

Andreas Gryphius, *Menschliches Elende* (1637)

Abstract

The poet and playwright Andreas Gryphius (1616-1664) was born in Glogau in Silesia. After studies in Leiden and travels through Europe, he returned to Silesia, where he spent the rest of his life. He is considered the most important poet of the German Baroque and is particularly famous for his sonnets. His work is marked by the experience of the Thirty Years' War and the destruction, misery, and religious persecution that accompanied it. He wrote this sonnet, "Human Misery," during the war. The poem takes up the *vanitas* motif, typical of Baroque lyric poetry, and gives an impression of how the experience of the Thirty Years' War shaped the world view of its 21-year-old author and many of his contemporaries.

Source

What are we humans, after all? A house of grim sorrows.
A ball of false happiness / a will-o'-the-wisp of this time.
A scene of bitter anguish / occupied by sharp suffering /
a soon-melted snow and burnt-out candles.
This life is as fleeting as chatter and jokes.
Those who have gone before us have shed their weak bodily garments
and are long since inscribed in the book of death of the great mortality/
are forgotten by our minds and hearts.
Just as a vain dream easily falls out of mind
And like a stream runs along / that no power can stop:
So too must our name / Praise, honor, and fame disappear /
What now draws breath / must evaporate with the air /
What comes after us / will follow us into the grave
What am I saying? We perish like smoke blown off by strong winds.

Source: Andreas Gryphius, *Sonette*, Lissa, 1637. Recording: *Invitation to German Poetry*. By Gustave Mathieu and Guy Stern. Read by Lotte Lenya. Dover Publications (IPG1/2), 1959. Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/lp_invitation-to-german-poetry_lotte-lenya/disc1/01.01.+Band+1%3A+Unter+Der+Linde%3B+Menschliches+Elende%3B+Das+Rosenband%3B+Der+Tod+Und+Das+Madchen%3B+Abendlied.mp3

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