

Dahl Clark  
Dr. Miller 3rd  
British Literature  
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The theme of this poem appears to be the distinction between Nothing and Something. The author, writing this poem in the late 17th century, was aware of the transition between the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration, and this transition may have been his motivation for writing this poem. This is concluded because the author is drawing a distinction between two very abstract ideas, and is attempting to understand these ideas by defining what Nothing and Something are. Many other writers we have studied this quarter also attempted to define these two concepts, although in different ways--among them, Andrew Marvell draws a distinction between life and death, which represent Something and Nothing respectively. Johnathan Swift discriminates between the quantity and quality of human life, in which the quantity of people is nothing compared to the quality of their existence. On the far end, Shakespeare's Macbeth draws no distinction at all between Nothing and Something; Macbeth sees no distinction between good and bad, or between life and death.

In this poem, the author makes a division between Nothing and Something. The author defines "Nothing" as being "Thou elder brother even to Shade." We get the sense that Nothing is dark and obscure, and because darkness is a symbol of death, Nothing takes on new dimensions of coldness, disease, and since "Thou hadst a being ere the world was made," Nothing also represents age and a bleak continuity. Since death is the final state of all things, the author states that Nothing "art alone of ending not afraid." We are afraid of Nothing because of what Nothing represents; it is the direct opposite of Something. However, the author connects these two ideas by telling us that from "primitive Nothing Something straight begot; / Then all proceeded from the great united What," just as new life comes forth after death. He defines Something as being "the general attribute of all," having "Snatched men, beasts, birds, fire, water, air, and land" from emptiness, commanding its "mighty power," and obscuring its "reverend dusky face." Here, we get the sense that Something had been at war with Nothing in order to keep itself in existence. The idea of Something battling to keep its existence against Nothing can also be thought of as a good person trying to remain good in the face of temptation, or a good lover trying to live life fruitfully in the face of death.

Andrew Marvell, in “To His Coy Mistress,” tries to convince his beloved to return his love now, because life is short, and death will soon overtake them. He would likely disagree with the author’s assertion that Something is born from Nothing, because to him, there is no life after death. The wonderful things of life, such as youth, beauty, and love, are nullified by death, which is Nothing; he goes on to describe Nothing as “vast deserts of eternity.” Human life is Something to Marvell, and death is Nothing. We see the battle between Something and Nothing near the end of the poem, where Marvell tells us we need to fight to have a good life. To live, we have to live forcefully, breaking through the “iron gates of Life.” We have to do this because we know we will soon die, and we have to *carpe diem*, or “seize the day,” before that happens.

Johnathan Swift writes A Modest Proposal in protest of the way society treats people as commodities. He would likely agree with the author of this poem that Something and Nothing are two different ideas, but he would probably also add that Something and Nothing mean different things to him. To society, the availability of people to do work is Something, while the individual rights, values, and abilities of people are neglected and considered to be Nothing. Solving the problem of poverty by proposing that the rich eat the children of the poor, and using lots of numbers to describe the number of poor in England is Swift’s way of demonstrating how the sense of humanity has been lost by much of English society. To him, Something and Nothing have been reversed by society. By describing the number of affluent and poor couples, and by referring to women as nothing more than “breeders,” society has reduced humanity to Nothing, when humanity is actually a very important Something. The difference between cold, mathematical logic and humanity is as great as the difference between good and bad, or life and death, and Swift has argued that we should recognize this. The battle between Something and Nothing can be seen in A Modest Proposal as the battle between humanity and a growing lack of it; Swift speaks for the preservation of humanity in a period where it is becoming less valued.

Also in A Modest Proposal, Swift helps us to understand the value and importance of knowledge and understanding (Something), above ignorance (Nothing). While we read A Modest Proposal, we were ignorant of Swift’s real intentions until midway through the proposal, when we finally realized his proposal of eating children was serious. Swift had given the reader clues to his intentions earlier in his proposal, but often the reader fails to read the proposal critically. Instead, the reader is drawn to agreement because the reader trusts the likeable and intelligent persona Swift creates. This satire is not only about society’s growing disinterest in humanity, but also about

humanity's growing disinterest in learning. Instead of being outraged by Swift's proposal, we sit back and nod our heads in agreement, failing to critically read and understand the meaning of his proposal until it is almost finished.

Marvell and Swift are alike in that they both have made some kind of distinction between Something and Nothing as the author of this poem has. Macbeth, on the other hand, makes no distinction between these two concepts, and would likely fail to understand the importance of the author's message. The author tells us that Something was born from Nothing, and that they are two very different things, but Macbeth sees only one state of things. He sees that everything is Nothing, and believes there is nothing different from Nothing. To him, his life (Something) has become Nothing because he has ceased to be under the great hand of God. After his wife dies, he makes a numbing speech that is evidence to how little he cares about life. He says, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps forth in this petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time." Time has no meaning to Macbeth, and unlike Marvell, who tells us we need to live each day to the fullest, Macbeth sees no distinction between today, tomorrow, or any day after that. Macbeth goes on to tell us that "Life is a tale told by an idiot, / Full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." In this last line, Macbeth clearly states that life is Nothing. Nowhere in the play does he tell us that life is Something to him. Also, Macbeth fails to make any distinction between good and evil when he says "So fair and foul a day I have not seen," and when he chooses to listen to the tempting witches who tell him "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Since being good means he would go to Heaven and live eternally, goodness must represent Something, if death is Nothing. Macbeth understands the importance of eternal life, but when he tells us he would rather be king than to live eternally, he essentially tells us that he would rather sin than do good, which also tells us he doesn't care about the course of his life.

The author of this poem, likely driven by the changing ideas and values of the late 17th century, has defined what Nothing and Something mean to him. To other writers, such as Marvell, Swift, and Shakespeare, Nothing and Something mean different things. However, these writers have tried to preserve the value of Something, whether it be life, humanity, or holiness, against a consumptive, cold Nothing that threatens to overthrow us with each passing day.