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3 Words:

- Death
- Taboo
- Culture

Student Number: 1702930

Course: BA Graphic Design

Word Count: 2720

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Everyone knows the word Death and the meaning, but it's not often discussed or comfortably spoken in a casual conversation. The word Death through various meanings can mean the end of something, the end of someone's life and conscious state or it could mean the beginning into the next world or life. It varies between cultures and can be seen as a positive and worth celebrating and in other society's it can be seen as a gloomy scary subject that isn't talked about often. But death is inevitable, we are all programmed to die. We know why we die in the biological sense but sometimes this doesn't really answer the question fully. The topic is often swept under the carpet until that time comes.

I will be exploring three key words and definitions to propose a question about death and its taboo in our society and how this differs from other cultures. Can we learn something from other cultures? Are we right to keep it tabooed?

The context I will be writing in will be life and death of a human conscious rather than of an animal or of an unconscious being such as the life cycle of a star.

The definitions of death. We'll start with the most obvious as I think this still holds relevance:

“Death is defined as the act of passing away, the end of life, or the permanent destruction of something.”

This is the widely accepted definition of death. Death here is described as the end of a life, the last chapter or stage of a living being, the conscious no longer exists or at least there is no longer evidence of a lingering presence. In modern society we know when people are sick and we can determine when they die whilst sometimes it might be sudden and unforgiving. Either way it's always a shock and the effect it has on each of us can affect us in different ways. We all react differently. Some people can find understanding and move on and other may have been conflicted and can be quite traumatic or cause a depressive state. I can't remember being taught that someday my relatives may die or that it may have either been a good or bad thing. I have not had the experience of going to a funeral myself, but I know we all assume they have gone to a better place. People usually read words from the

Bible, friends and family make speeches and the dead are finally placed to rest outside of a church with others.

My second definition of death comes from The Buddha himself as he describes death as the

'the greatest of all teachers', 'the sickness' and 'the most important manifestation of impermanence'.

This definition or description introduces a different viewpoint on death, one that is optimistic and carries lessons to be learnt. In Buddhism to this day, Buddhists treat death head on. They are presented with death as soon as a family member or friend passes away in their home, an example of this that Buddhists go witness corpses of their loved ones decaying in funeral grounds but all with reasoning. This exposure has a lesson in teaching about the awareness of death and the appreciation of living life in the moment, this is key to learning about temporary states that we find ourselves in; impermanence. Obviously, there's a bit more to the teachings of watching a dead body decay but I've simplified it for sake of example.

Some would say religious values and beliefs are starting to diminish with science being dominant alongside materialistic views. But it seems that science and may be increasing existential panic as there is less understanding and reassurance when these events occur. We really value science but being brought up without teachings or understandings of death make some of those quite unprepared and possibly susceptible to stronger emotions of loss and grief. If death only brings negativity, what is the reasoning?

With these two definitions and viewpoints on the subject of death I can see that death which has been along with us the entire journey is still misunderstood. There is no single viewpoint, belief or solution to witnessing death and I think that there is a lot to learn from these various traditions. I can take away that a scientific view is not always a reassuring view and that science perhaps can't always prove a solution. I also understand the idea of what

previously I would consider a tragedy and then come to understand that there may be some benefits of loss and what can be taken away to help my own well-being.

These two different views of death each have values that would be worth discussing. The idea of exploring cultures that have already found ways of helping themselves where developed countries have not such as preparing or coping with death. Ways that we could learn and appropriate these solutions that science or modern society haven't quite figured out. In this case the discussion about Death. These definitions also reflect the way we think about death. When someone says the word Death, what would be the first to come to mind?



- *A European depiction of Death as a skeleton wielding a scythe*

“For thousands of years, various cultures have had figures to represent death. One of the most common and enduring of these is the Grim Reaper—usually a skeletal figure, who is often shrouded in a dark, hooded robe and carrying a scythe to “reap” human souls.”

Counter argument – at some point you need to rise a counter point to the discussions above. This will help you show how your idea/concept/word is open for debate and that the final research question understands and reflects it.

But then again are we not happy with the way it is? Death may not be spoken about often but for a good reason, why worry about it in the moment? We should be worrying about our own well-being, our work and our goals. For some of us we don't see it worth the time. We're all so caught up with life, we can worry about it later.

The second word I will study is the word Taboo. I will first look at a couple example definitions before bringing the subject back to Death.

“A prejudice that prohibits the use or mention of something because of its sacred nature.”

This definition of Taboo is specifically looking at the mentions of sacred forms which may cause offence and possibly discomfort when misused. Examples would be sacred places that should remain unvisited or perhaps objects or tools that hold a strong religious value that if misused may displease spirits.

An example would be Mount Kailash which has been deemed as a sacred mountain by a number of religions. Each religion has a story to tell so the example I will use is again the Buddhists. The mountain was believed to be home of the buddha Cakrasamvara who represents supreme bliss. Additionally, where two magicians would race:

“It is said that Milarepa (c. 1052 – c. 1135), champion of Vajrayana, arrived in Tibet to challenge Naro Bönchung, champion of the Bön religion of Tibet. The two magicians engaged in a terrifying sorcerers' battle, but neither was able to gain a decisive advantage. Finally, it was agreed that whoever could reach the summit of Kailash most rapidly would be the victor.”



Ancient Thangka depicting Mount Kailash

With religions claiming the mountain to have a sacred history, no one is permitted to climb. To decide to trespass would be considered shameful and unforgiving.

“The term taboo language refers to words and phrases that are generally considered inappropriate in certain contexts.”

This definition refers to the word taboo in the sense that there are certain words, topics or phrases that society have considered to inappropriate to use. Using these words can make people feel uncomfortable, uneasy and sometimes banned altogether. I can imagine in this context we can also include gestures and how they differ around the world. These Taboos do not usually carry the same negative values across cultures and societies, this then means that word or gesture taboos are another example of constructs. The obvious example is the OK hand sign which has now been added to the list of Hate Symbols. Though overwhelming usage for saying “OK” has prevented total hatred of it. But who knows, over time the OK symbol may become tabooed.

In addition to this definition I would to point out that when a word is tabooed, it may not carry the same taboo as another word. When we talk about existential words like God, Death or Heaven (or even the word existence), the response is usually dismissal or uninterest. These are of course words we don’t usually talk about or are up for a long discussion, some people don’t have time for these discussions as well as the fact these discussions can lead to nowhere. Another type of tabooed words would be forbidden or

disapproved opinions or acts. Examples would be Necrophilia, Bestiality and Paedophilia. All of these words cause unease and discomfort and are probably the most tabooed examples in society.

These different definitions of Taboo have given me insight into the different reasoning behind taboos and the kind of reactions that may be caused. Deep meaningful values on objects or places to create Taboo that can be respected and at the scale of being a serious crime to trespass Mountains. As well as those smaller scales of taboo that aren't religious and have been constructed by societies that can cause scare or discomfort. These also prove that social taboos can change over time.

When covering the taboo of death these definitions have made me question the origin of modern societies taboo of death. Why haven't we adopted more accepting or pleasant views of death, has death always been the same level taboo or as a society are, we growing to become more relaxed or strict about the subject of death? Does the word death carry its own stigma and our ideas of what death is in reality? What I would like to examine is where our perception and the idea of death have split off between cultures.

Culture is my third word to wrap up the project. Along with human existence, death has always been present and never changing. However, the subject of death has been changing throughout time and in the present world we can see this is evident that death carries different meanings despite the fact we will all be meeting the same fate. Death has been changed and presented through religion, storytelling and art and these are through the development of cultures past and present.

"The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society."

This definition of culture is the collection of ideas and beliefs that have defined a way of living. These cultures can stem from religious beliefs, or from societies of like-minded people. They can appear anywhere. Culture can also defy who we are, the world you were brought up in has straight influence from those around us, we are exposed and moulded by those who raised you. These influences can be from family values or from the city you were

raised in or even the country you live in. These ideas and behaviours stem from your cultural background.

“The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.”

This definition of culture is a branch of arts and creations that have come from a particular culture. This could be anything from graffiti art of political statement in the streets of London or religious seasonal celebrations in festivals over in India. An example of this could be Holi which is a Hindu festival. They celebrate victory of good over evil, and Winter turning to Spring and this is celebrated every year and it has done for generations, an example of culture and art that has been passed on over centuries. They celebrate by gathering in a crowd and throw paint and water balloons at each other and this way of celebrating had become popular and has been spread to different countries. An example of an art from culture being a trend.



<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/holi-festival/>

PHOTOGRAPH BY PORAS CHAUDHARY, MYSHOT

These definitions both helped me understand that the word culture is quite a broad and maybe not well defined. But the both define the existence of a collection of ideologies and I can understand that peoples opinions and thoughts may stem from their culture background and can be understood in the context of where or how they were brought up. I can also see that these ideologies can be changed or develop over time and the possibilities of other cultures taking ideas from another. Culture can be defined in many ways and it can be celebrated and teach lessons or a way of making a voice for change.

In the context of Death and Taboo I have explained before that death is viewed and approached differently between societies. I now understand that culture is one of the main factors for these attitudes. Knowing that religion, art and social customs are all building blocks for what culture is, this would explain where Taboos and the ideas of death have been originated or developed from. It has also made me think off into a tangent and question our own festivals or holidays in the UK or modern society. They're not celebrated truly on the message the festival or religion has originally tried teaching us but rather we use them as a way to advertise and commercialise, working in retail has taught me this is only too true. This makes the point that although were living the best life's in developed countries, are we becoming more out of touch with what's important for celebrations and well-being?

The argument would be that most of us are quite content with the things we have now. What use is religious and spiritual teachings today? I know my morals. I have been brought up to be rational, every feeling can be explained and taught without having to appropriate other cultural norms. Some people may not even like the idea of other cultures intruding in our own. Is ours not perfectly fine as it is?

In this thesis I have discussed 6 definitions and I have expanded my knowledge of what each of these words mean and come up with possibilities of questions to ask for my dissertation.

I have first learnt that the meaning of both the word and subject of death can mean a very different thing across the world, the fact that death has been present since our existence and we still haven't defined what death is universally is quite interesting and worth researching. Of course, learning to define or coming to terms with death can be taught through vast range of world cultures that some evidently have either been celebrated and have been taught that you shouldn't be a stranger to it. As well as other cultures who have found other aspects of life more important and forgotten about until it inevitably greets us. This also brings the question of the origins of our attitude and what Taboos have been created surrounding the subject of death. Has the Taboo been something constructed by ourselves in the past? Or is there a far deeper philosophical and sacred meaning that we are programmed to ignore or dismiss? Are we mature enough to talk and openly discuss death? Is there any point in doing so? Are we all scared of death? What have other cultures come up with the embrace it and is there anything we can learn?

To conclude this, I will be asking myself the following questions I wish to peruse and research. "How has death defined attitude towards our ways of living in different cultures?", "Does the inevitability of death give life meaning and should it be openly discussed for the benefit of our well-being?", "What are the origins of our cultural beliefs in death and has it affected the way we live today?", "Do these cultural beliefs in death differ between cultures or are they similar, what the core roots of these ideas of death."

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