

CAI-T Schools' lecture day

“The same night awaits us all”: Death in Horace's Odes



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Lecture Outline

- 1) Introduction (Horace | Philosophers on Death)
- 2) Death in Horace's Odes
- 3) “Living Well” when faced with the inevitability of Death

Learning Outcomes

Philosophical ideas about mortality and living well

- 4.13. Examine what constitutes ‘living well’ when faced with the inevitability of death according to Horace in the Odes
- 4.14. Explore how the relationship between human decision and responsibility on the one hand and divine will and fate on the other is viewed by Horace in the Odes



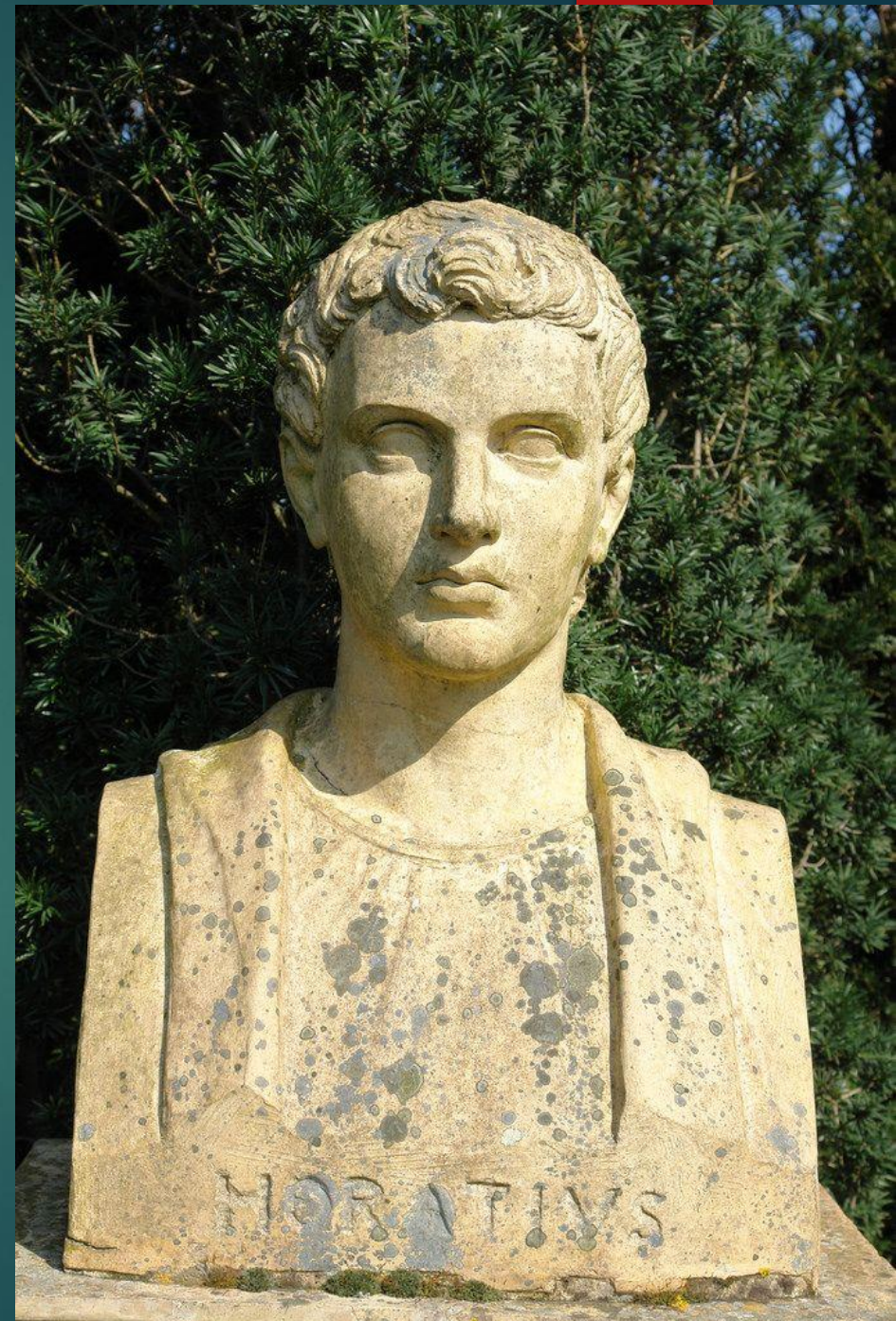
1) Introduction

Horace, portrayed by Giacomo Di Chirico

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 BC – 8 BC)

Horace

- ▶ Born in Venusia, Southern Italy.
- ▶ His father was a freedman.
- ▶ He studied in Rome and Athens.
- ▶ He fought against Octavian at the battle of Philippi – he was pardoned by Octavian.
- ▶ Maecenas provided Horace a villa, wherein he spent the rest of his life writing poetry.
- ▶ Works: *Satires*, *Epodes*, *Odes*, *Epistles*, *Secular Hymn*.
- ▶ **Odes** (*Carmina*)
 - Lyric poetry, four books, various Greek poetic metres.
 - Various themes: love, patriotism, **philosophy**, religion, etc.



Philosophers on Death

“the true philosophers practice dying, and death is less terrible to them than to any other men”

Plato, *Phaedo*, 67e

“Train yourself to hold that death is nothing to us, because good and evil consist in sensation, and death is the removal of sensation. A correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable ... So death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, because as long as we exist death is not present, whereas when death is present we do not exist”.

Epicurus, *Letter to Menicoeus*, [124-125](#)

“Accept death in a cheerful spirit, as nothing but the dissolution of the elements from which each living thing is composed. If it doesn't hurt the individual elements to change continually into one another, why are people afraid of all of them changing and separating? It's a natural thing. And nothing natural is evil.”

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.17



2) Death in Horace

Charon carries souls across the river Styx

Ode 1.28

“You were the man who measured the sea and the earth and the measureless sand, Archytas, and **now you are held in fast, by a puny hillock of paltry dirt**, on the seacoast near Matinus: what good is it now that you pried in the airy homes of the gods and let your mind run through the turning heavens, **as death waited**.

Dead is the father of Pelops, who once was the guest of the gods; so is Tithonus they brought into heaven, and Minos, who shared the secrets of Jove, and **the lower world** holds Pythagoras on his second trip, who had once been, he said, the son of Panthous, and took his shield from the temple to show that he knew Trojan times, and that death had seized mere muscles and skin: he was never, to your mind, a bad judge of nature and truth.



Souls on the Banks of the Acheron (1898), Adolf Hirémy-Hirschl

Ode 1.28

But a single night is waiting for all, and the
walk on the road of death must come.

Some are the gifts of the Furies for bloodthirsty Mars'
entertainments; death to the sailors is the hungry sea:
old and young makes no difference, funeral crowded
on funeral, **cruel Proserpina spares not a head**".

2.3 "Death, who has no tears"

2.8 "the gods, who never know death"

2.13 "unforeseen the force of death has gripped and will grip all men"

2.14 "Death, who cannot be beaten" | "Pluto, who has no tears"

2.16 "Sudden death took Achilles in his glory"

2.18 "greedy Death"

3.4 "the dim world of Death"

4.2 "dark Death"

4.12 "the dark fires of Death"

A Pre-Raphaelite Proserpine
(1873–1877) by Dante Gabriel
Rossetti (Tate Gallery, London)



Common fate of mankind:

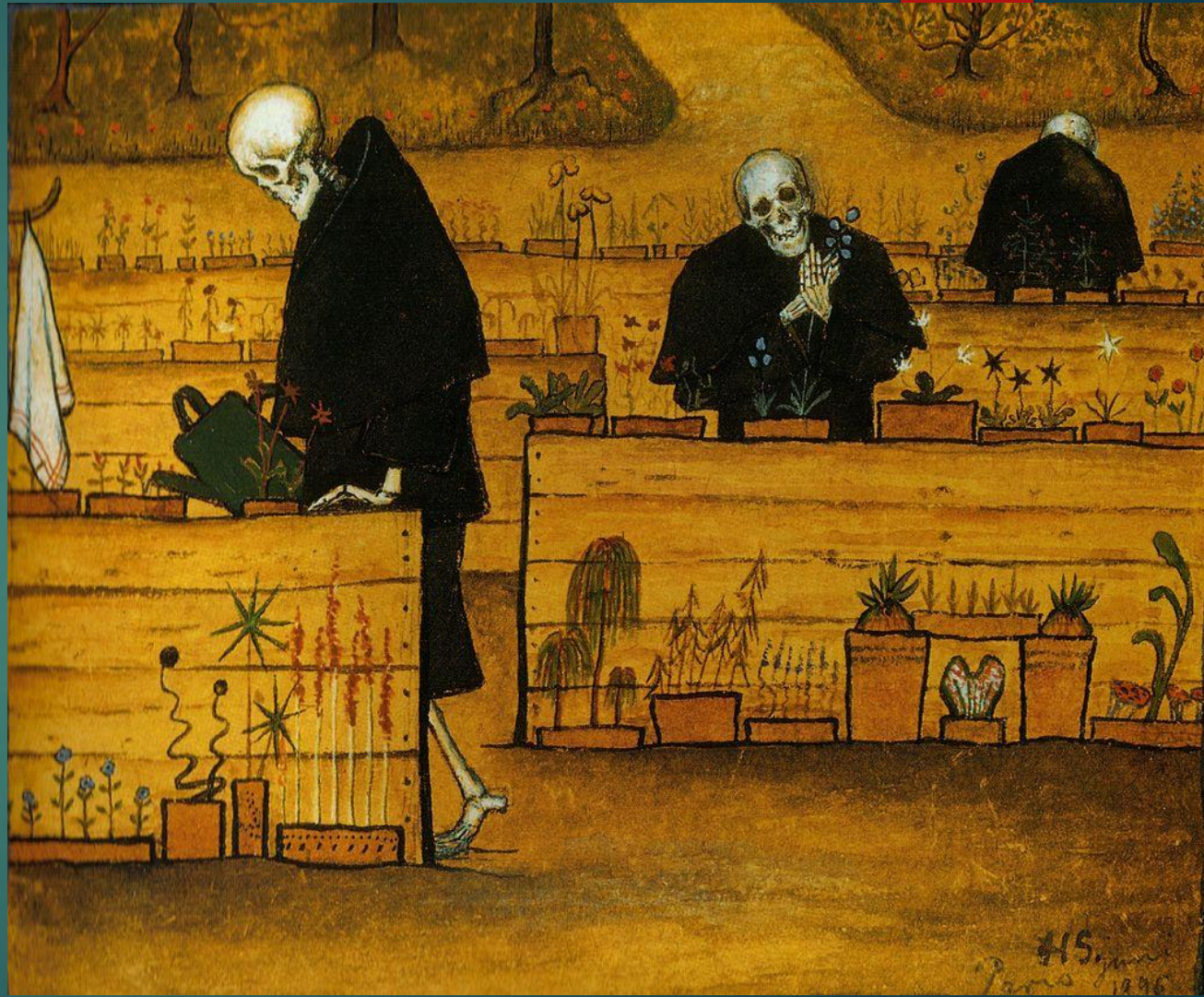
Mors certa, hora incerta =

“death is certain, the time uncertain”

Life: road/journey that ends in death (last stop)

All living beings must die (inevitability of death)

Life as light/day, death as darkness/night



Garden of Death (1896), by Hugo Simberg



3) “Living Well”
when faced
with the
inevitability of
Death

Gravestone inscription (1746).
Edinburgh. St. Cuthbert's Churchyard.

Ode 1.11 (*Carpe diem*)

Don't ask, Leuconoe, the forbidden question, **how long the gods have given to you and to me**: don't imagine fortunetellers know. Better to take what is coming, **whether** love allows us **more winters**, or **this** that now wearies the Etruscan sea as it beats on the cliffs **is the last**. Be sensible: strain the wine: in a little life, **take no long looks ahead**. As we talk, time spites us and runs: **reap today: save no hopes for tomorrow**.



Roman mosaic representing the Wheel of Fortune

Ode 2.3

“Keep this in mind: a steady head on a steep path; the same holds true when the going is good:

don't let happiness go to your head,

friend Dellius, **for you must die someday,**

whether you spend all your time in sorrowing,

or keep yourself happy on festival days

stretched out on the grass in seclusion

with a jar of your best Falernian.

Why do the towering pine and white poplar
love to weave shady welcome by lacing their
branches? Why do the rushing waters
hurry on against the winding river?

Tell them to **bring the wines and the perfumes and**

sweet rose blossoms that live such a little while,
here, **while it still is allowed by luck and**

youth, and the dark threads of the three sisters.



The three Moirai, relief, grave of Alexander von der Mark [de] by Johann Gottfried Schadow (Old National Gallery, Berlin)

Odes 2.3

You will leave the pastures you bought and your home
and your country place washed by yellow Tiber.
you will leave, and into the hands of
an heir go the riches you piled so high.
Rich, and descended from ancient Inachus,
or poor and from the lowest class, loitering
out in the open, **it is all one**:
an offering to **Death**, who has no tears.
All of us are being herded there, for all
lots are tossing in an urn: **sooner, later**,
out they will come and book our passage
on **the boat for everlasting exile**".

Thanatos as a winged and sword-girt youth.
Sculptured marble column drum from the
Temple of Artemis at Ephesos, c. 325–300 BC.



Odes 2.14

“Ah god how they race, Postumus, Postumus,
how the years run out, and **doing what is right**
will not delay wrinkles and age's
onslaught and **death who cannot be beaten**;
no, dear friend, not even if every day
you tried with three hundred bulls to please **Pluto**,
who has no tears, who holds in prison
three-bodied Geryon and Tityos
by the sorrowful river whose crossing is
certain for those who live by the gifts of the earth,
a must for all, the high and mighty
and the poverty-stricken small farmers.
It will do no good to escape bloody Mars
and breaking waves on the rough Adriatic,
it will do no good to spend autumn
in terror of sirocco and sickness:



1st century sculpture of Pluto in the Getty Villa

Odes 2.14

we must see the dark waters of Cocytos

winding slowly, and the infamous daughters
of Danaus, and Sisyphus, son of
Aeolus, condemned to endless labor.

We must leave behind us earth and home and dear
wife, and of all the trees that you care for now,
not one will follow you, so briefly
its master, only the loathsome cypress.

An heir who deserves it will drink Caecuban
you kept safe with a hundred keys, and he will
soak the floor with magnificent wine,
finer than the priests drink at their festivals”.



Odes 2.16

“**Joyful here and now, may the spirit despise concern for what lies beyond and dilute the bitter with a calm smile.** Nothing is wholly filled with happiness.

Sudden death took Achilles in his glory,
his long old age wasted Tithonus away,
and to me **perhaps** this hour will offer
what you are denied”.

Odes 2.18

“But for me, trust, and a full
vein of talent, and **poor as I am** the rich
come to find me: I demand
nothing more from the gods, and exact no
greater
favours from a friend in power,
blissful enough with my one and only farm

...

Yet there is no hall that waits
more surely for a master of property
than the **predetermined bounds**
of **greedy Death**. Why strain for more? Impartial
earth is open to the poor
and to prince's sons”...

Ode 4.12 (*Memento mori*)

Vanitas (c. 1671), by Philippe de Champaigne

“Really, **put delay and desire for wealth away**, and **keep the dark fires of death in mind**: while you may, mix a bit of silliness into your scheming: sometimes it's good to be foolish”.

Death is inevitable, **BUT**, that's no reason for sorrow. Seize the day, enjoy the moment.

Don't act as if you're going to live forever (e.g., don't obsess over making money), cause you're not.

Appreciate the present moment and the small pleasures in life (e.g., wine = symbol of joy).

