

## Literature—Philosophy—of Life and Death

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### Abstract

Literature is also Philosophy. Various writers have expressed their views on life and death. To understand the concept of life and death, one must understand the Hindu Philosophy preached by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita.

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Literature is also philosophy. Though some critics differ, there are innumerable literary examples of visionary poets revealing the primeval truth. These poetic revelations are universal spiritual truths to which no one person, age or religion can lay exclusive claim. Of a radically different milieu and conviction in their attempt to unravel the mystery of life and death, poets secure the same rapport with the central spiritual reality, as could sages.

Tennyson acknowledges that intellect is not potent enough to realize ultimate reality-it only “stir the surface-shadow” but never “hath dipt into.....The abyss of all abysses”. Vedic scriptures declare the illusory dualistic veil or surface-shadow as “maya”. This is something we need to overcome.

Mystics perceive reality through **Self**-realisation and poets and thinkers perceive it through transcendental imagination. Once they experience out-of-body consciousness, poets reach the realm of pure consciousness and the self seems “to dissolve and fade away into boundless being; and this is not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest... the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming not extinction but the only true life.”Tennyson here conveys the essence of advaita vedanta, the cardinal tenet of which is the same. Brahmn alone is real. The universe is unreal, and the individual soul is none other than the universal soul.

In ‘Memoirs’ Tennyson informs Mrs Bradley: “There are moments when this flesh is nothing to me, when I feel and know the flesh to be the vision, God and the spiritual the only real and true.” On the death of Keats, Shelley knew: “He hath awakened from the dream of life.” Wordsworth feels the same state when the “breath of this corporeal frame” is “almost suspended” and then, “we are laid asleep in body, and become a living soul.” D H Lawrence is overjoyed at the prospect of discarding his flesh “Like luggage of some departed traveller”.

A parallel is found in the autobiography of Sri Yogananda: “The flesh was as though dead, yet in my intense awareness I knew that never before had I been fully alive. My sense of identity was no longer narrowly confined to a body but embraced the circumambient atoms.... An oceanic joy broke upon calm endless shores of my soul. The spirit of God, I realised, is exhaustless Bliss.”

Evidently this state is not confined to sages. Plato regarded this divine madness to be a divine blessing granted to man. Saint Paul and Francis of Assisi are reported to have fallen into the same ecstatic trance. The poet William Blake confidently said: "I am in God's presence night and day." In this mystical trance, which is seeing the soul with bodily eyes closed, is when we receive the highest kind of intuitive knowledge.

In the Kathopanishad, Yama tells Nachiketa that the supreme person, the size of a thumb, dwells forever in the hearts of all beings. Krishna assures us in the Gita that He is seated in the heart of all beings. Christ knew that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. Vivekananda said: "After long searches here and there, in temples and churches...at last you come back completing the circle from where you started, to your own soul and find that He ...is nearest of the near, in your own Self."

Poets are born, not made. Socrates says what poets compose they compose not by wisdom but because they are inspired. The purest creative moments of their inspiration have filled literature with pure magic. Entirely different from the tradition of mystics, their vision nevertheless contributes to our spiritual heritage.

Here are the various views of authors, poets, writers and critics on life and death. Life is an Enigma. To understand it, one must understand the Hindu Philosophy of Karma given by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. Thus the research in this paper expresses the idea of life and death from different perspectives.—the Indian and the Western.

Life every man holds dear; but the dear man holds honor far more precious dear than life. **by William Shakespeare**

Life is as tedious as twice-told tale, vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man. **by William Shakespeare**

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. **by William Shakespeare**

Life is a long preparation for something that never happens. **by William Butler Yeats**

Life is divided into three terms - that which was, which is, and which will be. Let us learn from the past to profit by the present, and from the present to live better in the future. **by William Wordsworth**

Life without liberty is like a body without spirit. **by Khalil Gibran**

Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal; dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul. **by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, satins the white radiance of Eternity, until Death tramples it to fragments. **by Percy Bysshe Shelley**

**The Culture of Life in Poetry**

Blessed John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* is more about the Culture of Life than the Culture of Death, though the latter has received more Media attention. Although John Paul is an internationally recognized poet, his encyclicals, of course, must be straightforward and clear. Nonetheless, poetry does enrich prose. Thomas Carlyle defined poetry as musical thought, a form of thought that caught the music that can be heard in the depth of nature and reality. The American poet, James Russell Lowell put it this way:

*I believe the poets; it is they  
Who utter wisdom from the central deep,  
And, listening to the inner flow of things,  
Speak to the age out of eternity.*

What have the poets said about Life? First, let us think of Christ as the wisest of all poets. He tells us: "I am the bread of life" (John 6: 35); "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10: 10); "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6). St. John the Evangelist tells us that, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1: 4) and St. Paul states that "The gift of God is eternal life" (Romans 6: 23).

"This is what Christianity is for," exclaimed an unidentified author, "to teach men the art of Life. And its whole curriculum lies in one simple phrase, 'Learn of me'." Life is both meaningful and fulfilling not only when it is united to God, but also when it is directed to its final end. "Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not the goal," wrote Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His compatriot, Herman Melville added, "Life's a voyage that's homeward bound." "Life, like the waters of the sea, freshens only when it ascends toward heaven," added the German poet Jean Paul Richter. And his compatriot, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe added, "Life is the childhood of our immortality." For Robert Browning, "Life is probation, and the earth is no goal/But the starting point of man." Sir Richard Francis Burton expressed it as follows:

*Life is a ladder infinitely stepped, that  
Hides its rungs from human eyes;  
Planted its foot in chaos gloom, its  
Head soars high above the skies.*

In his epic novel, *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy writes: "Life is everything. Life is God. Everything changes and moves and that movement is God. And while there is life there is joy in consciousness of the divine. To love life is to love God." Life, especially its continuation, was also everything for Dostoevsky, Russia's other pre-eminent writer: "If you were to destroy the belief in immortality in mankind, not only love but every living force on which the continuation of life in the world depended, would dry up at once."

Many honorific adjectives have been applied to life. For George Bernard Shaw, it is luminous: "Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." For Alfred Lord Tennyson, life is inexhaustible:

*Whatever crazy sorrow saith,  
No life that breathes with human breath  
Has ever truly longed for death.  
Tis life, whereof our nerves are scant,  
O, life, not death, for which we pant;  
More life, and fuller, that I want.*

For Henry van Dyke, life is an adventure: “Let me but live my life from year to year, with forward face and unreluctant soul.” The 19th century American clergyman William Merrill Vories found life too great to be wasted on trifles:

*Life is too great  
Between the infant's and the man's estate,  
Between the clashing of earth's strife and fate,  
For petty things.  
Lo! We shall yet who creep with cumbered feet  
Walk glorious over heaven's golden street,  
Or soar on wings.*

The label “pro-life” hardly begins to do justice to the rich poetic expressions of life. Yet “the fine art of Life,” as the contemporary poet, Edwin Leibreed has said, “is to make another Soul vibrate with a song of joy.” God is the author and paragon of life, which, in its pilgrim form, becomes a challenge, an adventure, a sublime and luminous possession, a great gift, an inexhaustible treasure, and the way to heaven. We should live out our lives with the full understanding of how infinitely valuable life is. Then, when we have completed our lives and the preacher concludes his eulogy, members of his audience will not think that they have attended the wrong funeral.

Lord Krishna gave a message to the people from all walks of life in the Bhagavad Gita. Philosophers delight in the description of the karma and the Sankhya Yogas as well as in the Mystics Tree with its roots in the sky, and the branches down under, while proponents of the Bhakti cult extol the several manifestation (vibhuti) of the Lord and His almighty Visvarupa. The description of the gunas (sattva, rajas and tamas) can surprise even a hard-core psychologist. The common man finds solace in the concept of the equipoised soul, to overcome his ever-increasing anxieties. Management experts see in it the entire process of Change Management.

Perhaps, the greatest idea is the focus on commitment to work, without getting excited about the rewards. This portrait of a karma yogi has made many a scholar—to sit up and take notice of the elegant truth behind all human endeavour. Hence, the Gita has a universal appeal and it transcends the boundaries of time and space. It teaches the three basic paths to reach the Almighty—namely bhakti, Karma and jnana. Hindus believe in doing their Karma which will lead them to a good life after death. The saying “As you sow, so shall you reap”, goes with the Hindu Philosophy and is also a universal truth.

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