



Transmogrification of the Danse Macabre Image: Capturing the Journey towards Creativity

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ABSTRACT

This study, “Transmogrification of the Danse Macabre Image: Capturing the Journey towards Creativity,” traces the evolution of the concept of Danse Macabre. In Everyman death takes away the sinful when they least expect it, in Solymon and Perseda everyone falls prey to death irrespective of their deeds and in Tauba-tun-Nasuh, the sinner is plagued. The climatic point in this brief research comes with the Modern texts, *The Moon and Sixpence*, *Roohe-e-Insani* and *Amédée, ou Comment s’en débarrasser*, when Danse Macabre extends its boundaries, uniting the idea of creativity with death. Similarly in the visual context, Danse Macabre image, initially a horrifying idea, becomes a part of the present day comics and serves an entertaining rather than a cathartic purpose.

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Introduction

Ever since the beginning of the world, man has yearned to capture the haunting idea of death in words and images. The phenomenon of death, in all its inscrutability and incomprehensibility, has elicited most profound thoughts from man in all times and circumstances. The mystique of death is a concern of all mortals, regardless of any spacio-temporal or cultural boundaries. This fact instigates the basic contention of this study. The Medieval concept of Danse Macabre has seeped through the ages and has retained its image in the present literary and visual context as well.

‘Danse Macabre’ or the Dance of Death, is a Medieval allegorical concept of the all conquering and equalizing power of death, expressed in the drama, poetry, music and visual arts of Western Europe (“Danse Macabre”). As an allegorical concept, it originated primarily after the wreckage of Black Death in Europe in the Middle Ages. Black Death (Plague) first hit the European Continent between 1347 and 1351. It was both bubonic and pneumonic in nature, destroying more lives than any other known epidemic or war up to that time. Such a large scale of destruction is beyond man’s normal reasoning powers, and his psychological condition can be affected in a curious manner. It’s natural for man to associate various causes and logical explanations with catastrophes. One of the primary schemes of finding method in such madness is reverting to religion, which may console the survivors with its philosophy of good and evil. Thus by delving in the background of the allegorical representation of death in the Danse Macabre concept, various psychological, religious and social factors can be found.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the psychological climate of Europe experienced a moral decline. Black Death devoured human lives catastrophically and the average age of the population fell. The custom of marrying very young girls to men, aged thirty to forty years, increased the number of frustrated young men in their twenties. These young men joined the army, or became a part of the mob on festivals and galas. The “tenor of emotions, conflicts and enterprises became generally more violent” (Fossier 12-13). Added to this

frustration was the injustice which reigned in society. Irrational pardons were granted frequently and the sense of honour and nobility was fading away from the death stricken people. Desperation often led to bouts of anger, “luxurious appetites and pleasures, sexual excesses, immeasurable greed and outrageous clothing”(13). Alongside this lax scenario spirited religious fervor prevailed. Religious feasts were celebrated with enthusiasm. Uncorrupted and morally upright members of clergy were given much esteem (15). Thus the people encountered relentless contradictions in their daily lives which gave birth to nervous tensions. There was an uncertainty in the air and the general populace hung somewhere in the middle of a devotional, religious zest and nonchalant, frivolous and uncouth behaviour. In the origins of Danse Macabre, the shades of this tension are so powerful that they can be seen in the later eras, in the Elizabethan skepticism and Modern cynicism.

Thus uncertainty, doubt and fear were the predominant features of the Medieval psychological landscape after the ruinations of Black Death. The Church’s authority was failing because its philosophy of sin and punishment was no longer valid against the rampant scenes of death. Death manifested itself everywhere in the form of wars, plague, epidemics. It was something inevitable and incomprehensible. To crown it all, the Church was unable to quench the anguish of mortals about mortality. Thus men agonized about death “in a way unknown to their ancestors of the eleventh and twelfth centuries” (18). The way to salvation became obscurer day by day. Nonetheless, despite all the excesses of body and soul, hope of renewal was still there. The efforts of prophets and apostles such as Catherine of Siena and Vincent Ferrer, and of uncorrupted priests brought about a powerful wave of religiosity after 1500.

One important factor related with the religious milieu of the Medieval age is the illiteracy of the masses. The immense crowd in churches was formed often by illiterate people belonging to rural areas. They were dedicated to a traditional and essentially collective form of religion. The popular religion remained a religion of fear and had an inherent believe in the power of obscure forces. This produced rituals of extreme physical torture and affliction, which discarded the most fundamental Christian

doctrines and created a meaning of their own. The apathy of Church towards the prevalent feelings of doubt, led the survivors of Black Death to cling to physical and tangible religious dogmas. The tenets of such religious activities provided immediate consolation to the people suffering from emotional and psychological haziness. One movement of the Medieval age, with such pervert Christian attitude, is specifically important in this respect; the Flagellant Movement. Flagellantism was a 13 century and 14 century radical Christian movement. It began as a militant pilgrimage and was later condemned by the Catholic Church as heretical. The followers were noted for including public flagellation in their rituals. The peak of the activity came around 1347, during the Black Death in Europe. The Flagellant groups spread spontaneously everywhere except in England. Their rituals began with the reading of a letter, claimed to have been delivered by an angel and justifying the Flagellants' activities. Next the followers would fall to their knees and scourge themselves, gesturing with their free hand to indicate their sin and striking themselves rhythmically to songs, known as Geisslerlieder, until blood flowed. Sometimes the blood was soaked up in rags and treated as a holy relic. The text of Geisslerlieder songs was imploring, penitential, and apocalyptic. These lyrics looked at life as a necessary God-given vale of tears in which death reminded people that they must lead sinless lives in order to stand a chance on the Judgment Day. Thus in desperate times, people involved themselves in many absurd activities which gave them hope for divine intervention and a consequent end of their suffering.

Hence, the visual and literary concept of Danse Macabre originated from a culture of fear. With Plague, sickness and war in the background, it emerged as an expression of people bewildered by the ravages of death. With the progression of years, the concept evolved, molding itself according to the altering mechanics of thoughts. Thus what started as a representation of horror and revulsion, ended up being a symbol of positive and creative zest. At this point, a literary review would be highly pertinent and would elucidate the contention of this study that the concept of Danse Macabre has transmogrified into a positive phenomenon after its initiation as a negative one.

Danse Macabre has not been left unexplored by the earlier or contemporary writers. Danse Macabre has been treated primarily as a pictorial manifestation, and the most relevant work in this regard is Sara Godwin's (Godwin 1988). Nonetheless, in various studies, authors have tried to trace the origins and the implications of Danse Macabre as for instance in the study mentioned earlier, by Nancy Caciola, titled "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture." But the author has stopped after an elaboration of the Medieval Danse Macabre. In "Death and Resurrection in the Middle Ages: Some Modern Implication," Caroline Walker has discussed Danse Macabre while documenting Medieval religious values and customs, but has not emphasized it in particular. In "Triumph of Decomposition," Francis Henry Taylor has used the history of Danse Macabre in the background of his study of surrealism in modern art. Further more, there is an article by Margaret Milne Beck title "Dance of Death in Shakespeare," in which she has focused primarily on *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, finding similarities between Ophelia and the gentlemen in the old dances of death.

I would like to start the present study of the transmogrification at the time when Danse Macabre first appeared in literature and visual arts almost simultaneously.

With a religious intensity precariously on the verge of violence and an immense fear of the incomprehensible phenomenon of death, the pictorial representation of death, known as the "Danse Macabre," started in the Middle Ages. According to Kyla Ward, the term made its first appearance in an early 14th Century fragmented poem by Jean Le Fevre, called "Je fis de macabre la danse" ('I Finish the Macabre Dance') (Ward 1-2). Nancy Caciola quotes Emile Male, who has traced the term's origins in literature, in the work of the poet Helinand of the 12th Century. In her book *Religious Art in France*, Male has referred to "Les Verse de la Mort" ('Towards Death'), a poem on death in French language, of which only four stanzas have survived. However, by the beginning of the 14th Century, the Danse Macabre existed in the form of a morality play, "to be publicly performed with actors playing dead men in their winding sheets and taking hands of the living from all walks of life" (Caciola 34). There is also a Spanish play, *La Danza General de la Muerte* (The General Dance of Death'), which dates back to the year 1360, in which dead men are leading the living beings towards Afterlife. The same idea recurs later in the 15th Century morality play *Everyman*.

Along with the pieces of poetry, a pictorial representation of the Danse Macabre concept started as early as the 15th Century. The earliest known fully articulated example of the Danse Macabre was a series of mural paintings in the cloisters of the Church of the Holy Innocents, Paris (Colombia Encyclopedia). The paintings were destroyed in 1669 but a reproduction survives in the 1485 woodcuts of the Paris printer Guyot Marchant. Ward says that these woodcuts revolve around the idea of death as a leading partner in a dance (Ward 15). The most important series of paintings in this context are those of Hans Holbein the younger which were completed in Basle by 1526. Before talking about his paintings, Natalie Zemon Davis says that in the earlier representations of Danse Macabre, Death's accompanying the living only implies its inevitability and unexpectedness. Holbein designed such cuts which make death appear a consequence of sins. So his woodcuts became a pictorial rendering of a purely Christian idea of sin and punishment. Holbein's pictures are independent dramas of their own. Death is shown coming upon his victims in the midst of their surroundings and activities (Davis 102). For example in the woodcut titled "The King", Death is playing with the royal crown while the king listens to the well dressed people and ignore the poor man kneeling near his feet. (Fig.1) Than there is a female Death figure who has come to take a nun from her cell while she is neglecting her rosary for the sake of her lover. (Fig.2)



Fig 1. Hans Holbein, "The Nun," Danse Macabre, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (*Studies in Renaissance* Vol 3 (1956).



Fig.2. Hans Holbein, “The Emperor,” *Danse Macabre*, Ottley Collection, British Museum. (*Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol 7 (April, 1976).

This is an obvious satire on the deceptive facades and neglect of duty by the clergy. Connected with the religious doubts of the period, the theme of the woodcut titled “The Nun” reflects upon the sinful acts of the upholders of religion. The Nun is listening to the serenades of a young man in her room and what makes the situation more sinister is the fact she is involved in sin at the time of her prayers. The religiously zealous strongly believed that death was an outcome of sins and the declining of the Church’s authority was a result of negligent individuals like the Nun.

The physical appearance of the Death figure in Medieval iconography is a highly interesting study of its own. In the paintings of Alfred Rethel, Death is disguised in mortal apparel. He is recognized by the victims however, who are shown fleeing from him in horror. (Fig.3)



Fig 3. Alfred Rethel, *Auch ein Totentanz*, Suermond Ludwlg Museum Aachen, by Anne Gold, *The Art Bulletin* Vol 82: March 2000.

In Holbein’s woodcuts, Death is often in a playful mood, bearing a mocking grin as he plays around people of high social profile. The figures of death were also shown as emaciated corpses, in the middle of the process of decay. The artists pictured “skin that stretched taut over bony limbs, but burst open over the entrails_ an area of body subject to early decomposition” (Caciola 44). Such images can be connected with the body images in the modern day images of hunger struck Ethiopian and Somalian children. The image of Death figure forms a vital part of the Danse Macabre iconography with its

inevitable mockery and laughter over the ignorant and erring mortals.

The concept of Danse Macabre has two important fragments; *Memento Mori* and *Ars Moriendi*. *Memento Mori* meant “Remember, thou too shalt die.” In a tradition of Imperial Rome, the victorious generals were accompanied by a slave who constantly chanted “Remember thou art mortal”(Ward 18). In the Medieval times, *Memento Mori* stood as a reminder of mortality for the people, focusing on the rewards and castigations of the Afterlife. It includes symbols such as skulls, bones, coffins, urns, and angel of death, upside-down torches, graves and ravens, cypresses, weeping willows, tuberose, parsley, and many more. *Memento Mori* was a direct contradiction of the *Carpe Diem* strain of thought in classical antiquity, which meant “seize the day,” eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we may die (Schlicke 221). In *Memento Mori* on the other hand, there is the idea of Christian suffering. In Christianity, the prospect of death serves to emphasize the blankness and temporariness of earthly pleasures, luxuries and achievements. Thus the decaying corpses, half eaten cadavers and Grim Reapers in the Danse Macabre illustrations are facets of *Memento Mori*.

Related with *Memento Mori*, *Ars Moriendi* is an important component of the Danse macabre concept. *Ars Moriendi* or the “Art of Dying” emerged as a body of Christian literature during the Plague years. The fragility of life during the Black Death had raised several questions about individual judgment immediately after death. *Ars Moriendi* was a part of the Church’s educational program for the priests and laymen alike. It contained guidance for the dying and for their attendants, and by doing so it ritualized the pain and grief of dying. The ritualization sort of formatted the grief and made it perhaps more manageable. There is also the point that when attention is diverted towards issues of rituals, customs, prayers and religious practices, than the questions about fate, about the logic behind good and evil, are sidelined.

Knowledge of the origins of the Danse Macabre concept is vital to the understanding of its evolution, which forms the main contention of this study. The concept has vividly evolved in literature and image world. Thus the present study starts with an appraisal of the Medieval morality play *Everyman*, in which a figure of Death is present on stage, representing the horror and fear of an ultimate annihilation of the physical self. The erring human being is flabbergasted when Death arrives to take him to the Afterlife, because he has not prepared for the journey during his stay on earth. From among all the friends, only “Good-Deeds” agree to go with Everyman on his fateful journey. At the end *Everyman* repents and is forgiven by the Angel. The plain enough moral, staring from every word, is that everyone should be aware and afraid of the horrors of death which overtakes the sinful in an unexpected manner. Fear is a dominant emotion of the play, depicted through Death carrying a dart and a message of condemnation from God. Death is shown to have no will of his own and acts on the instructions given by God.

In the Elizabethan play *Solyman and Perseda*, Death is still there in the form of a character, but there are new dimensions to it as compared with the Death figure in *Everyman*. Death in *Solyman and Perseda* is whimsical and daring, even when he is a part of the Chorus instead of being one of the major players. The caprice and omnipotence of Death are the notable points. He is bound by the will of God as much as the Medieval Death is, yet he has an unmistakable streak of individuality in him. He

is no longer a 'death for all' figure, instead he is Death as 'death' should appear to be; callous, deriding and erratic.

The early Elizabethan tragedy, *Solyman and Perseda*, mirrors the transmogrification of the death 'image' and 'attitude', from the fifteenth till sixteenth century. Erastus, the young knight in love with Perseda, kills Fernando in order to get back the chain which Perseda had given to him and as a result he is banished from Portugal to the Turkish land where he becomes King Solyman's protégée. When Solyman's army conquers Rhode, Perseda is taken a prisoner and presented before Solyman who immediately falls for her and is devastated later on when he realizes that Perseda is his protégée's lover. Solyman gets Erastus killed in full awareness of his sins and faces Death after kissing the poisonous lips of the dying Perseda.

As far as the change in death 'image' is concerned, Death is a character in *Solyman and Perseda*, as it was in *Everyman*; but here Death is a part of the Chorus only. Death's presence is not imposing. He has no verbal communication with the protagonists, Solyman, Perseda and Erastus. In *Everyman*, Death is the interpreter and messenger of God. He takes lives but he is not capable of exercising this action according to his own free will. He gives commands of God, leaves the stage and remains invisible in the rest of the play, though his presence is felt by the characters.



Fig 8. "Death comes even to kings," Roxburghe Ballads (1847), University of Victoria Library (Dialog File <http://www.internetshakespeareeditions.com>)

Talking about the transfiguration of death 'image', it would be interesting to note that in the Medieval morality plays, Death is an important and dominating character but his physical appearance is not described. In this Elizabethan text, however, there is a vivid description of the physical appearance of Death in Basilico's monologue at the end of Act IV, and in Solyman's last speech before his death. When Perseda asks Basilico to kill Lucina for her, he refuses. When Perseda herself kills Lucina and leaves the stage, Basilico starts a soliloquy in which he pays homage to Death and confesses that his love for his own well being is stronger than his love for Perseda. He eulogizes Death because of its immortal and transcendent nature. Death is described as a pale and haggard creature by appearance. But it has the power to end the lives of great warriors of all times, known for their physical strength and adroitness in battle fields. The idea behind a weak physical image of Death is to highlight the inevitable hold he possesses.

Basilico: I will ruminare Death, which the poets
Fain to be pale and meager,
Hath deprived Erastus's trunk from breathing vitality
Where is the leader of the Myrmidons,
That well-knit Achilles? Dead...

I am myself strong, but I confess death to be stronger;
To conclude in a word: to be captious, virtuous,
ingenious,

Are to be nothing when it pleaseth death to be envious.
(63)

Death is physically weak, lean and has a loose knitted body. That is why he is envious of the strong, muscular bodies of combatants like Hercules, Achilles, Ajax, Alexander and in this play, Erastus and Solyman. Perhaps the Elizabethan image of Death is somewhat like the figure in the pictorial rendering of Roxburghe Ballads. (Fig 8)

When Solyman is dying because of the poison he has sucked from Perseda's lips, he also visualizes the person of Death sitting on his soul. An interesting point would be, to imagine whether the director of the play would have used the actor playing Death in the chorus, to stand by the dying Solyman's side or perhaps in the background. Nonetheless, the weak, haggard creature of Death has introduced a hellish fire in the sturdy and tough Solyman. The image of the poison spreading in his veins is closely connected with the image of a blood-less creature sucking his very soul:

The poison is dispersed through every vein,
And boils, like Aetna, in my frying guts...
And now, pale Death sits on my panting soul,
And with revenging ire doth tyrannize,
And says: "for Solyman's too much amiss,
This day shall be the period of my bliss." (145-55)

Death's fury is unleashed on an erring, wrongful mortal. There can also be a hidden implication in Death's saying that "Solyman is too much amiss." Death gives full leverage to the human beings who go astray and then attacks on them when they are least aware of its approach. So Death willfully keeps his victims oblivious of his assaults.

Linked up with his physical appearance is his grandeur and pomp, which create a potent verbal spectacle at the very end of the play. Death, as foretold in the title and in expository scene, triumphs at the end. When Fortune or Love triumphs, the story becomes a comedy, but when Death becomes the "chiefest actor", there remains nothing but tragedy, "For powerful Death best fitteth Tragedies." (29)

Death is rightfully boastful at the end because his prophecies have been proved true. In the tragedy of Solyman and Perseda, the deeds of Death gave the major and final turning to the plot. The boastful, vain and exultant behaviour of Death is in close contrast with the subordinate, slavish temperament of Death in *Everyman*. This is the shift, the change in the image of Death from fifteenth till sixteenth Century. The Elizabethan Death personification holds his bony head high when he is successful in creating a ghastly, bloody spectacle on stage. The Medieval Death figure has a docile messenger's aura about it despite the frequent hints at his wrath.

Death: By wasting all, I conquer all the world...
In this last act note but the deeds of Death.
Where is Erastus now, but in my triumph?
Where are the murtherers, but in my triumph?
Where Judge and witnesses, but in my triumph?
Where's false Lucina, but in my triumph?
Where's fair Perseda, but in my triumph? (14-21)

Death lists every character, every one of his victims, in order to demonstrate his ultimate power. Whether the human beings were fair or foul, false or great, Death overtook them all. The spectacle of Death's 'triumph' is culminated in the final image of his riding with the souls in his royal coupe. Death says:

“Aye, now will Death, in his most haughty pride, / Fetch his imperial Car from deepest hell, / And ride in triumph through the wicked world;” (34-36)

Death has made one exception to his general rule of life-taking. He has vowed to spare “scared Cynthia’s friend.” In Greek Mythology, Cynthia is the virgin goddess of the hunt and the moon; daughter of Leto and twin sister of Apollo; identified with Roman Diana. She is a symbol of unmatched beauty and the captivating power of moonlight. Because of the magic alchemy exercised by her light upon the things of earth, the heightened mystery, poetry, and withal unity of aspect which she sheds upon them, she becomes a symbol of Beauty itself.⁷ So Cynthia’s friends would be people who are true aesthetes—who have the ability to worship beauty beyond hope of any worldly good. The flaw therefore in Perseda and Erastus’ love, in their aesthetic bonding is that they thought that the mere token of jewels were parameters with which one’s love can be measured. When the confusion over the loss of carcanet rises, Perseda no longer trusts her love, or her instincts which tell her that Erastus is innocent. And because of that carcanet, Erastus ends up murdering Ferdinando and has to seek refuge in a foreign land. Death prophesizes at the end of this scene of tumult: “And more than so; for he that found the chain, / Even for that chain shall be deprived of life” (27-28).

Erastus is going to be dead then because the loss of chain, of material wealth, has led him to his extermination. The chain is found by him after shedding of blood. Perseda belongs to him again with all her heart, but they have catered more to the need of their worldly wishes and thus have strayed from the path of higher, spiritual love.

That is why Death has not spared them and in the end too they are not utterly united. Solyman would be sharing their grave with them. Thus according to the fatal formulae of Death, the human beings in love with world are bound to be led in a dance of doom, and all meet the same end. The single grave of Solyman, Erastus and Perseda can be the dramatic equivalent of Holbein’s ‘Danse of Death’ series.

So as far as physical appearance goes, the character of Death in medieval morality plays has less grandeur and opulence about it than the Elizabethan personification of death. Both Death figures have a masculine gender, and both carry a ‘dart,’ but Death in *Solyman and Perseda* is described more vividly. He is exultant, boastful and yet pale and lean and leaves the mortal world in his “imperial Car.”

Death in *Solyman and Perseda* has a very authoritative personality. He does not mention for once, his dependence on a higher, divine order of command. This lends a powerful and baleful, rather ominous touch to the person of Death. Even when the author does not put it into words until the end, the fact that Death has more influence than either Love or Fortune is declared in the title; “The Tragedy of Solyman and Perseda, wherein is laide open, / Loves conftancy, Fortunes inconfancy, and Deaths Triumphs.”

From the very opening speech, Death manifests a high degree of self-assurance and omnipotence. He calls both Love and Fortune, his “subjects” and asks them to vacate the place for him. He thinks of himself as the person most suitable for leading the Chorus, because “what are tragedies but acts of death?” The “Wrathful muse” of death should tell the tragedy which was written in “husky humor” by “her bloody quill.” It was Death which laid the foundation of the tragedy in the first place by cutting short the lives of the chief characters. Thus Death proclaims that in the tragedy, “chiefest actor was my sable dart.”

Death in ‘Everyman’ attempts to give logic behind all his actions, the Divine logic. The Elizabethan personification of death on stage is not inhibited by such fears. When he fails to take Bragardo’s life because “Fates” have not given him leave, he takes other lives to “accomplish” his life taking task. So the idea is that Death has certain limitations but he is capable of exercising the right to take lives. Perhaps Elizabethan consolation for the ruthlessness of death was that it had not been perpetrated by God. Some agent other than God was involved in the process of extermination of individuals. Death declares: “And here and there in ambush Death will stand, / To mar what Love or Fortune takes in hand (18-19).

This leads to the second part of analysis of *Solyman and Perseda* in relation with *Danse Macabre*, which is the Elizabethan ‘attitude’ towards death. As mentioned earlier, the culmination of Elizabethan tragedy was the destruction of the feeling individual through collision with the unfeeling larger system, either societal or religious. As a consequence, the most powerful Elizabethan tragic protagonists are neither Christians, nor live in England. The Elizabethans were perhaps averse to the idea that their socio-religious culture could fester such hapless characters as Barabas, Shylock and Solyman.

Solyman is a victim of fate, fortune and in the end, of death. Despite the fact that he murdered Erastus, Perseda and several others, he is not a villain. This shows the basic change in the ‘attitude’ towards death from Medieval till Elizabethan period. Medieval morality focused its attention on abstractions. Therefore Good-Deeds alone agrees to accompany Everyman on his last journey. But even in an early Elizabethan tragedy such as *Solyman and Perseda*, the apparent villain is vulnerable to the ravages of Fates. Solyman is honest and open in his relationships with friends and foes before his ill luck makes him fall in love with Perseda. He even accepts the irony that his best loved friends were lovers ere they met him: “By this accident I well perceive/ That heavens and heavenly powers do manage love.../I love them both, I know not which the better (169-71).

His speech after the revelation of Perseda Erastus affair, explores the confusion of values and aspirations in his mind. He feels full of revenge, frustration and anger but doesn’t know how to locate the real adversary. His weakness and henceforth his tragedy, is rooted in his love for Perseda: “Heavens, Love, and Fortune, all three have decreed/ That I shall love her still, and lack her still,/Like ever-thirsting, wretched Tantalus...” (16-18).

Solyman’s true foe is something Divine and intangible. He rules the world but feels entrapped in the bonds of love and friendship simultaneously. The decision to kill Erastus is not abrupt. He is ready for revenge after his loss of love, after his alienation from his friends because of the emotions he harbors inside him, and Erastus perhaps fits the role of a possible oppressor for the moment. That is why he accepts Brusor’s suggestion of Erastus’s murder. Accordingly, in the Chorus following Solyman’s decision of murder, Death takes the responsibility for all the emotional chaos, shortly to be turned into a fatal spectacle.

Death: And I suborned Brusor with envious rage
To counsel Solyman to slay his friend.
Brusor is sent to fetch him back again.
Mark well what follows, for the history
Proves me chief actor in this tragedy. (14-18)

In Medieval *Danse Macabre*, Death leads the anomalous away from the mortal world. In Elizabethan *Danse Macabre*, Death plays the role of a contriver and schemer as well. This

complexity in the role of Death arose because in all probability, the keen on learning Elizabethans could not digest the iron clad medieval moral structure behind the working of Death. Death for them was something bizarre, mystic and unexplored. Majority of people were Catholics, who believed that Priests and the Pope were able to forgive sins - at a price. Gifts, or indulgences, were given to the church (Macfarlane 88). And along with the doubtful material consciousness of religion, there were public spectacles of sheer physical torture. The greatest and most grievous punishment used in England for an offence against the State was drawing the prisoner, from the prison to the place of execution upon an hurdle or sled, where he was hanged till half dead, and then taken down, quartered alive. After that, his limbs and bowels were cut from his bodies and thrown into a fire, provided near hand and within his own sight ("Crime and Punishment in Elizabethan England"). Thus the whimsical slaughter by Death was not a strange thing for the Elizabethan audience.

Solyman becomes therefore, the Elizabethan Everyman, an individual estranged from society because of his emotions. He is not a villain so he cannot revel in the glory of power. He is not innocent, and cannot thus communicate with others without a pang of guilt. He mourns the loss of Erastus more than he laments his own death. He revenges the wrongs of Fate by the extermination of his own being: "Forgive me, dear Erastus, my unkindness. /I have revenged thy death with many deaths;" (147-8).

The tragedy on which this study focuses and which is written towards the end of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, the Danse Macabre concept has shrugged away its moral connotations. The basic strain of thought was not molded on the Medieval pattern of good and evil. Rather it questioned the fragility and unpredictability of life and the role of individual efforts. Nonetheless, dealing with a universal phenomenon, the Danse macabre concept can spill over the English scenario and become a part of the Indian scenario, thus providing a seminal link in the study of comparative literature.

The concept of Danse Macabre encompasses a universal fear of death, physical deformity and absolute annihilation. It was this trepidation which gave birth to the image of a mocking skeleton in the Fifteenth Century Danse Macabre series of paintings. The ravages of Black Death in Middle Ages left people as amazed by the inevitability and absurdity of death as the Elizabethans were years later. The concept of Danse Macabre keeps on evolving because every age has tried to grasp the fear of death according to its socio-cultural and religious way. The spectacle of massive deaths by epidemics and war triggers a kind of questioning which is universal in nature. The difference transpires when people arrive at conclusions and answers for the phenomenon of mortality. The basic derive behind the concept of Danse Macabre has been the consuming destruction of Plague in the Middle Ages and then in the late Elizabethan era. The Elizabethan skeptical mind in the year 1603 was able to accept the inescapability of death without any trappings of Medieval morality even after witnessing the ghastly scenes of Plague's destruction. Yet years later, in the Indian Subcontinent, under the Victorian rule, learned men reverted to the Medieval pattern of thought.

In the background of the Danse Macabre concept present in the literature of the Indian subcontinent, there is a wide level of epidemic destruction. In 1861 there was a huge outbreak of cholera, ending the lives of millions of Indian and European lives. In the closing years of Victoria's reign, bubonic plague

spread rapidly across India. Between 1896 and the end of 1901, 688,000 Indians died because of it.

In the Subcontinent, a fear of deformity was immediately associated with an unruly and ungodly behaviour. This reflects upon the circular movement of the Danse Macabre concept. Starting from the Fifteenth Century it had shrugged off its moralistic garb and had become multidimensional. However in the Subcontinent its reversion to the *Everyman* model becomes apparent in the fiction of Deputy Nazir Ahmad, particularly in *Tauba-tun-Nasuh*.^{*} Nasuh is an ordinary man living a life of comfort until the day he grasps the inevitability of death and his own moral and religious flaws. He then becomes an passionate advocate of religion and takes up the responsibility of reforming his family and saving them from a life of sin and eventual doom. Thus here again there is the Medieval moral segregation of Good-Deeds and Bad-Deeds leading 'bad men' to the damnation of Death.

The novel starts with a vivid description of deaths by cholera in Delhi in 1876. The "Doctor of Doom" took thirty to forty lives each day. The only "warmth" to be seen was in the "Death-market," other than that there was silence and desolation everywhere. A comparison between the markets of living creatures and the "death-market" is given in order to accentuate the gravity of the situation. The rattling of pots, the vendors' voices, casual rendezvous and rush hours, all had been swallowed by the "Doctor of Doom." The survivors were worse than the dead ones because after witnessing frequent deaths their nerves gave way and they were "benumbed" with the fear of approaching death. The most important point in the context of Danse Macabre is that this fear led people to the houses of worship, the Mosques:

Negligence was attacked with intense force that people warmly turned to their religious duties. The people who did not even pray five times in Ramadan were there in the front rows five times a day. The temporariness of worldly life and the transitory nature of relationships was being carved on the hearts of people. Their hearts were lit with the glow of redemption. Thus life in those days was an embodiment of that kind of purity, sanctity and selflessness which is preached by religion.

There is an explicitly contradictory attitude observable here. The fear of death had forced people into doing things which they would not have done normally. So the truth and validity of such devotion becomes questionable in the very beginning of the novel. Later in the course of the novel, the blatant and obligatory moral structure would give birth to insipid and unreal characters.

The main character of the novel, Nasuh, experiences a peculiar kind of helplessness in the face of death and reverts to religion. He takes all sorts of preventions against the disease, but three people in his house die of it one after another in three days. Few days later Nasuh gets nauseated, probably because of over-eating, and thinks that he has contracted cholera. As the symptoms are those of cholera, so it is generally assumed that Nasuh is about to go on the eternal journey. He is flabbergasted and keeps on listing the chores which would be left undone in case of his death. His family, property, business interactions, all would be in total jeopardy. In the midst of these musings, Nasuh goes into a deep sleep under the influence of a relaxing drug. In his intoxicated sleep, he goes on the journey of *Everyman*. His travel takes him to the place where the Last Judgment is being held. That is the difference between his and *Everyman's*

^{*} Deputy Nazir Ahmad, *Tauba-tun-Nasuh*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2004. All translations are mine.

journey. Medieval Everyman is being taken by Death towards that scene of Last Judgment and the Victorian Nasuh goes to witness the scene in his drug infused slumber. There he sees a huge building, "similar to a High Court," in which thousands of people are awaiting something in total silence. Then his gaze wanders to the prison adjacent to the Court and he sees his dead father there. When he asks his father that why he is there because as far as Nasuh knew, his father was a pious man.

The replies of Nasuh's father constitute the main body of the death thesis in *Tauba-tun-Nasuh*, relatively analogous to *Everyman*. After the refusal of Kindred, Fellowship and Goods, Everyman is left only with Good-Deeds to accompany him on his fatal journey. Likewise Nasuh's father regrets having spent his life in futile activities of hoarding wealth, indulging the whims of relatives and doing lip service to religion. When he professes his devotion before God, he is bombarded with reminders of his sinfulness and negligence:

Did you not think that Our endless bounties of luxury and comfort were outcomes of your own contrivances? And did you not accuse Us for the pain which you suffered because of your own ill doings? O forgetful, unruly spirit! Why couldn't you accept Our bounties for once with a word of gratitude from thine lips.

There is the obvious echo here of the God in *Everyman*, reminding man of his disobedience:

I perceive here in my majesty,
How that all the creatures be to me unkind,
Living without dread in worldly prosperity:
Of ghostly sight the people be so blind,
Drowned in sin, they know me not for their God. [22-26]

Nasuh's father presents a picture of man's inherent sinfulness and the plight of non-believers after the Last Judgment. The pattern of moral dicta is comparable in *Tauba-tun-Nasuh* and *Everyman* because in both works of literature there is an attempt to comprehend the devastation of epidemics, the suddenness and inescapability of death. Everyman tried to bribe Death in the hope of being given more time, but Nazir Ahmad's Nasuh is taken to the very scene of Last Judgment where he sees his father's plight and repents. Everyman's repentance has been delayed and when realization dawns on him, Death has already arrived to take him away. Nasuh has time enough on his hands to redeem not only his self but his family too. The interesting point is that the redeemed Nasuh is devoid of the spirit of life. "Rot talk, impish laughter, participation in meaningless conversation; he left everything." "When his other habits changed, he also became a recluse. He used to sit alone in the upper storey all day long. If some one came uninvited, he was not rude with them but avoided company to the maximum." Deep involvement in religion closely related with a fear of horrific death makes Nasuh a redeemed character, larger than life and without any vivacity or vigour. In terms of a Medieval Morality play, he would become the personification of "Bad Man Turned Good Man," serving a didactic purpose in the story by showing others a righteous path to deal with the horrors of death.

Contrasted with Nasuh and presented as the personification of "Bad Deeds," is Nasuh's eldest son Kalim. He is proud of his education and his poetic talents. In the novel there are quite a few references about the evil influence of literature on youth and children. The erotic themes of Persian and Urdu poetry are considered unhealthy and detrimental for the growth of a pious soul. That is why Nasuh burns Kalim's library and destroys his chess boards and play cards etc. Besides the poetry, cards and

company of greedy sinful friends, Kalim's basic flaw, if any, is his pride which forbids him to repent like his father. Other than that, even the detailed listing of his flaws, which are more or less the whims and recreations of a vivacious young man, fails to create the required impression of evil. This forced sense of evil is the essential component of the Victorian *Danse Macabre* in the Indian Subcontinent. There has to be something sinister, something evil in the conduct of mortal men which would lurk behind the ravages of death by epidemics and wars. "Kalim is raw and headstrong, but there appears no reason, when you come to think of it, why he should have been so unlucky in his friends, or why he should have been so consistently dogged by misfortunes. The only answer is that it served the author's end to do so... [Kalim dies] obligingly to enable the author to deliver his last sermon to clinch the moral" (Sadiq 412). After thwarting continuous efforts of his family to help him morally and financially, he is exploited by one friend after another and even ends up in jail. He is shown as a man devoted to appearances. "He dressed up with such a care that suits only women. Woke up late in the morning, quite near noon. Then started preening before the mirror deity till the evening." His sins, of possessing a poetic talent and preferring a life of enjoyment, are exaggerated in order to emphasize the magnitude of his torturous death.

Nasuh wins his battle against choleric death and old age because of the goodness of his soul and his passionate repentance. The unrepentant Kalim's end serves as a lesson for all with the vivid details of his horror. The handsome Kalim joins the army, when all other doors of income have been closed upon him, and gets a bullet wound in his knee. This wound is not considered to be a reflection upon his bravery but a result of his sinful pride in physical and poetical attributes. His wounded body is called a "lump" which is taken to the Physician who operated and severed one foot from his body. Kalim, who has lived a luxurious life, could not bear the pain "and his condition became poorer day by day with fever. His wound worsened and started to fester with germs. Such a gorgeous young man melted away on bed in a few days." He is taken back to his parents' home which he had left in pride and arrogance. The clichéd story of the prodigal son is connected with the *Danse Macabre* concept when Kalim gives his death bed speech. He is clearly able to see his end as the infection of his wounds spreads and has made a "living cadaver" out of his once healthy body:

There isn't a single drop of blood, which is the crux of life, in my body. In fact I know that the marrow in my bones has been evaporated after continuous melting.

This "living cadaver" with melted marrow is the epitome of both *Memento Mori* and *Ars Moriendi* fragments of *Danse Macabre*. Kalim's end is not supposed to evoke a pitiful or cathartic response in the readers of Victorian India, but just a fear of bad deeds. The "living cadaver" seem to follow the Medieval tradition and saying along with the skeleton in Holbein's woodworks that 'as I am, thou shalt be one day.' It provided the consolation that bad deeds and sacrilegious actions lead to untimely deaths.

Moreover Kalim's death documents *Ars Moriendi* as well; 'the art of dying.' Nasuh as the embodiment of 'Good Man' gives a calculated demonstration of how to act when a loved one is dying. When his dying son's carriage arrives at his door, he is reciting Holy Quran. He hears the cries and moans of his wife "but he was such an emotionally stable man that he continued to recite as per his routine and then came out towards the carriage." Then he tells his wife that grief is natural for human beings but

it is better to rise above such failings because they create “feelings of doubt” towards the Creator. Then his wife wipes her tears after listening to the “powerful sermon.” *Tauba-tun-Nasuh* thus becomes an imperative part of the transformative journey of the Danse Macabre concept because it provides the blue print of how pious and God fearing men should act when encountering untimely deaths by epidemics or wars, which are usually the outcome of man’s sinful nature. By providing this blue print, the novel demonstrates the regress of the concept to its Medieval archetype and establishes the grounds for a comparative literary study.

This idea of a purposeful and significant death marks the evolution of the Danse Macabre concept. The purposefulness of death depicted in Victorian fiction grows further and links the concept with creativity in literature of the Modern period. Hence in *The Moon and Sixpence*, there is the London stockbroker Charles Strickland, who suddenly abandons family and career to become a painter. He is a man possessed by demonic forces and does not care a pin for any moral or social sense of decorum. But when Strickland dies, he is neither purging nor deserting the world like Kalim. Instead he has delved deep into the mystery of the universe and has captured its maddening beauty with his masterpiece. Strickland dies as a leper, alienated from society. This would have been the epitome of a sinful existence and consequent eradication in the Medieval scenario, but in the Modern, evolved version of Danse Macabre, his death is a part of a larger and significant creative process. The Modern Danse Macabre subsists in the post world war world and has witnessed annihilation larger than the epidemics of plague and cholera could ever have created. For solace, the Modernists have no moral schemata because it had been destroyed in as early as the later Elizabethan era. Their consolation thus lies in the creative, regenerative process. The post world war set-up and the connection of death with some creative force, again establishes grounds for a comparative literary study. In *The Moon and Sixpence* the anguished artist finds his destination and his peace of mind in his artistic expression. He dies when his expression has been fully articulated. In the Urdu play of Rajindar Singh Beidi, *Rooh-e-Insani*, this artistic expression is portrayed in the form of a prisoner, captured in the jail of a society which believes in pseudo moral values. The prisoner is mentally tortured by the law enforcing authorities, who take a sadistic pleasure in the process of tormenting the artist. The articulation of imagination takes up the role of a genderless character whose form is similar to the Medieval and Elizabethan death figures. Hence death is coupled with the creative process across the geographical borders, in the period after the First World War.

In such a comparative study, a similar theme can be traced in a French play of the Absurdist Theatre; *Amédée, ou Comment s’en débarrasser*, which would help in the demonstrating the transmogrification of the Danse Macabre concept. An unidentified corpse in a room of the Amédée apartment grows bigger and disgusting everyday. The corpse can be interpreted as a symbol of Amédée’s mental stagnation, since he has not been able to complete the manuscript of his play in three years. This interpretation is substantiated by the fact that the moment Amédée takes the corpse out of its confinement, it starts becoming weightless. At last, the corpse becomes as light as a balloon and floats away in the sky, taking Amédée with it. In poetry, flying in air is associated with unbridled imagination, the breeze of creative forces. So in a way, the rotting corpse becomes a symbol of emancipation and inspiration, changing the concept of Danse Macabre with full verve.

Danse Macabre took its first breathe in the image world and did not leave it afterwards. The basic drive behind the concept was the fear of death by plague which had haunted the Medieval sensibilities. The skeletons became the icons of that fear of something unprecedented, unknown and mysterious. People of all ages have tried to thwart this fear with a religious zest. Thus the belief that only sinful are taken by the horrific Death has somehow remained attached to the concept of Danse Macabre. The trepidations of annihilation triggered by the skeletal figures and the consequent bent towards moral well being have manifested themselves in the print and electronic media time and again. This section is an attempt to trace the presence of Danse Macabre fragments in contemporary image culture. Compared with the earlier representations of the concept, the contemporary image cultural would reflect a change in the general attitude towards death and physical destruction.

In the concept of Danse Macabre, fear of death runs parallel with a dread of physical corrosion. In *Tauba-tun-Nasuh*, the prodigal son Kalim, who is so careful about maintaining good looks, ends up dying with a disgusting infection of wounds, giving a moral lesson. However, in the later eras, physical corrosion was no longer related to moral or spiritual decay. The glamorous world of modern fashion accentuates the value of a slim and slender body. The images of ultra thin models lead to various nervous diseases, which earn the body a look worthy of any skeleton dancing in Holbein’s Danse Macabre series of woodcuts. (Fig 13-14)



Fig 13-14. Anita Mahatrapa. Pre-Bulimic Catwalk. Live Journals, 2005 (Dialog file

<http://www.livejournal.com/mahatrapa>)

The skeletal thin figures which were used in past to evoke horror and fear are now a part of the fashion statement. Hence the image of the character of death is no longer alien to the modern man.

Thus in the modern age there is a perverted sense of torture. The Elizabethans created spectacles of horror on stage to voice their skepticism and the acknowledgment of the transience of life, the *Memento Mori* dictum. In the current scenario, human beings torture themselves and voluntarily shake hands with death so that they may acquire a transient splendor. So in the body images of the fashion models, there are obvious traces of the Danse Macabre image as it was in the Medieval and Victorian period. These pictures are not illustrations of the original Danse Macabre philosophy of good and evil. The personification of death in them stands for the degeneration and frustration of society. Degeneration, because modern man is capable of selling the misery of other human beings and frustration because in order to be a part of an obscure cult of beauty, the physical self is put through severe torture.

Perhaps the most remarkable change in the concept of Danse Macabre is the transmogrification of the character of death. The Grim Reaper coming to take away the souls of erring mortals was a symbol of fear. With cavities in place of eyes and nose, and with a mouth divested of lips, the Death figure was created to cast an ironic glance at the unrepentant world. In modern times however, the image of Death figure has been transformed. Starting as an embodiment of the inevitability and fatality of death, the Grim Reaper has now become the protagonist in various comics. In Mark Parisi comics, the Grim Reaper is pictured as a family man living in the suburbs with his wife and kid. (Fig 18) In this way everyday, household dialogues are turned into humorous quips. There are also comics by Randall McIlwaine which portray Grim Reapers as a part of casual office jokes. (Fig 19)



Fig 18. Mark Parisi. "Grim Reaper," *Off The Mark* (Dialog File <http://www.offthemark.com>)

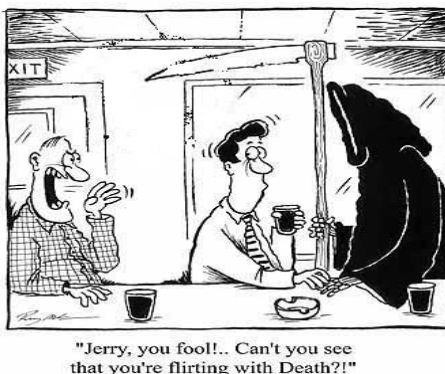


Fig 19. Randall McIlwaine.. *CSL Cartoon Stock* (Dialog File <http://mcllwaine.cslcartoon.com/reaper>)

The electronic vision does not end with the portrayal of the Death figure in cartoons. It brings the elements of humour in something utterly horrific and attempts to beautify the very centre of an unreservedly stark and bleak phenomenon. A Japanese animation has gone several steps further than Mark Parisi and has given the Grim Reaper, the form of a sprightly little girl. In the animation titled "YuYu Hakusho," sweet faced Botan (Fig 20) is the Grim Reaper since she works for the devil's own son. She has a bubbly personality and a girlish voice. She spins in the air and rides on logs and sticks. This is a clear manifestation of the modern way of thought which registers the evil *beneath* the enchanting exteriors and does not necessarily need a Holbein modus operandi for this purpose.



Fig 20. "Botan," *YuYu Hakusho*, Wikki Media. (dialog File <http://www.wikimedia.com/botan>)

The modern mind is not only able to see beneath the exterior but it is also able to appreciate the repulsiveness of an exterior as an art form. The deadly figures which were used by the Medieval clergy to insinuate a pious horror, have culminated in the heroic and charismatic villainous figures like Botan and Grim Reaper.

Danse Macabre is a literary and visual concept which is evolving constantly, without any hint of reaching a dead end. As long as man would continue to be mortal, Danse Macabre would continue to survive as a primary manner of perceiving death. Man has striven to put his finger on the crux of the mystery of death and has been as baffled at the end as he was in the beginning. The purpose of this study, thus, is not accepting or rejecting any notion related to the conception of death. Rather it is an effort to reveal the transmogrification of the Danse Macabre concept which documents the flux in the religious, social and cultural schemata throughout the ages. The key objective of the study cannot be encapsulated in a few thousand words and spills over the boundaries of this text. Therefore at the end, there is still much space for contentions and revelations.

Nevertheless, in the short span of the study, an attempt is made to capture the evolution of the Danse Macabre concept in visual and literary traditions. In tracing the origins of the concept, a link has been established between the perception of death in past and the present. Thus the echoes of the Medieval Morality play *Everyman*, which carries the foremost rendering of the concept, can be heard in the Elizabethan, Victorian and the Modern periods. Danse Macabre concept and its inevitable image is as much a part of the world today as it was of the Medieval era, yet its implications and representations are an inexhaustible evolutionary study. Man's mortality makes Danse Macabre immortal.

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