Neruda’s Masterful Use of Dark Visual Imagery in “Only Death,”

“Walking Around,” and “There is No Clear Light” to Express Heartache

Student name

 Candidate Number:

Mrs. Jane Stone and Ms. Jenna Lassila

Ronald Wilson Reagan College Preparatory High School: 002843

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**Question:** How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral?

**Work Used:** *The Essential Neruda, Selected Poems* by Pablo Neruda

Pablo Neruda has drawn all of us into his own cultural world with his dynamic words. Throughout my classmates’ oral presentations on Neruda’s memoirs, my understanding was developed through the origins of the rich sceneries described in Neruda’s childhood and his cultural, political life. After gaining knowledge on Chile’s communism, I felt a personal connection to Neruda’s childhood, since I was also born in a foreign land in the midst of political chaos. Through group interactions, I learned that Neruda’s Chilean homeland drastically influenced his unique poetry style.

Groups were assigned to a specific chapter in *The Memoirs of Pablo Neruda* and expected to create a PowerPoint presentation on that chapter. These presentations made me become more attentive on the subject, since they incorporated visual snapshots of his life on the slides to emphasize on how his surroundings impacted on the development of his writing. Born and raised in a vibrant environment, Neruda’s Chilean rural homeland has aroused him to capture his perspective through poetry. Later on in his adulthood, Neruda explored other international poetries by travelling and connecting with high-profiled figures, like Kirsanow. However, Spain had the greatest impact on Neruda’s life. Madrid had allowed Neruda to experience the true horrors of death; he witnessed heightened civil tensions and revolutions. The pictures in the presentations highlighted the gruesome scenes of the Madrid chaos and gave me a chilling sense of what Neruda witnessed; like him, these visuals were engraved in my memory. Political violence exploded everywhere, resulting in the deaths of his dear comrades Falrico and Cunnard. I have realized that the reasons why Neruda created poems with such darks tones are due to his personal experiences of loss. These deaths infected his soul with depression and inspired him to produce his darkest poems, such as “Walking Around” and “Only Death.” Other than death, politics also affected him.

Neruda joined the Communist Party in 1945 and became the ambassador of France in 1972. Several decades later, Neruda withdrew from the party and escaped to his little house in Isla Nigra, near the Chilean ocean. He gathered his past emotions and political experiences—of love, friendship, and especially death—and went through a poetical metamorphosis. With the soothing aide of his natural environment, he developed his poetry within this house. In times of hardships, Neruda escaped to his own poetical haven with the control of his hands and imagination.

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Classic writers throughout the centuries have incorporated numerous literary devices in their works to enhance the connection with readers through the stimulations of emotions. Similarly, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda also uses one specific literary device, visual imagery, to express his anguish. In *The Essential Neruda Selected Poems*, readers are drawn into a universe of cultural movements and vibrant poetry. In order to vivify his poems with a sense of darkness and melancholy, Neruda uses a series of descriptive scenes that encompass the theme of death in, “Only Death,” “Walking Around,” and “There is No Clear Light”; Neruda’s dark visual imagery powerfully and intensely expresses death’s emotional impact on human heartache.

In poems like “Only Death,” Neruda emphasizes on images pertaining to absence and longing to signify the role of death on human emotions. The dreary visual images and personification of death in “Only Death” signify the burden that one must carry after the loss of a loved one. In this poem, Neruda describes a gloomy scene of death taking place, “I see coffins under sail weighing anchor with the pale dead, with women in their dead braids…coffins climbing the vertical river of the dead, the bruise-colored river” (Neruda 33). He compares the process of the dead moving along the flowing current of blood with the “bruise-colored river” and the river’s various shades of bruises from rouges to violets to maroons. This rich scene of the “pale dead” flowing through the pouring river creates a melancholic mood, since Neruda’s word choice of “pale” symbolically represents the absence of color—or life—and, hence, happiness; the loss of a loved one can lead to one’s unhappiness. This juxtaposition of these two images of the lifeless bodies in contrast to the rich current of blood indicates that happiness is extracted from the human souls and is poured into the bloody river as a result of death taking away these lives. Because the action sail holds multiple meanings, this process of dead bodies physically “sailing” through the river of the dead may also symbolize the process of emotionally sailing through time as one who experiences the loss of a loved one must carry the burden of mourning.

Furthermore, Neruda’s inclusion of the image “weighing anchor” not only allows readers to visualize a presence of weight but also suggests the agony swelling in the victim’s heart due to this loss. Neruda explores this concept of a grief-stricken heart as a result of death in one of the stanzas, “the heart going through a tunnel. Shadowy, shadowy, shadowy: we die as if a ship were going down inside us, like a drowning in the heart, falling endlessly from the skin to the soul” (Neruda 33). From this second portion of the poem, Neruda refers to the healing process of the heart as one that involves difficult copings, while allowing readers to fully envision the physical depths of drowning in a heart. This process involves a great amount of time and struggles; “drowning in the heart” and “falling endlessly” emphasize on the feeling of helplessness. Neruda’s selection of dramatic word choices to create the dark images in this poem emphasizes on the human emotions of suffering. Not only does death force one to experience great hardships, but the side effects can also lead to a repulsion to life.

The miserable scenes in “Walking Around” describe an individual’s boredom of life and loneliness from a loved one’s loss. In addition to this boredom, the poem also hints the narrator’s phobia of dying alone. Snippets of visual phrases in the poem show a continuous misery within every aspect of life, “Comes a time I’m tired of being a man…mirrors bawled with shame and terror...where underwear, towels, and blouses cry obscene tears” (Neruda 44). These gloomy observations made during the narrator’s walk reflect the agony brewing inside of him; he simply cannot find the happiness in any object. The phrase “mirrors bawled with shame and terror” especially represents the reflection of him experiencing massive anxiety throughout his life. Grief has blinded him, and all he can see are the “obscene tears” dripping from the hanging garments in the streets, rather than water droplets through a normal perspective. Death accounts for the responsibility of all this grief as the poet ironically claims, “How beautiful it is to run through the streets with a green knife howling until I died of cold” (Neruda 43). This creates a disturbing image of an unstable man roaming down the streets with a burdened heart. The “howling” signifies the physical release of pain within him as he approaches death with a murderous weapon in his hand. The poem furthermore moves into the direction of a phobia of dying alone as Neruda states, “I don’t want for myself so many misfortunes…alone in a vault stuffed with corpses, frozen stiff, dying of shame” (Neruda 43). Despite his undesired intentions to live, he also describes his undesired intention of dying in isolation as he witnesses the mountain of dead bodies piling onto each other. The somber, lonely scene consisting of “a vault stuffed with corpses” chillingly illustrates the misery of having to encounter death without the accompaniment of living souls. This reoccurring theme of living life in a joyless, lonely manner is not only present in “Walking Around” but in “There is No Clear Light” as well.

Similar to “Walking Around,” the poem “There is No Clear Light” creates raw, bloody images to represent the dreadful moments that may be present in life as a result of death. Neruda describes the time passed by on earth as mentally painful, “Yesterday’s hours, stitched by life threaded on a bloodstained needle between decisions endlessly unfulfilled” (Neruda 179). Not only does this line create a literal, sanguinary image of pointy needles threading bloody stitches, but it also beholds a figurative meaning pertaining to time and life. Neruda uses “bloodstained needles” to portray both the physical and psychological pain involved when living in agony through time, as he states “yesterday’s hours” being stitched. This can be connected further to the anguish of death as he narrates, “Who is that other me, who didn’t know how to smile, who died of sheer mourning…I bear only these cruel scars, because those griefs confirm my very existence” (Neruda 181). The physical presence of the cruel scars represents the hurt that the narrator experiences as he states that “those griefs confirm my very existence.” Though the reasons for the narrator’s lack of happiness and inability to smile are not stated explicitly, death may contribute to his grief, since he mentions the absence of the living in his life, “Life, steady flow of emptiness…all brightness buried like an old-time prince…to be and not to be—that’s what life is” (Neruda 181). If there is a “steady flow of emptiness” in life, then that means that this nothingness in life is no other than a reference to death; with the absence of life, death exists as this emptiness. Neruda highlights this binary by stating “to be and not to be”. As a result of this, the absence of the living has sucked away the joy in his life as his statement indicates “all brightness is buried like an old-time prince.” “Old-time” refers to the unchangeable past and, once it has been buried, nothing left may be done to bring back the brightness once caused by the living. These visual images help depict the miserable emotions accumulated over time for one who experiences the hardships of longing from the loss of a loved one.

Throughout his poems “Only Death,” “Walking Around,” and “There is No Clear Light,” Neruda has firmly written down raw emotions that fully express the detrimental, psychological effects that death can have on humans in their daily routines. By mastering the literary device of visual imagery, Neruda includes a series of dark and graphic images to realistically express his view on death as a memorable experience in life with the negative impacts that it can have on people—especially in provoking human emotions in different forms of mourning. Neruda’s “Only Death,” “Walking Around,” and “There is No Clear Light” all suggest a melancholic first-person narrative that powerfully describes the endless sufferings of the narrator due to the losses of loved ones. In each poem, sadness is evident as the narrator describes the experience of having to endure life despairingly each day. This allows the readers to empathize with Neruda’s personal experiences of death in his life as well. He masterfully expresses these emotions by bombarding all three poems with dark and symbolic visual images. Neruda has truly conquered the connection of emotions through his words.

Word Count: 1,439

Work Cited

Neruda, Pablo. *The Essential Neruda, Selected Poems*. Trans. Robert Hass, Forrest Gander, and Alastair Reid. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2004.