The Act of Dying in Literature and Film as an Imaginative Challenge

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> *"Where do bad folks go when they die?*
> *They don't go to heaven where the angels fly*
> *They go to the lake of fire and fry*
> *Won't see them again 'till the fourth of July"*
> *—Curtis Matthew Kirkwood, "Meat Puppets" (1983)*

The dark humor of these lyrics captures a particular macabre view of death which has been part of Western culture for millenia. It seems that our society's prevailing relationship with death indulges in horror and supernatural fantasy on one hand or denial on the other, which seeks to cover up an underlying fear and dread. Author Susan Sontag wrote, "[y]et the modern denial of death does not explain the extent of the lying and the wish to be lied to; it does not touch the deepest dread."[1] The use of common tropes in horror fiction, supernatural fantasy, and certain religious narratives is a hindrance to a more imaginative depiction of death and dying. Allegheny College English professor John MacNeill Miller considers why there are so few literary works that consider what happens to humans after we die. He suggests that death should not be treated as a final stop, citing the death-positive movement and nonfiction portrayals as advances, while calling for more creative imaginings of the afterlife. Miller suggests:

> If we want to reclaim the good death as part of the good life, we need to consider how we

[1] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Picador, 2001), 8.

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> incorporate death in the stories we tell about ourselves. When we tacitly treat death as The End of every individual's story, we only increase a collective sense of death's unspeakability. What lies beyond the grave seems unthinkable in part because it remains unimaginable.[2]

The capacity for literature—and other art forms—to exert influence on sociocultural views[3] presents an opportunity for reimagining death. This essay acknowledges present-day scholars and creatives, unafraid of the horrors and hopes around dying, equally unbesotted by either the commoditization of death or the cult of death phenomena. Imaginative depictions of death in literature and film can go beyond entrenched tropes, which impede the transformation of views on death, particularly in contemporary Western society.

Death In Literature: An Imaginative Challenge

From the moment we're alive, there is a growing knowledge that death is inevitable—it begins as a mother embodies this awareness for her child and expands with each individual's own growing sense of mortality. In this way death is a shared experience, which compels the use of narratives, across literary cultures, to sooth anxieties and confront hesitations and fascinations around this universal human fate. In all languages, the scientific brevity of depicting a death in meager, factual words may coexist with spaces

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[2] John MacNeill Miller, "Can Novels Change Our Attitudes About Death," *Electric Literature* (February 27, 2018). https://electricliterature.com/can-novels-change-our-attitudes-about-death/.

[3] According to Van Brussel and Carpentier, we cannot reduce death to the way it is socially and culturally interpreted, but at the same time death remains loaded with meaning and we cannot detach it from the processes of social construction. Correspondingly, the study of death in literature is a broad topic; myriad analyses consider philosophical, psychological, and spiritual perspectives on dying. Diverse concepts such as the good death (also called successful dying), death positivity, and death denial all show up in literature. As well, the rationale is informed by a geographically diverse cross-section of interdisciplinary sources from literature, film, music, health humanities, and various science disciplines. A range of theoretical viewpoints, such as death-positive, right-to-life, and transhumanist, are considered. See L. van Brussel and N. Carpentier, eds., *The Social Construction of Death: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

for imaginative liberties. Such openings may allow humans to better undertake the sometimes hideous effort of dying and the uncertainty about what happens after death. In the field of narrative medicine, John Skelton, Professor of Clinical Communication at University of Birmingham (UK), has studied how writers have approached the concept of death. He explains that the epistemology of science is to find single facts by eliminating uncertainty, whereas the epistemology of the humanities is to represent knowledge as complex and ambivalent. Skelton argues that one of the primary reasons healthcare professionals should read literature is to become familiar with this different epistemology. In contemporary culture, the tension between a general denial of death as existentially inevitable and a neo-gothic, macabre fascination with death as a multifaceted object of entertainment upholds this complicated ambivalence.[4] In early twentieth-century literary circles, Virginia Woolf suggested a more literal recognition of the body as a central figure in circumstances of poor health. In her essay *On Being Ill,* she lamented how the body is marginalized: "the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, negligible, and non-existent."[5] Woolf acknowledged our avoidance of illness and its associated morbidity and questioned the mind–body hierarchy: "People write always about the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how it has civilised the universe."[6] Similarly, the way we talk about death with

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[4] Dina Khapaeva, Professor of Russian at Georgia Tech University, explores the focus in electronic media and popular fiction on nonhuman figures and the devaluation of humans in today's Western culture. She identifies a linked fascination with death, which she associates with "a gothic aesthetics," a literary tradition over the past two centuries. In her view of these developments, she argues that the origins are in a critique of European humanism and the rejection of human exceptionalism. Khapaeva points to the role of French theory and extends her argument to include proponents of animal rights, who put animals on par with humans. She also notes the appeal of recently fashionable ideas of posthumanism and transhumanism. See Dina Khapeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2017).

[5] Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill," *The New Criterion, A Quarterly Review* VI, no. 1 (January 1926): 32.

[6] Ibid.

recurring tropes and ritualized responses reflects much of humanity's eternal dread of death. This is a call to create a more expansive repertoire of the death experience and realize the visions of past artistic torchbearers, such as Virginia Woolf.

Visions and Versions of Death in Literature and Film

Two late twentieth-century novels, *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham and *Big Fish* by Daniel Wallace, are paticularly representative of the kind of literaure that can constitute such an expansive repertoire of the death experience. An important distinction between the two is the difference between the meanings attributed to the death of specific characters within the context of a story as opposed to the act of dying itself. Death is a primary theme in each novel and supports character arcs, yet the visions and versions of death represented in these works differ.

In *The Hours,* the suicides of Virginia Woolf and Richard Brown bookend the story; throughout the stream-of-consciousness narrative the main characters grapple with mortality in compelling ways. Death is a plot device designed to support the parallel story structure and eventually connect the characters Clarissa Vaughn, Virginia Woolf, and Laura Brown. The two suicides are both voiced through omniscient narration yet shift in narrative point of view.

Richard Brown's death is inevitable because he is dying of AIDS. Clarissa goes to Richard's apartment to help him get ready for the party she's been planning to fete him. She finds him perched on a windowsill, unbathed, in his robe. After brief dialogue, he jumps through the open window and falls to his death. Through Clarissa's point of view, the scene ends with her weeping and ruminating over his body, "She would like to speak to him, but can't. She simply rests her head lightly, against his back."[7]

In contrast, Virginia's suicide is only witnessed by the narrator, yet Cunningham gets closer to her body and spirit. Following her death by drowning in a river, Virginia's body floats downriver and nears a bridge, with a boy and his mother standing and observing a WWII military truck filled with soldiers:

> He waves back. He demands that his mother pick him up so he can see the soldiers better; so he will be more visible to them. All this enters the bridge, resounds through its wood and stone,

[7] Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Picador, 1998), 203.

> and enters Virginia's body. Her face, pressed sideways to the piling, absorbs it all; the truck and the soldiers, the mother and the child.[8]

Cunningham's imaginative description of the absorption of life by a fresh corpse creates a more intimate proximity to death, whereas Richard's death is a plot point, which serves to culminate Clarissa's persisting grief and advance the story arc to the novel's denouement.

The Preface of *Big Fish* suggests that the author may possess a spiritual view of death: "On one of our last car trips, near the end of my father's life as a man…."[9] The sentence is also an example of artfully spare foreshadowing. Wallace's magic realism tale of a dying father, Edward Bloom, is told from the perspective of the adult son, William. In this personal narrative point of view, the final scene between Edward and William takes place four times—in four different ways—in chapters titled "My Father's Death: Take 1, 2, 3, and 4," respectively. These accounts may be alternate or intertwined, offering versions which may or may not be entirely accurate.

In Take 1, Wallace validates the role of the body, as William describes his father's physical decline: "He used to be hard to look at, …but I've gotten used to it now. Even though he doesn't have any hair and his skin is mottled and scabbed, I'm used to it."[10] In Take 2, Wallace addresses the afterlife. William asks his father if he believes in Heaven. Edward dodges the question, offering jokes and eventually landing on a poignant sentiment:

> "I was a good dad," he says. A statement of not unassailable fact he leaves hanging there, as if for my appraisal. I look at him, at it. "You are a good dad," I say. "Thanks," he says, and his eyelids flutter a bit, as if he's heard what he's come to hear. This is what is meant by last words: they are keys to unlock the afterlife. They're not last words but passwords, and as soon as they're spoken you can go.[11]

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[8] Ibid., 8.

[9] Daniel Wallace, *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1998), 1.

[10] Ibid., 17.

[11] Ibid., 74.

In Take 3, Wallace tackles death denial. The story is filled with Edward navigating his pain and impending death with a joke-filled prattle, first to the doctor, then to William. Despite Edward's comedic litany, William notices a shift: "He's not a man in the same way now. He's something else altogether."[12] In Take 4, after losing consciousness in the family pool Edward lies in a coma in the hospital. Wallace portrays medical death, as William observes his father's intubated form and considers:

> I sat there and waited—for what I don't know—and stared at those marvelous machines. This wasn't life, of course. This was life support. This was what the medical world had fashioned to take the place of Purgatory.[13]

William attempts to retell a favorite joke to his comatose father, who awakens. In the throes of dying, Edward asks, "Tell me everything it is I've taught you about life so I can go ahead and die and so I won't have to worry so much. Just…just go ahead and say it."[14]

In the subsequent and final chapter, titled "Big Fish," William answers his father with his own tall tale. It's the ultimate palliative care for Edward, the fantastical storyteller. He imagines carrying his father out of the hospital and driving to a riverbank:

> I just stood there, holding his body shrouded in a blanket on the banks of this river, until he told me, *You might want to look away now* and then *Please*, and all of a sudden my arms were full of the most fantastic life, frenetic, impossible to hold on to even if I'd wanted to, and I wanted to. But then all I was holding was the blanket, because my father had jumped into the river. And that's when I discovered that my father hadn't been dying after all. He was just changing, transforming himself into something new and different to carry his life forward in.[15]

The story and Edward—the man—comes to an end. He turns into a fish and swims away. William declares, "I saw him dart this way

[12] Ibid., 109.
[13] Ibid., 171.
[14] Ibid., 174.
[15] Ibid., 179–180.

and that, a silvery, brilliant, shining life, and disappear into the darkness of the deep water where the big fish go."[16] Edward's death takes place outside the hospital bed, a sanguine commingling of father–son imaginings. The four chapters on dying are less about the truth of what happened than how each of us understands what is true—if anything—and what is important for us to believe. There is a coda in the film adaptation (2003), which is not in the book. At the riverbank, the characters from Edward's mythical stories appear at his funeral, and the viewer realizes that his astonishing tales are based on real people; in the book there is no funeral and no explanation. The film provides an additional interlude before his transformation into a big fish.

The depiction of Edward's death in *Big Fish* is an imaginative triumph and an antidote to the common tropes. Wallace succeeds in demonstrating how the body is both connected and separated from the spirit. In *The Hours,* death and the potentiality of death are a plot mechanism, moving the characters to action. Richard's suicide is primarily an intellectual endeavor, rather than an imaginative experience, whereas Virginia's death scene offers a more imaginative ending as she drifts down the river absorbing the reverberations of life surrounding her lifeless body.

Conclusion

The late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century examples cited in this essay are a sample of a larger argument surrounding death and dying in literature, film, and the arts. However, the literary challenge to stretch narrative conventions and reimagine the act of dying is not purely an artistic aspiration relegated to fictional settings. In a more recent example, a network of "Death Positive Libraries" in the United Kingdom aims to create trusted spaces to encourage people to speak openly about death and dying through a range of events and activities that appeal to diverse communities.[17]

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[16] Ibid., 180.

[17] Lyn Lofland, author of the seminal *The Craft of Dying*, has critiqued the happy death movement, pointing out the blind spots of contemporary death activism. She asserts that death positivity is premised on an ethos that is not shared by all people, noting that self-reflection and self-expression, choice and personal customization, and the desire for what is ostensibly "natural" are culturally and historically specific values that resonate especially strongly with affluent whites. Sociologist Ara Francis recognizes the persistent relevance of Lofland's work and indicates that it

Activities are not limited to book recommendations but also include reading groups, author talks, film screenings, art installations, immersive digital experiences, and death cafe discussion groups. Redbridge Library Service, the inaugural site, coined the phrase "death positive library" in 2018; just a couple years into the project, the pandemic underscored the need for safe places to connect with others, to share experiences of loss, and to have conversations about death. According to Anita Luby, Head of Cultural Services at Redbridge, "[u]sing books, film, and the arts we have created a gentle and accessible way to start conversations about a challenging subject, with over 60% of participants saying that they felt more comfortable exploring this topic in a library space than they would have done anywhere else."[18]

Creative narrative expression reflects our subjectivity to the experience of death in real, clinical situations and underpins larger sociocultural trends, such as the death-positive movement and related modalities. In closing, consider the challenge, examples, and ideas presented today and, in turn, how reimagining the death experience holds potential to produce enormous sociocultural change.

A Reader Responds

IN HER ENGAGING DISCUSSION OF DEATH in literature presented above, Michelle van Kriedt cites the opening lines of Daniel Wallace's 1998 novel *Big Fish*, in which the narrator refers immediately and forebodingly to the end of his "father's life as a man." There are myriad examples of literature that treat death, as van Kriedt writes, as an "imaginative challenge." There are fewer, I think, which treat death so explicitly and immediately as Wallace

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will be important to bring conversations about death and dying to marginalized communities as certain practices favor affluent whites, such as narrative medicine, the use of end-of-life doulas, and natural death. See Ara A. Francis, "An App to Remind You You're Going to Die? On Death Positivity," *Literary Hub* (April 24, 2019). https://lithub.com/an-app-to-remind-you-youre-going-to-die-on-death-positivity/.

[18] Miranda Bryant, "UK libraries become 'death positive' with books and art on dying," *The Guardian* (July 25, 2021). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/25/uk-libraries-become-death-positive-with-books-and-art-on-dying.

does in the opening lines of his novel. van Kriedt's use of these lines immediately calls to mind my first reading of Jeffrey Eugenides' 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides*, which begins in a similarly striking and fateful way:

> On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide—it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese—the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope.[I]

It's one thing to enter a novel that contains, among many other things, the faint shivers and scents of death. It is perhaps quite another thing to be told, from the first words, that death will be a central theme—*the* central theme—which is to engage you over the hours and pages to come. What's more, I think that it takes a certain kind of reader to recognize that warning in such words and to continue on, unwavering. Often I wonder why that is.

Certainly, as van Kriedt notes, Western views of death have, historically and contemporarily, frequently been colored by denial or visceral reactions grounded in horror. And although such reactions may ultimately be *over*-reactions, they are understandable. Writing nearly fifty years ago, Ernest Becker posited as the "tragedy" of individual life "finitude, [the] dread of death and of the overwhelmingness of life."[II] A more precise and accurate description is difficult to imagine. Human finitude truly constitutes the tragedy of human existence, not merely by representing the downfall or end of that existence but also because finitude, as the "cause" of the ending of existence, is itself an essential component of the nature of human existence itself; human existence is thereby undermined and ultimately overthrown from within by an essential aspect of its own nature (that is, its finitude), an aspect without which human existence could never have

"Death" embossing from the cover of the first American edition of Albert Camus' *The Plague* (*La peste*). Drawing by Riley Einstein-Burr.

been *human* existence at all. It is not sufficient to say that human existence is finite; rather, it must be said that human existence *is its finitude*, and thus the quality which defines such existence is simultaneously that which annihilates it. With this in mind, Becker concluded:

> the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of [humanity].[III]

Given Becker's descriptions, it's easy to understand why a denial of death would be such a common, and comforting, human response; it is thus equally easy to understand why, when greeted with an opening sentence such as that crafted by Daniel Wallace or Jeffrey Eugenides, many readers might say "no thank you" and turn instead toward literature of a different ilk. Yet as van Kriedt rightfully suggests, this choice could be a mistake.

Any account that literature can offer as a way of understanding or explaining death can only be a *possible* account, a *story* of what death *might* mean or entail. This impossibility of truth, however, is not necessarily a weakness of any literary account of death; on the contrary, it can prove to be a strength. Precisely by *not* being in possession of a full "Truth," literature of this kind is truly a *story*, a *myth*, filling in the gaps of human existence that render it unintelligible, mysterious, and disorienting.

In the account of the trial and death of Socrates that Plato gives in the dialogues *Apology* and *Phaedo*, Socrates is continually asked by his friends to justify his refusal to escape his sentence or to fear his impending death. Whereas in the *Apology* Socrates centers his argument around his fidelity to the identity that he has created, in the *Phaedo* Socrates relies on his ability to prove to his friends that no one need fear death because the soul is immortal. Yet one of the truly inspiring aspects of this "proof" is that, despite having successfully convinced his friends of the immortality of the soul, Socrates ironically concedes that he may actually be wrong about all of it. But even if he is wrong, the account that he has given has sufficiently convinced himself, which ultimately allows him to own his life and his death with faith and joy:

> Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them. But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitations…this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking, for the risk is a noble one. We should use such accounts to inspire ourselves with confidence… [to] be free from all anxiety about the fate of [the] soul.[IV]

This is precisely what Daniel Wallace has done in his narrator's account of his father's death, as noted above; as William describes Edward's final transformation through death into a new manner of existing, William is constructing, and committing himself to, a manner of understanding that allows him to accept his father's death. This is what literature can do: it can effectively articulate a mythic account of possible meanings of death and thus possible meanings of life which, if understood by the reader as a potential reality, may equip the reader to better abide the fact of death.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, van Kriedt notes that death can be a shared experience. This seems an odd claim to make, given that an individual's death is seemingly the one thing that one must do alone; in Heideggerian terms, it is one's "ownmost possibility." But if death really is the one true inevitability of human existence, and if finitude really is a primary defining characteristic of human existence, then finitude is the one thing that we all *must* have in common and death is the one experience that we all *will* undergo. In this sense, there is a solidarity in death, if not as an immediate experience as least as a shared, absolute possibility that we all share in *equally*.

I have written elsewhere regarding the ways in which death may (should!) be viewed as a shared fate and thus engaged as a shared struggle, noting in particular the ways in which literature can profoundly and compellingly implore us, as readers, to engage the reality of death not just as a way to better understand what it means to be human but also as a means to better understand, *and ultimately better serve*, humanity.[V] When van Kriedt writes that a particular kind of literature "presents an opportunity for reimagining death," this is only one way in which she is right; to reimagine death in this fashion, as a shared, inevitable, absolute fate, could foster a greater connection

between us as human beings despite our differences. In this sense, "practicing death" through an engagement with literature, while aiding an individual understanding of the meaning(s) of death and thus perhaps the meaning(s) of life, may also cultivate a better communal understanding of the meaning(s) of death and life for the other individuals in our shared communities and world.

Steven A. Burr
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NOTES TO READER RESPONSE

[I] Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (New York: Picador, 1993), 1.

[II] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 63.

[III] Ibid., ix.

[IV] Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Collected Dialogues*, trans. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 114d–114e.

[V] See, for example, Chapter 4, "Revolt and [Re-]Union," in *Finite Transcendence: Existential Exile and the Myth of Home* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), as well as the essay "On Plague," published in Volume XVI, Issue 1, of this journal.