

## Sweet Mystery of Death in Jalaluddin Rumi and Mary Oliver's Selected Poem

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### Abstract

Jalaluddin Rumi is a long-time dead poet yet, recently he is the best-selling poet in the United States of America. This paper connects antiquity with modernity represented by Rumi and Mary Oliver over the theme of the mystery of 'death'. They both have provided a bright picture of it, this mystery is sweet. The paper casts the light on such a shared mystical attitude of both poets, Rumi who considers death as yet another stage of life, and that humans shouldn't fear death despite its inevitability, grief, and mystery, and Mary Oliver who is eager to pass to the other stage after death and call for welcoming it and socializing with it as a familiar comrade.

**Keywords:** Death, Rumi, mystery, mysticism, Mary Oliver

لغز الموت الجميل في قصائد جلال الدين الرومي وماري أوليفر المختارة

جلال الدين الرومي شاعر ميت منذ زمن طويل ، لكنه في الآونة الأخيرة هو الشاعر الأكثر مبيعاً في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. تربط هذه الورقة بين العصور القديمة والحداثة التي يمثلها الرومي وماري أوليفر حول موضوع سر "الموت". كلاهما قدم صورة مشرقة له ، هذا اللغز حلو. تسلط الورقة الضوء على مثل هذا الموقف الصوفي المشترك لكلا الشعارين ، الرومي الذي يعتبر الموت مرحلة أخرى من مراحل الحياة ، وأنه لا ينبغي للبشر أن يخافوا

الموت رغم حتميته وحزنه وغموضه ، وماري أوليفر التي تتوق إلى المرور. إلى المرحلة الأخرى بعد الموت والدعوة إلى الترحيب بها والتواصل معها كرفيق مألوف.

## Introduction

Death is an ever-present thematic preoccupation for poets and philosophers all over the ages. Some have a sacred viewpoint, and others mock and challenge it; however, it is a mysterious presence that has daunted humanity. Amidst all the attempts to interpret or comprehend death, Rumi sets an approach to cope with death as a part of the journey of human existence. He deems it as a transition stage. And in the contemporary stand, Mary Oliver believes that as long as one lives an accomplished life it is fine to welcome the unknown adventure of death.

Death is a common ground to build a thematic concern for both the thirteenth-century mystic poet Jalaluddin Rumi and the twenty-first-century poet Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver through the belief in questioning spirit and dwelling in the mystery adds to the knowledge about death and how to handle it. These two poets from the East and the West share somehow a similar approach to death.

Rumi is a Sufi poet who was born in Balkh in Afghanistan. “The common belief is that Rumi was born on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1207” (Okuyucu, 2007,p.7). Though Rumi has demised long ago, his teachings and poetry continue generation after generation, he put rules and lines for other scholars and poets to follow. He enlightened the minds of his readers about the issues of creation, love, religion, and immortality. The appearance of Shames of Tabriz another mystic wanderer has made a turning point in the life of Rumi “a man who had given abnormal life a wandering Sufi or dervish” (Denys, 1997, p.4) The association with Shams of Tabriz has directed Rumi's poetry towards the mysterious orientation to seek the ‘beloved’, and die in it, the beloved here is the

name of the God for Sufis. The poet Rumi has written in different regional languages of Persia, Arabia, Turkey, and Greek. (Joseph, 290-291)

Rumi's magnum opus *Mathnawi* has culminated his poetry, ethical lessons, Sufi tales, and mystical edifications in form of twenty-five thousand verses that are known as “Quran in the Persian Language” (Chittick, 1983, p.35).

Mary Oliver (1935-2019) is an American mystic poet of the contemporary age who admired Jalaluddin Rumi. Her eventual career won her many awards among the most significant are Shelly Memorial Award in (1970), National Book Award in (1992) and a Pulitzer. Mary Oliver is a distinctive poet in the fashionably surreal and escapist world of contemporary verse (Alford 283). Her poetry is categorized by transcendental orientation as well as nature attribution. Oliver's many poetry collections culminated in her *Devotions* (2017) which made the best collections of her poems over the last five decades of her literary product. Mary Oliver turned to writing poems at a young age and was a great admirer of Walt Whitman which shapes her poetry about nature and mystical values.

Mary Oliver in most of her poems offers many questions to be answered she sends her readers to a barn land of mystery one of her mysteries is death. She reflected upon nature and its effects on humanity, especially on the foundational issues of life and death. Her poem *When Death Comes* (1992) marks her tendency to leave the world of here and now and join the world of the undiscovered. Oliver is motivated to do that through the ultimate curiosity in her poetry to plunge into the sweet mystery she believes to be somewhere that is not far for the soul. She was

impressed by the Sufi poet Rumi, however, she attributed her preparedness for death to be an accomplished human who lived her life to a further extent.

The two poets of antiquity and modernity Rumi and Mary Oliver had almost identical perspectives about the reality of death; they belong to totally different places of the world and eras of time. Through their poetry comment on a sensitive matter like death, their views meet at certain points and divert in others. However, Rumi and Oliver share one pessimistic motif that death is not monstrous but an event that we all must undergo, Rumi deemed it as another phase of our existence. He had an optimistic aspect to hope of rebirth and hope of another life after the curtain of the grave is removed to mark the other life. He supports his argument about that with examples from nature for instance the cycle of life of the plants and the story of the prophet Joseph. In the case of Mary Oliver who thought of death as another adventure next to a fulfilled life. Their views about the concept of death that is mysterious it is still a console in the face of the inevitable end.

### **Review of Literature**

Death is a universal and controversial theme for poets of all times moreover, many researchers and scholars analyze literary texts about death in different ways. For instance ‘Winter’ is an image of death in Europe classical poetry. In Greek literature, there are Gods of death, life, and rebirth. The rich and fertile views of the Greek philosophers have brought about many interpretations among them is the most prominent by Euripides who remarks “... death and life are not at all the same; the one is nothingness, the other offers hope.”(Rutherford, 2004, p.199)  
Answered by Plato:

“Let us reflect in another way, we shall see that there is a great reason to hope that death is a good.” (de Bals,2005, p.297) Molina in an essay titled “The Problem of Death in Classic Greece and Its Role in Plato's Philosophy” remarks that Plato was among the most prominent Greek critics who dealt with the matters of life and death, in his philosophical views he believes that only the wise man would pass to heaven, as he thinks that only through philosophy the soul would be purified and made virtuous. Plato believes in philosophy, the ultimate reality, and the knowledge of it. Due to the wars in Ancient Greece Plato believes that to avoid the vicissitudes of life, corruption, and evil powers we need to trust oaths and ethics of good morality if someone wants to come to terms with the tragedy of death it is essential to rely on universal facts. Hence the wise philosopher wouldn't be in turmoil by the awaited death nor he had a firm attachment to this earthly world. (Molina 17/18)

(Tilak 2009) In his book *Studies in Poets: John Donne Selected Poems* claims that Donne deems death as not mighty or a king, rather it is like a wretched slave, slave to fate, chance malicious persons or sickness, moreover it doesn't have free will but a heartbreaking slave that lives in such despairing company of aging or sickness. (246) In the poem *Death Be Not Proud* Donne (1633) satirized death in a vivid way in which he used rigorous images to ridicule death as a powerless thing, however, the metaphysical poet Donne viewed death as a relief.

(Ali and Hamad 2022) in their paper “An Eco-critical Study of Mary Oliver's Poetry”, the researchers have concluded that poetry from an Eco-critical perspective is an indispensable method to compensate for the damages inflicted on nature and human relationships. Hence they claimed a considerable role of poetry that employs natural elements to achieve a union between nature and humans. The study also pinpointed the

malfunction of the industrial revolution and the vast leaps of technological advancements that sabotaged the harmony between nature and humans.

(Alzubidi & Radhi 2021) In an essay titled “spirituality in Mary Oliver's Poetry”, the researchers hold the fact that humans can find themselves and obtain positivity and spiritual consistency, moreover every natural element has a soul, and spiritual message that humans may utilize to benefit a lesson of spirituality. They also emphasized an urge for spirituality amidst materialistic crises to cope with the mystery of life, man should find a spiritual balance.

(Ghazazani&Alizamani 2014) in their study titled “A Comparative Study of Martin Buber and Rumi on God-Man Relation” Rumi and Martin Buber have brought to the fore the sense of the relationship between man and his creator. Reading the evaluations of these two writers makes the reader familiar with a God who has granted His servants the ability to be in a relationship with Him and call in communication as —Thou'. Moreover, Martin Buber and Rumi, describe such a relationship as getting oneself related to God features the highest levels of relations.

All the above mentioned studies have dealt with Rumi and Mary Oliver's poetry from different standpoints however, they covered issues other than death. The mystery of death is a common ground for Rumi and Mary Oliver which is the theme of death. They both have dealt with it in their ways. Hence, the researcher finds such an arena as a fertile ground that is worth development by readers and scholars. To bridge the gap left by other researchers about the theme of death this paper works as a

consoling factor to the inevitable death that is around the corner with all its accompanying mysteries.

Since Rumi is a Sufi and a mystic poet and Mary Oliver is admired and affected by him, their selected works for this study can be analyzed through a mystic lens. The core of our existence and everything else that is related to the soul of the human being can only be assessed through a certain level of consciousness. The poetry of Both Rumi and Oliver involves elements of nature and the things that enhance the spirit. Rumi strives to awaken the soul to its undiscovered part. Rumi and Oliver pass beyond the natural order of life to attain the state of spiritual freedom.

The mystic philosopher confirms the power of self-individual, emotion, and spirit to locate one's consciousness. Death as a mysterious concept is part of the mystical sense and its interpretation can gently be moderated through a mystic sensor.

Mysticism is not to be regarded as a religion in itself, but rather as the most vital element in all true religions, rising in revolt against cold formality and religious torpor. Nor it is a philosophical system, though it has its doctrine of the scheme of things. It is to be described rather as an attitude of minds; an innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and attain to direct experience of God, and which believes that the human soul can be united with the Ultimate Reality, when "God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience" (Smith, 1980,p.20).

The poetry of Jalaludin Rumi assumes a mystic perspective to help visualize the connection with God and to scrutinize death as another stage of life, though fearful. Meanwhile, Mary Oliver suggests that death could

be a gateway to eternity, death is yet a new experience for her after she lived her fulfilled life. Oliver believes in living the moment of death with all of its mysterious manifestations in the light of mystical experience.

Since death is part of our reality, the two poets are curious about it in and made it a major theme in certain poems. As part of the mystic functions Oliver and Rumi sound like seekers of such an ultimate reality.

### **Death According to Rumi**

In several poems by Rumi, there is a sense of lofty, sublime, and sweet mystery. Rumi always tries to lighten the burden of the inevitability of death. So the significance of his poem is to drag you into a sweet mystery and keep you away from the ramifications of the death of your loved ones.

His thoughts and philosophy about death were not of fear rather they are declarations of welcome call. As a mystic poet and Sufi master Rumi appreciate the idea of death more than that of life. He through death was trying to comprehend life. Hence, for him, death shouldn't always be lamented. As part of his teachings when his death approached he ordered his disciples and followers not to weep for him or feel grief. For him, death will disclose the unknown secrets of God. Death is his only opportunity to meet his God or namely return to God. A man should show bravery and valor to endure and accept death.

To unleash the soul from the cage of the body, Rumi's poem *When I Die* is a title given by modern American poet and translator Professor Coleman Barks this poem is referred to in this paper as (118) according to text translated by A.J. Arberry as part of his collection of *Mystical Poems*



of Rumi. It shows the readers that he considers the mystery of death though is captivating and overwhelming yet it is a sweet and delightful mystery as Nicholson states that “death and migration from this (earthly) abode has become as sweet to me as leaving the cage and flying (is sweet) to the captive bird.”(2011,51)

Death is thus not an end but a new start or a shift to arrive at eternal love. In *When I Die* there is a journey from one state to another that will happen to man, Rumi uses very vivid images from nature, Quran, and Bible to support his argument about the cycle of life. In this poem particularly Rumi emphasizes the renewal theme of life and set it in a comparison with the seed, moreover the allusion to the prophet Joseph who was thrown into the dark well and later becomes the king of Egypt. Rumi personifies the seed in the following lines as translated by (Arberry, 2004) What seed ever went down into the earth which did not grow?/ Why do you doubt so regarding the human seed? (118. Line 7-8)

Rumi metaphorically compares the cycle of life of man to other creatures of God like that of plants, they are seeds that crack and bring about new life a small plant that grows, blooms, and blushes flowers, roses, and sweet fruits. Man passes almost through the same process.

The employment of symbolism reflects the intellectuality of Rumi who wants to drag the reader into the mysterious existence of the afterlife that he considers as sweet and not grievous. So it is not reasonable to shed tears at a funeral such behavior curbs the atonement of the light. He further regards death as not a monstrous illusion as the ego portrays it, man should concentrate on the sweet meeting with eternity. (Hardy,298-299)

As part of the mysterious features of death by Rumi, he was accused of a trite resemblance to evolutionism; as he believes that man never dies but travels from one shape to another as follows:

I died from mineral kingdom and become a plant;  
I died to vegetative nature and attained to animal state.  
I died to animality and become a man. (*Mathnavi III* 3901-3)

According to the mystic standpoint, death is not merely painful but lovely and sweet. In the process of death, the soul departs the body to join the divine. As Nicholson, 2011 translated the words of Rumi “Death and migration from this (earthly) abode has become as sweet to me as leaving the cage and flying (is sweet) to the (captive) bird.”, (*Mathnavi III*: 3947-51) Thus, Rumi acknowledges death from mystic and spiritual perspectives, in his view, death is a means to release the soul from its prison that is the body. Once the soul is liberated it reaches back to the divine beloved, hence the mystery is promised to be sweet. Moreover, Rumi looks for the real place of the soul that he is always in search of. This place can only be seen as the atonement of it or a reward. “It is death that takes you to a higher spiritual plain and it involves eradicating one's bad qualities” (Fahm, 2014, p.12)

Rumi assures his readers about the consequence of death, it is not a fearful alley or abyss of darkness but it is an abode of eternal love; “To you it appears as setting, but it is a rising; the tomb appears as a prison, but it is release for the soul” (118. Line 6)

A part of the mystic facts that Rumi embraces is the use of the image of the grave as a gateway to heaven after death. Death is an ultimate reality and it takes a mystic mind to absorb such departure of the soul, Rumi believes in a paradise that awaits the soul after departing the

carnal existence. The grave is dark, scary, and low however, Rumi used it as a turning point from which the soul finds its liberation: “When you commit me to the grave, say not “Farewell, farewell!” For the grave is a veil over the reunion of paradise” (118.Line4) Hence, the mysticism is about the ultimate reality that can only be felt and attained by those who reach the eternity where there is no place and time.

Rumi's style and content revolve around love this love is exalted and directed towards the beloved which could be God. Though this paper follows the mystic approach of analysis, nevertheless Rumi leaves room for pondering about the identity of that beloved to add more mystery. Besides this type of love needs a sacrifice to annihilate the body and liberate the soul no matter what ramifications and pains arise with death.

### ***When Death Comes (1992)***

The poem *When Death Comes* (1992) is a significant component of the collection of *New and Selected Poems, Volume I* (1992) it has similarities to Rumi's poems regarding death that these share a certain sweet mystery behind death. In Mary Oliver's perception of death, the reader is promised with sweet mystery if he/she lives and fulfilled life. In her approach to poetry, Oliver used to sustain her themes with questions to be answered. However, she doesn't answer them which creates mysterious assets in her poetry.

The poem is built on the theme that death is a broader term, however, this mysterious notion is worth to ponder about. Oliver tends to moderate the imminent death through her curiosity to explore the mystery of death and what will happen later. She begins the poem with the monstrous descriptions of death that is on doors as follows: When death comes/Like a hungry bear in Autumn. (10.1-2). Oliver shows the scary images of

death at the beginning of the poem as she inflicted the most frightening and fatalist images like a hungry bear, autumn, measles-pox, and iceberg.

Oliver draws a vivid picture of death and keeps her sense of curiosity to discover more facts beyond that overwhelming event of death. To add more to the sense of sweet mystery Oliver by providing a question as follows:

When death comes  
Like an iceberg between the shoulders  
I want to step through the door full of Curiosity wondering:  
What is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

(10.7-10)

Unlike the case with Rumi, who sets out his arguments about the consequences of death which are based on Islamic and Quranic shreds of evidence about what's going to be after death. Oliver counts on the way we should live our lives to a fuller extent, so one couldn't miss a single moment. Hence, they would be fully prepared to accept death with wonder. That wonder is part of the mystery that dominates the writings of Mary Oliver in most of her poems once in an interview with Coleman Barks she remarks "Love the mystery don't forget the mystery be glad of it" (Lannan Foundation, 2010) Oliver explains that if she attains this inevitability, then there's a way she wants to do as in her words:

"I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering: /what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?"(10.Line9-10) Death is at any cost a mystery, and sort of scary, yet these lines make us imagine it as not merely an end, but a gateway to a new living place – a doorsill she wants to step over with certainty. Housden remarks "what a homely space this seems to be– a cottage of darkness."(2004,p.116) nothing is pretty

enormous or captivating, but more as a habitation one might welcome and make his own.

Oliver also wants to emphasize the meaning of mystic conceptions like life and death, and by dwelling on the mystery she adds more pleasure in her poem as follows:

And therefore I look up everything  
as a brotherhood and sisterhood,  
and look upon time as no more than idea,  
and consider eternity as another possibility

(10. 11-14)

By preparing to accept the mystery of dying, Mary Oliver looks at life from an optimistic standpoint of brotherhood and sisterhood death must be received as a familiar comrade. In the meantime the poet also wants to show the reader that time is a consonant whether someone lives or dies, the time is looked at from a mystic point of view as an idea and not a way of counting days of a particular age. Hence, Oliver hinted to eternity that Rumi longs for as in these lines: When you have closed your mouth on this side, open it on/ that, for your shout of triumph will echo in the placeless air. (118.13-14)

## Conclusion

To sum up with the fact that Mary Oliver mentioned that she was affected by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century mystic poet Rumi who calls for receiving death with arms open wide and not to grieve. They both share a similar resolution that death must be celebrated as a new stage that is worth a try. Rumi considers it as a part of one cycle. And Oliver deemed it as another adventure made in eternity. At any rate, such another phase of existence is not experienced yet except for those who died. For us the living we

have to be curious and wait for that inevitable stage with sweet mysterious awareness. Rumi advises his followers not to weep or shed tears for him dying as the lines show: Do not weep for me, say not “Alas, alas!” You will fall into/ the devil’s snare—that would indeed be alas!.(118.Line.3-4)

Oliver's poem closes with a piece of advice that humans should not fret about the fact that they are leaving this world through her perspective as she uses a first person narrator. “I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument)

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