

ENGLISH

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Is it Dead?

REFLECTION STATEMENT

If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life - and only then will I be free to become myself.

- Martin Heidegger

Propelled into an existence we didn't pre-determine, humanity is forced to grapple with its mortality, leaving us to interpret this world with literature as our guide. By simultaneously exploring, satirising, and inciting reflection, 'Is It Dead?', quite literally asks its listeners to re-evaluate Western thanatophobia — *the fear of death* — by presenting the reader with an anachronistic melting pot of literary perspectives on mortality. Using an unreliable guide figure as a vehicle for introspection, my Major Work presents a collage of prose fiction, verse poetry and song through a phantasmagorical podcast. By utilising the literary perspectives of the Beat Generation, Post-Modernity, and Anti-Romanticism, 'Is it Dead?' presents literary depictions of mortality to the listener. The audience is therefore expected to academically engage with questions surrounding "what can we learn from engaging with these [literary] works today?", as well as the experimental nature of literary forms in contemporary podcast drama, where "anything you can imagine" can happen.

Crafting this piece has been incredibly reflective in reconciling with a stage of life that many of us choose not to think about. It has opened my eyes to the power death has over us, as death shapes how we choose to spend our very existence. Though I am still only young, I feel my piece has shaped my worldview, caused me to reflect on how I want to live my life. I hope my piece does something similar for you.

NARRATOR

'Freudian Slippers' by Chilly Gonzales¹

Welcome to an exploration of conceptualisations of death in literature.

In a collaboration between *The History of Literature Podcast* and the *Theatre of Tomorrow*, today, we take you on an allegorical narrative through literary explorations of death. Tunnelling through Ginsberg's 1950s defiance of a compliant response to physical, social and intellectual death, into *Baudrillard* and *Bo Burnham's* postmodern satirical critique of nothingness, 'round the corner and back again into *Baudelaire's* anti-Romantic idealism of mortality. I'm Albert Heidegger, with you today as you journey through the metaphoric Bayou.

Prologue

Bayou sounds of moving water, crickets and frogs

NARRATOR

It is a surreal, moonlit night.

Stitched to the sky sits a collection of withering mangroves covered in leaves that droop like emerald rags. Creme de Cassis dahlias emerge around the bayou.

You approach a pool of swamp water that connects to an intricate river system, a place where verdant ideas sleep furiously.

Creaking hull noise

A handcrafted vessel drifts over, its bowels knotted with twisted timber. A sack of coins, tied to a steel nail that had been hammered into its frame, thumps methodically against the ageing hull.

Sound of someone slowly paddling towards the listener. The boat creaks

1 *'Freudian Slippers' by Chilly Gonzales*

LEGBA

You need a ride cher?

NARRATOR

The figure wears a stovepipe hat and underneath its dark brim, their face is painted powdery white, resembling a sort of skull. It wears a tailored Western funeral suit with silk dress gloves.

LEGBA

Hold up dere drifta, a ride'll cost ya, but I'll throw in a Lagniappe².

(beat)

You ain't from around d'ese parts are you?

NARRATOR

You ask its name.

LEGBA

Been through many names Son, but Legba was a favourite, always.

NARRATOR

Legba reaches out its hand and you choose to grab its gaunt fingers.

LEGBA

I've seen your kind pass d'rough men'ey a time. He pauses as he begins to turn the boat around. Learn'in your name.

Sound of inhaling a large cigar

(beat)

doesn't ma'dder to me.

Sound of the bayou

2 Lagniappe (a small free gift)

NARRATOR

The sun is at its last light as if it was about to slip into unconsciousness and, like clockwork, a congregation of fireflies parade into the languid air like parishioners.

Each stroke Legba takes with her oar creates a whooshing sound that fills the silence.

The trees cover the stars in a way that makes the leaves shine.

LEGBA

Right now, we be at a crossroads. Your choice to stop ere' and find your way.

NARRATOR

Legba points to a long straight river branch then turns and points towards a dark cave.

LEGBA

Or we can go this way.

Legba relights their cigar.

When a cher like you is faced with nothingness he has a choice to face it or pretend it ain't real. If you let me, I can show you round de abyss. Be a guide to you.

NARRATOR

You answer with an impulsive yes.

A walloping whoosh to propel the boat down the stream. The sound of a dark and damp cave

Scene I: The Cave

NARRATOR:

You enter a cave; the fireflies hang back at its mouth reluctant to venture further, but the light shining from their tears shows no such fear. Its light, like dayless eternity, creates dancing shadows that bounce off the water and onto the veiny columns that grow down from the roof.

Sound of some sort of uncanny slime

The cave smells of late-night fish markets where the produce has gone rancid, a smell that makes you grimace.

A wind whistles along the cave walls like a cursed banshee.

LEGBA

Welcome cher to d'ee world of dem bottom feeder. Be wary when you talk to d'ese folk."

NARRATOR:

In the corner you witness a mass of catfish, each squatting in crescent pools shaped like a yoni, writhing against each other.

The sound of a slimy splashing. Gore sound effects implying cannibalism

Each pool has a single blushed orchid that sways on its fallopian stem, drooping towards the catfish writhing in the pools, like some horrible Lovecraftian creation... truly disgusting.

On a sharp rock, a single catfish inhales, and exhales with a heavy breath. His scales are patterned with black and white pinstripes, and he wears a pair of circular tinted black glasses which are barely big enough to hide his eyes.

LEGBA

Dis ere cher is Ghede. Remember, words have meaning 'cause you give it cher. Nothen is real without anod'er perceiving it. This aint for me cher, it's for you, we be goin now anyways, dem Loa ain't waiting for long.

GHEDE

In a fight against the peculiar night³, you witness my prophecies:
imposed hopefulness and manufactured
optimism,
manifest into the inspired Cowboy Cassady⁴ and the sun-splashed hipster⁵,
whose wizard eyes radiated
through malls.

Billboards, Billboards, classic, deluxe, complementary, prestige, pain-easing, flavour
enhancing gelatine⁶. Do want to learn more?

Eat this, drink that, true taste, new edition, FDA approved, ethically sourced,
clinically tested blind folds⁷.

Perception shields placed over the eyes of a billion star-dusted eggs⁸, scrambled in
their perpetual ignorance
I rarely have eggs for breakfast though my indulgences feed on the new life of our
generation as we, angel headed hipsters, burn for the ancient heavenly connection to
the starry dynamo. Eggs really should be given to their mothers⁹,
While newsmen laugh so much their face is wet with Kool-Aid¹⁰ I am an atom bomb,
mine Führer I can walk,
I see nothing but darkness and war, Are you my angel¹¹?
There is nerve-gas over the radio¹², it's descending from Mars!¹³ But history will make
this poem prophetic in its predictions;

3 Reference to Dylan Thomas

4 Neil Cassady, Jack Kerouac's best friend - member of beat generation

5 Ginsberg

6 Rejection of materialism, middle-class capitalism

7 Reference to 1950s conservative culture 'regulation' and rise
of television and advertising 'American Dream'

8 Reference to a Ginsberg poem 'Death to Van Gogh's Ear' - egg
motif which represents human life as "eggs"

9 Ibid

10 This line references Ginsberg's Moloch as a metaphor for society within the poem, 'Howl'.
Kool-Aid, Reference to accepting ideologies ignorantly (historical reference to 19X event)

11 Reference to Allen Ginsberg's "Supermarket in California"

12 Beat Generation poetry (article - beat and politics) reflected a political concern
for the Cold War and the needless pursuit of death-making weaponry

13 Reference to H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*

All true stories end with death¹⁴
Walt Whitman was right¹⁵, we contain multitudes, No one owns life,
The Allan Watts' steam engine transports enlightenment¹⁶ No one owns life, and I
can pick up a frying pan¹⁷.
Rage! Thomas!¹⁸ Rage! And I'll break Moloch's¹⁹ ventriloquist jaw And scream
"Catfish of the world, Unite,
You have nothing to lose but your brains"²⁰!

NARRATOR:

The gudgeon begins to gargle, spewing various bile across his domain. Until
a tiny lung, shelled in black tar, flies out his mouth.

Sound of vomit, gore sound, paddle sound as you leave the cave

Reflecting on these sights you ask Legba if the creature is still alive.

LEGBA

Does it ma'dder?

Silence with heartbeat

NARRATOR

You ask yourself if pleasure is worth it. If being an individual lifts you from
suffering? If life should be a wild ride fighting against death?

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- 14 Reference to Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*
 - 15 "Throughout these interviews [in *Spontaneous Mind*] Ginsberg returns to his high praise of William Blake and Walt Whitman. Ginsberg obviously loves Blake the visionary and Whitman the democratic sensualist, and indeed Ginsberg's own literary personality can be construed as a union of these forces." Edmund White, *Arts and letters* (2004), p. 104.
 - 16 Alan Watts' - a play on words referring to the countercultural leader Alan Watts who popularised Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism for western audiences and the Watt steam engine.
 - 17 Reference to an article which quoted William S. Burroughs, an important figure in the beat movement, saying "No one owns life, but anyone who can pick up a frying pan owns death."
 - 18 Reference to Dylan Thomas 'Rage against the Dying of the Light'
 - 19 Reference from Ginsberg's usage in 'Howl', a metaphor for capitalism
 - 20 Satirising the final line of the Communist Manifesto, "workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains"

Scene II: The Stage

NARRATOR:

The boat exits the cave. The moon hangs above the bayou in utter defiance. The air smells of corporate fragrance. A row of plastic chairs overlooks a stage on the river's edge. Each chair seat is made for something inhuman: made to be filled by protrusion fitted with a handmade nail sharpener.

Sound of faint improvised jazz — Infant Eyes by Wayne Shorter²¹. Continued sound of an oar paddling

Scores of alligators shatter the glass of the water and stand to their hind legs.

Over the stage stands a jumbotron which plays an idealistic advertisement that reads “Welcome your hatchlings to Swampyland, the happiest place on earth, so enjoy the magic for just \$67 dollars per person per day with a three-day one park per day ticket.”

A hatchling gawks at the sign while wearing a ‘Song of the catfish’ T-SHIRT

One alligator walks out from around the side of the stage. He wears a black turtleneck and leather jacket with buttons placed in the most random of places. He looks eerily similar to Michael Foucault. The alligator walks around the stage with his hands placed firmly in his coat's pockets with his head down, staring at his feet. He rambles out towards a guitar that sits idly in the centre of the stage where the sound begins.

LEGBA

You be one lucky one cher, dey be putin on a show just for you!

21 *Infant Eyes* by Wayne Shorter

LOKO

In Baudrillard's simulacra you barely exist²²
So let's watch the opera and Tweet that you resist²³
For the political unconscious²⁴, Pastiche movies are harmless fun,
A sequel
to a prequel to the film that's just begun.

Over my grave, again,
The soil is falling,
The soil's falling
Over my grave, again,
The soil is falling.
The soil is falling.

Reading apple's terms of service, you feel justified
When your phone was built by someone barely over five.²⁵
A full thanatophobic,
Losing focus, cover blown
I ordered 1984,
Hand-delivered delivered by a drone

Death's dissociation,
I'm fully out-my mind.
Googling derealisation,
Hating what you find.

That uncanny anxious spine in early fall.
That quite comprehending
of the ending, of it all.²⁶

Over my grave, again,
The soil is falling,
The soil's falling.

22 Reference to Simulacra and Simulation

23 Ironic: Participating in the culture while also portraying yourself to disagree

24 Reference to Fredric Jameson

25 Reference to the inability seeing the base-structures of things

26 Reference to the Waning of affect

NARRATOR

Faint rustling sound

From the side of the stage, a frog crawls from the midst of tall grass. He bears a red beret and a single bandolier ranging across his shoulder.

Sound of someone cocking a rifle

FROG

Liberté, égalité, fraternité! Vive la révolution!

NARRATOR

**Gunshot stops the song* *Sound of complete chaos: intense flowing water, alligators making loud noises.* *Frog is eaten* *Explosion* *Frogs croak victoriously* *A sound of water flowing softly in a fountain*

Silence and heartbeat

What is the point of worshipping all this manufactured noise? Do you want to retreat into a simulated reality in order to fulfil others' desires? Should we adopt some schizoanalytic nightmare in order to distract ourselves from our own mortality?

NARRATOR

Your eyes open slower than usual to see Legba standing above you. You ask about the alligator.

LEGBA

He sure ain't singing no more.

Scene III: The Maze

NARRATOR

You begin to approach a small island.

Clair de lune plays

The sun's rays refract and reflect through the dawn. A hedge maze rises from the island's centre, perfectly trimmed and symmetrical. It sits low enough in the water that waves have exposed the roots of the hedges – the place is on the brink of collapse.

You and Legba make your way to the maze's heart, where stands a statue of the water nymph Daphne. Her expression is one of contentment, despite the ferns that choke her plinth and the water that has flooded its base. Circling this figure, a single swan treads the water. Its life seems faded, as if it had lived rather than merely existing.

LEGBA

Dis ere is our final destination cher, your last stop. I want you to listen to dis' 'ere Ezili.

EZILI

With the downswing of a scythe
, Silent like the space between breaths,
You cut the crop of my heart —
Soil, turned with tendon and sinew
In which pomegranate
Trees lay their roots.

Gnarled wood
And gnashed constitution.

Hewn. And with
The toppling of the timber
Your bony hands compose a bed
For me to lay.
Silk sheets, trimmed with lace,
rise up walls stuffed with down,
Plucked from the underside
Of a goose.

Fool! I am,
For laying so still
While the maple wall encloses me in
While a rhythmic beat splinters into teeth
That cuts to silence as
Into the ground you lower,
Once again,
The seed of my heart.

NARRATOR

The swan takes its final flight. She thrusts her wings forward, flying up, up as close as she could to the Bright Stars. Ezili falters in midair, wings beating in vain as she falls back to earth and crashes into the statue. She hits it with a thud, rolls to the side and collapses into the flooded clearing, coming to rest just under the water's surface so you can see her outline, but nothing more.

You hope that death will somehow be like art. That meaning can be found through the appreciation and creation of beauty. Maybe you will live eternally in your own creation, or maybe, you will just be food for the earth.

You walk with Legba out of the labyrinth and sit down on the island's stumpy shore. After some time, Legba stands. You rise to meet its gaze, and it hands you the oar from its twisted boat before turning sharply and disappearing into the trees.

Epilogue

'Freudian Slippers' by Chilly Gonzales

NARRATOR

For our literary listeners, we hope you enjoyed the intertextual narrative made from the work of Ginsberg, Baudelaire, Bo Burnham and Baudrillard amongst others found in full on our podcast website.