

# EXPLORING THE BEAUTY WITHIN: EXPLORATIONS ON DEATH AND GRIEF IN “MANSION” AND “ARIZONA MIDNIGHT”

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**Abstract:** Death and grief are universal experiences that all individuals must confront, yet the way in which these topics are approached can reveal profound beauty within. Among the many poems that explore the different mindsets in the face of death, grief, and suffering, the “*Mansion*” by A.R. Ammons and “*Arizona Midnight*” by Robert Penn Warren are indisputably in the vanguard. By examining the diction in both poems that portray tone, readers see a clear distinction. While both works incorporate elements associated with the desert—symbolizing desolation, barrenness, and a stark confrontation with mortality—they ultimately conclude on a positive note that transcends the somber nature of these experiences. In “*Mansion*,” death is presented as a new beginning, framed through the accepting attitude of the persona. The uniformly positive tone throughout the poem suggests a life-affirming perspective towards death, transforming it into a natural progression rather than an end. Conversely, “*Arizona Midnight*” adopts a more negative tone from the outset, as the persona projects his grief onto the coyote and the surrounding desert landscape. This initial portrayal underscores a deep sense of loss and isolation, reflecting the weight of sorrow that can accompany such experiences. However, as the poem progresses, it spirals towards a positive direction, ultimately highlighting the inner resources one can tap into amidst suffering. This distinction between the two poems is profound because both poems essentially underscore the ultimate positive attitude towards death and the pursuit of hope amidst the depths of despair. They highlight how, even in the most tragic circumstances, one always has the inner resources to survive and prevail, despite being unaware of this possibility.

**Keywords:** Death and grief; Desert imagery; Tone analysis; A.R. Ammons; Robert Penn Warren; Comparative poetry; Resilience; Transformation

## 1 INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, the two poems, “*Mansion*” by Ammons and “*Arizona Midnight*” by Penn Warren, differ significantly in terms of tone and mood. In “*Mansion*,” Ammons maintains a consistently positive tone throughout the poem, while Penn Warren starts off with a negative tone in “*Arizona Midnight*” and only introduces positive aspects towards the end. Specifically, in “*Mansion*,” the persona not only accepts that it is time to “cede” but also views it as a matter-of-fact event, as indicated by the opening line of the first stanza: “So it came time.” This acceptance reflects a broader philosophical understanding of life and death, suggesting a deep-seated belief in the natural order of existence. While one might argue that separating oneself cannot be seen as a positive, the use of the word “choose” reinforces the active role the persona takes, suggesting a sense of agency in their decision. This choice indicates that acceptance is not passive resignation but a conscious, empowering act. Additionally, the wind in the poem is described as “glad” and eager to carry the remnants of the persona, creating a mutually ecstatic attitude where the wind “needed all the body it could get”. This vivid imagery suggests a symbiotic relationship between the persona and nature, further reinforcing the idea that death is not an end but a continuation of existence. In fact, the mention of the “whirlwinding” further emphasizes the exuberant nature of the journey of death, devoid of negative connotations. That being said, Ammons uses a positive tone, portraying processes like decay and death as natural cycles in life, making these experiences seem less foreboding and more like an essential aspect of the human journey. On the other hand, “*Arizona Midnight*” begins with the persona projecting his own grief onto the coyote and personifying the stars as they “quiver whiter.” The use of the verb “quiver” as opposed to more positive verbs like “twinkle” as well as the description of the sky’s “blankness” as opposed to describing it in richer terms such as “darkness,” creates a sense of hopelessness and deep pain. Despite the persona’s attempts to protect himself using “the anti-rattler horsehair rope” and “grinding sand on sand,” he is not shielded from his grief, and his wound only seems to deepen. This illustrates the futility of attempting to escape from one’s emotional turmoil; instead, the pain becomes an inescapable part of the persona’s existence. In fact, from “the only answer I have for the coyote would be my own grief, for which I have no tongue,” readers can understand that the persona cannot even commiserate with the coyote or put parameters around his own pain, as he has “no tongue” to articulate his grief. This powerful imagery suggests a profound sense of isolation, as the inability to express one’s suffering can exacerbate feelings of alienation. Even the prospect of tomorrow is described as “inflamed,” as if it were a burning sensation or a fever that scars the narrator, further highlighting the depth of anguish that engulfs him. Accordingly, this stark contrast in tone, compared to “*Mansion*,” underscores the profound suffering experienced by the persona in “*Arizona Midnight*,” which is emphasized throughout the poem, justifying why said persona isn’t taking a hopeful stance.

## 2 CONTRASTING TONES: ACCEPTANCE VS. PROJECTED GRIEF

Despite the differences in tone, both “Mansion” and “Arizona Midnight” incorporate desert-related elements to emphasize the beauty inherent in death and grief as the poems unfold. This is noteworthy despite the general perception of the desert as devoid of life-affirming elements and therefore bleak and empty. Specifically, Ammons utilizes the noun “plain” instead of “desert” and proceeds to describe the “ocotillo” and “saguaro,” highlighting the adventurous nature of the landscape, suggesting that the desert is teeming with life and a vast array of vegetation. By choosing “plain,” Ammons invites readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about barren landscapes, revealing the underlying vibrancy that often goes unnoticed [1]. Furthermore, Ammons invites the reader to “fall with evening” and again to “watch the closing up of the day,” symbolizing an embrace of the passage of time. The climactic closing line, “morning breaks,” elevates the hope and optimism to another level. While some may argue that “break” typically carries negative connotations of fragility and shattering, there are multiple instances that suggest otherwise. For instance, the words “so” and “cede” in the first stanza can be interpreted as homonyms for “sow” and “seed,” justifying that “break” is closer to breaking into a blossom or a seed. This duality speaks to the transformative potential of endings, suggesting that from the fragility of life, new growth can emerge. The forces of nature, such as decay and death, merge with the cycles of nature, offering endless possibilities for new beginnings beyond that stage. In fact, the title “Mansion” serves as a metaphor for the richness of a world beyond death, where one can be elevated to experience luxurious things, further emphasizing the positive takeaway. It invites readers to envision death not as a finality but as an entryway into a more expansive existence. Likewise, in “Arizona Midnight,” Penn Warren establishes a somber tone, but its ending employs the image of the “cactus” to portray a positive change in the persona. The cactus, described as “lifting in blunt agony” [2], embodies the pain that echoes the despair within the persona, illustrating how suffering can coexist with resilience. Although the desert remains desolate and bleak, the cactus is able to lift itself up, symbolizing the strength that can emerge from adversity. Instead of listening intently to the wail of the coyote, the persona now “strains to make out the cactus,” realizing that the cactus can protect itself and sustain itself by holding water due to its piercing qualities that serve as its armor from intermittent rainfall. Despite these seemingly negative attributes, the cactus possesses its own “necessary beauty” and is equipped with all the inner resources to survive and thrive in harsh conditions. Similarly, grief itself can be seen as possessing its own necessary beauty, as humans, much like the cactus, possess emotional resources that can empower but are often overlooked [3-4]. Ultimately, both Ammons and Penn Warren incorporate elements from the desert to end their poems on a positive note, inspiring readers to find hope and see the beauty in phases like death and grief while believing in their ability to maintain a positive attitude.

## 3 THE INNER RESOILIENCE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING

Ultimately, the poems “Mansion” and “Arizona Midnight” offer profound insights into the nature of death, grief, and suffering, while presenting a positive perspective towards death that readers can embrace and assimilate into their own lives. In the case of “Mansion,” the persona maintains a consistently positive attitude, embodying an acceptance that frames death not as an end but as a transformative passage. This perspective encourages readers to view mortality through a lens of possibility, suggesting that death can be a catalyst for renewal and growth [5]. On the other hand, although “Arizona Midnight” initially portrays a sense of hopelessness, marked by the persona’s projection of grief onto the coyote and the barren desert landscape, the journey toward a positive outlook becomes a central theme. This epiphany is vital, as it allows individuals to recognize that, even in the darkest moments, they have the agency to affirm life and harness their inner resources. Similar to immigrants or refugees starting anew in unfamiliar environments, individuals possess the potential to tap into their resilience and embrace the natural cycles of life and death, appreciating the depth and beauty that can emerge from even the most arduous situations.

## 4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both “Mansion” by A.R. Ammons and “Arizona Midnight” by Robert Penn Warren offer profound meditations on death, grief, and the often overlooked beauty inherent in these universal human experiences. While their tonal approaches differ significantly—Ammons maintaining a serene and accepting voice throughout, and Warren moving from despair toward revelation—both poets ultimately guide the reader toward a life-affirming perspective. Through skillful use of desert imagery, each poem transforms symbols of barrenness and isolation into landscapes of meaning, resilience, and renewal.

Ammons’s “Mansion” reframes death not as an end, but as a harmonious return to nature and a beginning within a broader existential cycle. The poem encourages an embrace of transition with grace and agency, suggesting that endings are inseparable from new possibilities [6-8]. Warren’s “Arizona Midnight,” by contrast, begins immersed in personal sorrow and a sense of irreparable loss, yet gradually shifts toward recognizing the latent strength within—both in the natural world and the human spirit. The cactus emerges as a powerful symbol of necessary beauty and innate resilience, reflecting the poem’s movement from projection of pain to recognition of inner resources.

Together, these poems illustrate that while the journeys through grief and confrontation with mortality may vary greatly in emotional texture, each can lead to a similar destination: a renewed sense of hope and an acknowledgment of the transformative power inherent in suffering. Both writers suggest that beyond the starkness of loss lies a deeper, often surprising beauty—one that empowers individuals not merely to endure, but to perceive and partake in the continuous

cycles of nature and spirit. In doing so, "Mansion" and "Arizona Midnight" each affirm, in uniquely resonant ways, the human capacity to find meaning, light, and even majesty amid life's most challenging passages.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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