

Death Scenes in Literature from the Nineteenth Century to Current Fiction

Jeff Koloze

ABSTRACT: This paper considers five elements found in the nineteenth-century depiction of death scenes. (1) Dying characters have the benefit of being in a comforting place before they die, and (2) they have contact with a caring human being. (3) Removal of pain of the individual dying is a significant concern; (4) material goods, in contrast, are insignificant to the dying. Finally, (5) spiritual solace can be found in the death scenes. After showing how these elements are depicted in significant passages in the novels of Dickens, the paper then documents how the elements can be discovered in early twentieth-century novels; by century's end, however, the elements were almost completely absent. The paper examines contemporary twenty-first century novels whose death scenes include the five elements and suggests that future research is needed before a literary trend of novels rediscovering the nineteenth-century standard can be established.

F ICTION READERS who wish to satisfy their desire not so much to be educated by the literature they read as to be entertained by it would do well to focus on nineteenth-century novels. Almost every novel written in the century that saw the rise of the novel as the dominant means of prose expression can rise to the stature of a "good read." This can be attributed to the tendency that nineteenth-century novels have of generally following the four-part plot structure (exposition, crisis, climax, and dénouement), which gives readers, not necessarily a happy ending, but a sense of completion or fulfillment, a practice that endured until realism and other literary movements at the end of the nineteenth century encouraged fiction writers to alter the model that had worked well since the late eighteenth century. While readers may not be concerned with the didactic value of such novels if their intent is to

enjoy the writing, what do they enjoy when they encounter many death scenes of significant characters in these novels—death being an unpleasant topic in literature that disturbs the idea of a “good read”?

By “death scenes” I mean those scenes in fictional works that depict a human being at the last stage of living, one who is dying naturally and not because of judicial decree or military activity. Perhaps the presence of numerous death scenes in the masterworks of nineteenth-century fiction indicates that authors used them as vehicles for sentimentality. Perhaps the death scenes illustrate social protest in a manner befitting a non-didactic mode of nineteenth-century novels. It would have been preachy for a novelist to write: “It is not right that the poor should die as they do in an environment where industrial development is eradicating the agrarian society from which they have come. It is not right that the rich should not care for their poor brothers and sisters.” But the death scenes in nineteenth-century novels convey the ideas of the preceding two quotes much more effectively by giving readers enduring images and powerful vocabulary.

Twentieth-century literature may have lost the bearings of its ancestor. While dying characters in nineteenth-century novels were treated with respect, the dying in twentieth-century works are often dehumanized, belittled, and reduced to entities that likely to benefit from euthanasia. What the twenty-first century has to offer is still in formation, but some commentary about recent works can be provided. Examining death scenes in all literature in all genres is beyond the scope of this paper, so I would like to restrict my field of study to American and British literature, beginning in the nineteenth century.

I. NINETEENTH-CENTURY DEATH SCENES

Of all the nineteenth-century British authors one could select, the reader naturally gravitates to Charles Dickens—“naturally” because there are many enduring images of characters at the moment of death in Dickens’s work, so many that a reader may not be able to

conclude which character's death is the most poignant. Focusing on some of the more famous episodes in his fiction will suffice to document certain elements that compel readers to remember the scenes, to linger over the details of the characters' dying moments, and perhaps to learn how the deaths of fictional characters can apply to their own lives. I will consider the deaths of characters spanning Dickens's career: Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), Richard Carstone (and, in contrast, Lady Dedlock) in *Bleak House* (1852-53), Mr. Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), and Johnny in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).¹ All of these episodes include five elements that appear to be essential for reader appreciation of the death scenes: a comforting place in which to die, contact with a caring human being, removal of pain of the individual dying, little concern with material goods, and spiritual solace.²

A comforting place to die. The first element common to the major death scenes is that the dying characters occupy a comforting place in which to breathe their last moments. The setting for Smike's death is idyllic:

¹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852-1853; New York NY: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005); *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), ed. John Holloway (Harmondsworth UK: Penguin Books, 1967); *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839), ed. Michael Slater (Harmondsworth UK: Penguin Books, 1978); *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841, New York NY: Dodd, Mead, 1943); *Our Mutual Friend* (1865, New York NY: New American Library, 1964).

² Some death scenes in nineteenth-century literature are mentioned briefly in major works, primarily for the sake of character development, and need not be discussed here. Such is the case with William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48; Great Illustrated Classics, 1864; New York NY: Dodd, Mead, 1943), where the pitiful state of Sir Pitt is reduced to this: "For this was all that was left after more than seventy years of cunning and struggling, and drinking and scheming, and sin and selfishness—a whimpering old idiot put in and out of bed and cleaned and fed like a baby!" (444), this followed immediately by a notation of his death. Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886; Ware, Hertfordshire UK: Wordsworth Classics, 1995) can be included here as well; the final words of Susan Henchard are relayed by another character at great length to illustrate that she was a fine woman (93).

On a fine, mild autumn day, when all was tranquil and at peace, when the soft sweet air crept in at the open window of the quiet room, and not a sound was heard but the gentle rustling of the leaves, Nicholas sat in his old place by the bedside, and knew that the time was nearly come. So very still it was, that every now and then he bent down his ear to listen for the breathing of him who lay asleep, as if to assure himself that life was still there, and that he had not fallen into that deep slumber from which on earth there is no waking. (862-63)

Nell's death occurs in the abandoned abbey church where she and her grandfather eventually dwell after an extensive journey across England. For over a hundred pages before her death Dickens describes how much Nell loved to be in the former abbey buildings, to wander in the graveyard adjacent the church, and to reflect on the buildings' former ecclesiastical use. Her death is described as reverentially as the environs are:

There, upon her little bed, she lay at rest. The solemn stillness was no marvel now.... Her couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. "When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always." (542)

Two death scenes in *Bleak House* are worthy of discussion regarding dying characters' need to have a comfortable place to die because of the contrasts they provide at the moment of death. Lady Dedlock, trying to flee the ignominy of having given birth to Esther Summerson out of wedlock, is discovered not in a comfortable place, but "on the step at the gate [of the graveyard], drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere" (756).³ In contrast, Richard Carstone, the young man whose obsession over the Jarndyce and Jarndyce will led to his

³ The 1985 BBC dramatization of the novel enhances the sentimental value of this scene, but is unfaithful to the narrative. *Bleak House* (1985), performed by Diana Rigg, Denholm Elliott, Philip Franks, T.P. McKenna, Brian Deacon, Robert Urquhart (Videodisc, Warner Home Video, 2005). Although mother and daughter do meet, there is no communication between them in the novel as there is in the video adaptation; the novel makes this clear when Esther affirms that the figure reclined on the step "was my mother cold and dead" (756). The film version, however, provides Lady Dedlock with an opportunity, haltingly rendered by Lady Diana Rigg, to indicate that she is there because her deceased lover, Esther's father, is buried beyond the locked gate of the cemetery.

demise, is “lying on a sofa.... There were restoratives on the table; the room was made as airy as possible and was darkened, and was very orderly and quiet” (806). Even though her father’s death occurs in luxurious surroundings, Mr. Dorrit imagines himself back in the Marshalsea debtors’ prison, the place where he was most happy. Johnny finds rest at the Children’s Hospital in the last of Dickens’s finished novels, *Our Mutual Friend*. Despite the fears of the woman to whose care he had been entrusted, Johnny wakes “to find himself lying in a little quiet bed,” surrounded by toys designed to make the little child comfortable, such as a “Noah’s ark, the noble steed, and the yellow bird, with the officer in the Guards doing duty over the whole” (367).

Contact with a caring human being. The second element common to the death scenes, contact with a caring human being, is crucial—not only for the person dying, but also for the reader to extract as much emotion and didactic value out of the scene as possible. Nicholas Nickleby witnesses the death of Smike, who was “the partner of his poverty, and the sharer of his better fortune” (862). Smike’s estimation of Nicholas is clear. His death imminent, since Nicholas has told him that they “shall meet again,” Smike affirms that he “can even bear to part from you” (863). Just before the moment of death, “They embraced, and kissed each other on the cheek” (864). Nell’s death is tragic in that the person whom she loved the most in the world, her grandfather, is not present at the moment that her death is first conveyed to the reader. Perhaps this is dramatic justice for the sake of the reader, for it is her grandfather’s gambling habit that led them to dire straits; having him present at the death of so reverent and self-sacrificing a young woman would be sacrilegious.⁴ Richard in *Bleak House* is surrounded by all of his beloved: his wife Ada, Esther, Esther’s future

⁴ Two pages later, however, it is obvious that “they” (her friends and, presumably, her grandfather) were around Nell when her death occurred two days earlier: “They had read and talked to her in the earlier portion of the night, but as the hours crept on, she sank to sleep” (544).

husband who was Richard's stalwart friend, and the guardian of Ada, Esther, and Richard. Having the guardian present was most important because Richard had become hostile towards him, presuming that he was blocking his inheritance from the Jarndyce will. Mr. Dorrit dies with the satisfaction of having not only his Little Dorrit around him, but also his brother Frederick, with whom he has reconciled. Doctors and hospital staff care for Johnny in his last days at the Children's Hospital, but also present is Mrs. Boffin, who cares for the little boy as though he were her own son.

Removal of pain of the individual dying. Third, most scenes of characters' dying moments involve or mention the removal of pain; the pain is often physical, but many scenes depict the removal of mental pain or anxiety. While "there was no rallying, no effort, no struggle for life," Smike's death occurs in the context of "little pain, little uneasiness" (862). The absence of pain at Nell's death is one of three constituent superlatives used to describe her on her deathbed: "No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon" (542). Richard experiences extreme anguish in *Bleak House* for having offended his benefactor, who can only reply to the confession by uttering "well" five times—said for the express purpose of removing his mental anguish (of "comforting him" 807). The narrator makes it a point to state that Mr. Dorrit "had been sinking in this painless way for two or three days" (712). Johnny asks whether the other children in the hospital ward are there so that their pain can be removed, and such is the little boy's selflessness that he understands "that the reply included himself" but only after they "made him understand" (367).

Little concern about material goods. Fourth, there is little concern at the moment of death about material goods. The only material good that Smike possesses at the moment of his death (a lock of his beloved's hair, wrapped in "two slight ribands") will be restored to him once he dies. Smike asks Nicholas to remove this lock once he is dead "so that no eyes but his might see it" and then to replace it around his neck "that it might rest with him in the grave" (864).

Throughout *The Old Curiosity Shop* Nell treasures no material good, whether in the curiosity shop where they first lived or on the road as they fled from London and those who would torment them. She loves only her grandfather. Even when he steals money from her to satisfy his gambling obsession, Nell cannot accuse her grandfather, so much does she love him and so constant is her devotion. Richard reduces the hundreds of pages of his anxiety over the Jarndyce will at the moment of his death in *Bleak House* to an interrogative:

“It was a troubled dream?” said Richard, clasping both my guardian’s hands, eagerly.

“Nothing more, Rick; nothing more.” (808)

During his last days Mr. Dorrit slowly eliminates the extraneous items that his wealth had purchased. Little Dorrit helps him to sell “a pompous gold watch” and “his sleeve-buttons and finger-rings...and it is as likely as not that he was kept alive for so many days by the satisfaction of sending them, piece by piece, to an imaginary pawnbroker’s” (712). Johnny’s only possessions are the toys that greeted him when he first came to the hospital; he gives them to a child with a broken leg. After giving these toys away, as well as “a kiss for the boofer lady [Mrs. Boffin],” “Having now bequeathed all he had to dispose of, and arranged his affairs in this world, Johnny, thus speaking, left it” (369).

Spiritual solace. Finally, many scenes offer spiritual solace to the dying individual. If spirituality is not essentially linked with the character, then spiritual solace is expressly offered for the reader. The account of Smike’s death contains two such spiritual references. In the first instance Smike recalls Nicholas’s affirmation that they would see each other again. The second reference occurs while Smike is dying. He sees “beautiful gardens, which...were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces; then whispered that it was Eden—and so died” (864). The description of Nell at the moment of death reverses the chronological order of the created world: “She seemed a creature fresh from

the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death” (542). Nell is so transformed after death that the narrator first proclaims that, as she was known in life, “[s]o shall we know the angels in their majesty, after death.” The schoolmaster who befriended Nell and her grandfather closes the chapter, reflecting on heavenly justice, and asks the rhetorical question: “If one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!” (543). Richard’s protracted death scene ends with his plea for forgiveness for having “married [his wife] to poverty and trouble[;] I have scattered your means to the winds.” Forgiveness must be obtained, he asserts, “before I begin the world” (808)—this last dependent clause has become a metaphor for his death. At his brother’s death, Frederick Dorrit directly invokes God to vow that he would take care of Little Dorrit. Within that same night, “[t]he two brothers were before their Father; far beyond the twilight judgment of this world; high above its mists and obscurities” (715). Johnny’s limited religious experience is illustrated by two incidents. Above his bed in the Children’s Hospital “was a coloured picture beautiful to see, representing as it were another Johnny seated on the knee of some Angel surely who loved little children” (367). The possible allusion to Christ escapes him as does the cause (man’s inhumanity to man) of his being in the hospital in the first place; Johnny later asks the doctors if the children were all brought to the hospital by God.

II. TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEATH SCENES

Twentieth-century literature, in contrast, offers many examples of characters whose last moments either continue or lack the elements discussed in the memorable death scenes above. A passage from Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*⁵ will illustrate that a continuity with the nineteenth-century standard of depicting death

⁵ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (1945; Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

scenes was still functional. However, passages in two of James T. Farrell's works (*New Year's Eve/1929*, published in 1967, and his *The Death of Nora Ryan*, published in 1978)⁶ clearly suggest that, while some of the nineteenth-century elements can be identified in these works, most are significantly altered or absent.⁷

An important death scene in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) involves Lord Marchmain, the patriarch of the family whose history the narrator relates. Lord Marchmain has the satisfaction of being in his home when his last moments occur, and he receives exemplary medical care during his final hours. His

⁶ James T. Farrell, *The Death of Nora Ryan* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1978); *New Year's Eve/1929* (New York NY: The Smith, 1967).

⁷ As mentioned above regarding nineteenth-century works, some characters' deaths in twentieth-century novels, while important in helping the reader to understand the personalities of other characters, are too brief for study here. Such is the case in major works such as Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886; New York NY: Modern Library, 1956), where Miss Birdseye's death extends over two independent clauses: "Miss Chancellor and Miss Tarrant had sat by her there, without moving, each of her hands in theirs, and she had just melted away, toward eight o'clock. It was a lovely death" (413). *The Big Money* portion of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, *I. The 42nd Parallel; II. Nineteen-Nineteen; III. The Big Money* (New York NY: Modern Library, 1937) contains a brief passage where Mary French's father died alone and in great pain: "His face, rough with the grey stubble, was twisted and strangled, eyes open" (124). Zhivago in Pasternak's masterpiece (1958) suffers great pain during his heart attack, and the narrative describing his death increases the alienation of his character in its final moments. The film adaptation makes it seem as though Zhivago suffered the heart attack on the trolley because he thought he saw his beloved Lara walking down the street; however, there is no cause for his sudden heart attack in the novel, thus increasing the sense of futility of life expressed in his death scene.

Non-canonical works that include or disregard many of the five elements include Olive Schreiner's *Undine* (New York NY: Harper & Brothers, 1928), whose main character dies at novel's end; Robert Herrick's *Sometime* (New York NY: Farrar & Rinehart, 1933), whose depiction of Felix's death ends the novel; Karl Ashton's *Illegal Nurse* (New York NY: Godwin, 1936), where the death scene is an infanticide which is only suggested by the barest of narratorial detail; Gillian Tindall's *The Youngest* (London UK: Secker & Warburg, 1967); and Michael D. O'Brien's *Strangers and Sojourners* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1997). The death scene in O'Brien's work contains all five elements: Anne dies in her home, in the presence of her aged husband, and has spiritual solace from a beloved priest; there is no concern over material things at her death. Although she is dying of cancer, no pain is mentioned; in fact, whatever fear or anxiety she experienced is eliminated: "I want you to know that the shadows went away. They've gone forever. I'm not afraid anymore" (545).

family surround him, and he has the benefit of “the simple, genial” Father Mackay to provide the last sacrament for this ostensibly fallen-away Catholic (339). Although the family is in financial peril (174-75), there is no concern about this expressed at the moment of Lord Marchmain’s death.

Two items in the nineteenth-century catalog of elements in death scenes are interconnected in this case. Although no physical pain is expressed in the scene, Lord Marchmain’s spiritual solace and anxiety over his sins are intertwined:

“Now,” said the priest, “I know you are sorry for all the sins of your life, aren’t you? Make a sign, if you can. You’re sorry, aren’t you?” But there was no sign. “Try and remember your sins; tell God you are sorry.”...

I suddenly felt the longing for a sign, if only of courtesy, if only for the sake of the woman I loved, who knelt in front of me, praying, I knew, for a sign....

Suddenly Lord Marchmain moved his hand to his forehead; I thought he had felt the touch of the chrism and was wiping it away. “O God,” I prayed, “don’t let him do that.” But there was no need for fear; the hand moved slowly down his breast, then to his shoulder, and Lord Marchmain made the sign of the cross. (338)

Farrell’s *New Year’s Eve/1929* depicts the life of Beatrice Burns, a sensuous young woman whose goal is to spend New Year’s Eve at a party. This attempt to enjoy life masks the futility of overcoming tuberculosis. Although there is no specific death scene in the novel, one can argue that the entire novel is a prolongation of Beatrice’s dying. She loses a connection with her father (he leaves her apartment in the initial pages, and the reader does not see him again). She is unable to reciprocate the affection of a man who sincerely loves her (she loses him by page 25). Her desire to have sex is unfulfilled by the end of the book.

At the novel’s end, the reader finds Beatrice on New Year’s Day with all of the five elements of the nineteenth-century standard for death scenes unmet. Instead of a comforting place to die, Beatrice surveys “her unmade bed. She had slept all day, and now it was dark outside. The first day of this New Year was gone. She ran her hand through her uncombed hair, and let the sight of her unmade bed depress her” (139). Instead of contact with caring

people, she bemoans that a friend of hers “hadn’t shown up, and he should have come by now. He knew that she’d expect him to come so that they could talk over last night’s party” (139). The end of the novel is replete with instances of her emotional distress, thus negating the element of removal of pain. Beatrice “didn’t have the will power to make up her mind and decide what she would do. It was even too much of an effort to get dressed” (139). Beatrice’s anxiety and concern about material things is expressed in the penultimate paragraph of the novel. When “Beatrice opened her eyes, and looked at the bare, whitish-grayish ceiling” and realized “That, she told herself, was her life,” her emotional reaction is swift: “She collapsed into tears. She shook with sobs, rolled over on the bed, and, with her face sunken into the soiled pillow slip, she continued to sob” (144). Finally, being agnostic, there is no spiritual solace for Beatrice. The novel ends with the pitiful thought, “I don’t want to die, she told herself like a frightened little girl” (144).

Set in 1946, *The Death of Nora Ryan* is another Farrell novel in which few of the nineteenth-century standards can be identified. The novel considers the effects that a debilitating stroke has on Nora Ryan, the matriarch of a Chicago family. Nora Ryan will not recover from the stroke, and so her children arrive from across the country for her last days. However, the children do everything but spend time in Nora’s presence. While she rests comfortably in her bedroom in a daughter’s house, her children are almost always depicted in another room. (One daughter does enter Nora’s bedroom when she is already in a coma.) The only contact Nora has with caring people are her attending physician and two nurses called in especially to care for her. While several characters wonder whether Nora is in pain, they make no effort to try to read their mother’s face, or to ask her directly (although the effort may be futile, since Nora has lost the capacity to speak). Nora herself is unconcerned with material goods; she is a devout Roman Catholic and prays not for her children’s financial or professional success as much as she prays that those of her children who have lost their faith will return to it. The children, however, are concerned about material goods, specifically, the costs associated not only with maintaining

everybody in the house during her final illness, but also the financial costs of Nora's care if her dying becomes prolonged.

One paragraph in the four-hundred page novel is solely devoted to Nora's perspective, and her thoughts show just how removed from the nineteenth-century elements, except for spiritual solace, her own death scene is:

Nora Ryan could only see part of the room. Sometimes something looked familiar, a face, an object, something. But it didn't look the way it used to. The space of her world had changed. She could hear talking; she heard the doctor saying that her right side was paralyzed and that she could not feel anything on that side. But she had dreams of pain there. As she lay with one eye open, seeing and watching, the world stopped. On the right of her, there was nothing. It was as if there were a wall in the room blocking out everything on that side. She was helpless, as helpless as a baby. But she had no mother. She dreamed one night that she was a baby and she recognized her mother in the dreams. Was her mother dead? Her mind was too weak and tired to try to remember. An automatic acceptance was imposed upon her by her condition. She was living from one minute to another. The only thing she knew was that she was dying. God was calling her but she could do nothing but lie here helpless until He called her for the last time. (350)

III. LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Late twentieth-century fiction bifurcates, consistent with the two approaches towards the dying evident in society: one that is life-denying and one that is life-affirming. Life-denying novels follow the trend of earlier twentieth-century novels, largely disregarding the nineteenth-century elements and stripping away sentimentality and human compassion in death scenes. Life-affirming ones contain the five elements, incorporating them with significant changes (most notably, a more realistic approach towards dying and an absence of sentimentalism).

The life-denying approach is illustrated in three contemporary novels, two by British authors Ann Widdecombe and Tony Sullivan, the third by the American author Laurie Blauer.⁸ Ann

⁸ Laurie Blauer, *Infinite Kindness* (Seattle WA: Black Heron Press, 2007).

Widdecombe's *The Clematis Tree*⁹ describes the tribulations of the Wellings family as they care for their handicapped son who was struck down by a drunken driver at age four. Now eleven, Jeremy is wheelchair-bound and unable to communicate except by grunting (often loudly in public to the embarrassment of his parents) and is slowly losing his ability to swallow food so that the family and his caregivers must use feeding tubes.

Jeremy's death scene manifests several of the nineteenth-century elements. In a way, his death occurs in a comfortable place; he is at home, sitting in his wheelchair "in the shade of the lilacs at the top of the slope on the other side of their back yard." He has his family members around him—his mother and father and his attentive Aunt Isobel. Even the next door neighbor trimming his hedges has affection for Jeremy. When Jeremy's wheelchair rolls down the slope, advancing towards the stream at its base, his father realizes what is happening and struggles to catch up with the chair. Jeremy eventually rolls into the water, where his father "went on staring, unwilling to disturb his son's peace" (268). The seconds lost at this moment guarantee that Jeremy will die by drowning.

Involving a futuristic view of life in Britain under legalized euthanasia, Tony Sullivan's *The Virtues of Volanasia*¹⁰ contains one death scene that poignantly describes the final moments of a ninety-nine-year-old woman whose granddaughter had applied on the woman's behalf for "volanasia" (voluntary euthanasia). The "gerry-house" in which the woman resides is far from a comforting place to die:

The place was thick with bodies[;] it was a swamp of aged flesh. The air was clamorous with voices, drenched with the nauseating stink of ordure and disinfectant, topped off with the sickly sweetness of an air-freshener. The light was gluey as though we were underground. (158-59)

The absence of any compassionate person is described just as

⁹ Ann Widdecombe, *The Clematis Tree* (London UK: Phoenix, 2000).

¹⁰ Tony Sullivan, *The Virtues of Volanasia* (Lewes UK: Book Guild, 2005).

depressingly:

At first we could not find an attendant; everyone we came across was an inmate, appallingly old. Some wandered about distractedly, others sat abandoned in wheelchairs, calling out weakly for assistance...and had I not been so appalled and sickened I might have noted that in the midst of this loathsome chaos they often created a little oasis of human warmth and kindness for themselves.... (159)

When asked whether any other family members cared for the woman, the granddaughter retorts: “They all cleared off long ago and left her on my hands. Bleeding nerve! How am I supposed to afford it?” (160). Her response perfectly summarizes the concern for material goods, a significant element for the granddaughter, not for the old woman, who remains silent throughout the episode. Shortly after the granddaughter’s statement, the old woman signs the suicide note requesting that she be put to death. The actual killing of the elderly woman, which is not depicted, is reduced to the demonstrative pronoun “this” that is embedded in the solicitousness of the narrator, who finds the scene sickening, not in any moral sense, only a physical one. “Are you all right?” the narrator’s companion in the volanasia activity asks. “Why don’t you leave? I’ll finish this off then meet you in the car park” (160).

Laurie Blauer’s *Infinite Kindness* (2007) follows Ann Russell, a nurse in the Crimean War, as she readjusts to life in London. Ann lost her fiancé in the war, and, at age thirty-two, she seems to be interested only in continuing the inspiring work of Florence Nightingale. Ann is convinced that she has chosen the correct career after she receives a message from God to “continue” her own work in a London hospital (141). However, unlike Nightingale’s efforts to alleviate pain, Ann interprets the divine command as an affirmation of the killing that she has already accomplished at the hospital. The killings for which Ann is responsible begin indirectly. For example, a patient commits suicide by overdosing on drugs that Ann left at her bedside. The moral objection of this suicide cannot be traced to Ann because, after all, the patient took the pills herself. Her move towards active killing occurs when she thinks that she could “help” (in quotations in the original) an abandoned newborn

named Carrot (106). Just before her command from God, Ann has progressed to the killing of two patients.

Consistent with her interpretation of nursing as a desire “to end the needless suffering” (142)—a definition of nursing that she formulates immediately after the divine command—Ann begins her killing career in earnest. She kills a blind old man who asks to be killed; she asserts that Florence Nightingale, the nurse exemplar, had killed two soldiers, severing their arteries (this claim is asserted twice, on 204 and 211); her benefactress’s death is called a “release” (213); she strangles and then shoots two Abyssinian soldiers (229-30). Paradoxically, she feels more alive after the killings (233).

In contrast, the life-affirming approach towards the dying is represented in two contemporary American novels. These authors’ novels not only hearken to the characteristics found in nineteenth-century works, but also, without that century’s sentimentality, provide the reader with much more linguistic play and dramatic power.

Janice Thompson’s *Duty to Die*¹¹ begins with a death scene typical of the fiction that illustrates a life-denying perspective. Ashley Cooper is being euthanized under the provisions of the newly-enacted “Duty to Die” federal law that allows the active killing of persons suffering from incurable illness, later defined as illnesses that pose a “financial burden to society” (17). What would be a comforting place to die, a sanitary hospital room, is a location that only increases her anxiety. The only person in the room attending her death is a nurse whose consoling words are, “It’s only a matter of time”—said while she was “yawning impatiently” (19). Ashley reviews her life as a successful corporate executive, but the italicized words “*Help me!*” and “*Daddy?*” suggest that what is occupying her mind even more is a need to connect with the nurturing love of her family. An agnostic, her only religious thought is the recollection of an aunt chastising her for lying. The repetition

¹¹ Janice Thompson, *Duty to Die* (Uhrichsville OH: Promise Press, 2001).

of “It was almost over now, almost over...” at the end of this scene indicates that she will soon die.

Of course, she will not succumb to the euthanasia drip. She is saved by a representative of an outlaw band of medical personnel who use “intervention” as a way to rescue persons about to be euthanized. Dramatic torque continues until the end of the novel with what appears to be a repeat death scene just as gloomily reported as the opening scene: “Drip, drip, drip.... Ashley gazed at the IV bag to her right” (237). What first reads as an act of euthanasia, however, is transformed into a life-affirming event:

The pain was overwhelming. But it was almost over now, almost over. The inevitable was upon her. She was lost in a fog, a haze, drifting....

Then words of a young doctor rang out, shattering the darkness: “It’s a girl.” (238).

The larger plot of Jane St. Clair’s *Walk Me to Midnight*¹² concerns Susan Rutledge’s fight against a murderous suicide-assisting physician named Alexis Hedeon. A significant subplot in the narrative concerns an AIDS patient who considers using Dr. Hedeon’s suicide method. St. Clair’s novel is the latest in contemporary fiction that illustrates a death scene in a life-affirming manner. Receiving hospice care, Kyle is able to spend his last moments in his own home, surrounded by his wife Lorie, his daughter Erica, his pastor, and Charlotte, a hospice nurse who is not only compassionate but also realistic about what duties must be performed to aid the dying man in his last moments. Unlike Dickens’s characters whose pain is specifically removed at the time of their deaths, St. Clair does not mask the unpleasantness of Kyle’s last moments:

About a half hour later he began to struggle, gasp, and gurgle as he breathed. “Cheynestokes breathing,” Charlotte explained. “Loud and rapid intakes followed by no breaths, sometimes for longer than thirty seconds.”

“Can you do something about it?” Susan demanded.

¹² Jane St. Clair, *Walk Me to Midnight* (Waterford VA: Capstone Fiction, 2007).

“Gurgling is caused by congestion,” she replied. “If I suction it out, it’ll make him even more uncomfortable. We’ll raise his head up a little, and play some more music to drown out the noise. Most families freak out when they hear Cheynestokes.”

Kyle’s mouth was now hanging open, and the irregularity and noise of his death rattle was disconcerting. It sounded like a very loud coffee percolator—a noise so loud it penetrated walls. (166)

While the purpose of the preceding dialogue about Cheynestokes may be to educate the reading public about the physiological events that naturally occur at the moment of death, unpleasant though they may be,¹³ the last moments of Kyle’s life balances these negatives with strong positive images that provide spiritual solace not only for Kyle and his family but also for the reader, who has probably been disturbed by the intensity of Cheynestokes’s description. Kyle speaks with his grandfather, who has been dead for eight years and who is apparently in his grandson’s presence. Erica asks her mother, “Why is that angel and Jesus standing by Daddy?” (166). Kyle’s last words are, “Lorie, it’s beautiful here” (167).

Earlier, the pastor and the hospice nurse recognize that the dying think they see their deceased relatives coming to greet them at the moment of death. The pastor acknowledges that dying persons experience “the tunnel and the light thing.... That’s pretty universal and cross-cultural.” The hospice nurse responds with: “‘Also the dead relative on the other side,’ Charlotte added. ‘There’s nearly always someone they know to greet them when they cross over’” (163).

The pastor’s use of the simple word “thing” and the nurse’s presumed emphasis of the word “always” could suggest that their comments may be interpreted as dismissive. This rhetorical ploy counters the charge that such a passage would remain maudlin if Kyle’s words were not considered from a secular perspective. The

¹³ The starkness of this scene contrasts against a contemporary novel that tries to mimic this condition. Describing her mother’s death in Anna Quindlen’s *One True Thing* (1994), the narrator conveys the difficulty of her mother’s breathing with a repetition of the onomatopoeic “eh” for each breath taken (185).

explicitly religious elements of Kyle's last moments, especially when uttered by the characters themselves and not the narrator, should strike the reader as being more compelling than a narrator's mere mention of a spiritual value to the death. In this way, contemporary life-affirming fiction improves the Dickensian formula.

The examples cited above can support three claims: that nineteenth-century fiction set the standard for the depiction of death scenes; that twentieth-century authors altered that standard by altering or eliminating certain elements; and that late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century authors may be revisiting the nineteenth-century standard, either to restore their work to the older standard or to develop aspects of death scenes that have lain dormant for a century.

Two qualifications need to be made. First, the corpus of works consulted in this study is relatively small; more research is needed to determine not only whether other twentieth-century works abandoned the nineteenth-century elements, but also whether twenty-first-century authors are re-examining the five elements.¹⁴ Second, perhaps some elements have been missed in the exploration of the samples. If literature can be compared to an archaeological dig, then some items within the literary works or artifacts surrounding those works may have been completely overlooked. More research needs to be conducted in this area as well.

Despite these objections, some conjectures can be made about what appears to be a changing, if not growing, literary trend. Perhaps twentieth-century authors abandoned the nineteenth-century standard in the interest of pursuing artistic freedom—abandoning not so much the five elements of the death scenes, but what they may have considered as a too facile plot structure in favor of what were new fictional styles at the turn of the twentieth

¹⁴ Among the other works consulted for this paper are the following: William Jeremiah Coughlin, *Her Honor* (New York NY: New American Library, 1987); Jodi Picoult, *Mercy* (New York NY: Pocket Books, 2001); Steven Snodgrass, *Lethal Dose* (Orlando FL: ICAM, 1996); Terry Trueman, *Stuck in Neutral* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 2000); Stephen White, *Kill Me* (Thorndike ME: Center Point, 2005).

century. The sentimentality found in nineteenth-century novels where the problems are resolved in the *dénouement* would not fit well in a twentieth-century novel where alienation and an unsatisfactory (often unhappy) ending are the norm. Alternatively, if twentieth-century authors abandoned the nineteenth-century standard because they had a vested interest in dehumanizing the dying and opening the culture to the idea of eliminating not so much the suffering, but the persons experiencing suffering themselves, then future research must be conducted using biographical and Marxist criticism to determine the forces at work in the authors' lives.

Similarly, twenty-first-century authors may be reacting against the twentieth-century trend by restoring literature to its foundation of respect for the dying—a balance that was destroyed when the twentieth century disregarded those elements that should feature in every dying person's experience. This restoration may be attributed either to contemporary authors' own life-affirming values, to their sense of being advocates on a philosophical level of the rights of the dying to be treated as human beings, or to a desire to produce meaningful works of literary merit—none of which is mutually exclusive.

Finally, only the addition of more works over perhaps one more decade can determine whether a literary trend is occurring. Death is not a pleasant topic for literary discussion, and authors' and critics' discussion of it could easily veer towards the morbid. However, if the trend to produce more meaningful fictional works faithful to the literary heritage of the nineteenth century continues over the next decade, death and dying may become a fascinating and a life-affirming topic for literary studies.