Manifestations of Mortality in Alexandra Oliver’s *Meeting the Tormentors in Safeway*

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Alexandra Oliver presents vignettes of life in her book of poems, *Meeting the Tormentors in Safeway*. Her preoccupation with form not only provides order to the disorder of life, but gives even the most morbid sentiments artistic value. The most intriguing vignettes are Oliver’s sketches of mortality and the ways in which they employ diction, form, and irony. “Eulogy for Ken Spada” is a standard Petrarchan sonnet adhering to line count, rhyme scheme, and iambic pentameter, containing contrasting forms of diction in conjunction with a last-minute twist that ironically imagines parodies of living behaviour in the afterworld. “The GO Train Arithmetic Song” employs the same ironic twist while loosely adhering to the form of the Irish casbairdne as a commentary on the disorder of life and death. The lack of sincerity in the two aforementioned poems is contrasted with the outward appearance of sincerity in “How Are You, Bunny?” which is written as a Petrarchan sonnet using diction and irony to portray the finality of death and the way in which its emotional effects can only be masked, not erased. “What You Want The Doctor To Tell You” is a personal story about the death of Oliver’s grandfather written with a definitive rhyme scheme in the voice of a doctor. It creates irony through the portrayal of death as motion. Significantly, death itself becomes a process with all the makings of an elaborate dramatic performance. All four poems use specific diction, syntax,
form, and irony to portray mortality that is a common aspect of all lives yet is variable in its impact.

Oliver’s poem “Eulogy for Ken Spada” uses the point of view of a eulogy to create a provocative vignette of mortality. A eulogy is a formal speech generally given at a funeral by someone close to the deceased, and Oliver’s use of the Petrarchan sonnet emulates this formulaic style of writing. With this in mind, the eulogy is meant to praise the person it is written for and highlight memories of their life. The first three stanzas of this poem do just that. Beginning with “at thirteen, I met my first leather man” (l. 1), the poem places the speaker in the position of giving this eulogy. The praise that is meant to come from eulogizing a person is given through details of the clothes that leather man Ken Spada sold and his deep connection to them. She mentions “an ancient sable stole” (l. 3), “a Chinese dress crawling with yulan/in Vegas gold” (ll. 5-6), and the way he would “extol/the virtues of the A-line or a fan” (ll. 7-8), in which her dearest memories of Ken define him by the clothes he worked with. The extolling of virtues mirrors the praise the speaker is supposed to be giving Ken Spada in her eulogy. It is this very detail that allows Oliver to twist the final stanza into a parody. Oliver contrasts diction in terms of higher- and lower-class speech which, in itself, creates irony. She writes:

At thirteen, I met my first leather man;
he ran the shop a stone’s throw from the hole
where I bought smokes. An ancient sable stole,
shell bangle, some weird pegged pants from Japan (ll. 1-4)

Ken’s shop is “a stone’s throw from the hole/where I bought my smokes” (ll. 2-3), which is immediately followed by the mention of an “ancient sable stole” (l. 3). The drastic opposition between the terms “stone’s throw”, “hole”, and “smokes” to the “stole” makes an attempt to meld the lower-class speech of a thirteen-year-old girl with the higher-class diction supposedly used in the fashion industry. The combination of these words as well as the “droll conspiracy” (ll. 7-8) creates irony, which is amplified by Oliver’s final parody. As a thirteen-year-old, the speaker was vulnerable when she met Ken and even explains that “a pair of eyes/like [Ken’s], to youth, is dangerous and dear” (ll. 10-11). This alludes to the idea that Ken was an influence on her, yet also a source of
menace. It is directly following this line that Oliver inserts a twist in the form of morbid humour. She imagines Ken “in Charon’s little boat” (l. 12), that is, floating down the River Styx on his way to the underworld. This image of Ken travelling to the underworld is an anachronistic one to present within a eulogy, but it is Ken’s unchanging nature that creates humour. Even on his way to the underworld he is concerned about fashion telling Charon – the hooded, faceless figure of death – “These hooded robes…are so last year” (l. 14). While horrible and humourous, this last-minute twist – borne from specific diction both in the imitation of the idioms Ken used in his speech and the description of his steadfastness through death – brings comfort in the memory of a loved one who has passed on as they will remain themselves eternally.

Merging art with death in the way that Oliver does emphasizes the importance of death in the world while simultaneously creating laughable (although dark) humour.

Like “Eulogy for Ken Spada”, “The GO Train Arithmetic Song” provides a humourous parody of living behaviour in the afterworld. In this case, however, the effect of the irony itself is morbid as it doesn’t provide comfort with regards to the unchanging nature of our loved ones, but instead creates a feeling of entrapment even in the seemingly ultimate “escape” of death. This poem is written in the form of a casbairdne as it contains the same ABAB rhyme scheme, as well as twenty-eight heptasyllabic lines arranged in seven quatrains. However, the rules of alliteration, stress, and relation between lines, characteristic of the casbairdne form, are lost in Oliver’s depiction. This loose adherence to form can be viewed as mimicking the disorder of life. Each line, with only a few exceptions, begins with a number. In conjunction with the rhyme scheme, the numbering creates a rhythm which seems to increase reading speed as the poem progresses. This creates an all-encompassing feeling of fear with regards to counting down the moments until she can escape this train “hell”. Oliver’s diction sets up events taking place on the train that are extremely unpleasant including “dead flies on the pane” (l. 3), “hairy hands on your knee” (l. 4), “vomiting” (l. 7), “none with a hope of succeeding” (l. 12), “lousy” (l. 17),
and “pried” (l. 20). This illustrates the speaker’s personal “hell on earth” foreshadowing the trip down the River Styx that comes at the end of the poem while creating humour, once again, through the contrast of formal and colloquial diction. The use of the more formal “pane” (l. 3) as opposed to the colloquial “window”, the formal “vomiting” (l. 7) as opposed to the colloquial “puking” or “upchucking”, and the formal phrasing of “none with a hope of succeeding” (l. 12) are juxtaposed to the more colloquial terms “lousy” (l. 17), and “pried” (l. 20). The irony in this poem comes from imagining the train as a metaphor for life. Once boarded, one cannot exit the train until it comes to a stop. In the same way, life is on a constant path which one cannot divert from until death is reached. Oliver captures this lack of hope in her description of asking to be left alone five times, “none with the hope of succeeding” (l. 12). The inescapability of the train—like the inescapability of life—makes all of the unfavourable events that occurred on the train an imitation of the unfavourable events of life. These unfavourable events, experienced over long periods of time (suggested by the rhythm of the numbering) lead one to “yearn for the heavenly bed” (l. 23) as an escape from this miserable life. Here, death seems to be a welcome reprieve. Oliver contrasts this desire for death with the failure, “at the moment of truth” (l. 24), to flee the drunk passengers on the train, suggesting that what is imagined as an escape may not be the alleviation it was hoped to be. The “Stygian bark”, then, as yet another reference to the River Styx, amplifies this lack of escape even in death as the speaker “meet[s] [the passengers] again: pursuing the Stygian bark” (ll. 26-27). This contrast between the expectation of death as escape and the reality of its confining and inescapable nature creates dark irony and morbid humour.

In contrast to the morbid humour in both “Eulogy For Ken Spada” and “The GO Train Arithmetic Song”, Oliver’s “How Are You, Bunny?” is a more sincere vignette of mortality. The image created at the outset of the poem is of a blank stare and an overly tight grip as Bunny is described “standing in the laundry room,/her mottled knuckles round a jug of Cheer” (ll. 1-2), suggesting the way in which she is affected by the death of Ron. On the other hand, this poem can be read as an ironic representation of life and death in terms of cleanliness. In the world of the living, Bunny and the speaker are seeking cleanliness through doing laundry, and while doing so, both are thinking about Ron, someone who has been ‘cleaned’ out of the world. Oliver creates a list of
objects removed upon Ron’s death, “They took away his chair, his IV stand, his magazines, his stains, the view he loved: his lake and rusting cranes” (ll. 5-7) all of which emphasize the alignment of death and cleanliness. An even more obvious depiction of death as being the ultimate cleaner comes when Oliver writes, “No sentiments outclean the leading brand, that bastard Mr. Death” (ll. 10-11), parodying a detergent commercial. However, it is not death itself that cleans but instead the emotions faced by the living, brought on by death, that bring order. Using the Petrarchan sonnet, an extremely well known and enduring poetic form, allows Oliver to bring this idea of ordering to the forefront. Irony is created both through the imitation of an advertisement and the way in which this advertisement is inserted into a poem about death. In these two lines, Oliver manages to depict the way nothing that one can say or do will ever be enough to wipe clean the grief brought by the death of a loved one. By juxtaposing the “full bloom” (l. 4) of the flowers outside with the phrase “Ron is gone” (l. 5), the finality of death becomes glaringly obvious.

In contrast, life—as the opposite of death—is portrayed as being dirty. Part of what is removed upon Ron’s death are “his stains” (l. 6) and the view of “rusting cranes” (l. 7), suggesting that they were present in his life, and thereby aligning life with dirtiness. This alignment is also illustrated as Oliver describes the birds outside the laundromat as “grimy” (l. 12). If life and dirtiness are made parallel and juxtaposed to cleanliness and death, then the choice of the laundromat as the setting for the poem and Bunny’s attempt to mask her emotions is ironic. In reading the poem this way, Bunny’s clenching of a “jug of Cheer” (l. 2) becomes ironic as well. Cheer is a brand of laundry detergent obviously present in a laundromat, but knowing Oliver’s precision with diction the question of why she chose this specific brand becomes important. The double entendre of the word “cheer”, as an emotion and a brand of detergent, creates an accidental real-life irony in the way Bunny clenching “Cheer” parallels her feigning of good cheer in hopes that saying “I’m fine” (l. 14) will make it so. The irony continues through Oliver’s inversion of the idea that birds represent freedom. As death can also be seen as a freedom from the world, the idea of “rusting cranes” (l. 7) and “grimy birds” (l. 12) clearly affixes these birds to the world of the living through their dirtiness. These images of the dirt of life and the freedom of death are placed side-by-side as a means to convey the fine line between life and death.
As the poem progresses, the speaker realizes that seeking cleanliness is futile as death is the ultimate cleaner mentioning, “the sorted load I toss to chase my words, but none will do” (ll. 9-10). However, Bunny does not recognize this as “she shuts the last machine” (l. 13) and tells the speaker “I’m fine” (l. 14). The use of italics is meant to draw attention to the phrase and to make its importance to the poem as a whole explicit. The poem, taken as a whole, indicates that Bunny is deeply affected by death. In no way is she ‘fine’. Her denial not only cements her level of emotional connection to Ron’s death but also hints at why she attempts to quell her own feelings of grief but cannot manage to ‘clean’ them away. Bunny’s “change-cold breath” (l. 14) makes a connection between the change required to do laundry at the laundromat and the coldness of death. Oliver leaves a depressing image of Bunny as working, unsuccessfully, to overcome her grief in the wake of Ron’s death.

“What You Want the Doctor to Tell You” adheres to a strict rhyme scheme, ABCDCBABCDDB, while not neatly fitting any specific poetic form. While all the rhymes are heard while reading the poem aloud, the nature of the rhyme scheme places rhyming words at such a distance in the stanza that they may go unnoticed in a first reading. This unusual rhyming is effective in the way it gives rhythm and motion to the poem in the same way that Oliver uses this poem to give motion to death. As a personal experience of the death of her grandfather, Oliver tells this story through the voice of a doctor, presumably as a mirror to the doctor in her grandfather’s last days: a method of detachment that allows her to write about an emotional experience so personal while still maintaining poetic form. However, the diction used is not realistic for a medical professional, but stems from the fantastical aspects of this poem. Thus, the poem is appropriately titled “What You Want the Doctor to Tell You” instead of “What the Doctor Told You”. Oliver writes,

There was nothing we could ever do
to keep him in the world. He just escaped.
His brain said, “Hold that thought!” and there he went –
left the intern feeling like a dunce.
His five bad habits failed him, all at once;
we lost his bile and all embarrassment
from monitors; the spiked, green line re-scape\(d\) into a placid sea, and then we knew. (ll. 1-8)

Phrases such as, “he just escaped” (l. 2), “feeling like a dunce” (l. 4), and “all embarrassment/from monitors” (ll. 6-7) are less formal than one would expect from a doctor. This is effective in establishing the way in which death can be bewildering and disorienting as well as giving the feeling of sincerity that stems from personal experience. The diction surrounding the mention of death in this poem is also strangely out of place for a doctor. Describing the flat line on the monitor at the moment of death as “the spiked, green line re-scape\(d\)/into a placid sea” (ll. 7-8), in conjunction with the description of death stealing her grandfather “to the kind/place where he could see the red sun rise” (ll. 15-16), mirrors the gentleness of a doctor’s death notification to families in the hospital. At the same time, however, the artistry of these phrases is more poetic than the factual nature of death notifications. That is, they are poetic in the imaginative and emotional style of expression. The metaphor of the flatline on the monitor as a “placid sea” (l. 8) as well as the description of the afterlife as a place where one can see “the red sun rise” (l. 16) are both symbolic and beautifully expressive figurative phrases.

By attributing motion to idleness, Oliver creates an image of death as a grand production. By opening the poem with “there was nothing we could ever do” (l. 1), Oliver immediately establishes the inevitability of death as not even the medical professionals could prevent her grandfather’s passing. The insertion of “ever” into this well-known cliché is important. It alludes to the idea of death as motion, which becomes prevalent through the reading of this poem in its entirety. Ever, meaning constantly or always, implies that the doctors continued to try as the motion of death continued to move but there was nothing that could ever be done to halt death. From this point onward an overarching irony begins to play out, shedding light on the grandiose nature of the end of one’s life, even if death comes abruptly. In order to highlight this grandness, Oliver describes the action of her grandfather’s death as a process of motion as opposed to the common idea that death is the final event that halts a life. She creates a list of five parts of the
By attributing motion to idleness, Oliver creates an image of death as a grand production. This idea is evident in her diction. She uses the word “bile” (l. 6), which is secreted in the liver, as opposed to simply using the word “liver”, presumably because of the connotations of bile. According to the traditional theory of humours, bile was thought to be an indicator of mood or emotion based on colour – black meaning melancholy and yellow meaning anger. In “los[ing] his bile” (l. 6), Oliver’s grandfather not only experiences liver failure but also a loss of his moods or emotions, proving that death does more than take a person’s physicality. Similarly, words such as “pierced” (l. 9), “ballooned” (l. 10), and “burst” (l. 11) solidify the argument that one’s passing is a grand production as these words resemble those used to describe extravagant theatre. It proves that the finality and inevitability of death does not make it any less formidable in nature.

Oliver’s use of form, irony, and diction creates an evocative outlook on mortality. She employs black humour to encourage feelings of morbidity and peacefulness amongst readers. Her poetry allows for an inward analysis of one’s own mortality through the real life ironies so cleverly incorporated in all four poems. To initiate this personal, inward assessment, Oliver provides the reader with four separate views of death and its impact. Oliver is able to capture the way form can create order while twisting the ending in a seemingly morbid way. Through metaphor, Oliver implements a terrifying critique of the inescapable nature of life and the way in which one’s nightmares will haunt them into death. She allows the permeation of the unfavourable aspects of life from which one yearns to escape into death, leaving a haunting notion of death as final and yet
without reprieve. Oliver’s most suggestive portrayal is of death as motion which is made obvious through her word choice as well as through metaphor and the slight alerting of an obvious cliché. This is not only an uncommon view of death, but one which forces the reader to consider their own life as leading to the production of death rather than the common understanding of life as a production ending in death. Death is already a scary notion for many people and Oliver’s poems make it immensely more so. It is the multifaceted nature of death which makes it a difficult concept to grasp and yet Oliver manages to express the unexpressible through her poetic form, diction, and irony. By providing various angles from which to approach one’s own mortality Oliver touches upon aspects of death which everyone has experienced at some point within their lives.

Merging art with death in the way that Oliver does emphasizes the importance of death in the world while simultaneously creating laughable (although dark) humour. Our understanding of death is limited. Science is being used to attempt to minimize those limitations. Oliver’s work proves that poetry—an art form—can be equally pivotal in our mental capacity to grasp mortality.

WORKS CITED


