

Examining the Connection between Death and Material Possession
Lauren Windmiller, Dr. Patricia Fumerton, English Department

Introduction:

My work as an undergraduate research assistant has expanded my knowledge of literature and enhanced my technical skills. This spring quarter I was able to associate images and collaborate with mentors in the program in order to complete a small portion of the overall project. Working within this program allowed me to utilize my organizational skills as well as examine how many of the pieces in the past historical period continue to be relevant to our modern society. As a student I find myself driven to learn more about the past in order to understand the present and how the production of such material can be connected to the social fabric of modern society. In transcribing these materials and editing them for the archive I have found several areas of interest that I will continue to explore concerning death and material possession/wealth. Through utilizing the EBBA archive as a reference to these modern topics I will continue to research and analyze how these concepts continue to be relevant to consciousness and the pursuit of enlightenment.

Discussion:

As I close out my last quarter at the University of California Santa Barbara I am very proud to have been a part of this program and to have been taught by such kind and knowledgeable mentors. This program provided me with a place to apply my skills learned as an undergraduate student at the university as well as to adapt newfound knowledge that I attained over the past two quarters. The English Broadside Ballad Archive is very vast and I am proud to have contributed to a portion of its magnitude, as a resource and educational tool it will continue to grow and support educators and scholars everywhere. Despite the pandemic this program provided students and staff with the opportunity to connect with the department as well as scholars across the globe, an opportunity I am truly grateful for in a time of extreme disconnect and extraordinary circumstances. There are two concepts that I found particularly interesting from my work this Spring quarter that include death and material possession/wealth. The media of the past and of our present ties together these concepts as blocks to consciousness and/or enlightenment as one becomes consumed by their environment as well as accumulating possessions. Our modern society is preoccupied with the attainment of capital as well as the representation of wealth while so many around the world go without. The pieces that I drew from the archive examine the intersection between death and material wealth in the past historical period as it pertains to mortality, this concept can also be applied to modern day society. The first piece from the archive explores the connection between mortality and morality. In “Death's Uncontrollable Summons; / OR, The Mortality of MANKIND. / Being a Dialogue between DEATH and a YOUNG-MAN” the speaker explores the intangibility of wealth after death (EBBA 30571). The historical period of the piece relies on the fear of mortality and the powerlessness of the individual to create repentance and acceptance of death. The experiences of

individuals and communities during health crises in the past as well as the present pandemic should forge a drive to seek out aid for others while one is still living. This piece affirms the fleeting nature of wealth and confirms the impact of one's actions as a measure of compassion, "I scorn thy Treasure and thy Pelf, hey ho, hey ho, haste away" (EBBA 30571). Material wealth and comfort should not affect our empathy or compassion for others and this conversation particularly relates to the dialogue between different classes in America as Covid-19 exposed much of the class hierarchy. Death and illness is undiscerning of class and therefore negates the power structure which much of modern society relies on to sustain stratification between classes. Mortality is certain and should spurn individuals and communities to improve their current environment as life is not always promised, "For me sweet death I hope not so, hey ho, thy thred is spun; My name is death ad I come for thee" (EBBA 30571). The second piece from the archive examines the connection between nature and mortality, the natural world is reflective of the birth, growth, and death cycle which relies on repetition and circular nature. The poem's structure follows this cycle closely to refute the negative connotation of death to the reader. In the poem a "A discourse of Mans life. / Comparing him to things that quickly passe, / As bubble, shuttle, blossome, streame, and grasse" the individual takes several natural forms that complete the life/death cycle (EBBA 30049). With the exclusion of material possessions the individual is able to achieve enlightenment in several forms as it is possessed instead by nature, "The grasse is witherd, and the tale is ended/The bird is flowne, and up the dew ascended/Even such is man, who liveth by his breath/Is here, now there, still subject unto death" (EBBA 30049). The certainty of mortality is presented as an opportunity to repent as well as make amends in the surrounding community. Unburdened by material wealth this connection to the self/nature is strengthened, the third piece to explore this idea references the birth/death cycle as well. In the piece, "A good Exhortation to every / man what he should doo when he goeth to bed and when / he riseth" mortality is experienced by sleeping as it is represented as a form of "death" (EBBA 32168). The process of preparing for sleep is paralleled to that of death as the individual must live with the uncertainty that their mortality will allow them to wake. The use of the bed as the grave explores the connection between the physical tangible world and the metaphysical in which worship and dreaming take place. Mortality is established as an anchor to the physical world, "AT night lye down prepare to have:/thy sleep, thy death, thy bed, thy grave./A rise a wake think that thou hast:/thy life but lent, thy breth a blast"(EBBA 32168). These three pieces from the archive sparked my interest in literature written about mortality and the influence of consuming material possessions/wealth because it prevents individuals from achieving their enlightenment or to a degree making them unaffected by the struggles of others around them due to their elevation in society/culture. The class hierarchy in America is tied to this extreme accumulation of wealth that creates such stratification between classes. The use of mortality as a driving force to seek good is one connection I saw throughout the pieces I read as a solution to create a better environment for all communities.

Conclusion:

This program afforded me the opportunity to seek out mentorship and connect back to the university despite the global pandemic. I am grateful for the skills that I have learned and for the experiences that I will take with me as I graduate. This program was supported by our mentors and I cannot thank them enough for their work and willingness to adapt to the online format. I will take the program skills and apply them to other areas of my life as I look toward the future as an alumni. The English Broadside Ballad Archive is a program that I wish I had joined even sooner than I did and I am so proud that I was able to contribute to such a vast project.