

Death within the Text

Death within the Text:

*Social, Philosophical
and Aesthetic Approaches
to Literature*

Edited by

Adriana Teodorescu

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



Death within the Text:
Social, Philosophical and Aesthetic Approaches to Literature

Edited by Adriana Teodorescu

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by Adriana Teodorescu and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2754-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2754-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Preliminary Interdisciplinary Story of Death and Literature 1
Adriana Teodorescu

I. Knowing Death: Epistemological and Philosophical Aspects

“The Poems and the Dances of the Shades”: Destabilizing Psychological
Theories of Grief in *The Year of Magical Thinking* 10
Rachel Warner

Displacement of Memory: A Negative Dialectics from Shoah
to Alphaville 28
Aura Poenar

The Duck, the Cat and the Rabbit: Looking at Death in Picture Books
for Young Children 57
Maggie Jackson

Death without Death: Kierkegaard and Cioran about Agony 72
Ștefan Bolea

Facing Death. A Sartrean Perspective on the Contemporary Tendency
to Over-Humanize Death 84
Adriana Teodorescu

II. Socializing Death: Anthropological and Cultural Dimensions

‘To Keep the Heart Beating... when Really It Wants to Break’:
Uses of Keening in Irish Literature 112
E. Moore Quinn

Poetic Solutions for Environmental Pollution Caused by Human
Bodies Disposal 142
Alin Rus

Death, the Anthropologist, and Knowledge in Thomas Mann's <i>The Magic Mountain</i> <i>Laura Tradii</i>	154
The Curious Case of Sherlock Holmes' Death..... <i>Marise Chartrand</i>	173
The Protagonist Does Not Die Anymore: Examining Narratives of Closure in Popular Culture of Saudi Arabia..... <i>Maha Zeini al-Saati</i>	184
III. Shaping Death: Aesthetic Dimensions	
<hr/>	
Fellini's Death <i>Kevin Kopelson</i>	206
The Dance of Death from Salome to Mata Hari..... <i>Florina Codreanu</i>	224
Pierre Jean Jouve, a Grieving Poet <i>Tess Grousseau</i>	244
Death and Creation in <i>Three Little Pigs</i> <i>VU Cong Minh</i>	259
Prolegomena to an Aesthetics of Decay <i>Marie-Pierre Krück</i>	269
Contributors.....	282
Index.....	288

A PRELIMINARY INTERDISCIPLINARY STORY OF DEATH AND LITERATURE

ADRIANA TEODORESCU

There are three elements that build the logic of this volume, *Death within the Text: Social, Philosophical and Aesthetic Approaches to Literature*, namely: literature, interdisciplinarity, and death. We shall discuss the basic understandings of each of these and the manner in which they relate to each other.

Regarding literature, the focus of this book is two-fold. Firstly, there is an interest in literature as a particular discipline of knowledge, in how it succeeds in enabling social and cultural meanings through its mechanisms of representation, with a special attention upon disentangling its capacity to create reality (strategic and even constitutive according to numerous specialists in criticism and literary theory) from a narrow, *tainted* mimesis—which limits literature to the humble function of mirroring reality. Secondly, there is also a focus on literature’s special power to establish various connections with disciplines as diverse as film studies, philosophy, anthropology, visual arts or cultural studies. This power has its roots in the theoretical foundation of literature, thus endowing it with the ability to be a permanent trigger for critical thinking and de-ideologization (Culler 1997, 2007) and its permeability into other discourses—as literature is not so much about content, it is about manner and, as a consequence, about a dialectical relationship between difference and universality (Poenar 2017). Conversely, literature has the ability to imbue, non-structurally, diffusely, other domains of knowledge and therefore challenge the safety of any exclusive, single methodology or perspective. To give only a few examples, literary methodologies are reinvestigated and considered useful from the point of view of social sciences by Andrew Irving (2017), who observes that literature’s concern with internal experiences should find some social translations or some ways to reverberate into social sciences’ strategies of the in-depth inquiry into the world; or from a gerontological perspective, via the narrative approach of William Randall (2004), who

draws consistent parallels between lived text (stories of life) and literary texts.

Thus, another term of our book, namely the *interdisciplinary*, comes to light. It refers to consciously accepting the alternate dimension of literature and assuming a relational perspective of it, allowing—enthusiastically!—the purity of methodologies to become diluted, to contaminate and be contaminated, to traverse disciplines, to engage in a process of interpreting social and cultural phenomena through/with literary filters/instruments, without the imperative of being confined to a sole literary work or corpus.

In this conceptual framing of literature assumed by the present book, we still require another element in order to furnish the complete picture. We need—and a smile already blooms—death. One of the most powerful clichés of current research from humanities and social sciences that engages, one way or another, with the theme of death and dying, is that death is taboo. It is a stereotype that seems to resonate perfectly with the philosophical idea that death totally resists representation or with the positive aura of death that surrounds current epistemological trends in humanities and social sciences, partially as a consequence of the need to heal the cultural wound inflicted by the modern epoch of the so-called death denial. Well, death is no longer a taboo (if it ever was), not if you are reading this volume that, despite its effort to debunk contemporary stereotypical constructions of death and despite its hope of bringing original contributions to both the field of death studies and literary/cultural studies, revealing the many unforeseeable ways in which death functions as a complex trigger of meaning-making, is aware of the fact that death has become a major concern for many scholars all over the world. Actually, a considerable number of researches on death celebrate what was called the revival of death and understand death in an idealised, exclusively positive manner, which also necessitates a critical approach.

In a previous volume published with Cambridge Scholars Publishing, *Death Representations in Literature. Forms and Theories* (2015), one of the aims was to prove that literature can be relevant for the study of death, not only in the sense that it can reflect society (attitudes, meanings, perceptions etc.)—which differs from what is usually intended by a mechanical reproduction of reality—but especially in relation to its power to participate, through its representations, in the ever-continuing construction of death and society. With a more ambitious aim, this book is a manifest for the relevance of literature, both as a platform—as a world where death (actually, too much death) should be explored by scholars from various disciplines exactly because death cannot be discovered inside literature like an object could be found inside a box (one cannot just extract death from literature and call these

extractions representations)—and an instrument able to deconstruct socio-semantic configurations of the world we live in exactly by allowing death to enter the realm of representation and to structure its images around certain meanings. The book is also a manifest for the recognition of death as an inexhaustible source of meanings which should be understood as preemptorily plural, on multiple levels (personal, social, cultural etc.), discontinuous, problematic, competitive and often conflictual. They should not, by any means, be related to ideological positive or negative interpretations of death according to which death gives *meaning* (stable, luminous significations) to life, so that the effect of acknowledging this meaning would consist in communicating as much as possible, incontinently about death. This unsettling complexity is totally assumed by the present volume.

The volume is based on a three-day seminar that took place at Harvard University, in 2016, as part of the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association. Various scholars participated in creating this book, although not who contributed to the seminar also became contributors to this volume, which, while not denying the role of the academic meeting in the coagulation and circulation of ideas within an enthusiast group of researchers, has its own, independent stakes and goals. 15 chapters authored by scholars from USA (4), Romania (4), UK (2), France (2), Canada (2) and Saudi Arabia (1) form the substance of the book, which is organised into 3 sections designed to do justice, both to the general possibility of literature in promoting and creating knowledge, and to its relevance for a social and cultural history of death and dying. It is structured, not in accordance with some thematic cores that would have emphasised rather arbitrary, non-specific features of death representations in literature (the simple result of placing similar chapters together), but rather around dimensions and functions of literature in connection with death.

The first section is built upon an emphasis of the dimension of thanatic knowledge (emanating from death) and correlates with the ontological and cognitive functions of literature: what can we know about death and how does literature and a literary approach to the world and existence respond to our human need for knowledge? Alternately, how do they (re)create this need when all the (social) approaches avoid death, or contrarily, when they transform death into an unavoidable, all too palatable subject, moving the accent from the object of knowing (that which is to be known about death, and its usefulness) to a modal manifestation of the same verb (what are the ways through which we can have access to death, how can we make them useful)? Thus, this first dimension deals with epistemological and philosophical aspects.

In the first chapter of the section, “*The Poems and the Dances of the Shades*”: *Destabilizing Psychological Theories of Grief in The Year of Magical Thinking*, Rachel Warner analyses Joan Didion’s autobiographical account of grief from the perspective of grief and bereavement theories, revealing how literature, through an aesthetics of non-linearity, of fragments that gives authentic shapes to personal experience, can interrogate and deconstruct standard social and psychological theories of death and dying. In the second chapter, entitled *Displacement of Memory. A Negative Dialectics from Shoah to Alphaville*, Aura Poenar is interested in establishing the limits and (im)possibilities of bearing witness (an intricate form of knowledge, empathy and representation) in what concerns the death of the Other in the (grim) light of the post-World War II cultural and philosophical sensitivity. An important direction of the article consists of exploring the role played by art and literature in compensating (through and beyond what Theodor Adorno calls *negative dialectics*) for the constitutive vulnerability of memory, its historically wounded mechanism of making sense of death and mortality. With a focus on three modern books that avoid metaphorizing death, Maggie Jackson investigates the ways in which children’s literature over the course of time portrays death and describes dying in order to familiarize them with the idea of human finitude and in order to produce a pedagogical effect—death is something they can learn about, while raising ethical and epistemological issues: what is to be learned from death, what are the (social and personal) costs and benefits? Ștefan Bolea identifies the similarities between the prominent thanatic concepts of two existential philosophers, Emil Cioran, with his *agony* and Søren Kierkegaard, with the *sickness unto death*, observing that for both the roots of the knowledge of death are immanent to life and have aesthetic nuances. *Facing Death. A Sartrean Perspective on the Contemporary Tendency to Over-Humanize Death* takes a critical stand against the exaggerated humanization of death—which becomes programmatically, ideologically positive—identifying various occurrences of an over-humanized death, from literature and pop-culture to death studies, by using Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical perspective of death and dying as a theoretical framework.

The second section refers to the power of literary representations of death to tell stories—social stories—about negotiating meanings and offering social configurations when living (both as a society and as its constituent elements, namely as individuals) at the horizon of an impending mortality and thus eliciting questions and providing answers on the anthropological and cultural layers of society. What characterises death in this section is that it becomes socialised, in a double sense: first, as any element that conforms to the norms of a society, it is semantically tamed,

and second, when a literary perspective is applied to this *socialisation* or when the first socialisation of death occurs prior to entering the realm of literature, it contains an effort to make sense of a socialised death. At that point, the stake is no longer so much about telling social stories, but about questioning and, if necessary, suppressing them.

E. Moore Quinn examines Irish *keens*—death laments specific to oral literary tradition—during the Great Irish Famine of the nineteenth century both in terms of artistic particularities and social functions in the context of a country going through significant social transformations, drawing attention on the inextricable connections between the two. Alin Rus proposes a comparative study in which he contrasts two visions regarding the disposal of human bodies, a literary one (a folkloric creation) and a social one (related to the modern funeral industry), arguing that placed in a pragmatic context and from an ecological perspective, the first clearly expresses its superiority and proves to have had a socially anticipative effect. The chapter of Laura Tradii revolves around the multiple meanings of death in the *Magic Mountain* novel and reveals how the main character of Thomas Mann's writing, Hans Castorp, acts as an anthropologist, deconstructing Western cultural dichotomies, such as body-mind, nature-civilisation, and profane-sacred through reflexive observations and experiences of death. While Castorp's socio-anthropological perspective is helpful in de-ontologizing the nature of death, it is effectively doubled (in a dialectical manner) by Castorp's creative perspective, according to which death cannot be reducible to its conceptual explanations and deconstructive functions, because it transcends all cultural and social dichotomies. In *The Curious Case of Sherlock Holmes' Death*, Marise Chartrand analyses the relationship between the significant and sometimes astonishing impact that literature can have on reality, by concentrating on the death of the fictional character Sherlock Holmes, a death that produced a lot of sorrow to its readers and increased its power to transgress pure literature and enter the collective popular imagery not limited to Arthur Conan Doyle's historical time. Maha Zeini al-Saati discusses important transformations suffered by one of the most prominent death narratives circulating in Saudi Arabia's popular culture (the last moments, the sense of closure and the tense relationship between the afterlife and real-world life), assessing the role played by social media in restructuring the attitudes towards death and religious manifestations of grief, and also in reshaping the aesthetic value of Islamic popular literature concerning death and dying.

The third section of this volume is dedicated to the aesthetic dimension of death. It refers to the fact that when incorporated into artistic expression—literary, cinematographic, or pertaining to visual arts—death

can break with its primary meanings—decay, loss of form, crisis of meaning and also with its ‘pragmatic’ uses—death as a purely narrative device, as a trigger of action—and produce significant changes in the ways we build our worlds, whether interior or social. Thus, death itself is also shaped and integrated, through aesthetic devices, into new perspectives of human existence and mortality, while, at the same time, disclosing the creative power of art in terms of coping, personally and socially, with finitude. Even in the articles that focus primarily on non-literary representations, the literary perspective (hermeneutical analysis, criticism) prevails.

In his chapter dealing with death representations in Federico Fellini’s movies, Kevin Kopelson strives to clarify whether cinematic death is ever discursively constructed and to what extent it falls into the realm of the unrepresentable. He applies an interdisciplinary critical apparatus which interweaves literary theory, psychoanalysis and philosophy and suggests that being perpetually haunted by Fellini’s characters is a symptom (an ironic one if we think of Fellini’s rejection of an afterlife) of the aesthetic effect of Fellini’s efforts to conjure death. Florina Codreanu draws a rich comparison between artistic/visual and literary representations of women who embody the power of death (with its collateral desire and attraction), the so-called ‘femme fatale’, shaped by fictional and real-life figures such as Mata Hari. An important accent of her study falls on the socio-cultural mechanisms that trigger the growing obsession with feminine eroticism as a destructive weapon. The chapter authored by Tess Grousson explores the various representations of grief in the poetry of French writer Pierre Jean Jouve not only from a literary point of view, but also in relation to mainstream theories of grief, revealing that one of Jouve’s greatest lessons is that freeing oneself from grief is neither possible, nor desirable. Grief is a dynamic, never-ending event of connecting a living being to one who is dead. Vu Cong Minh investigates whether fairy tales adapted into cartoons change their moral, pedagogical and cultural content as it relates to death. He focuses on Walt Disney’s cartoon, *Three Little Pigs* and its parody directed by Tex Avery, analysing also their aesthetic differences and similarities. The final chapter of this volume, *Prolegomena to an Aesthetics of Decay*, tackles a difficult, yet inherently cultural and historical topic, namely that of putrefaction and uses a variety of perspectives, from art, literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis to medical science, in order to reveal what could be the aesthetic, ethical and political stakes of representing a shapeless, abject, and rotten body and how transcendence and ambivalence are always among its significant possibilities.

References

- Culler, Jonathan. 1997. *Literary theory: a very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. *The Literary in Theory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Irving, Andrew. 2017. *The Art of Life and Death: Radical Aesthetics and Ethnographic Practice*. Chicago: Hau Books.
- Poenar, Horea. 2017. “Glitches of the Archive: On the Relation Between Memory and the Commons.” *Caietele Echinox* vol. 33, 2017, pp. 115-131.
- Randall, William and A. Elizabeth McKim. 2004. “Toward a poetics of aging: The links between literature and life.” *Narrative Inquiry* 14(2), pp. 235-260.

**I. KNOWING DEATH:
EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL
ASPECTS**

“THE POEMS AND THE DANCES
OF THE SHADES”:
DESTABILIZING PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES
OF GRIEF IN *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*

RACHEL WARNER

***Abstract:** Although Joan Didion has been noted throughout her career for being “highly intelligent, clear-sighted and practical”, one of the most significant recurrent themes in her autobiographical account of grief, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, is her (self-described) irrational belief in the reversibility of her husband’s death (Brennan and Dash 2008, 35). From the very first lines of her narrative onward, Didion holds a taut balance between recognizing the fickle nature of life, its fungibility during the most unsuspecting times, and struggling to accept the finality and inevitability of death. While many literary critics have interpreted Didion’s account as reflective of typical psychological theories of grief from Freud onward, such readings often fail to examine how Didion herself actively interrogates her own grief and manipulates psychological theories to construct her experience. This paper will thus examine how significant theories and socio-historical trends in the psychology of grief interact with Didion’s portrayal and in doing so will query the role of different epistemologies in organizing and ordering human grief. Although Didion overtly gestures towards psychiatric research on mourning throughout her work, she nonetheless destabilizes these very models through her non-linear form, invocation of the mythic, and insistence on the epistemological limits at the heart of her experience.*

***Keywords:** bereavement, pathological grief, magical thinking, pathography.*

Joan Didion's memoir about mourning the sudden loss of her husband, John Gregory Dunne, and simultaneously coping with the trauma of her daughter Quintana's acute illness and extended hospitalization has come to occupy a unique nexus among popular pathographies¹, critical literary and cultural studies, and psychiatric discourse. At once arrestingly specific and yet hauntingly universal, Didion's memoir has generated strikingly divergent reactions among critics. While some scholars go so far as to suggest that contemporary readers of grief memoirs are gaining "guidance about how to mourn" (Dennis 2008, 803) from these texts and describe *The Year of Magical Thinking* as "the one indispensable handbook to bereavement" (Hare 2008, 3), others claim that Didion's work is actually misleading and troublesome for it "encourages her audience to see her extreme reaction as universal and archetypal" (Konigsberg 2011, 50). This ambivalence in the critical reception of her work reflects a central tension in the psychology of grief, that of pathologizing or normalizing the subject of bereavement. Although grief memoirs have typically been fashioned as antidotes to the cold technicalization and medicalization of mourning, many authors still employ psychiatric language and concepts to structure their experience². *The Year of Magical Thinking* participates in this hybrid form as Didion manipulates various psychiatric theories of grief in order to question the relevancy of such Procrustean formulations to the variegated nature of death and bereavement. In doing so she fashions a distinctly idiographic approach for understanding mourning and destabilizes any notion of a universalizing theory of grief.

Magical thinking

This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, and the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself. (Didion 2005, 7)

¹ Pathography is defined by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins as "a form of autobiography or biography that describes personal experience of illness, treatment, and sometimes death" in her work, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography*.

² Tony Walter examines the extent to which medical and non-medical spheres work to police the construction of grief in such first-person accounts in his article, "Grief Narratives: The Role of Medicine in the Policing of Grief".

Throughout her memoir Didion foregrounds “the power of grief to derange the mind” or how mourning can entail irrational and fallacious thinking (Didion 2005, 34). These cogitations often surface around supposed synchronistic relationships between various events leading up to her husband’s death and become crystallized in her belief that she could “reverse time, run the film backward” and either prevent or reverse John’s fate (Didion 2005, 184). Didion thus fashions her “magical thinking” as the conviction that John will eventually return home to her—the “disordered thinking” that remains “both urgent and constant” (Didion 2005, 35). Borrowing from the Piagetian notion of magical thinking as a childlike orientation to the world³, Didion describes herself “thinking as small children think” or as though her thoughts and wishes could somehow be made manifest and alter the course of events (Didion 2005, 35). This causal yoking of outside reality to internal mental and emotional states allows Didion to believe that she can exert some degree of control over a situation that refuses such order. Although magical thinking typically carries punitive associations of a puerile or superstitious nature, Didion’s text invites consideration of the potentially beneficial qualities of such meditations during mourning.

While most clinical psychologists agree that the loss of a loved one is a “confusing and even mystifying” experience (Bonanno 2009, 113), reports of magical thinking, feeling, or seeing the presence of a lost loved one are typically understood as hallmarks of a pathological mourning style in psychiatric diagnoses. Martin Lunghi in his article “Ontology and Magic” asserts: “it may only be in rational pragmatic cultures that such grief reactions are judged to have a strongly magical cast and perhaps even to be disturbingly deviant” (Lunghi 2006, 42). He claims that such knee-jerk reactions to code beliefs in posthumous animation as aberrant are highly culturally inflected and may be just as magical as the thinking of the bereaved. Even Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, creator of one of the most stridently sequential theories of grief, conceded near the end of her life that such “hauntings” experienced by the bereaved are normal, especially when the loss is sudden and unexpected (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005, 56). The extent to which magical thinking indicates abnormal grief thus remains highly disputed within psychological theorization as the very nature of an

³ In *The Child’s Conception of the World*, Piaget writes that magical thinking is a normal development in childhood particularly among children ages 2 to 7; because young children have not developed the ability to think logically, they have a tendency to attribute events that happen around them to their own inner mental and emotional states (e.g. “It is raining outside because I am sad.”).

encounter with mortality seems to beg for existential questions and spiritual impulses.

That Didion relates her magical thinking retrospectively from a supposedly enlightened future state complicates readings that simply “diagnose” her as exhibiting a pathological mourning style. There is an oft-overlooked tension at the heart of the text between Didion’s confessional irrationality and biting realistic insight—her blatant recognition that her thinking is erroneous and simultaneous assertion that this realization does not necessarily translate into acceptance of the finality of John’s death:

‘Bringing him back’ had been through those months my hidden focus, a magic trick. By late summer I was beginning to see this clearly. ‘Seeing it clearly’ did not yet allow me to give away the clothes he would need. (Didion 2005, 44)

In other words, recognizing her “magic trick” as the wrongheaded belief that he will return is not synonymous with what it would mean to see clearly (44). She destabilizes the entire concept of clarity in mourning and troubles the distinctions between rational and irrational, magical and real. Jonathan Glover claims that Didion’s “delusion” may be better understood as a “nonliteral ‘belief’” or more of a rhetorical device she uses to convey her sense of disorientation and bewilderment (Glover 2014, 140). While many critics have understood Didion’s belief in the reversibility of her husband’s death as indicative of a pathological style of mourning, the self-conscious manner in which she relates her experience and repetitive juxtaposition of rational thought with magical thinking subverts any facile identification of psychological abnormality.

Although Didion wonders whether or not she may be one of Dr. Volkan’s “established pathological mourners”, it is unclear whether or not she understands her own magical thinking as maladaptive and harmful (Didion 2005, 55). By shifting away from material reality towards more magical and illusory beliefs, she is able to continue her relationship with the deceased without confronting the immediate pain of separation. In fact, this idea of “continuing bonds” has recently gained traction among psychologists who now recognize the degree to which maintaining a relationship with a loss loved one may benefit the bereaved⁴. Didion’s need to return to the primal scene of her loss, evinced through her repetition of the following incantatory lines, seems to reflect this idea: “Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The

⁴ Dennis Klass’s article, “Continuing Conversation about Continuing Bonds”, in particular has helped to establish this shift in discourse.

question of self-pity” (Didion 2005, 3). The form of her work itself thus insists on a certain affective bond between deceased and survivor as Didion fashions a distinctly non-linear portrait of her grief.

Stage theorists and the linear model of grief

Early grief theories with their “stages,” “phases,” and “tasks,” beginning with Freud and moving through Kübler-Ross, Bowlby, Parkes, Worden and others, have in many instances been pressed into the service of formulating linear, prescriptive and goal-oriented models. (Brennan and Dash 2008, 37)

With the advent of the stage theories of grief in the late 1960s, a bowdlerized, overly linear notion of grief became established as the psychiatric standard. This futurist bent toward letting go, “getting past it”, and moving on has influenced perhaps every common parlance surrounding discussions of grief to this day (Didion 2005, 4). Prominent early psychiatrists who contributed to this notion of grief included John Bowlby, Colin Murray Parkes, and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Kübler-Ross’s assertion in particular that “all dying patients, in fact everyone who suffers a loss, went through similar stages” has remained indelible to popular understandings of grief to the present (Kübler-Ross 1969, 161). She emphasized that the mourner need only complete the proper steps in order to achieve the final stage of healing and resolution. The stage theorists thus collectively ingrained the psychology of grief with a “strongly individualistic Protestant work ethic” that praises “self-development, forward movement and resolution” (Brennan and Dash 2008, 38).

Didion cites this progressive, mechanistic grief narrative near the end of the book when she underscores the discrepancies between the clinical accounts of grief and experiential grief:

Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it... In the version of grief we imagine, the model will be ‘healing.’ A certain forward movement will prevail. The worst days will be the earliest days. (Didion 2005, 188)

Didion swiftly relieves us of our preconceptions of how grief will proceed and recasts the experience as entirely personal, empirical, and continuous. By couching the concept she wishes to deride in quotes, she emphasizes the artificiality at the heart of stage theories of grief (Didion 2005, 188). According to the reality of Didion’s grief, the models she describes may in fact be more fantastical and unrealistic than her own magical thinking.

Formally, Didion's account circles back again and again to specific times and places and emphasizes the constant vacillation between being drawn backwards towards the dead and forwards towards life. For example, she describes the night of John's collapse, "December 30, 2003," as part of an official medical record, "thirty-one days short of our fortieth anniversary," and exactly predicted when John received a diagnosis described by his cardiologist as the "widow-maker" (Didion 4; 6; 157). Temporal dimensions get collapsed as Didion describes the same event multiple times with different emotional valences, critical commentary, and personal insight. Alison Brickey's analysis of Didion's mourning rests on the idea that the process of grieving is "always already infected with a pull from behind" (Brickey 2015, 152). She locates a tension at the heart of Didion's grief between moving forward and recognizing that "if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead", and the inability to acknowledge the irreversibility of death: "I realized for the first time why the obituaries had so disturbed me. I had allowed other people to think he was dead. I had allowed him to be buried alive" (Didion 2005, 87; 226). This play with temporality thus largely complicates the linear theory of grief for it demonstrates the mourner's need to move in two conflicting directions at once. Beyond that, Didion's oscillations demonstrate the extent to which the dead stay with the living and trouble any notion of a clean break with a lost loved one. Ultimately, Didion's subversions of traditional grief theories in *The Year of Magical Thinking* may be seen as a representation and enactment of alternative ways to grieve.

The medicalization⁵ of mourning

Medical ideas include being healed of grief, and a healthy outcome to bereavement. The tearing away of the beloved is portrayed as leaving a scar, which will be healed once the dead are relocated in memory; eventually grief, like a wound, heals, a recovery is made, and the threads of life can be picked up once more. (Walter 2000, 97)

Near the beginning of her account, Didion cites perhaps the single most important work for the psychological study of grief, Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia". She quotes Freud's beliefs on how

⁵ Throughout this section, I am using the term "medicalization" in the sense defined by Thomas Szasz in his 2007 collection of essays, *The Medicalization of Everyday Life*, as the misperception of nonmedical conditions as medical problems and non-diseases as diseases.

grieving entails “grave departures from the normal attitude toward life” and continues with Melanie Klein’s assertion that the mourner must go through a “transitory manic-depressive state” in order to overcome their grief (qtd. in Didion, 34). It is important to note that “hallucinatory wishful psychosis” in the context of Freud’s work does not indicate pathology but a functional process of wish-fulfilment (Freud 1917, 243). Indeed, Freud poses the very kind of magical thinking that Didion describes as a compromise between the observation that the love object no longer exists and the enormous libidinal investment in that person. Therefore, a Freudian understanding of mourning actually provides for much more lenience and understanding when confronting the “ontological dilemma” posed by death, or the disruption in a person’s hard-wired beliefs in continuity (Lunghi 2006, 33). Interestingly, Freud’s essay issues forth from a place of uncertainty and intellectual humility, evident in his opening admission that we must “from the outset drop all claim to general validity for our conclusions,” and emphasizes the overlapping features of mourning and melancholia (Freud 1917, 242). Over a century beyond the publication of Freud’s article, the distinction between mourning as normal affect and melancholia as psychological dysfunction remains highly unstable.

One causal factor behind this contemporary tide is the ongoing effort to import the neurobiological model of the brain into psychology.⁶ Primarily American and British psychologists have insisted on discovering the neurological pathways underpinning significant psychological disorders and have turned towards various neuroimaging techniques to substantiate their claims. While this trend may have originally been aimed at relieving patients of culpability for their ailments, it has also produced a certain biological fatalism and corresponding sense of the encroaching medicalization of everyday life.⁷ Moreover, the removal of the “bereavement exclusion” from the diagnostic category of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition* (DSM-V) created an uproar in the psychological community as many clinicians believed the decision would precipitate the over-prescription of

⁶ Nancy Andreasen’s book *Brave New Brain: Conquering Mental Illness in the Era of the Genome* may be seen the apotheosis of such attempts to use neuroscience and genetics to “unlock” the mysteries behind major mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, dementia, anxiety disorders, and manic depression. Accordingly, she argues for an understanding of mental illnesses as primarily “diseases of the brain” (7).

⁷ For an excellent critique of such biological reductionism, see Gilbert Garza and Amy Fisher Smith’s article, “Beyond Neurobiological Reductionism: Recovering the Intentional and Expressive Body.”

antidepressants to treat ordinary grief (Pies 2014, 19). Although many psychologists concede that there are significant overlapping symptoms between grief and depression⁸, others fear such a change will only further pathologize and stigmatize mourning as an abnormal condition that must be treated with medical intervention⁹. Current diagnoses of pathological versus normal grief are thus complicated as the mourning process itself has become overdetermined as “a morbid state which must be treated, shortened, and erased by the ‘doctor of grief’” (Ariès 1974, 100). Importantly, the gradual translation of all grief expression into a medical condition may be traced back to Erich Lindemann, a military psychiatrist during World War II¹⁰. Perhaps because psychologists have historically dominated empirical research and scholarly writings about grief, the phenomenon has been slowly transformed from a natural life event into an illness of the body and mind.

Didion highlights the arbitrary nature of the distinction between healthy and abnormal bereavement by querying the relevancy and efficacy of such diagnostic constructions to lived experience:

The preferred kind, the one associated with ‘growth’ and ‘development,’ was ‘uncomplicated grief,’ or ‘normal bereavement’... The second kind of grief was ‘complicated grief,’ which was also known in the literature as ‘pathological bereavement’ and was said to occur in a variety of situations. One situation in which pathological bereavement could occur, *I read repeatedly*, was that in which the survivor and the deceased had been unusually dependent on one another. (Didion 2005, 48) [emphasis mine]

⁸ Ronald Pies in particular argues that the change in the DSM-V was made because there have never been any clinical studies demonstrating that MDD following bereavement is significantly different from equally severe depression in any other context and maintains that because MDD is potentially lethal, it should be treated even in the recently bereaved. For more on these points, see “The Removal of the Bereavement Exclusion in the DSM-5: Exploring the Evidence” (Iglewicz et al. 2013) and William Coryell’s and Elizabeth Young’s article, “Clinical Predictors of Suicide in Primary Major Depressive Disorder”.

⁹ A key scholar in this camp is Allen Frances whose work *Saving Normal: An Insider’s Revolt Against Out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life* vehemently argues about the dangers of ever-expanding diagnostic criteria and the increasing turn to pharmaceutical companies to treat ordinary life experiences.

¹⁰ While Lindemann’s article, “Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief” is only a brief report, it accomplishes a radical discursive pivot away from Freud by constructing grief and mourning as processes that must be actively managed by psychologists.

Although it would seem that Didion’s repetitive readings suggest a certain degree of identification with “pathological bereavement”, the pedantic tone with which she narrates her research and interrogative sentiment reveal a latent scepticism. To begin, she questions what kind of relationship does not feature partners who are “unusually dependent” on one another and whether the opportunity she had of working ten feet from her husband for most of her life had not made them “unusually lucky” (Didion 2005, 52). She continues: “Unusual dependency (is that a way of saying ‘marriage’? ‘husband and wife’? ‘mother and child’? ‘nuclear family’?)” (Didion 2005, 54). Where such a line between dependency and independence, affection and fixation rests within our most intimate relationships seems extraordinarily difficult to ascertain. By couching each of these dyads in quotes, Didion extricates them from their given associations and recasts them with the same anaesthetized tenor of the medical model of grief. Her writing seems to suggest that such simplified, dualistic models may represent an insufficient epistemology for understanding the complexity of mortality and grief.

Didion’s invocation of psychiatric models and data is indicative of another side effect of the medicalization of grief, the suffusion of semi-psychiatric language into popular literature on the subject¹¹. For example, Didion repeatedly invokes the language of psychological science to describe her “delusionary thinking” or the “demented” nature of her bereavement (Didion 2005, 22; 125). This language is echoed in critical readings of her magical thinking that describe it as “a symptom of the bereaved Didion’s altered mental and emotional states” (Bladek 2014, 945). Other critics have tried to “diagnose” Didion’s experience as indicative of “Prolonged Grief Disorder” and see her “extreme reaction” as significantly atypical in relation to most widows’ experience (Konigsberg 2011, 50). This scholarly impulse to tease apart Didion’s inner world and psychologize her grief seems to reveal a certain anxiety surrounding expressions of grief that do not contour to psychological expectations. Furthermore, the tight knit relationship between literary grief and psychological grief implies that scientific research has become so sedimented in Western culture that bereavement may no longer be articulated without recourse to psychological theories. Such tides beg the question: has grief become so far removed from the

¹¹ Julie Ann Wambach observed the grief process as a social construct during a 1981-82 field study of three widows support groups in Phoenix, Arizona. The investigator pointed out that the grief process was originally the product of scholarly writers and that these findings have implications for interactions among widows, popular writers, professionals, and researchers.

sphere of human experience that we can no longer discuss it without using outmoded and inflexible psychological concepts?

Part of what makes Didion's account so arresting is the juxtaposition between her acutely pragmatic style and simultaneous reliance on mythic concepts and magical thinking. She blends the agnosticism of Western medical science with ancient stories of loss and the afterlife to fashion a more holistic portrait of death and grief, one that does not necessarily make a choice between the Dionysian and Apollonian. For example, when considering the implications of her husband's Catholic faith, she thinks: "I did not believe in the resurrection of the body but I still believed that given the right circumstances he would come back" (Didion 2005, 150). She then translates this concept into a reading of Euripides's *Alcestis* that wonders what would happen if the river Styx truly flowed both ways and people could somehow transcend the bounds of earthly embrace and return after death: would they be able to speak, and would we want to hear what they had to say? Would we want to have pulled them back from the peace of non-existence into the tedium of everyday life? Didion's reliance on such mythological interpretations of mortality may be linked to her scepticism towards scientific theories of grief that insist on the discontinuity between life and death. Didion's account ameliorates this divide by summoning the place of spirituality and the arts in coping with grief and its almost unmentionable correlate, mortality itself. This is what Didion describes when she says:

We are imperfect moral beings, aware of that mortality even as we push it away, failed by our very complication, so wired that when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all. (Didion 2005, 198)

Psychologist Irvin Yalom goes so far as to say that all life's neuroses are sublimated acts of avoiding the death we know to be omnipresent¹². Didion reminds readers of the place of mysticism, the mythic and magical in our conceptions of death. Although she presents a substantial amount of scientific research on bereavement, her account moves beyond strict diagnostic categories and shows the insufficiencies inherent to conceiving of grief through a purely biopsychosocial lens.

¹² Irvin Yalom's existential psychotherapeutic approach views psychological distress as arising from the avoidance of both the fact of death and the uncertainty of when it will happen.

“The poems and the dances of the shades”

In time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control. (Didion 2005, 44)

Didion’s instinctive impulse towards scholarly research and recurring mantra about the power of knowledge has overshadowed her subtle identification with more expressive forms of grief in most critical readings. The vast majority of critics devote significantly more attention to explications of how her grief parallels the work of Freud or Klein¹³, or how she compares to sociological data about typical afflictions in widowhood¹⁴. Far less exploration has been executed on how figures such as C.S. Lewis, Delmore Schwartz, and Gerard Manley Hopkins remain embroiled in her self-exploration as she relies on the allegorical functions of their writing to instill her own experience with meaning and mutual understanding. This gap in the critical reception of her work may again gesture towards the hegemony of grief theory and psychological science in literary pathographies. While it is true that Didion “obsessively reads the literature of mourning”, the extent to which she naively absorbs this material is dubious at best (Luckhurst 2009, 95). Instead, Didion equivocates over how she perceives the professional and abstract renderings of grief and weaves her narrative through both bodies of knowledge to create a hybrid form that largely refuses such boundaries.

From her descriptions of John’s death as “the collapse of the dead star” to her invocation of the River Styx in her musings on mortality, Didion relies on abstract concepts and images to convey the particularities of her grief (Didion 2005, 184). Although she depends on the specialized knowledge of scholars in related fields for “comfort, validation, an outside opinion that I was not imagining what appeared to be happening”, there is a recurring turn towards more emotional and expressive forms of grief that remains constant throughout the work (Didion 2005, 46). In fact, she offers numerous instances of outright rejecting the stage theory inspired how-to guides of grief and slyly mocking their dogma. For example, after

¹³ See for example Marta Bladek’s article “‘A Place None of Us Know Until We Reach It’: Mapping Grief and Memory in Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*” for a discussion of how Didion’s relationships to particular places associated with her lost loved ones reflect Freud’s theory of reality testing, or the tendency of the mourner to constantly assess and challenge the epistemological limits of their new status (940).

¹⁴ Ruth Konigsberg’s work, *The Truth About Grief*, argues that Didion’s reaction is significantly atypical compared to aggregate data on the recently bereaved.

describing Hermann Castorp's grief in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and detailing the sensual moments in classical ballets when abandoned lovers try to find and resurrect their lost loved ones, she states:

Beyond or below such abstracted representations of the pains and furies of grieving, there was a body of sub-literature, how-to guides for dealing with the condition, some 'practical,' some 'inspirational,' most of either useless. (Didion 2005, 45)

It is curious that Didion situates more classically psychological representations as occupying a metaphysical space "beyond or below" arts-based forms (45). While the latter would seem to support a simple hierarchy of the arts being preferred conduits for understanding grief than the sciences, the former, with all its troubling connotations with the unknown realm that follows death, seems to again register a certain ambivalence in Didion's critique. She does not offer any easy formulations to describe her own relationship to these models and instead seems to question the very premise of any universalizing theory of grief. Didion's text, itself an amalgam of scientific theory, empirical research, personal narrative, and intertextuality, seems to suggest that there may be a place for both the poetic forms and the professional literature in confronting and surviving one's grief.

The literary language she uses to describe her orientation toward John allows for a more open-ended, encompassing notion of grief that permits the infusion of the mythic with the real, the living with the dead. In the midst of Didion's exploration into the poetics of grief, she offers a line of striking clarity that may provide insight into how she understands her own grief: "The poems and the dances of the shades seemed the most exact to me" (Didion 2005, 45). Didion's choice of such literary prose which insists on the choreography of mourning as fluid and crepuscular, juxtaposed against the exactness with which she receives them, illuminates the significance of such imprecise representations in the world of the bereaved. In this way, Didion offers a subtle message to her readers, a substantial amount potentially also struggling with loss, about how works such as W.H. Auden's "Funeral Blues" and Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Mermaid" may be more accurate representations of grief as it is, rather than grief as it ought to be. Put differently, the Gerard Manley Hopkins line "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" is a more emotional and eloquent representation of the abject sorrow of grief than any diagnostic criteria (qtd. in Didion 2005, 32). Within the nebulous spatio-temporal zone occupied by the person in mourning—the space between the "future in which the one who has died no longer exists, and the past in which they have existed"—

Didion’s poems and dances may serve as an alternate vehicle for confronting the mystifying nature of death and grief (Brickey 2015, 155).

Within the affecting reifications of grief Didion cites, there are running threads on the shadowy, imprecise nature of death and grief. For example, when Didion is still in the heart of her trauma, just days after John has died, a famous line from *The Tempest* floats into her mind as she thinks of Quintana: “Full fathom five thy father lies/ Those are pearls that were his eyes” (qtd. in Didion 2005, 19). The emphasis on his eyes is repeated in a line by e.e. cummings as she thinks of the hospital staff performing corneal removals on John: “and what I want to know is/ how do you like your blueeyed boy/ Mister Death” (qtd. in Didion 2005, 40). It is through these intertextual relationships that Didion finds kinship and clarity in her own experience. Her “too offhand and too elliptical” telling of her story bears almost no resemblance to an orderly, incremental notion of grief and thus reproduces “the poems and the dances of the shades” that she found to be most precise (Didion 2005, 6; 45). Beyond mere bibliotherapy¹⁵, Didion’s reliance on elegiac evocations suggests that more humanities-based epistemologies may be uniquely suited to interpret the mystifying experience of grief and accompanying acknowledgment of one’s own mortality.

Mourning in the modern era

Precisely how, though, are literary responses to bereavement affected by barely spoken strictures against mourning? And how are such repressive forces, along with the elegiac gestures of defiance they elicit, related to the historical phenomenon. (Gilbert 2006, xx)

Although trends such as the “natural death movement” have surfaced as efforts to demedicalize death and restore it as a natural occurrence in a life cycle, the stigma surrounding public mourning remains prevalent in most Western cultures (Wolfelt 1998, 3). While some link the public’s discomfort with death to the “full-fledged burlesque” of the funeral industry, others point to the decay of social structures meant to provide stability and comfort to the recently bereaved (Mitford 1963, 201). Modern grief memoirs thus paradoxically “emerge out of a context in which death, dying, and mourning

¹⁵ Bibliotherapy, or the use of (typically) literary texts to promote healing, has been stressed as an effective coping strategy by bibliotherapists and literary academics. In conducting empirical research on the consumption of artistic media during bereavement, E.M. Koopman found that out of a sample of 200 subjects, 25% reported using both music and literature to cope with their loss.

have become taboo” (Bladek 2014, 937). Didion ponders these cultural tides as she recalls, “how open we are to the persistent message that we can avert death. And to its punitive correlative, the message that if death catches us we have only ourselves to blame” (Didion 2005, 206). This inverse relationship between a death-denying culture and the growing popularity of pathographies and grief memoirs seems to suggest something quite unique about how grief is now experienced, consumed, and shared among people. Tony Walter understands Arthur Frank’s seminal work *The Wounded Storyteller*¹⁶ to be key in understanding if the medicalization of mourning and spike in the popularity of grief memoirs are causally associated—the question of whether or not “Frank’s heroic postmoderns are reclaiming the experience of their own bodies from medical domination” (Walter 2000, 98). In this same vein, we may ask if Didion’s account fits into this model of the empowered mourner using her pathography as a bulwark against the modern impersonal state of mourning.

Although Didion is acutely aware of the societal prescriptions for mourning from the moment of her shock onward, the extent to which she is being interpolated into the socially proper widow or is critiquing and thereby resisting this very process remains ambiguous. Initially described as a “cool customer” by a hospital social worker just hours after John’s death, Didion’s stoic persona belies her inner struggle with how to externalize such overwhelming emotions within the context of her social position (Didion 2005, 15). The “question of self-pity” or degree to which she may lament her loss thus returns throughout the memoir as Didion weighs her own developing insight about the “urgent need” grievers have “to feel sorry for themselves” with sociological research and prescriptions on mourning (Didion 2005, 3, 193).

She cites Geoffery Gorer’s ethnographic work in *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* to emphasize how mourning in the modern era came to be seen as “a morbid self-indulgence, and to give social admiration to the bereaved who hide their grief so fully that no one would guess anything had happened” (qtd. in Didion 2005, 95). This praising of emotional masking and private mourning may be closely tied to the advent of preventative healthcare and the subsequent transformation of death into an unnatural and individual failure. Didion’s “idle shadow” of self-pity or the arrest of forward motion thus becomes vilified as the inappropriate reaction to death in contemporary times (Didion 2005, 38). Beyond that, the

¹⁶ Many scholars understand Frank’s work as the beginning of narrative medicine and integral to the contemporary emphasis on humanist methods and values in medical practice and research, as well as to the developing field of medical humanities.

economic language initially used to describe Didion’s widowhood reflects the inherently capitalist nature of modern healthcare as well as how this system contributes to the elimination of public mourning. Didion’s account exposes the extent to which the conception of grief as “work” that one must “overcome” is inherently related to neoliberal values of relentless progress, dogged individualism, and personal attainment. Her immensely personal conveyance of her grief in *The Year of Magical Thinking* reflects the same acute social consciousness and aloof, abstracted nature she is known for.

Conclusions

Throughout her memoir, Didion embraces the contradictions inherent to the human experience of death and offers a portrayal of grief steeped in paradoxes and incongruities, occupying the liminal space between understanding and bewilderment. Her characterization of her bereavement thus seems to suggest that idiosyncrasy may be the rule rather than the exception and as such potentially more appropriate to understanding grief in all its fickle, flickering forms. In analysing her memoir, scholars across disciplines have continually drawn on psychological theories and language to interpret Didion’s grief. However, she illustrates a certain void at the center of her experience that seems to cut against these projects. The crux of Didion’s grief is as follows:

Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself. (Didion 189).

Ever since Didion’s seminal reflections on the bleak underbelly of 1960’s counterculture captured in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, she has been an expert at pointing out fissures in the world—disruptions that force us to acknowledge the very fragility and arbitrary nature of so many things we take for granted: society, family, even mortality. Ellen Friedman describes this “Didion sensibility” as inhabiting an existentially meaningless, melancholy world (Friedman 1984, 90). However, I would argue that her work in *The Year of Magical Thinking* overflows in personal meaning to its readers precisely because she forces reflection upon the existentially meaningless—“the ordinary instant” in which life changes—and does not make promises about grief being so easily charted, understood, and overcome (Didion 2005, 4). Drawing from her personal experience of this remarkably singular yet universal event, Didion treats psychological