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Sample Poetry Explication

If we are dropped into the ocean, the ocean will become our grave. If we are born onto the earth, the earth will become our grave. The places we live and breathe bury and consume us in the end. In Marianne Moore's "A Grave," (Ramazani 440-1, see appendix) life is portrayed as a journey to death.

Moore begins the poem with a curious statement: "Man looking into the sea, / Taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to yourself" (1-2). How could someone, *those*, have ownership of a *view* as much as the *man* has to *himself*, his own body? For this relationship to make sense, the *view* must be part and parcel of the *those* Moore speaks of in line two. The view of the sea must actually compose the mysterious group of people who, at this point in the poem, are not even named.

Although Moore's speaker forgives the man who is looking into the sea by dismissing his actions as typical—"it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing" (3)—she goes on to say that this grave, this view, this sea, "you cannot stand in the middle of this" (4). Why? Perhaps because you cannot walk on water. Perhaps because death is a place where you permanently lose your footing. Or, as she says in line five, because there's nothing for you there: "the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave."

This *well excavated grave* is our first hint at the identity of those who own this view—those who died here and whose graves have been emptied, "whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer investigate them / for their bones have not lasted" (11-12). The owners of this mass grave have nothing left with which to claim their resting place. Their protests drowned; their bones disintegrated. All that is left of them is the view of the sea that swallowed them—the view the

man in line one is so casually taking in.

The man doesn't know the sea is a grave. But there *are* witnesses: the trees. "The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top, / reserved as their contours, saying nothing" (6-7). The trees say nothing perhaps because they accept death as part of life. Moore certainly suggests this possibility in many lines throughout the poem. In line 11, there is "no longer a protest" from those in the grave. In line 15, daily movement continues "as if there were no such thing as death." In line 21, the ocean "advances as usual." But perhaps the trees say nothing because they are afraid. Perhaps they say nothing because, although seemingly safely rooted out of the sea's reach, they are still not about to cross this greedy and ravenous ocean: "the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look" (9).

The trees' respect and fear of the ocean is not mirrored in the men in Moore's poem. The man in line one is forgiven for not knowing he is gawking at a grave site. But the men who appear in line 13 seem to know better yet still prioritize their own desires above respect for the ocean and those who died there. They "lower nets, unconscious" (not unaware but *unconscious*) "of the fact that they are desecrating a grave, / and row quickly away" (13). The men know that, in this ocean, "dropped things are bound to sink" (21). But they are also driven by their desire for fish and stunned by the surface tranquility and beauty of the water: "The wrinkles [of their oars] progress among themselves in a phalanx—beautiful under networks of foam," (16). Beauty allows them to disregard the sea's ability to devour them—beauty, hunger, and the silence of the trees.

But this isn't just a poem about the sea and how, if you are not respectful, it can drown you. It's a poem about the world, represented by the sea. It's a poem about how life progresses through certain cycles that eventually lead to death. It's a poem about how "turn[ing] and twist[ing]" will not change the fact that "dropped things are bound to sink" (22, 21). We breathe until we don't. Death is inevitable. The world continues.

One way craft mirrors content in this poem is in Moore's diction. Her language is unadorned and in a fragmented prose that mirrors everyday speech. Long lines give way to short

lines randomly and end-stopped lines stack upon each other like a series of well-timed “and thens” from the mouth of a storyteller. With her choice of plain, everyday words; mix of long and short lines; and stacked end-stops, her language becomes all-inclusive—just like death. This is a poem for everyone mortal. Neither death nor Moore’s diction and lineation make distinctions.

Moore also writes this poem with many long breath-like lines which add not only to her theme of life and breath but to her personification of the sea as well. In line 17, Moore writes that the wrinkles that circle around the oars’ entry into the water disappear without breath while the sea continues its rhythmic existence. “The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx [...] and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of seaweed” (16-17). A phalanx, a group of soldiers, are not even a match for the power of the sea to consume life. Their breath fades while the sea’s breath—which “rustles in and out of seaweed”—is consistent. Life, as we understand it, no matter how strong, will end. Yet the lines of the poem continue, breath-like, through this realization to become the breath of the sea itself. The sea, the world—these are the things which will carry on beyond our understanding.

This breath-like rhythm presents itself in the quiet repetition of sounds as well. Moore buries rhyme within her lines; *motion*, *ocean*, *pulsation*, and *volition* all appear within lines 18-22. But these words are not found at the end of lines. This use of internal rhyme, coupled with the soft “sh” sound that is repeated, allows the reader to internalize the rhyme without being overwhelmed by it. The result is the feeling of a gentle wave lapping at your heart. A siren. It’s the same beauty and necessity that lured the fishermen in line 13 to cast their nets. The sea, the world, *this poem*, draw us into beauty in such a way that we, like the fishermen, become unconscious of danger. It’s not a bad thing; life’s beauty makes us forget its promise of mortality.

Another rhyme that appears in “A Grave” is found in line 20: *noise* and *bell-buoys*. The noisy “z,” in this rhyme pair seems to mirror the noise of which Moore writes. In lines 15 and 16, Moore uses alliteration, repeating the “f” sound in *phalanx*, *foam*, and *fade*. The “f” sounds are soft, like the “sh” sound repeated in the above rhyme pairs. Alone, these sounds mimic moving water;

repeated, they mimic the random but rhythmic waves of an ocean crossing its shoreline. By using these devices, Moore allows us to experience the sounds of the sea.

Not only does Moore use rhyme, consonance, and alliteration to mimic the sounds of the sea, she presents imagery that does the same, visually. The fir trees in lines six and seven, Moore writes, “stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top, / reserved.” It is easy to see these green trees lining the water’s edge. While the trees stand, the animals vividly carry about their duties. The “birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls” and the “tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs” (18-19). Moore’s imagery shows that even the oars of the fishermen are unaffected: “moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were no such thing as death” (15). Each of these images presents a snapshot of the ocean and brings readers a step further into the living world of this poem.

The speaker of “A Grave” is more observer than judge. The poem doesn’t seem to be a call to live life to the fullest or anything as pedestrian as that. It is more of a comment on how the world continues despite the unspoken inevitability that all things living will, one day, die. The trees keep the secret, sure. But so do the unconscious fishermen. So do the birds and the tortoise-shell. So do we. With the sea as a two-way metaphor for grave and world, Marianne Moore’s poem, “A Grave” gives us a view of the gears of life in motion. The world continues with or without individuals. The time we have will come to an end. And even if the poem is not a call to action, we can use it that way.

Works Cited

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A Grave (Marianne Moore)

1 Man looking into the sea,
2 taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to yourself,
3 it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
4 but you cannot stand in the middle of this;
5 the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.
6 The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top,
7 reserved as their contours, saying nothing;
8 repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic of the sea;
9 the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
10 There are others besides you who have worn that look—
11 whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer investigate them
12 for their bones have not lasted:
13 men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave,
14 and row quickly away—the blades of the oars
15 moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were no such thing as death.
16 The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx—beautiful under networks of foam,
17 and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the seaweed;
18 the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls as heretofore—
19 the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in motion beneath them;
20 and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouses and noise of bell-buoys,
21 advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which dropped things are bound
to sink—
22 in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor consciousness.