

2019, Undergraduate essay, English Literature

Close reading essay: Denise Riley's *Still*

*Still*¹ explores death as a reality relative to the emotional experience of death for those left behind, and engages with the role of language. The title of Riley's poem, *Still*, I interpret as indicating the centrality of this word to the poem's meaning. Riley's poem uses the homonymic nature of 'still' to express two realities following death. The adjectival 'still' is depicted in association with the physical actuality of death, in which the body of the deceased becomes 'still'. In contrast, the adverbial 'still' is associated with the experience of those who have lost someone, for whom that person, despite death, is 'still' here in an abstract form. The continuing existence of the deceased is depicted through the loved ones *responding to* death after the fact. My reading suggests that whilst the poem expresses these two facets of death as opposing, they co-exist. The wavering dynamic between the two expresses difficulty in the very defining of death.

The first section of this essay will delineate where Riley's *Still* engages with the notion of responding to, alongside the actuality of, death. The poem opens with a matter-of-fact 'You're dead', and in the third line the speaker expresses dislike ('it's maddening') towards the deceased's continued 'bobbing'. Introduced is a past death of the unspecified addressee and the speaker's response, shown through 'maddening'. A shift in the situating of addressee and speaker occurs in line seven: 'No welling up after my death', and the following line wonders 'What they'll make of this'. Evident again is the notion of a death and response. The final sentence bolsters this reading. It begins 'may they bear it', 'bear' being a negatively loaded action of response. The speaker goes on to list similar actions ('plan for or fashion or

¹ Denise Riley, "Still," in *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 23.

help or screen out or subdue') towards the 'fight' of a thing which is 'stone-dens[e]' to 'stay animate'. The stone imagery, as well as the insinuation of a coming loss of animation is again suggestive of death.

Having established this dynamic in the ambiguous narrative of the poem, I will now analyse where the poem expresses the adjectival meaning of 'still' as associated with the reality of death, and where the speaker offers this as a preferred ontological state for the addressee, probing the binary of stone and water imagery concerning this. After the speaker describes the state in which the deceased still exists for them in terms of water ('bobbing'), the second sentence begins 'rather', inferring a preference, which is elaborated using stone-like imagery: 'go blocky, be granite ... lodge stock-still, a slab.' Given the permeating theme of death, this imagery in association with a deceased person is suggestive of the adjectival 'still', as it brings to mind both a gravestone and the physical body of a deceased person. Continuing on the subject of 'my death', the speaker wonders what others will make of the 'great lump of myself.' The heavy physical imagery implied by 'great lump' is suggestive of stone. Death is further implied by the indifferent and comic tone of the phrase 'great lump'. It mimics the nature of the body after death: impersonal and detached from the identity of the person gone. The opening line echoes this sentiment. The two stressed beats of 'You're dead' sound hard and finite, suggestive of the adjectival bodily stillness of the 'dead' addressee. To similar effect is the assonance of 'stock-still, a slab', the syntax of which is weighted and hard, echoing the preferred 'still' state of the deceased.

In contrast with the stone-like descriptions are those of water, which are portrayed as the (ill-favoured) state in which the deceased is currently existing, and which I argue embodies the adverbial meaning of 'still'. I would like to note the nature of water as fluid, ungraspable, and

unceasing, and as aligning with the grammatically continuous nature of the adverb 'still'. The poem's second line describes the opening 'you' as 'still flicker[ing] bluish' and 'bobbing', the movement and colour of these creating the impression of water. Of note, too, is the adverbial 'still' used in the opening line in direct association with the imagery of water. The third line elaborates on the opening state of the addressee by positioning them 'bobbing | [...] in my eye's corner', an image suggestive of tears. Tears are a physical manifestation of grief. They are a (liquid) form in which the memory of the lost loved one exists after they are gone. This notion is repeated in line seven with 'welling' as the speaker shifts the subject matter to their own death, and again expresses ill-favour towards such a continuation of existence after death: 'no welling up after my death in the mouths of the living'. Expressed is an aligning of water with the fact of the dead continuing to exist through responses from the living, both of which embody the adverb 'still'.

Having suggested that the speaker of *Still* constructs a water versus stone binary in expressing ways in which those dead exist or do not exist after their death, and in conjunction with the homonymic nature of the word 'still', I will advocate the poem depicts language itself as a form in line with the continuous nature of water and the adverbial 'still'. As the speaker describes their preference for numerous water-like states in a post-death setting, they state 'no welling up after my death in the mouths of the living.' The use of 'mouths', as the setting of a continuing existence of the deceased is indicative of speech. Moreover, nine lines of the poem's fourteen use enjambment. In terms of syntax, the poem itself drags and flows over its own edges. It is not 'stock-still'; rather, 'fluid'. The poem's four-line final sentence utterly lacks punctuation and uses polysyndeton in repeating 'or' four times. Once more, the experience of the reader in this final line is one of dragging language, an experience epitomised by the action of the 'stone-dense' subject of the final line, which 'fight[s] to stay

animate'. Such a notion is evident throughout Riley's collection as well as its title, *Say Something Back*, which is an assertion of speech as a responsive action; outliving that which came before. As such, I argue that *Still*, at the level of syntax, expresses language as a means of making '*still*' *here* that which is gone.

Finally, I argue that the poem's shifting pronouns express the nature of the homonymic 'still' as polysemic, but also single. In relation to the subject of death, I suggest the poem uses the homonymic nature of 'still' to propose that whilst a death is one event, there is more than one experience of it. The poem's fourteen lines align it with sonnet form. Indeed, it opens with a single and definite addressee: 'You're dead'. Nonetheless, ambiguity builds in the fourth line, beginning 'Rather'. 'I'd not' of the first line grammatically connects with 'rather'. However, whilst the second and third sentences appear to be on the same subject matter, implied by the repetition of 'not whirr and not flare' and 'not become fish', there is an unintroduced shift into 'my death', which creates confusion concerning whether the speaker or addressee's death is the topic. Such indistinctness surrounding subject matter alongside the meditative nature of the poem creates a lack of stillness. The poem's third section makes a final shift in pronouns towards the impersonal 'it'. The use of 'it' is a linguistic loss of personal pronouns, mimicking the poem's concern with the loss of a person. The 'it' of line ten's 'Let it keep inert' seems to refer to 'the coming great lump of myself'. The first 'it' of the final sentence refers to the experience of an unspecified 'they' to the speaker's death ('may they bear it'), then to the solid adjectival nature of the thing which is dead ('its stone density'), and finally to 'its fight to stay animate', 'it' being the unspecified thing which is both 'stone dense' (physically dead) but trying to 'stay animate'. The dual nature of this concluding 'it' embodies the homonymy of 'still'. It is physically 'still' in death, yet 'still' here.

This essay has discussed the ways in which Riley's *Still* expresses two experiences of death which are distinct but analogous. Whilst the speaker alleges to want the deceased to stay in the adjectival, stone-like form, the poem's language suggests otherwise. The poem's final three lines, for example, use dactylic feet, beginning with 'something self-driven', and end with an internal rhyme, 'stay animate'. This concludes the poem with a sense of deliberate closure, and contradicts the content of the final words. Therefore, the poem asserts an inconsistent attitude towards death. In doing so, it depicts the difficulty of comprehending the finality of death alongside the abstract forms in which the deceased continue to exist, through grief, for example. In determining the significant role of language in responding to death, I argue Riley's poem is engaged with contemporary questions regarding language as an expression of personal grief, and of its ability as a representational form to continue the existence of something otherwise lost.

Word Count: 1525

Bibliography

Denise Riley, "Still," in *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016)