inevitability of death:

Or, that life's loan Time ripen'd into right;
And men might plead prescription from the grave;
Deathless, from repetition of reprieve.
Deathless? far from it! such are dead already;
Their hearts are buried, and the world their grave.
(611-5).

The graveyard in Young becomes a sight of recognition- an encounter with death for those who have not died yet. The graveyard to which man pays little attention becomes a marker of death itself.

In Gray's Elegy, the churchyard became that very sight of recognition. He becomes immersed in deep philosophical

meditation on the poor forefathers of a hamlet and their humble struggle for existence:

The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me
(1-4).

He writes an elegy for mankind. Every human being is like 'the rude forefathers of the hamlet' because the 'paths of glory lead but to the grave' (40).

The graveyard school turned their attention to the miseries of human fate and the inevitability of death. Instead of offering dreadful portraits of death unlike their predecessors, they reflect on more secular aspects of death and the graveyard. It should be added that the graveyard in Gray's poem becomes a literary liminality since it stands on the passage from the Neo-Classicism to Romanticism.

Philip Larkin and the 'Stone Fidelity' of the Graveyard

Some of Larkin's poems focus on the grotesque lingering of faith, its stoniness, and the possibility of its erosion. "Church Going" is such a poem. It alienates the readers temporarily from the "Christian" dimension of the churches and catapults them into a region of doubt and blankness. The churches, Larkin speculates, may fall out of use one day and only few of them may be preserved only as specimen. His unmatched cynicism about the future of Christian faith offers a prospective liminality that may transport one beyond the practice of burial services:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,

Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round (55-63)

In another poem, “An Arundel Tomb” his cynical tone is intensified as he unmistakably questions the religious notion of the posthumousness of the dead. The Entombment of the earl and his Countess is nothing but a parody of the love they shared when alive. Time has washed their ‘identity’ and they lie ‘helpless in the hollow of/An unarmorial age’ (32-33). The faith that entombed them together is no more found in the ‘scrap of history’ (35) and ‘only an attitude remains’ (36). Larkin questions the ‘stone fidelity’ of the graveyard since the graveyard is not immune to Time. Therefore, the notion of preserving the dead for the Final Judgement is merely an attitude- a scrap of faith.

Conclusion

The graveyard is a *thanatopic* liminal space. It is located in the passage from the life to death. Besides, it is associated with death and the dead bodies as well as the people living outside it. However, the graveyard is associated with both death and deathlessness. It preserves the dead bodies and therefore it becomes a marker of mourning. On the contrary, it is free from death simply because the actual death does not take place there. This ambiguity offers the graveyard a new spatial make-up that is at once heterotopic and *thanatopic*.

Endnotes

1. Ref. Emily Dickinson, “Because I Could not Stop for Death” (1890).
2. William Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra (5.2.365)
3. Walt Disney movie *Soul*, 2020
4. Ibid.
5. “liminal”, *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. OED Online Oxford 23, 2007
6. Bakhtin

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