

Fall 2023

The Vain Explorer & Death: An Analysis of Ecclesiastes' Philosophy

Quinn M. Gillies
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Gillies, Quinn M., "The Vain Explorer & Death: An Analysis of Ecclesiastes' Philosophy" (2023). *Student Publications*. 1099.

https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/1099

This open access creative writing is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

The Vain Explorer & Death: An Analysis of Ecclesiastes' Philosophy

Abstract

A literary work and analysis of the philosophy of Ecclesiastes about how they viewed the world, more specifically how and how not to live one's life. It starts with a short story about an explorer who in their vanity searches the whole world for answers and comes back feeling only suffering. They are then met by a personification of death who tells them what's wrong with the way they tried to live their life and then gives the explorer the ability to live their life again with new found knowledge of the correct way to live and be without suffering. Then there is an analysis of the short story connecting it to the works of Ecclesiastes on vanity and living a good life.

Keywords

Ecclesiastes, Literary, Vanity, Philosophy, Short Story

Disciplines

Creative Writing | Philosophy

Comments

Written for PHIL 101: Introduction to Philosophy

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

A Vain Explorer & Death: An Analysis of Ecclesiastes' Philosophy

Literary Work

I once was a great explorer. I grew up on an island in the middle of the vast oceans seeking to be more than simply toiling away on a dumb rock. I thought there must be something more that people weren't letting me know. What was beyond the horizon and where was the edge of the world? This question gnawed at me until I gained enough years and gathered enough coins to get a ship for myself to find the truth of the world. I wanted to find glory and purpose in this quest. I sailed for many years on the open ocean, losing many men to storms, sickness, and even mutiny. I sailed for a lifetime before I spotted something, and I was finally happy as my wishes seemed to be coming true, but it was a falsehood. In the end, I was back where I began. I was older but not wiser. I had toiled upon the sea my whole life trying to find the elusive edge of our reality, the end of the world that I could grasp and find and bring to light. Bring forth knowledge of the unknown to my people so that I could know the truth of it, but it was denied to me. I was angry at first but then I was only saddened. My great quest, my great odyssey was nothing more than going around in one giant circle finding nothing but the pain and suffering that came with believing that something would change, that somehow things would be different. The toil of the work and the pointlessness of my quest burned at my heart and turned it to ash. What was it all for? Why did I seek something so distant? I found myself set in a deep depression, a sunken hole so deep that it kept me from seeing any light of day. It was my prison that I had created in my attempt to do greater than all those before me. And then Death came for me, coated in black with a great scythe, seeking to reap my soul and end my sorry existence on this Earth. I was not scared when they appeared, they were an escape from my torment and anguish. They took my hand and I rose to meet them willingly. They looked into my eyes and asked, "Did you have a

good life?" A good life, what sort of life would that be? All I had lived was a life of loss and an unending hunger for knowledge and glory that would never be satiated. "Why ask such a thing, you of all would surely know that I lived a life of endless toil as it appears all will find out such a truth. I spent my life looking for an answer to my questions and I was given nothing, I was never given anything!" I cried. Death seemed to be confused by my response before they laughed. I was angered by their laughter, is my suffering funny to them? Death calmed himself down before saying, "You humans forget yourselves. You forget the bounty that has been provided to you every day by the Earth. Did it not produce the food for your hunger, the water for your thirst, the lumber for your ship, and the island you call home? You humans always attempt to look so far beyond the horizon that you forget that you are bound to the Earth. Dear human, you are limited and have brought upon yourself in your forgetfulness all of the suffering you ascribe being placed upon you. Should you not simply enjoy what has been provided for you as all that is good comes from what already is and what will be?" I was initially shaken by their answer until I realized that I had been made the fool by my own vain attempts at seeking what was beyond. I had wasted my life making myself miserable in the name of vanity. I began to laugh as my despair melted away to acceptance. "It is sad then that I never got to truly experience that in my life, my own thoughts got in the way of appreciating the gift that I was given." I chuckled, "Death if it is at all within your power, I have one thing to ask." "What is it then you want?" Death asked. I emphatically replied, "I want to live! There is enjoyment in life, the vastness of the sky, the cresting of waves, sailing a ship, tying the rigging, hoisting the anchor, cheering with friends, and all other creations that exist in the present in which I lived and wish to live again. I can find satisfaction in that." "Then it shall be", Death said. As those words were spoken, a bright light consumed my entire being and I became blinded. In my vanity, I assumed that I was

better than all that came before and all that would come after. I became blinded by my quest for greatness and the unknowable that I lost touch with the life that surrounded me. I could not see the beauty of the world, the beauty in my fellow human beings, and instead focused on an impossible task. It was my own pride and vain attempt at glory that brought my suffering. I awoke in a clearing among an orchard of peach trees. The sun felt warm on my skin, the soft grass between my toes, the sweet songs of birds pleased my ears and the supple peach that I had plucked from the tree tasted juicy and tart. I was back on the earth knowing that all was provided for me and that these joys that were provided could only be enjoyed by the living. And so I finally felt content as the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders and I could truly relax.

Explanatory Contextualized Commentary

In this story, the explorer's attempts to seek knowledge and glory for himself are representative of the search for meaning and the end of mental woes explored within the work Ecclesiastes. The voyage of the main character is like that of the teacher when he was younger and attempted to get rid of the sense of existential dread that was causing him pain and suffering due to his inability to create (Coogan et al., 2010, pp. 937–939). Instead, their attempts failed and they only felt worse. The story shows how the explorer finds himself in a deep depression even on the brink of death due to his voyage into vanity and attempting to surpass his limitations. This represents the consequences of doing what should be avoided. The vanity of believing that you know better than God or that you can attempt to find something beyond what is given by God is what causes torment. Later when Death comes to take him away they get into a conversation about life. Death acts as a guide to understanding what Qohelet would view as the correct way to live in the story. According to Qohelet, people should live their lives in a form of existential presentism where they are in awe of and enjoy the creations of God as he writes, “This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot” (Coogan et al., 2010, p. 942). God provides all the things we need and we should be thankful and find enjoyment in what has been given to us because we can’t know why that is what we have. The basis of living the right way is to accept one’s lot in life and make the best of it as it is God’s plan. God sets the seasons and the rhythm of the world and that is God’s plan (Coogan et al., 2010, p. 939/945). Death’s speech to the explorer focuses on this where the idea of God is replaced with a pseudo-mother nature figure of a personified Earth that provides for humanity and when their gifts are ignored humans are made to feel suffering because they fail to

understand. They forget that they are connected to and are a creation of the earth, like how in Ecclesiastes God created all things including humanity. The story ends with the vain explorer understanding that his attempts to find the edge of knowledge were all in vain and were the cause of his woes. He then is given a second chance to live this time following the premises of Qohelet and he finds peace of mind.

Bibliography

Coogan, M. D., Brettler, M. Z., Newsom, C., & Perkins, P. (Eds.). (2010). Ecclesiastes. In *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha New Revised Standard Version* (pp. 935–949). Oxford University Press.