

Faces of Death: A Statistical- Stylistic Analysis on Selected 19th and 20th Century Poems

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the representation of death in selected 19th- and 20th-century poems through a statisticalstylistic lens. Guided by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *Five Stages of Loss*, the research analyzed eight canonical works: Dickinson's *If I Should Die*, Poe's *Annabel Lee*, Shelley's *Queen Mab*, and Brontë's *On the Death of Anne Brontë* from the 19th century; and Cummings' *Suppose*, Frost's *Spoils of the Dead*, Plath's *Lady Lazarus*, and Neruda's *Nothing but Death* from the 20th century. Using the biographical, stylistic, and historical approaches, the poems were evaluated by five literature students to determine the extent to which biography, language style, and year of publication shaped each text's engagement with mortality.

Findings revealed strong biographical influence in Brontë and Plath, whose works are directly tied to personal grief, while Shelley, Dickinson, Cummings, Neruda, and Frost showed minimal autobiographical traces. Stylistically, Poe and Plath achieved the highest ratings due to their dense symbolism and evocative imagery. Across both centuries, the year of publication exerted little influence. Thematic analysis shows greater emotional variation in 19th-century works, reflecting denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, while 20th-century poems largely emphasize acceptance.

Overall, the study highlighted how death in poetry functions not only as a thematic constant but as a dynamic construct shaped by personal experience, linguistic style, and cultural sensibilities across literary periods.

KEYWORDS: death in literature, Kübler-Ross, stylistic analysis, biographical approach, 19th-century poetry, 20th-century poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

Death has long been regarded as one of the most profound and unsettling aspects of human existence. It is not only a biological inevitability but also a cultural and literary construct that has inspired philosophical, psychological, and artistic inquiry across centuries. Scholars such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) conceptualized the human response to death through her *Five Stages of Loss*, underscoring its psychological complexity, while literary figures have continually transformed death into a central theme of poetic expression.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries poetry are rich in depictions of mortality. From Emily Dickinson's contemplations of death as part of life's natural cycle to Sylvia Plath's haunting struggles with identity and self-destruction, poets have approached the subject through diverse lenses shaped by biography, language, and socio-historical context. Death becomes personified as lover, enemy, or companion, embodying contradictions of fear and acceptance, resistance and surrender.

While numerous studies have examined individual poets' engagements with death, fewer have employed a comparative framework that spans literary periods while integrating psychological and statistical-stylistic approaches. Most existing studies tend to be either purely interpretive—emphasizing symbolism and form—or psychological, focusing on grief theory without systematic attention to textual style. This creates a gap for research that bridges literary criticism with a more empirical, structured analysis of how mortality is represented across different eras.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing selected poems from the 19th and 20th centuries using Kübler-Ross's *Five Stages of Loss* as a framework, combined with biographical, stylistic, and historical approaches. By incorporating quantitative descriptive methods, the research seeks to determine how personal experience, linguistic style, and publication period influence the portrayal of death, and whether notable differences exist between Romantic/Victorian and modernist/postmodernist sensibilities. The study contributes to the growing dialogue between literature and psychology, while also demonstrating how statistical analysis can enrich literary interpretation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature has long turned to death as one of its most enduring and enigmatic subjects. Across cultures and centuries, writers have not only grappled with the inevitability of mortality but have also sought to give it shape, meaning, and voice. What emerges is a body of work where death becomes paradoxical—terrifying yet fascinating, inevitable yet deeply personal, destructive yet strangely redemptive.

Scholars such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) frame death in terms of human psychology, emphasizing the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—as a universal yet highly individualized process. Her model has become a cornerstone in understanding how people process mortality, both in life and in literature. Worth (2005) later documented Kübler-Ross's intellectual journey, tracing how her encounters with patients shaped her theorization of dying. Klein and Worth (2000) similarly stress that mortality compels us to value our decisions precisely because life is finite. Howarth and Jupp (1996) extend this view, noting that cultural contexts influence how communities conceptualize and ritualize death, suggesting that literature provides one such cultural expression.

Within the realm of poetry, death assumes multiple identities. Emily Dickinson, for instance, often approached it with quiet contemplation, portraying death as a companion or guide, never entirely fearsome but always inevitable. Daghamin (2017) observes that Dickinson endowed death with human and nonhuman traits—sometimes a suitor, sometimes a coachman, sometimes an adversary—reflecting the contradictions of life itself. Her restrained style underscores how ordinary language can elevate mortality into profound meditation.

Edgar Allan Poe, on the other hand, dramatized death through Gothic imagery, turning it into an almost hypnotic experience. In works like *Annabel Lee*, death is not just an ending but a rupture that intensifies love and longing. Poe's fascination with death often mirrored his personal tragedies, blurring the line between biography and art. Charlotte Brontë's elegiac *On the Death of Anne Brontë* does something similar, though with more subdued intensity, as she writes through the grief of losing her sister. In both cases, personal bereavement becomes inseparable from artistic creation. Dyer (2003) supports this view, arguing that both the nature of the deceased's relationship to the mourner and the manner of death (natural, suicidal, homicidal, or accidental) profoundly shape the grieving process and its literary manifestations.

The twentieth century introduced new tonalities. Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* confronts death through raw personal experience, turning her suicidal struggles into art. Here, death is no longer an abstract symbol but an intimate, lived reality. Likewise, Pablo Neruda's *Nothing but Death* magnifies mortality into a universal force, omnipresent and inescapable, blending lyrical imagery with existential dread. Robert Frost and E.E. Cummings, though stylistically different, also brought fresh language to mortality: Frost through reflective metaphor and pastoral imagery, Cummings through playful yet unsettling personifications.

Even outside poetry, death continues to shape literature. J.K. Rowling, for instance, has acknowledged that the death of her mother influenced the thematic weight of the *Harry Potter* series, where mortality and loss pervade the narrative. This mirrors Rabindranath Tagore's reflection in *Stray Birds*, where he described grief as "man barricading against himself," a reminder that the confrontation with death inevitably reshapes human consciousness and creativity.

Across these examples, one can see how biography and context inflect literary portrayals of death. The universality of death ensures its recurrence in literature, yet its representation is never static. Instead, it has been reimagined as enemy, lover, companion, or release—each incarnation reflecting the emotional, cultural, and stylistic environment of its author. This shifting lens not only enriches our understanding of mortality in art but also underscores why death remains an inexhaustible subject for literary inquiry.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **mixed-method design**, combining qualitative literary analysis with quantitative descriptive techniques to capture both the interpretive depth of poetry and measurable patterns across selected texts. The qualitative component was anchored in close reading, guided by biographical, stylistic, and historical approaches. These lenses allowed the researcher to examine how the poet's personal life shaped the portrayal of death, how stylistic choices reinforced or diluted the theme, and how historical or cultural circumstances influenced the representation of mortality. The psychological framework of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's (1969) *Five Stages of Loss* was then used to cross-analyze these perspectives, offering a structured interpretive model that linked the emotional arc of grief with the poems' thematic content.

To complement the interpretive analysis, a quantitative element was introduced. Five randomly selected World Literature students evaluated eight poems: Emily Dickinson's *If I Should Die*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee*, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Queen Mab*, and Charlotte Brontë's *On the Death of Anne Brontë* from the 19th century; and E.E. Cummings' *Suppose*, Robert Frost's *Spoils of the Dead*, Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus*, and Pablo Neruda's *Nothing but Death* from the 20th century. Each student assessed

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the poems according to three main criteria: the influence of the author's biography, the effectiveness of the language style, and the impact of the year of publication. These responses were recorded using a five-point scale, converted into numerical equivalents, and summarized through mean scores with corresponding verbal interpretations.

The first criterion, **biography of the author**, was grounded in **biographical criticism** (Abrams, 1999), which asserts that a writer's life and experiences often illuminate their works. The rating scale used is shown below.

Table 1. Rating Scale for Biography of the Author

Numerical Equivalent	Verbal Description	Verbal Interpretation
5	Highly Evident	The poem is strongly autobiographical; the author's personal experiences or losses are directly mirrored in the text (e.g., Brontë's elegy for her sister, Plath's confessional poetry).
4	Strongly Evident	Biographical influence is clear and significant, though partially dramatized or fictionalized (e.g., Poe's mourning in <i>Annabel Lee</i>).
3	Moderately Evident	Some elements may be linked to the author's life, but the connection is indirect or generalized.
2	Minimally Evident	Only faint traces of biography are present; influence is speculative or secondary to broader themes.
1	Not Evident	No identifiable biographical connection; the poem treats death in abstract, symbolic, or philosophical terms rather than lived experience.

The second criterion, **language style**, drew from **stylistic criticism** (Leech & Short, 2007), which emphasizes diction, imagery, rhythm, tone, and figurative devices as central to meaning. This was operationalized through the following scale.

Table 2. Rating Scale for Language Style

Numerical Equivalent	Verbal Description	Verbal Interpretation
5	Very Strong	Rich, vivid, and powerful language use; stylistic choices intensify the theme of death, leaving a strong impact on readers.
4	Strong	Language and literary devices effectively convey mortality with clarity and force.
3	Moderate	Stylistic features and imagery are present but limited in depth or originality.
2	Limited	Minimal stylistic devices; language is straightforward or abstract, reducing the poem's impact.
1	Weak/Absent	Little to no stylistic or poetic devices; the theme of death lacks artistic expression.

Finally, the third criterion, **year of publication**, was evaluated using the **historical/period approach** (Wellek & Warren, 1949), which considers how literature reflects its cultural and temporal milieu. The rating scale is presented below:

Table 3. Rating Scale for Year of Publication

Numerical Equivalent	Verbal Description	Verbal Interpretation
5	Very Strong Influence	The poem clearly reflects its historical context; major events or intellectual movements shape its portrayal of death.
4	Strong Influence	Historical context noticeably influences the treatment of death, though not as the primary focus.

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3	Moderate Influence	Some traces of historical or cultural context are evident but remain secondary.
2	Minimal Influence	Only faint hints of historical or cultural context can be identified.
1	No Influence	No discernible impact of historical context; death is treated as a universal and timeless concern.

The scope of the study was deliberately narrow, focusing only on eight Western poems and relying on the judgments of a small group of student evaluators. This choice ensured manageability but also signaled clear limitations: the exclusion of non-Western texts, the limited number of works per century, and the reliance on student readers whose interpretations, while insightful, may not capture the full scholarly depth. Nonetheless, by combining qualitative analysis with semi-quantitative ratings, the study addresses a crucial research gap. Prior scholarship often confines itself either to close reading or to psychological interpretation; few studies attempt to merge these with systematic, comparative analysis across periods. By bridging these approaches, the present study demonstrates that while death is universal, its literary representation is dynamic shaped not only by authorial voice and style but also by the subtle interplay of biography, history, and cultural imagination.

IV. RESULTS

The analysis of the eight selected poems revealed distinct patterns in how death was represented, particularly when examined in relation to the poet's biography, language style, and year of publication. These results not only highlight variations across the 19th and 20th centuries but also confirm the role of lived experience and stylistic intensity in shaping literary portrayals of mortality.

A. Biography of the Author

The first criterion, biography of the author, demonstrated the strongest influence among the three. As shown in Table 4, poems such as Charlotte Brontë's *On the Death of Anne Brontë* (M = 5.0) and Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* (M = 4.8) were rated as "highly evident," directly reflecting personal grief and lived struggles. Poe's *Annabel Lee* (M = 4.2) was likewise rated "strongly evident," with critics often linking the poem to his mourning for his young wife, Virginia Clemm. In contrast, Shelley's *Queen Mab* (M = 1.0) and Cummings' *Suppose* (M = 1.2) were rated "not evident" and "minimally evident," suggesting that their treatments of death were more philosophical or abstract than biographical.

Table 4. Mean Ratings of Selected Poems According to the Author's Biography

Poem	Author	Century	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
<i>On the Death of Anne Brontë</i>	Charlotte Brontë	19th	5.0	A deeply personal elegy written in response to the death of her sister, making biography inseparable from the text.
<i>Lady Lazarus</i>	Sylvia Plath	20th	4.8	Confessional style transforms personal suicide attempts into art, making death both intimate and performative.
<i>Annabel Lee</i>	Edgar Allan Poe	19th	4.2	Personal loss dramatized; grief for his wife translated into Gothic lyricism.
<i>Spoils of the Dead</i>	Robert Frost	20th	2.2	Mortality appears metaphorically but less tied to Frost's own biography.
<i>If I Should Die</i>	Emily Dickinson	19th	1.4	Philosophical meditation on death rather than autobiographical reflection.
<i>Nothing but Death</i>	Pablo Neruda	20th	1.6	Death depicted as universal force, not linked to specific personal grief.
<i>Suppose</i>	E.E. Cummings	20th	1.2	Playful abstraction with no discernible autobiographical traces.
<i>Queen Mab</i> (excerpt)	Percy B. Shelley	19th	1.0	Purely philosophical; no biographical evidence of grief or loss.

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These results confirm what Dyer (2003) observed—that the intensity of grief in literature is often proportionate to the poet’s lived experience with death. Poems written out of direct loss, such as Brontë’s and Plath’s, reveal a depth absent in abstract treatments, underscoring the biographical weight of mortality in art.

B. Language Style

The second criterion, language style, highlighted how stylistic choices amplify or dilute the theme of death. As shown in Table 5, Plath’s *Lady Lazarus* (M = 5.0) and Poe’s *Annabel Lee* (M = 4.8) were rated highest, using vivid imagery, rhythm, and metaphor to intensify death’s presence. Frost’s *Spoils of the Dead* (M = 4.4) and Brontë’s elegy (M = 4.0) also demonstrated strong stylistic use, though with more restraint. At the other end, Shelley’s *Queen Mab* (M = 2.0) and Cummings’ *Suppose* (M = 2.6) were rated low, showing that while both employed experimental or philosophical diction, their styles were less effective in evoking the visceral weight of death.

Table 5. Mean Ratings of Selected Poems According to Language Style

Poem	Author	Century	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
<i>Lady Lazarus</i>	Sylvia Plath	20th	5.0	Rich, visceral imagery makes death immediate and deeply personal.
<i>Annabel Lee</i>	Edgar Allan Poe	19th	4.8	Gothic lyricism and repetition intensify grief and mortality.
<i>Spoils of the Dead</i>	Robert Frost	20th	4.4	Pastoral imagery and reflective tone highlight mortality subtly.
<i>On the Death of Anne Brontë</i>	Charlotte Brontë	19th	4.0	Direct elegiac style conveys sincerity and quiet grief.
<i>If I Should Die</i>	Emily Dickinson	19th	2.8	Compact style conveys mortality with restraint but less vividness.
<i>Nothing but Death</i>	Pablo Neruda	20th	2.8	Universal imagery; less intimate, focusing on collective mortality.
<i>Suppose</i>	E.E. Cummings	20th	2.6	Experimental form personifies death playfully but with limited force.
<i>Queen Mab</i> (excerpt)	Percy B. Shelley	19th	2.0	Elevated diction depicts death abstractly; limited stylistic impact.

These results echo Daghamin (2017), who argued that language can transform death from abstract inevitability into a palpable, humanized presence. Plath and Poe’s high ratings demonstrate how stylistic intensity makes mortality unforgettable, while Shelley’s low rating suggests that abstract diction, though philosophically ambitious, often lacks visceral resonance.

C. Year of Publication

The final criterion, year of publication, revealed a striking uniformity. All poems were rated 1.0, suggesting that the historical moment of publication had little to no influence on how death was represented. This finding underscore what Howarth and Jupp (1996) noted: while cultural rituals shape death in society, literary treatments often transcend historical moment, positioning mortality as a perennial theme. The absence of historical influence suggests that for these poets, death was imagined not as a contextual event but as a universal human experience.

D. Comparative Synthesis

Taken together, these results highlight a critical research gap. While existing scholarship often focuses narrowly on either personal grief or abstract symbolism, this study demonstrates the necessity of integrating biography, style, and context to fully grasp how death is represented in literature. The contrast between the high influence of biography and language style and the negligible influence of publication year suggests that mortality in poetry is less a product of history than of personal experience and artistic craft.

When comparing the two centuries, certain contrasts emerge that sharpen the understanding of how death was represented in literature. The 19th-century poems tended to frame mortality in ways that were either romanticized or allegorical. Shelley’s

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Queen Mab epitomizes this, treating death as a philosophical abstraction, while Dickinson's *If I Should Die* illustrates how the metaphysical was favored over the explicitly personal. Even Poe and Brontë, whose works were rooted in loss, presented death with heightened lyricism or religious overtones, suggesting that 19th-century portrayals leaned toward the universal or symbolic even when biographical influence was strong.

By contrast, the 20th-century poems adopted a far more confessional and visceral tone. Plath's *Lady Lazarus* exemplifies the era's willingness to merge personal trauma with public art, using raw language to collapse the boundary between life and death. Neruda universalized mortality but did so with stark imagery that resonates with existential dread, while Frost and Cummings employed reflective or experimental techniques to reimagine mortality's presence in everyday life. These works suggest that in the 20th century, death was less abstract and more embodied, brought closer to individual consciousness and personal narrative.

This contrast indicates that while death remained a universal theme across both centuries, the mode of representation shifted. In the 19th century, mortality was often filtered through philosophy, religion, or allegory, making it less immediate but more culturally resonant. In the 20th century, mortality became intimate and sometimes unsettling, reflecting the modernist and postmodernist impulse to interrogate the self and dismantle traditional forms. Thus, the findings confirm that the literary treatment of death is not static but evolves with cultural and artistic paradigms, moving from universalized abstraction to personalized confession.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how death is represented in selected 19th- and 20th-century poems, analyzed through the combined lenses of biography, language style, and historical context, and interpreted using Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Loss. The findings provide several key insights.

First, the biographical influence of the author emerged as the strongest factor in shaping the representation of death. Poems such as Charlotte Brontë's *On the Death of Anne Brontë*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee*, and Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* demonstrate that mortality in literature is often inseparable from lived experience. In these works, personal grief becomes artistic creation, confirming that biography infuses the theme of death with emotional authenticity and resonance.

Second, language style played an equally decisive role. Plath's visceral imagery and Poe's gothic lyricism exemplify how stylistic choices amplify the power of mortality in poetry. By contrast, Shelley's philosophical abstractions in *Queen Mab* and Cummings' experimental playfulness in *Suppose* illustrate the limitations of treating death without stylistic embodiment. These results affirm that the impact of death in literature depends not only on what is said but also on how it is expressed.

Third, and most striking, the year of publication was found to have no significant influence. All eight poems scored at the lowest level for this criterion, suggesting that death is treated as a timeless concern rather than as a reflection of specific historical contexts. These findings challenge conventional historical-literary criticism, which often assumes that context heavily shapes content. In the case of death, the theme appears to transcend period-specific influences, anchoring itself instead in personal and universal human experience.

Taken together, these findings point to a broader synthesis. The 19th-century poets often approached mortality through symbolic, allegorical, or philosophical means, while the 20th-century poets leaned toward confessional, visceral, and experimental treatments. Mortality, therefore, is not static in its literary representation but shifts across periods, styles, and personal histories. This confirms that while death is universal, its portrayal is always refracted through individual and cultural lenses.

The study contributes to scholarship by filling a research gap in the analysis of death in literature. Existing studies are often either purely interpretive, focusing on thematic and symbolic readings, or psychological, emphasizing grief theory. Few attempt to combine these approaches with systematic, comparative analysis across literary periods. By integrating literary criticism, psychological theory, and statistical-stylistic methods, this study demonstrates how mortality functions as both a personal experience and an artistic construct.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges its limitations. The analysis was restricted to eight Western poems and to the evaluations of a small group of student readers, which, while insightful, cannot capture the full range of global perspectives on death in literature. Future research may expand the corpus to include non-Western works, enlarge the respondent base, or apply additional frameworks such as cultural studies or trauma theory.

Ultimately, this study affirms that death remains an inexhaustible subject for literary inquiry. It is at once universal and personal, abstract and immediate, terrifying and redemptive. By examining its representations across centuries, the study underscores how literature not only narrates mortality but also gives voice to the complex human effort to understand, resist, and accept it.

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