

Discuss how works you have studied portray the concept of death.

Death is a universal human experience, something that all people must face. However, this does not mean that all people face death equally. For some death is a tragedy that brings sadness and grief; for others, death can be a release from suffering. Both William Shakespeare in his play *The Merchant of Venice* and Han Kang in her novel *The Vegetarian* explore the idea of death as a release from earthly suffering. However, the works differ in terms of what death means for each character. For Yeong Hye, death is a path to victory, a way of reclaiming autonomy over her own body and represents her choice to live a less harmful life. By contrast, for Antonio death is a result of failure in both his professional and personal life.

In both works, Shakespeare and Kang present death as an alternative to the suffering of characters. In Shakespeare's work, Antonio, the titular 'Merchant of Venice' suffers from a mysterious malady that seems to have no cause. The first line of the play, spoken by Antonio, is: *"In sooth I know not why I am so sad"*. The line is embellished with alliteration that conveys a sense of Antonio's heavy sadness; yet, when questioned by his friends, Antonio is unable to give a concrete reason for his feelings. Antonio suggests that his sadness is something existential when he says the world is *"a stage where every man must play his part and mine a sad one."* This line suggests Antonio's sadness comes from his lack of control over his own life, no free will to make his own decisions as the fate of the world is scripted out beforehand. Therefore, when he is facing Shylock's brutal forfeit – a pound of flesh to be cut out from his chest, a punishment that will result in Antonio's certain death – he is one of the only characters to accept his death, saying plainly *"I care not"* as he is so exhausted by all his *"griefs and losses"*. Similarly, in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye is also in a situation where she has no control over her life decisions, or even the choices she makes about what she does with her own body. Throughout the work she has attempted to live in a way that does not harm other living creatures, expressed through her desire to become vegetarian. To Yeong-hye, meat is a symbol of murder, as to eat meat involves the killing of other living beings. Her refusal to eat is not an attempt to die, but she is willing to accept death if it allows her to live without harm. Before her death, she whispers to her sister: *"Why is it such a bad thing to die?"* Therefore, while Yeong-hye's suffers a crisis of conscience while Antonio suffers from existential despair, nevertheless, both works reveal how death can be a welcome release from suffering for certain characters.

Furthermore, both writers use imagery of death throughout the works, with a particular emphasis on the human skeleton as a symbol of death. Shakespeare's play is set in the

trading city of Venice, where ships from all over the world come and go, laden with goods and merchandise. As such, the ships represent the livelihoods of the traders, so when they are wrecked in storms, this is comparable to a metaphorical 'death' for the characters. This is evident in the dialogue of the play. Salarino describes "*my wealthy Andrew docked in sand,*" in terms that personify his sunken ship like a dead friend, including reference to its "*ribs*" and its metaphorical "*burial.*" Salarino's use of language implies how life is completely bound to his business ventures; when his ship sinks it is a tragedy on the scale of a 'death' for Salarino. Similarly, Han Kang directly uses the word "*skeletal*" to suggest the extreme fragility of Yeong-hye's body after she refuses to eat at all. She describes how visible her ribs and spines have become, and how the bones of her skull protrude in a grotesque way. As opposed to Shakespeare, who uses images of death in a more poetic way to symbolize the importance of business to the merchants of Venice, because Kang is writing about the actual death of her character, her imagery is more graphic and disturbing. Nevertheless, both writers use imagery of the human skeleton to imply how death is an ever-present concern for characters in their respective situations.

Where the treatment of death in the works differs most is in the meaning of death for different characters. For Yeong-hye, death is a path to victory, representing her defiance in the face of a society that wants to control what she can and can't do with her own body. For the traders in Shakespeare's play, death represent the failure of their business and romantic endeavours. For the men in *The Merchant of Venice*, it is better to die than to live as a failure. For example, when the Duke of Aragon wrongly chooses the silver chest in Portia's father's lottery game, he is presented with a 'death's head token' to symbolize the failure of his romantic pursuit of Portia. Similarly, Salarino's failure in business (his sunken ship) is represented with imagery of death, as is Antonio's failure to repay the money he loaned from Shylock: on informing Bassanio of his failure, he uses metaphorical language to describe himself as a "*tainted wether of the flock*" (meaning a sick sheep) and "*the weakest kind of fruit*"; both comparisons that reveal he views himself as a failure after his ships are lost at sea – along with all his investments. To Antonio, to fail in business means to fail as a man, leaving him fit only for death.

On the other hand, Han Kang attaches no sense of shame or failure to Yeong-hye's death; rather, her death is a symbol of resistance against the violence of the society in which she lives. In a way, her death is a kind of victory against those who won't let her make decisions about her own body. This can be seen most vividly in Part 3 of the novel, in which Yeong-hye is subjected to force-feeding by the doctors in the psychiatric hospital. This scene is graphically violent, as the nurses and orderlies "*wrestle*" with Yeong-hye to insert a feeding tube into her throat. There's a focus on the invasion of her body, as doctors use lubricating jelly to insert the tube, and she repeatedly vomits blood as she fights them off. It is this

scene that allows readers to see that, while the doctors think they are acting in Yeong-hye's best interests, in this case force-feeding her becomes a violation of her choices and an act of violent abuse. Therefore, unlike Antonio who sees his death in terms of his life's failure, for Yeong-hye death becomes the only way in which she can reclaim control over her own body. She accepts death because it is her choice, not the choice of others, making it a victory over oppressive forces.

In conclusion, both William Shakespeare and Han Kang explore the concept of death, both acknowledging how, for some characters, death can be a release from suffering. As a comedy, Shakespeare considers death in a more poetic way, underscoring the existential suffering of Antonio and suggesting that, from the perspective of the merchants and traders of Venice, death is preferable to failure in business or romance. By contrast, Han Kang's novel is tragic, revealing how Yeong-hye lives in a society that deprives her of rights and autonomy over her own body. In Yeong-hye's situation, death becomes the one way that she can escape oppression. Symbolised by the image of a blackbird flying over a burning forest, Han Kang leaves the reader with the impression that Yeong-hye has finally achieved her liberation from a harmful and violent world.