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Ephemeral Blossoms and Fleeting Lives: A Deep Study of Robert Herrick's "To Daffodils"

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Abstract

Robert Herrick's "*To Daffodils*" is a poignant meditation on the transience of life, encapsulated through the metaphor of the daffodil's brief bloom. This paper critically explores the poem using various analytical frameworks: from literary devices and structure to spiritual philosophy and historical context. The poem's soft melancholy, enriched with lush natural imagery and metaphysical undertones, appeals to both literary sensibility and existential reflection. Through Herrick's use of poetic technique and his delicate emotional tone, "*To Daffodils*" becomes not only a lyrical celebration of nature but also a memento mori—a poetic reminder of mortality.

Preface

Robert Herrick's *To Daffodils* is not merely a pastoral lyric or an aesthetic meditation on springtime flowers—it is a profound reflection on the transient nature of life itself. Through gentle imagery and melancholic tones, the poet expresses a sorrow that arises from observing beauty perish before its time. Though grounded in 17th-century English literary traditions, Herrick's sensibility deeply resonates with the ancient philosophical wisdom found in the **Upanishads**, the **Bhagavad Gita**, and other **Hindu scriptures**.

The daffodil, a delicate symbol of life's brevity, becomes the medium through which Herrick contemplates impermanence—a concept central to **Vedantic philosophy**. His sorrowful plea for the flowers to "stay" echoes the human desire to hold on to fleeting joy and beauty. This poem, then, functions both as a poetic elegy and a metaphysical musing, inviting readers to reflect not only on nature's cycles but on the essential truths of time, death, and the quest for the eternal.

In a world that often clings to permanence, *To Daffodils* stands as a gentle reminder—aligned with both **Eastern and Western spiritual thought**—that in accepting the impermanence of all things, we inch closer to understanding what truly endures.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Herrick deftly employs a wide range of **literary devices** to evoke the brevity of life and the inevitability of death.

- **Personification:** The daffodils are addressed as if they possess human traits—"we weep to see / You haste away so soon"—giving the flowers agency and emotion. This bridges the gap between human mortality and nature's cycles.
- **Metaphor:** Human life is compared implicitly to the short-lived daffodils and "summer's rain." The comparison does not use "like" or "as," which elevates the metaphorical depth.
- **Simile:** "As quick a growth to meet decay, / As you, or anything," draws a direct comparison between the human condition and the daffodil using "as," creating an emotional parallel.
- **Imagery:** Vivid images—"pearls of morning's dew," "summer's rain," and "early-rising sun"—create an ethereal and delicate mental picture of temporal beauty.
- **Alliteration:** "We weep" and "haste away so soon" subtly use initial consonant repetition to lend musicality.

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- **Symbolism:** The **daffodil** becomes a symbol of ephemeral beauty and the brevity of life. **Dew** and **rain** symbolize transient purity and fleeting existence.
- **Assonance and Consonance:** The lyrical flow benefits from internal sound repetition, enhancing the elegiac tone.
- **Irony:** The act of praying and seeking companionship with the daffodils is ironic, given their swift departure—echoing life’s impermanence.

2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem follows a controlled rhyming pattern. The first stanza: *AABBCCDD* and the second: *AABBCCDDEE*. The regularity reflects the inevitable, cyclical nature of time.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** Predominantly iambic, the poem’s smooth, almost songlike meter mirrors the flow of natural life and death.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** Two balanced stanzas mirror the brief twofold movement of life—beginning and end—without elaboration or excess.
- **Enjambment:** “Stay, stay, / Until the hasting day / Has run...” allows emotional continuity, reflecting the speaker’s pleading tone.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

- The central **theme** of the poem is **impermanence**—of flowers, of time, of human life.
- Nature is depicted not as eternally renewing but as fleeting.
 - The **deeper message** lies in recognizing mortality as a shared experience between humans and nature, thus fostering humility and mindfulness.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** The poet adopts a tone of **gentle lamentation**—grieving, yet accepting.
- **Mood:** The poem evokes a **melancholic serenity**, urging the reader toward contemplative sadness. There’s a spiritual tenderness rather than despair.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Herrick’s metaphysical undercurrents align with various **Eastern and Western philosophies:**

- **Vedantic/Upanishadic View:** The **Isha Upanishad** teaches: “*Everything that lives is transient*”. The daffodil’s impermanence echoes *anitya* (impermanence) central to Indian philosophy.
- **Bhagavad Gita:** Lord Krishna in Gita (2.27): “*Jatasya hi dhruvo mrityuh*”ⁱ — “For one who is born, death is certain.” The poem resonates with this inevitability.
- **Vachanamrut** (Gadhada I-11): Bhagwan Swaminarayan speaks of the world as fleeting like a mirage. Herrick’s imagery of dew and rain is a Western poetic mirror to this insight.
- **Biblical Echoes:** Psalms 103:15-16 — “*As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind passes over it, and it is gone.*”

- The poem subtly encourages **spiritual mindfulness**, not by religious preaching but through aesthetic realization of death’s certainty.

Let’s explore **Robert Herrick’s poem “To Daffodils”**—through the lens of **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, as well as insights from other prominent Hindu scriptures such as the **Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurana, and the Vedas**. The poem mourns the fleeting beauty of daffodils, drawing a parallel between their short life and the transitory nature of human life. This resonates deeply with the **Vedantic understanding of impermanence, detachment, and spiritual introspection**.

1. Upanishads: Impermanence and the Search for the Eternal

The **Upanishads** emphasize the transience of the material world and the permanence of the **Ātman (Self)**.

- **Kathopanishad 1.2.10:**ⁱⁱ

“As the corn is born, grows, and is harvested, so too is man born, grows, and dies, only to be born again.”

Like the daffodils that “haste away so soon,” human beings also undergo the cycle of birth and death swiftly. The poem captures this transient rhythm of life, which Vedanta urges us to transcend.

- **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.4.2:**ⁱⁱⁱ

“As a lump of salt thrown into water dissolves and cannot be taken out again, so too, the individual dissolves into the infinite Brahman.”

The daffodils dissolve into nature just as the soul eventually merges with the cosmic Self, once freed from ignorance.

2. Bhagavad Gita: Acceptance of Transience and Spiritual Equanimity

- **Bhagavad Gita 2.27:**^{iv}

“Jātasya hi dhruvo mrityuh” — “For one who is born, death is certain.”

This core teaching is beautifully echoed in Herrick’s lines: “*We die / As your hours do, and dry / Away.*” Just as the daffodil’s bloom is momentary, so too is human life.

- **Bhagavad Gita 2.13:**^v

“Just as the boyhood, youth and old age come to the embodied soul in this body, so is the attaining of another body; the wise man is not deluded by this.”

The poem expresses sorrow over mortality, but Vedanta encourages rising above this grief through knowledge of the soul’s continuity.

- **Gita 2.15:**^{vi}

“The wise, who are not disturbed by joy and sorrow, are fit for immortality.”

The emotional tone of Herrick’s poem contrasts this spiritual ideal. It presents human fragility, while Vedanta

urges **vairagya** (detachment) and **equanimity** in the face of change.

3. Vachanamrut: The World as Ephemeral

In the **Vachanamrut**, Bhagwan Swaminarayan frequently emphasizes the **perishable nature of worldly pleasures and appearances**.

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-11:**

“This world is like a dream. It appears real, but it is temporary and illusory.”

The daffodils, like dreams, enchant us briefly and disappear. Their swift departure is a metaphor for worldly beauty and attachments.

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-37:**

“Just as a drop of water on a lotus leaf is unstable, so is life.”

The line *“Like to the summer’s rain; / Or as the pearls of morning’s dew”* directly reflects this truth. Life is fragile and temporary—like dew that vanishes with the sun.

4. Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurana: Nature and Divine Order

- **Canto 11, Chapter 9 (Uddhava Gita):** The **Avadhuta Brahmana** learns from nature, including flowers, birds, and rain, that **all of nature exists to teach detachment and wisdom**.

The poem’s comparison of daffodils to human life reflects this spiritual insight—that we must read the impermanence of nature as a mirror for self-realization.

- **Canto 10:** Lord Krishna’s leelas in Vrindavan often occur in forests blooming with flowers like the **lotus and the kadamba**, symbolizing beauty that is fleeting yet divine.

The poem transforms daffodils from mere flowers into **spiritual metaphors**, capturing both their sensual charm and temporal nature.

5. Vedic Wisdom: Time, Death, and Rta (Cosmic Order)

- **Rig Veda 10.14.2:**^{vii}

“Yama has given us this mortal body for a while, but the immortal self journeys beyond.”

The poem’s grief over mortality is Vedic in tone: **awareness of Yama’s domain**—the inevitability of death—is key to spiritual wisdom.

- **Rig Veda 1.164.20:**^{viii}

“One being the Truth, sages call it by many names.”

While Herrick uses poetry and nature to express mortality, the **Vedantic seer sees the One Reality behind all appearances**, including daffodils.

6. Other Scriptural Parallels

- **Mahabharata (Shanti Parva):**

Bhishma says, *“Time is the root of all sorrow.”*

The poem is soaked in this sorrow—*“we weep to see / You haste away so soon.”*

- **Ashtavakra Gita 1.3:**^{ix}

“You are not the body, nor is the body yours. You are the witness of all things.”

Herrick mourns mortality, but Vedanta urges the seeker to **transcend identification with the perishable body**.

Conclusion: Poetic Grief and Vedantic Insight

Robert Herrick’s *To Daffodils* mourns the fleeting nature of life and beauty—a sorrowful but profound truth also echoed in the **Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Shrimad Bhagwat**. Where Herrick lingers in melancholy, Vedanta responds with **equanimity, non-attachment, and inner awakening**. Herrick presents a heartfelt elegy to impermanence; Vedanta responds by inviting us to know the **imperishable Self (Atman)** hidden behind it.

Thus, Herrick’s poem aligns with **Vedantic wisdom** by opening the doorway to deeper introspection: it begins with *ephemeral beauty* and ends by pointing subtly toward the **eternal truth** beyond time.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Time and Place:** Written in 17th-century England during the **Caroline era**, a time of religious introspection, political unrest, and a revival of lyrical poetry.

- **Cultural Movement:** Herrick belonged to the **Cavalier Poets**, known for lyrical grace and the *carpe diem* (seize the day) philosophy.

- This poem subtly revises *carpe diem*: it doesn’t urge indulgence but reflective awareness.

7. Poet’s Perspective and Emotional Mindset

- Herrick, a **clergyman and poet**, was deeply immersed in both **religious discipline** and **earthly beauty**.

- His **emotional mindset** here is one of **spiritual melancholy**—not of despair but wistful recognition.

- Possibly written during personal solitude or contemplation of natural beauty near his Devonshire vicarage, the poem reflects both **pastoral love** and **existential insight**.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

- The poem is directed to a **universal audience**, though couched in the poetic intimacy of an elegy.

- Purpose:

- To evoke awareness of mortality.

- To foster appreciation for beauty that is **not lasting**.

- To inspire readers to live reflectively, acknowledging that **life, like daffodils, is fragile**.

9. Personal Interpretation

To Daffodils offers a beautiful, poetic confrontation with death. Rather than invoking fear, Herrick gives us an aesthetic language to recognize mortality’s soft inevitability. Like daffodils, we bloom, radiate, and perish—our lives brief but luminous.

Personal Resonance: As a reader, one is compelled to look at a garden or a dew-laced morning with more reverence. The poem becomes a gentle spiritual teacher—

quietly reminding us to **cherish the transient, honor the moment, and prepare for the twilight with prayer and grace.**

Conclusion

To Daffodils concludes not with resolution, but with quiet acceptance. Like the daffodils that “dry away” unnoticed, so too does human life pass swiftly and silently. Yet in this very passing lies the poem’s spiritual potency. By acknowledging the brevity of life, Herrick implicitly gestures toward a deeper awareness—one that mirrors **Vedantic detachment (vairāgya)** and the **Upanishadic call for self-realization.**

While the poem mourns the temporal, its beauty lies in its honesty—a recognition of impermanence not as defeat, but as truth. Through this, Herrick’s work transcends the domain of lyrical lament and becomes a subtle spiritual discourse, urging us, like the scriptures of old, to cherish what is eternal even as the temporal fades.

Thus, *To Daffodils* becomes more than a tribute to a flower—it becomes a meditative bridge between **poetry and philosophy**, between the **fleeting and the eternal.**

Reference

- I. जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।
तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥ 27॥
- II. जानाम्यहं शेवधिरित्यनित्यं
न ह्यध्रुवैः प्राप्यते हि ध्रुवं तत् ।
ततो मया नाचिकेतश्चितोऽग्निः
अनित्यैर्द्रव्यैः प्राप्तवानस्मि नित्यम् ॥ १०॥
- III. स होवाचोषस्तश्चाक्रायणः, यथा विब्रूयात्, असौ गौः, असावश्च इति,
एवमेवैतद्व्यपदिष्टं भवति; यदेव साक्षादपरोक्ताद्ब्रह्म, य आत्मा
सर्वान्तरः, तं मे व्याचक्ष्वेति; एष त आत्मा सर्वान्तरः; कतमो
याज्ञवल्क्य सर्वान्तरः ? न दृष्टेर्दृष्टारं पश्येः, न श्रुतेः श्रोतारं शृणुयात्, न
मतेर्मन्तारं मन्वीथाः, न विज्ञातेर्विज्ञातारं विजानीयाः । एष त आत्मा
सर्वान्तरः, अतोऽन्यदार्त । ततो होषस्तस्चाक्रायण उपरराम ॥ २ ॥
इति चतुर्थं ब्राह्मणम् ॥
- IV. जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।
तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥ 27॥
- V. देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ १३ ॥
- VI. यं हि न व्यथयन्त्येते पुरुषं पुरुषर्षभ ।
समदुःखसुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पते ॥ 15॥
- VII. यमो नो गातुं प्रथमो विवेद नैषा गव्यूतिरपभर्तवा उ । यत्रा नः पूर्वे
पितरः परेयुरेना जज्ञानाः पथ्याऽनु स्वाः ॥
यमो नो गातुं प्रथमो विवेद नैषा गव्यूतिरपभर्तवा उ । यत्रा नः पूर्वे
पितरः परेयुरेना जज्ञानाः पथ्या अनु स्वाः ॥
- VIII. द्वा सुपर्णा सयुजा सखाया समानं वृक्षं परि षस्वजाते । तयोरन्यः
पिप्पलं स्वाद्वत्यनश्नन्नन्यो अग्निं चाकशीति ॥
द्वा सुपर्णा सयुजा सखाया समानं वृक्षं परि षस्वजाते । तयोरन्यः
पिप्पलं स्वाद्वत्यनश्नन्नन्यो अग्निं चाकशीति ॥
- IX. न पृथ्वी न जलं नाग्निं वायुर्दूर्निं वा भवान् ।
एषां साक्षिणमात्मानं चिद्रूपं विद्धि मुक्तये ॥ ३ ॥