

THE GRAVEDIGGER:  
A MEDITATION ON DEATH

by Jamie Thomas

Based on  
"Night Thoughts"  
by Edward Young

FADE IN:

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

We emerge from beneath the ground to reveal a plot of graves within a large, rundown cemetery - a timeless space visited by few. The day is clear and grey, a thin mist clinging to the remnants of natural life on the ground. There is a pervading stillness interrupted only by sporadic bird calls and the breathing of the wind.

A figure lies alone beside a grave plot in a drunken sleep, dressed in meagre Restoration period garb; the GRAVEDIGGER. His shovel rests nearby him, sticking out of the ground poised to excavate.

All V.O dialogue to overlay/interweave with corresponding visual action as written.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Tired Nature's sweet restorer,  
balmy Sleep!  
He, like the world, his ready  
visit pays  
Where Fortune smiles; the  
wretched he forsakes;

The GRAVEDIGGER takes a swig from his now empty bottle of Claret. He forces himself up off the ground, his joints tired and creaky.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Swift on his downy pinion flies  
from woe, And lights on lids  
unsullied with a tear.  
From short and disturb'd repose,  
I wake: how happy they, who wake  
no more!

He prepares to carry out his work; releasing his shovel from its earthy bed for the thousandth time and wearily gazing over the plot he is about to dig, as he will do a thousand times more.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Yet that were vain, if dreams  
infest the grave.  
I wake, emerging from a sea of  
dreams.

CUT TO:

EXT. A RUINED ABBEY - NIGHT

The empty ruins of an abbey underneath a starry sky -  
another world.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

We return to the cemetery. The GRAVEDIGGER has begun his  
work, shifting the earth with purpose.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

To reason, and on reason build  
resolve (That column of true  
majesty in man), Assist me: I  
will thank you in the grave;  
The grave, your kingdom: there  
this frame shall fall

He pauses, exhausted and yet determined to continue. He  
coughs heftily until blood comes up into his hand. He  
wipes it off on his breeches, unconcerned, and resumes  
his duty.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

A victim sacred to your dreary  
shrine.

A time later; a bell strikes but we see no source. The  
GRAVEDIGGER stands resolutely digging the same grave, now  
deeper beneath the earth. His concentration breaks at the  
sound of the bell and he looks to the sky, invigorated by  
its ringing.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

The bell strikes one. We take no  
note of time but from its loss.  
To give it then a tongue is wise  
in man. As if an angel spoke, I  
feel the solemn sound. If heard  
aright, it is the knell of my  
departed hours.

He allows his shovel to fall out of his hands and,  
possessed with some new energy, sinks to his knees within  
the half-dug grave. He holds his hands open in front of  
him.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

A dread eternity! How surely  
mine!

And can eternity belong to me,  
 poor pensioner on the bounties  
 of an hour?  
 How poor, how rich, how abject,  
 how august, how complicate, how  
 wonderful, is man!

He plunges his hands into the earth and plucks forth a single worm, dangling it between his fingers to gaze at it.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

How passing wonder She who made  
 him such.

CUT TO:

EXT. RUINED ABBEY - NIGHT

We return to the world beneath the starry night sky. The figure of a WOMAN in a white gown walks slowly towards us.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

From different natures  
 marvellously mix'd, connexion  
 exquisite of distant worlds.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The GRAVEDIGGER lies in the completed grave, his head pressed to the ground as if the earth were a silk pillow.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

How populous, how vital, is the  
 grave. This is creation's  
 melancholy vault, the vale  
 funereal, the sad cypress gloom;  
 The land of apparitions, empty  
 shades.

He grasps the earth with his hands once again, this time with a sudden urgency.

MONTAGE OF SHOTS:

The GRAVEDIGGER knelt upright in the grave.

1. Laughing hysterically.
2. A fit of anger.
3. Consumed by fear.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

All, all on earth, is shadow,  
all beyond  
Is substance.

CUT TO:

EXT. RUINED ABBEY - NIGHT

The WOMAN in white moves closer towards us.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Each moment has its sickle,  
emulous of Time's enormous  
scythe, whose ample sweep  
strikes empires from the root;  
each moment plays His little  
weapon in the narrower sphere of  
sweet domestic comfort, and cuts  
down the fairest bloom of  
sublunary bliss.

The GRAVEDIGGER is now in her world, amongst the ruins  
and alone. He moves around in silent awe, feeling a  
presence but seeing no one - he is unafraid.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

How deep implanted in the breast  
of man the dread of death.

The WOMAN appears behind the GRAVEDIGGER and places her  
hand on his chest to feel his heart. He recognises her  
touch - the GODHEAD.

She whispers gently into his ear.

GODHEAD

(whispered)

I sing its sovereign cure.

A burst of piercing noise.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Man makes a death, which nature  
never made; then on the point of  
his own fancy falls; and feels a  
thousand deaths, in fearing one.

The GRAVEDIGGER bleeds from his eyes, nose and mouth. He  
is smiling.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

The nameless She, who's nod is  
nature's birth; and nature's  
shield.

CLOSE ON: the GODHEAD's eyes.

CUT TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT

The GRAVEDIGGER is knelt in the grave looking up at the  
GODHEAD standing above ground at the foot of the grave.  
He stares at her, worshipping her form.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

The great First-Last! High she  
sits, in darkness from excessive  
splendour borne, by gods unseen.  
Her glory, to created glory,  
bright, as that to central  
horrors; she looks down on all  
that soars; and spans immensity.

He moves towards her, his hands outstretched. She walks  
away and he clambers out of the grave after her.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Though night unnumber'd worlds  
unfolds to view,  
Boundless creation! What art  
thou? A beam, a mere effluvium  
of her majesty?

He stands before her. Gently, he takes her hand and holds  
it like an artefact in his.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Her tenderness on fire? Like  
soft, smooth oil, outblazing  
other fires.

He places his hands on her body, feeling its perfection.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

Can prayer, can praise avert it?  
My all! My theme! My  
inspiration! And my crown! My

soul's ambition, pleasure,  
wealth! - my world!

He begins to sob. She holds his head to her breast but remains expressionless.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

My light in darkness and my life  
in death!  
Eternity, too short to speak thy  
praise!

She whispers in his ear once more. The GRAVEDIGGER turns to look back into the grave to see himself, wrapped in white cloth, lying dead within it. He turns to look back at her - she is gone.

GRAVEDIGGER

(V.O)

My sacrifice! My God!  
What then art Thou? By what name  
shall I call thee!?

CUT TO:

EXT. RUINED ABBEY - NIGHT

Amongst the ruins once more, the GODHEAD walks slowly away from us.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The same cemetery, now a pleasant day with the comforting sounds of nature able to be heard. An OLD MAN, in present day workwear, sits beside a plot with his shovel and a thermos.

OLD MAN

Narcissa, I'm become thy pupil  
now.  
Father of all, forgetfulness of  
death.

Moving wearily to the nearby plot, he picks up his shovel and drives it into the earth.

FADE OUT.

THE END