

Extreme Subjectivity

Theoretical Considerations for the First-Person Narrativisation of Death

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Abstract: The majority of narratives assign death scenes a crucial role in the development of the plot and characters; yet despite its prominence, dying per se frequently remains untold, with works utilising first-person narrators or focalisers proving especially problematic. From a commonsensical point of view, the authors' reluctance at representing the moment of death is justifiable since they do not possess any comparable experience. But the fact that all first-person descriptions of death are inauthentic does not mean that they cannot be subject to narrative representation. As it will be demonstrated through the discussion of some recent work in the field of 'unnatural narratology' and the cognitive sciences, it may be possible to create a valid and valuable narrative of death even from a first-person perspective.

Few topics exert such an enduring fascination on the human imagination as death does. With the possible exception of children's literature, most narratives feature death and mortality one way or another and the majority assign death scenes a crucial role in the development of plot and characters. Yet, despite its prominence, dying *per se* frequently remains untold, with works utilising first-person narrators or focalisers proving especially problematic: authors usually refrain from narrating the moment of death, leaving it to the implicit understanding of the reader that it somehow happened, even though the events leading up to it are often given a cautiously detailed description. From a commonsensical point of view, their reluctance at representing the moment of death is justifiable: since they do not possess any comparable experience, their attempts to describe the process of dying can easily result in a clumsy, grotesque, or outright comical piece of writing, which may disrupt

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the stylistic aims and unity of the text. But the fact that all first-person descriptions of death are (in the strict sense of the word) inauthentic does not mean that they cannot be subject to narrative representation. Recent work in the field of ‘unnatural narratology’ and the cognitive sciences might legitimise such attempts of narrativisation, but before getting ahead of ourselves, let us examine how and why the moment of death, despite near-ideal narratological circumstances, is relegated to the margins by William Faulkner (who employs a dead narrator in *As I Lay Dying*) and Virginia Woolf (whose stream-of-consciousness technique would have lent itself to such an enterprise).

As I Lay Dying is essentially the *marche funèbre* of Addie Bundren, who dies early in the novel, so a touch of the mortal is always palpable throughout. The use of multiple narrators would not be particularly interesting in itself, but one of the perspectives the text allows a glimpse into seems exciting. All chapter titles designate the identity of the narrator recounting the events in the given chapter, so when around the middle of the book the reader encounters a section headed by the name ADDIE, indicating that it is her turn to narrate, it furtively suggests an account of what dying is like from the point of view of the experiencer herself. But in spite of, or rather because of, our eager anticipation, this promise, already implicit in the title *As I Lay Dying*, remains unfulfilled: even though the reader willingly accepts the unconventional and unnatural presence of a dead narrator in exchange for a possibly enlightening shred of knowledge, this section thereafter ruthlessly cheats them as it neither describes nor refers to Addie’s moment of death in any way. The reader is robbed of both the involvement and authentic representation resulting from the first-person narration and the detachment arising from Addie’s hindsight and retrospective evaluation.

On the one hand, this could be explained away by the main subject matter of Addie’s musings, i.e. her contempt for language and her scepticism as to the usefulness of words. Addie repeatedly calls attention to the incapability of language to represent, as when she meditates on love: she draws a sharp contrast between the word love, which she deems “just a shape to fill a lack,” and the feeling love, when one “wouldn’t need a word for that any more than for pride or fear” (Faulkner 156). If words are not enough to capture and convey one’s sensations and feelings (or they even distort them), how could language be a suitable medium for representing such an idiosyncratic event as one’s own death? Death, similarly to love, is something that should be *experienced*; regarding one’s own death, it is pointless to engage

in discussions on its nature as that would cast doubt on the truthfulness of the experience in question as well.

On the other hand, cognitive and existential constraints might be another reason behind the absence of any reference to Addie's experience as, according to Ann Banfield, "to speak of something always implies reflective consciousness of it" (198). Death is arguably excluded from the list of events that can be subjected to self-reflexive examination; thus, instead of the apparently most qualified character in the novel, it is Dr. Peabody who provides a summary of what death is: "when I was young I believed death to be a phenomenon of the body; now I know it to be merely a function of the mind ... it is no more than a single tenant or family moving out of a tenement or a town" (Faulkner 37). While we should not necessarily regard a character's subjective speculations as instances of truth, accepting Peabody's translocational theory would lend further support for Addie's negligent attitude towards her death, which in this respect is degraded to a minor, practically marginal event not even worthy of mentioning.

Although such post-mortem monologues would be at odds with her refined prose style, Woolf's commendable use of the stream-of-consciousness technique carries in it the potential for narrativising the last moments of a character's life. She rejects direct monologues on the grounds that it "traps the reader within a single subjectivity," pushing her towards external yet intimate representations which "allow her to give a literal voice to many characters, particularly in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Years*" (Snaith 147). This ambiguous, blended technique has led Woolf's critics to liken some of her characters, most notably Mrs Dalloway and Lily Briscoe, to free indirect discourse: "the desire to know the other and the limits intrinsic to an external other's knowability are precariously held within the tensions of the formal properties of free indirect discourse itself" (Edmondson 26). The potential, however, does not oblige Woolf to narrate the death of a character, and often she indeed lets the opportunity slip by.

By virtue of subtle hints, symbols, and allusions, death is always lurking in the background in each of her works and this especially holds true of *To the Lighthouse* where Mrs Ramsay's death is arguably the gravitational point of the plot. From a textual point of view, the importance of Mrs Ramsay's non-existence far outweighs that of her existence. Her death, in the reasoning of Roberta Rubenstein, is repeatedly foreshadowed even in the first section when life is apparently bubbling with all force, the disfigurement of a fruit installation being one such ill omen that "anticipates

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the larger emptiness that will occur when Mrs Ramsay is ‘not there’” (Rubenstein 42). In the first part of *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay is the main focaliser; the reader spends a considerable amount of time getting acquainted with her thoughts, desires, and fears, maybe even bonding with her eventually and feeling sympathy for her private plights, and the implied author certainly seems particularly attached to this creation of hers, whom she carefully nurtures through dozens of pages. It comes as a shock, therefore, that we abruptly learn of Mrs Ramsay’s death in a radically marginalised manner: “Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty” (339).

This nonchalant, hurried remark calls attention to the inconsequentiality of Mrs Ramsay’s decease, which is further exacerbated by shrewdly-chosen typographical and syntactical cues (i.e. the square brackets and the perfect gerund): the reader, to complete the incompleteness implied by a gerund verb form, unconsciously sweeps over the “Mrs Ramsay having died” subclause to reach the syntactically more important, but semantically less loaded matrix clause (Minogue 291). An internal description of her experience would have marked Mrs Ramsay’s death as carrying some meaning and value, which would contravene the alarming suggestion of the text—the insignificance and irrelevance of human death in the grand scheme of things, reinforced by the cold indifference of nature in the “Time Passes” section.

The above examples demonstrate that even when the plot is weaved around someone’s death, the critical moment is rarely, if ever, granted the narrative focus its importance would presuppose. This marginalisation might be a consequence of narratological prioritisation or necessity, as can be argued to be the case with Faulkner and Woolf. Alternatively, there is a school of thought that approves this unwillingness on the grounds that there is absolutely nothing to describe. In his essay Paul Edwards calls attention to the absurdity pervading any endeavours to offer a phenomenology of death: he builds on the idea that death is pure nothingness which, in their inability to grasp what this proposition means, people are apt to mistake for a (negative) state of mind and thus for something that, however indirectly, could be investigated, when in fact it is logically impossible to do so. He ridicules the purported sensibility of questions like “what kind of an experience does a person have who no longer has any experiences?” and cuts the matter short by wittily remarking that even “an observer with the most sensitive and highly developed sense of hearing could not discover the language in which somebody is silent” (Edwards 56–58).

This might explain Addie's silence over her own death as there might not have been anything to relate. Edwards furthermore exposes the falseness and inevitable failure of promises to the contrary: in his view, the revelatory verdict on death as "man's untransferable possibility of being no longer in the world," firstly, does not answer the original question of what death is like from the inside, and secondly, gives the false impression of achieving a conclusion, just like the statement that "nobody can eat or digest my food for me" which, although undoubtedly true, "does not explain what eating [or] digesting . . . consist in" (Edwards 64).

Edwards' argumentation was mainly concerned with philosophical investigations, but the fictional realm, despite some overlaps with philosophical discourse, is a different domain where an internal characterisation of death may not be a pointless exercise. The obstinate refusal of narrativisation might have its roots in culturally-fuelled denial and consequently the reluctance to talk openly: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her influential *On Death and Dying* identifies death as one of the dominant taboos in modern Western society (6), and while there is some degree of truth in her claims, the noticeable prevalence of death scenes in modern fiction (Detweiler 273) implicates that literature is becoming somewhat exempt from this taboo-constructing tendency. The cathartic death scenes and the subsequent resonantly pro-life endings that are characteristic conclusions of Woolf's novels give way to another speculation along these lines. Both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway* end with an epiphany tinted with *Schadenfreude*: Clarissa and Lily realise their survival in contrast to another's death, which is symbolised by Clarissa's return to her party and Lily's completion of her painting. By extension, writing or reading about the death of a character is a reaffirmation of one's own (temporary) triumph over death and at the same time allows one to exorcise their fear of it. Literature can thus be regarded as a means of facing and defeating death and it offers a platform for the kind of collective experience, the loss of which is lamented by Kübler-Ross (5ff.). Although concerning herself with a different, linguistic-oriented angle, Monika Fludernik also recognises the special status of literature and its expressive capabilities. Positing "the verbal nature of utterance and the fundamentally nonverbal nature of consciousness and perception" as polar opposites or the two extremes of a spectrum, she points to narrative fiction as the medium that is best equipped to "resolv[e] the incompatibilities between experience, consciousness and linguistic representation" (*The Fictions of Language* 379).

Notwithstanding literature's suitability and the increasing inclination to talk about death, authors still do not take that crucial last step and the lack of internal

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representation is at least partially a response to the hopeless futility and perceived impossibility of narrating death. The authorial caution regarding the representation of such a thorny topic is not unwarranted as there are several dilemmas to be overcome, with each option containing distinct drawbacks enough for discouragement. First, there is the perennial problem of trying to convey the myriad contents of a moment or a brief period of time via language, a sequentially operating tool that, due to its temporal nature, distorts and dilutes the intensity and unity of the event. In addition, there is the question of narrative tense. Narratives conventionally refer to past events, which practice implies a “later” version of the narrator who must have survived to tell the tale, although experimental fiction is sometimes written in present tense, recording the events of the narrative quasi-simultaneously with their occurrence. Concerning the moment of death, the past-tense rendition (of which Addie in *As I Lay Dying* would have been an example) is problematic exactly because surviving death is an impossibility, thus giving an account of it must be impossible too, while present-tense narration (which Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness technique closely approximates) poses virtually the same issue for the narrative that should be interrupted once the narrator dies. To complicate matters further, it is equally difficult to find the suitable narrative point of view: common logic would dictate a first-person narrator who possesses the hands-on experience of dying, but this choice suffers from the same problem as that outlined above. The death of the narrator should coincide with the end of the narrative, whereas a third-person narrator, despite the guarantee of survival and therefore the possibility of retrospective narration, lacks the required authenticity and involvement naturally available to the first-person role. In other words, the chief obstacle in representing death stems from its extreme subjectivity. This “supremely unique and nonpareil event of existence” (Detweiler 277) is characterised by two features: it is a brief, once-in-a-lifetime experience (the German word *Einmaligkeit* is used to refer to this “non-contiguity”) and it offers the “experiencer” the ultimate knowledge while at the same time forestalls its future exploitation (Detweiler 288). The moment of death is specified as the “ultimate *Grenzsituation*, touching the boundaries of being and nonbeing” (Detweiler 269), which highlights the complications an author is bound to face in the pursuit of literary representation.

In order to describe this elusive event or moment as faithfully as possible, it is suggested that the author adopt a “double perspective that allows him to combine the intimacy of direct experience with the disinterest of an observer” (Detweiler 283–284).

This “double perspective” strikes one as being similar to Henrik Skov Nielsen’s concept of the “impersonal voice,” a distinct narrative voice not to be confused with either first-person or third-person perspectives. Nielsen, together with other theorists such as Stefan Iversen and Brian Richardson, studies what they call “unnatural narratology”: a field encompassing many areas of interest, from which the relevant for our purposes is how narrators obtain certain pieces of information that textual circumstances seemingly prevent them from obtaining. Although they have not explicitly pinpointed the narrativisation of death as a contentious issue, the emphasis on the perceived incongruity between a character’s level of knowledge and their means of acquiring it, and the acknowledgment that “some experiences may go beyond the scope of narrative comprehension, while some narratives may present experiences that resist being recognised as parts of what we would typically refer to as a human mind” (Iversen 93) more than justifies the discussion of death along these lines. Banfield’s already mentioned stipulation of the impossibility of directly speaking about non-reflective mental states, together with her caveat that narrative fiction is one of the very few domains where the various states of consciousness can be represented, is another case in point for the treatment of the death event from an unnatural narratological perspective. She asserts that language (form) and consciousness (content) should be kept separate: since the subjective consciousness of a character cannot be mediated in its entirety, all that a narrative can do is have their cognitive states “hypothetically reconstructed and represented in a language sensitive to its various modes.” These linguistic units that are about but are not anchored in the represented consciousness, Banfield terms “speakerless sentences” (Banfield 211).

Expanding on this idea, Nielsen builds on Fludernik’s warning against mistakenly presupposing the existence of a narrator (Fludernik, “New Wine in Old Bottles?” 621–622). From the premise that “in literary fiction, as opposed to oral narrative, one cannot be certain that it is the person referred to as ‘I’ who speaks or narrates,” Nielsen concludes that “we need to posit an impersonal voice of the narrative” for all those instances when “something is narrated that the ‘narrating-I’ cannot possibly know” (Nielsen 133). Following this argument, such a detached, independent voice that nevertheless can occupy the inner consciousness of a character retains the involvement necessary for authentic representation and at the same time provides the narrative with the opportunity of continuing after the character’s death. Most importantly, the impersonal voice allows the narrative to “say what

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a narrating-I cannot say, produce details that no person could remember [or] speak when the character remains forever silent” (Nielsen 139–140). The deictic expressions invoked in such a first-person narration give the account of death the illusion of subjectivity, but ultimately the description is revealed to be a linguistic construct. The fact that a first-person narrator is only “one manifestation of the impersonal voice of the narrative” (Nielsen 148) liberates the voice from the constraints usually associated with such an internal perspective, which includes the impractical post-mortem disclosure of the experience, and provides support for the theoretical possibility of the narrativisation of death.

The objections regarding the irreversibility of time can thus be circumvented, but the problem of authentic representation remains: since “neither [the author] nor the reader has undergone the moment of death that should be the common experience between them,” and, therefore, both are lacking a “foundational objective correlative” (Detweiler 272), it becomes impossible to obtain the knowledge required for a strictly valid narrative description, notwithstanding the information-gaining freedom permitted by the concept of the impersonal voice. This is where the “theory of mind” comes into the picture, according to which individuals attribute their own mind functions and processes to their fellow human beings, which is seen as a prerequisite for intersubjective understanding (Nielsen 136). Its extreme version can be regarded as a case of solipsism, but in a moderate dose this belief promotes empathy, i.e. the “power of entering into another’s personality and imaginatively experiencing their experiences” (Palmer 138). Alan Palmer extends this philosophical notion to fiction and argues that the “attribution to the character by the narrator of motives, dispositions and states of mind is at the centre of the process of constructing fictional minds and . . . is an essential part of the reading process” (137–138). Theory of mind and, more particularly, such an interpretation of empathy might render it possible to achieve a sense of what dying is like. Curiously and rather fittingly, it has been pointed out that Woolf had the capacity to “relive” someone else’s death herself, which propensity she lent to some of her characters, notably Clarissa Dalloway, who is capable of imagining Septimus’s death (Brombert 433). Additionally, Woolf’s indirect style, as we have observed, is well-suited for giving an external and at the same time internal representation of mental states, providing the perfect grounds for narrativising death. Clarissa’s empathetic capability finds its reflection in the popular belief that people very close to each other (which, as Woolf made sure of it by peppering the text with subtle hints at their connection, certainly

is the case here with Clarissa and Septimus) can establish such a strong emotional bond that when one of them dies, the other in some respect “feels” or “participates” in their companion’s death. On the surface, this is indeed the case: because of both Clarissa’s receptivity and the flexibility of the narrative style, Clarissa is said to arrive at a “remarkably accurate assessment of what Septimus must have thought and felt before he flung himself out the window onto Mrs Filmer’s area railings” (Edmondson 26). However, this sort of transubstantiation is a misconception inasmuch as the surviving party, for obvious existential reasons, cannot undergo the death experience themselves and most often they confuse their grief and sorrow with what dying *might* be like. Because of the inaccessibility characterising all deaths, Clarissa’s re-enactment of Septimus’ suicide is simply a vivid example of the power of the imagination: no matter how convincing it may sound, it has no empirical foundation and thus is essentially a piece of fiction.

The necessarily imaginary nature of all such representations does not mean that the topic should be dismissed as undeserving of attention, however. Since neither of them shares the ontological status of life/reality, fiction serves as the perfect environment for experimenting with descriptions of death, and Palmer (as well as Detweiler 270) alludes to the crucial role imagination plays in empathy and theory of mind, both of which can be useful approaches when tackling complications. Due to death’s distinct quality of being unknown and unknowable, the author and the reader need to collaborate on an imaginative level if they wish to create an analogous experience: the author presents their own idea of the dying moments of a character that the reader is bound to at least accept, even if they do not integrate it into their own concept or modify their ideas thereof. This obligation of assent resembles a psychological approach that Daniel Dennett terms “heterophenomenology,” a “method of phenomenological description that can (in principle) do justice to the most private and ineffable subjective experiences” (72), which category death arguably falls under. Its basic tenet is that when an individual describes a state of mind that “no critic can find any positive grounds for rejecting, we should accept them—tentatively, pending further discoveries—as accurate accounts of what it is like to be the creature in question” (Dennett 443–444), the dying consciousness included. The heterophenomenological approach validates and authenticates any narrativisation of death on the basis that there is no objectively verified evidence against a certain narrativisation (nor is it likely that there will ever be).

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Dennett, however, is aware that “what it is like to them” does not necessarily equal “what is going on in them” (94), suggesting that the majority of narrators must be, following his line of argument, unreliable. Narrators in the process of dying then are unquestionably unreliable, but unnatural narratologists claim that even if we possessed the means for a faithful depiction of death, the experiencer could not give a straightforward account of it because traumatic events, where the “mediating consciousness is unable to capture or grasp the recounted event” (Iversen 102), necessitate the use of “unnatural techniques” (Alber et al. 130). Iversen further states that these narrativisations have the purpose of simply telling the experience, disregarding whether the narrative offers satisfactory or true-to-life explanations (102), which reinforces the imaginary aspect inherent to depictions of death. Nielsen’s hypothesis of the impersonal voice can also contribute to the idea of the imagination-driven rendition of the death experience: he argues that the impersonal voice is responsible for the fact that “sentences that would clearly mark the narrator as unreliable or even insane in a nonfictional narrative come to the reader as authoritative [in fiction],” with the consequence that first-person accounts “produce a fictional world that does not exist independent of these sentences” (Nielsen 145), dispelling the urge towards realistic narrativisation and expectations.

Of course there have been several attempts at fictionalising death from the inside, but for want of any real-life experience, these are as often as not schematic representations following established conventions, such as using stock metaphors (entering a bright tunnel and the collapse of one’s sense of spatiotemporality being two favourites) or drawing the inspiration for the portrayal of the death scene from other states of altered (intoxicated, feverish, religious-ecstatic) consciousness, disregarding the fact that death is not a state in the conventional sense. Nevertheless, hopefully it has been successfully demonstrated through the discussion of the impersonal voice, theory of mind, and the liberating environment fiction allows for that it is possible to create a valid and valuable narrative of death even from a first-person perspective. Since the acquisition and the forfeiture of the knowledge that would allow for a truthful description coincide in the moment of death, its representation is always speculative, therefore anti-mimesis and narratorial unreliability are not hindering factors. Every passage that gives an interpretation of death, in short, is an independent work of art and they have intrinsic value as such.

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