

The theme of Death in representations of Brittany.

The subject of Death is a recurring theme that seems to permeate the very idea of Brittany, being interwoven into the very fabric of legends, myths and perceptions and ideologies presented by the outsiders. This essay, whilst analysing two pieces of literature about Brittany and Death - *The Sign* by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam from his collection *Cruel Tales* and Anatole Le Braz, *Dealings with the Dead: Narratives from 'La Légende de la mort en Basse Bretagne'*, translated by A.E. Whitehead, and maintaining them as its integral focus, will also aim to highlight the vast impact that the subject of Ankou, specifically, had on the popular culture these days, but also to discuss potential intercultural connections (i.e. Egypt). To begin with, the subject of Death is one that is integral to any and all cultures throughout the known civilisations. As, sadly, an aspect of life that we can not rid ourselves of yet, Death has become a cornerstone of the culture. Regardless of the beliefs a person may hold, the subject of death will come up, even if in passing only. People have different approaches to this. Some attempt to paint Death as some sort of aspect, a force that, in a mythical, spiritual way, exists to give Life meaning. While this may have some validity to it, looking from the binary perspective of the opposites, there supposedly would be no Death without Life and Life without Death, which others may argue that these two forces are capable of existing independently. Perhaps there is a grain of truth to this, given that a 1 can exist without a 0, and 0 without a 1, however, limited in its description and parameters those two binary options would be independent.

Death has a way of stimulating the imagination, always pushing curious minds towards the intellectual endeavour of asking 'What's next?'. It seems to lay in waiting, filling the minds of unsuspecting victims with fear and panic, as they look behind their shoulders and *walk over their own graves*.

Brittany is known for its theme of Death, which given the amount of focus, could be by some treated as a cult. Yet, a cult it is not, not any more than it was in Egypt during the times of Old Gods and Ra-Pharaohs. Interestingly, as this will be a point made later on, the name for the avatar of Death in the Brittanian traditions is 'Ankou'. Now, anyone who has ever read anything about Ancient Egypt, or even watched the famous *SG-1*, would have come across the Ankh - the cross that serves as the key to the afterlife, one that adorned the chests of the Gods that had dominion over the souls of the departed. The question that this would raise, would be whether there is actually a tangible connection, that can be documented, whether archaeological, anthropological or linguistic as those two words, Ankou and Ankh, seemingly sharing a word root and relatively interconnected meaning, are in fact, connected, or not. Perhaps it is a simple coincidence, perhaps not. After all the cultures have mixed and oftentimes one would influence the beliefs of another. As there was a tangible connection between Egypt, Greece and Rome, and there is a tangible connection established between Egypt and the Gaul, it is not so far-fetched to believe that there may be a connection between Ankh and Ankou.

The Ankou in the representations of Brittany.

Leaving the discussion of cultural exchange and possible influences, it is vital to focus on how Death was represented in the literature and therefore perceived by the 19th-century people, often outsiders to the culture itself, but influenced by the vivid energy seemingly enchanted into the very fabric of reality. The first and foremost representation this essay will discuss and dissect is *The Sign* by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, a short story set in Brittany, relying on the perceptions of the area to enhance the sensations for the reader and give potential validity to their already preconceived notions. The author focuses vastly on building the

atmosphere of the story with vibrant tales and descriptions of nature, ensuring to pay attention to the detail and providing a riveting narration capable of transferring the dear reader to the scene of the writer's mind eye. Such a narration, included in a story innately about Death, makes for a striking contrast. Even though it could be argued that it pulls the focus away, alas that is not the case, as portraying vivid, full-of-life descriptions, only serves to prepare the scene for what's to come, the macabre of fear and tension which tends to build up as the reader continues the story. Interestingly, as soon as the story approaches the physical embodiment of the divine - the presbytery, the atmosphere proceeds to shift seamlessly, the descriptions provided prior to the narrator's arrival, then full of life and bright colours, seem to lose their vibrancy as the shift happens. Gone are the descriptions of green blinds, and in their place a grey colour dominates.¹

Such a play on the atmosphere with the usage of the colour is strictly done on purpose and highlights the seamless blend of the mortal, material and that of the higher realms. The previous minute descriptions of the surroundings, then providing a sense of peace and relaxation, now serve to enhance the feelings of tension and urgency "I heard ticking sounds and sharp creaks in the woodwork and the walls; presumably **death**-watch beetles."²

Following, the description becomes even more vivid and tension inducing "Each of the almost imperceptible noises of the night was followed by a sort of electric shock passing through the whole of my body".³ He then proceeds to describe the outdoors, the sensations the wind and nature made him experience, once again referring to death by mentioning "My hearing had become as keen as that of people **dying** from hunger".⁴ This is a purposeful action, meant to influence the reader and share what the author wanted the reader to feel at the time, progressively stripping away the pleasant atmosphere of the colourful autumn to give way to the bleak reality of the cold, wet, windy season. The narration progresses, drawing the reader into the dreamscape of the subject, describing in vivid detail the blurry lines between the land of living and the land of dreams. His description of a deathly visage of a priest with red, glowing eyes, brings to mind the description in the *Dealings With The Dead*, where in 'A Dead Priest's Mass' the eyes of the purgatory bound priest are described to be glowing and entirely focused on Chatton, the subject of the story. Similar to how the aspects of the wind outside the window and the opening door have been described in the same book.⁵

The story itself progresses as the account of a friendly visit, aiming to achieve peace and health, perhaps even enlightenment, the atmosphere, the dreams and the *signs* serve as a foreshadowing of the events, making the reader wonder whether the priest is even alive at the point of the visit. The very fact of the card with the address being tucked into the mirror, seemingly a normal action practised by many even to the early 2010s in some regions, also foreshadows the events, as the mirror is often considered a portal to the Otherworld. Alas as the story progresses the reader remains tense, just as the narrator does, paying attention to every detail described in the story. The cloak, which the narrator dreamt of, becomes the final sign of what is to unfold as, just like in the dream world, the priest gives the narrator the cloak, repeating the events from the dreamscape, tying the two worlds together. At the end of the story, we learn that the good presbyter passed three days after parting ways with the

¹ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, 'The Sign', *Cruel Tales*, (1985), <<https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=8534§ion=8>> pp. 182-200, (p. 187) .

² Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, 'The Sign', p. 190.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Anatole, Le Braz, *Dealings With The Dead: Narratives From "La Legende De La Mort En Basse Bretagne"*, (1898), <https://archive.org/details/DealingsWithTheDead_201902/page/n77/mode/1up> pp. 147-148.

narrator. The words said by the narrator are a vivid reminder of how real his fears are - "I really cannot allow this. Your life is precious and this icy shower is anything but healthy. Go back home. Once again, this rain could give you a dangerous soaking. Do go back, I beg you."⁶ Interestingly, the taboo nature of wearing dead man's clothing comes into mind, a belief that is integral to various traditions and a superstition that wearing such clothing gathers the attention of death. Yet, in this scenario, this belief could only be mentioned in passing as a side note, as the priest was very much alive at the moment that the narrator wore the cloak. The cloak in itself is a symbol of Death, Death's shroud, Death's cloak, the length, the dark colour and oftentimes the associated hood, covering the identity and painting death as universal, are also integral parts of Death's description.

The Sign is set in Brittany, describing the seemingly metaphysical presence of Death and its reach. It is said that death never comes unannounced, always leaving signs and this is also the belief presented by the Bretons. The very focus on the story, its title being *The Sign*, openly refers to the set of beliefs and the subject of the narration.

To summarise, *The Sign* is deeply set as representation of Brittany and Bretonic beliefs, shrouded in mystery and tension, permeating the reality with little signs of its presence, poisoning the vivid descriptions from the beginning of the story with its icy touch that appears progressively more often towards the end. This also highlights the outsider's perspective of muddy and cold Brittany and contrasts it with the insider's perception of a natural, warm environment, focused on spirituality.

The second literary example, which very much follows the ideas put forth in *The Sign* is the *Dealings With The Dead* by Anatole Le Braz, published towards the end of the 19th century and serving as a gathering and recollection of oral stories about death. From the beginning it is first and foremost a collection of wives' tales, describing various examples of deathly encounters and signs that precede the event (one of the chapters is even aptly named 'Eight Omens Of A Death'⁷). The book, the collection contains various descriptions that could very well be told, similarly to how *The Sign* was told according to the book, as a 'scary story', for example, 'The Cradle' is very much connected to *The Sign*, maybe even more so than the 'Dead Priest's Mass'. 'The Cradle' speaks of a woman, whose husband went on a voyage, only to appear by her door, soaking wet, approaching the Cradle and singing a lullaby to a babe. The story, as the majority of stories speaking of death and the dead, highlights the intuition of the participants and the out-of-place nature of the events taking place at the time. In 'The Cradle' the wife is surprised by her husband's swift return. These days, this may have been even more surprising, due to the existence of the phones, but back then, the options for notifying people were limited, therefore it is no surprise that the wife did not pay the unusual events as much due attention as she could.⁸ Alas, as with many stories of the dearly departed, people only realise that they saw an apparition, a ghost, once they turn away from them and then try to resume the conversation, oftentimes there being no signs of the person's presence, causing anxiety and tension, just as death does.

There are often two contradicting notions, and beliefs, regarding death. Some believe that death comes peacefully, whilst others, Bretons included, if the stories are to serve as the recollections of their attitude, that Death is the scary, anxiety-inducing force that leaves signs, but appears suddenly, not so seldom in a macabre version of reality.

An example of this can be found in Chapter 10 - 'A Funeral Seen Beforehand', a story that describes the events surrounding the passing of the blind uncle of Marie Creac'hcadic, a

⁶ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, 'The Sign', pp. 196-197.

⁷ Anatole, Le Braz, *Dealings With The Dead*, pp. 74-79.

⁸ Anatole, Le Braz, *Dealings With The Dead*, pp. 69-70.

teenager who worked delivering milk. The story told by the narrator speaks of the girl observing a funerary procession and realising that it must have been her uncle who has passed. Upon investigating, she visits him in his dying hour, spending the night holding a vigil by his bedside,⁹ a custom that is known in various cultures and oftentimes has nothing to do with any traditions, but the chance to say goodbye to those that were preparing for their final journey.

Another interesting story in the collection is 'The Ox's Warning', it speaks of a story happening a short while before the Great Revolution in France, the place being Briec. The story focuses its symbolism on two young oxen, making sure to mention them returning unsold from a fair, and walking on either side of their owner.¹⁰

Interestingly enough, the cattle, in Slavic tradition, is associated with the God of Death, Underworld, Magic and Oath - Wales, his representation an Ox, depending on the depiction and who describes him.

To summarise, this representation of Brittany speaks of folk tales about death, various signs that precede it and represents a deep Breton connection to the Death.

Following the above discussion of the two examples of literary representation of Breton attitudes towards the Death, Ankou, the next point would be a side reference and possible connection between Ankou and the Ankh Cross.

Both of these are deeply connected to the theme of death and the underworld. But whilst they seem to share similarly sounding names, in reality, there's no direct connection mentioned to this day. The only connection that could be drawn, would be the fact that Ankh was a key to the other side, leading the mortals to their afterlife, a role it shares with Ankou, who as a guide, a grim reaper of sorts, serves as a guide into the afterlife, preventing chaotic passing and enforcing the supposedly natural processes of the death and passing.

Ankou in popular culture. Ankou as a grim reaper wearing a cloak and using a scythe is an imaginary that permeates various cultures but also media. Besides such obvious examples as previously mentioned Wales, who is also a God of Harvest, using a scythe to gather the grain and souls, the grim reaper is usually presented the way Ankou is described. One of the most recent examples, would for example be a game called *An Ankou* from 2023, developed by Alkemi.¹¹ *An Ankou*. The game's story revolves around the mythological Ankou, a guide for the departed soul. The player, as the last dead of the year, becomes an Ankou Ankou, guiding the souls and fighting demons in the roguelike (randomly generated content) adventure.¹² The game itself is fast paced, with the graphics of the terrain heavily influenced by the lore and the descriptions of Brittany often faced in its representations. This game is one of few recent examples of how mythology and folklore seems to be making a return to the wider scene and serves as an attempt at bringing people's attention to the stories of old. Another example of Breton's influence on pop culture, albeit in a different way, would be the TV series *Charmed*. In the seventh season of the show, the titular Charmed Ones, the three sisters whose destiny it is to fight demons and help the innocent, often including those who feel lost after their death, face a new enemy - a demon Zankou. Whilst Zankou does not share many characteristics with the Ankou of the legends, there is one connection they do, other than the name itself. Throughout the series, the Charmed ones often faced powerful

⁹ Anatole, Le Braz, *Dealings With The Dead*, pp. 92-96.

¹⁰ Anatole, Le Braz, *Dealings With The Dead*, pp.84-92.

¹¹ PID Games and Alkemi, *An Ankou*, (2023), video game, Steam, <https://store.steampowered.com/app/2281650/An_Ankou/> [Accessed 25/01/2025].

¹² PID Games and Alkemi, *An Ankou*.

enemies, including the incarnation of the devil himself, but none of these demons spelt doom for them the way Zankou did. All of the previous seasons, with the exception of season 3, end on a lighter note, with the door to the manor closing to reflect the closing of the chapter, but season seven is different. Demon Zankou serves as a sign of what's to come and the viewer is left feeling disheartened by how powerful the enemy is. The season ends with the house exploding and the sister witches supposedly dying, their death foretold by Zankou himself.¹³

As evidenced above, the representations of Brittany are filled with the theme of Death, of Ankou and the way they speak of it showcases a deeply rooted culture of Death that seems to permeate the traditions. The various ways the encounters with Death are described, yet retaining common characteristics amongst themselves showcases the way the stories are repeated, and how certain symbols ingrained themselves in the psyche of the citizens.

¹³*Charmed*, Season 7, WB, 2004, TV Show, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B00FZGFJCI/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r> [Accessed 25/01/2025].

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