

## THE GOOD DEATH AND THE MODERN NOVEL

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*Abstract: This paper reflects whether contemporary fiction can be used to establish and refine any modern idea of a good death. It defines a good death initially as one which is non-violent and sums up a whole life. It tests this against a series of examples, and looks at notions of preparedness and aptness, as well as some anxieties. A fuller reading of one novel suggest a good death entails additionally finding an appropriate language, the telling and ending of stories and the ordering of loves.*

*Key words: Death, fiction, anxieties, preparedness, language, stories*

Virginia Woolf knew that the one experience she would never describe was her own death; writers of fiction, who draw on their own experience and transform it, and naturally wary of imagining exactly what it is like to die. Yet the experiment – when it happens – opens up many possibilities for the reader. So what can a novel add to the knowledge of those who work with the dying? What can it tell us about our own mortality, and how can it help us contemplate our own deaths? Is there any contemporary idea of a good death – one in which the sufferer, certainly, and onlookers possibly, gain something positive from the experience, so that it illuminates and gathers into wholeness the life – and do novels of today help us to understand and define this more fully?

A novel can do several important things. It can focus on the individual rather than the theoretical, but without violating the privacy of a sufferer. It can – by an imaginative leap- privilege the point of view of the dying, and so ask us to envisage as participant not onlooker what it might be like, will be like to die. Novels, which belong, as many do, within the realist tradition, operate within that tradition's allegiance to the moral scrutiny of action and the creation of sympathies, so that our understanding is extended. All of these mean that a sense of importance and seriousness are attached to dying. In addition, novels are well suited to dealing with mixed motives, shifting feelings, ambivalence, uncertainties, and so can do justice to the range of ideals and failures that can surround death. The open-ended quality of stories resists absolute readings, although we may be nudged in the direction of a particular

interpretation. When a fiction deals with dying, it can reflect, without fundamentalism, the contradictions and conflicts that surround it. It does not claim to speak with authority on what necessarily remains a mystery; but it redeems dying from exclusion and silence.

This article examines what a “good death” might entail through a rapid survey of modern novels and their treatment of the theme; it then proposes a brief reading of one contemporary novel, *The Good Husband* by Gail Godwin (Godwin, 1994), which unusually and courageously puts the experience of dying at the centre, reinterprets the tradition of *artes moriendi* and so suggests the characteristics of the good death. Any field, including death studies, is dominated by certain approaches: medical; practical; social; historical. But new questions and angles, and a freshness of insight can come from imaginative writing; this paper attempts to show how this works.

What is perhaps surprising is how little of the fiction of the twentieth century has concerned itself with any notion of the good death. This may reflect Gorer's hypothesis (Gorer, 1965) that death has become increasingly forbidden and unmentionable. Whereas eighteenth and nineteenth century novels often displayed confidence in death as good, beautiful or even happy (Bronfen, 1992), this last century offers much thinner pickings. If, however, there is any concept of the good death, it draws its root, however distantly, from what Aries (Aries, 1976) described as the “tamed death” of Medieval Europe. This was characterised by its public, death-bed, ceremonial aspects; death came to one who was

forewarned and prepared, who had the chance to set life right, sorrowfully and solemnly, before turning from the world to God. The greatest fear was of sudden violent death; today Aries sees fear more often invested in the technically-driven, de-ritualised, hospital death where initiative is often wrested from the dying and those who love them.

So to test out whether there are notions of the goodness of death in modern fiction, we need to translate Aries's ideas into a template, which can be applied to a variety of models. The literature of our day is overwhelmed by images of violent and grotesque death; these may speak eloquently about anxieties, but must be set aside for our purposes. So too must the serious and pessimistic approach of a novel like *Scar Tissue* (Ignatieff, 1993), which concludes of death, '...what happens can never be anticipated. What happens cannot be redeemed... We live and we cannot shape life'. A classic twentieth century like *Brideshead Revisited* (Waugh, 1945) presents a death which is only good insofar as it coerces the living into a particular straightjacket of faith; that too must be left out. To find out what is left which speaks to us, we should begin with defining characteristics of the good death as having first, a non-violent context, where the sufferer can experience some clarity and coherence, and where some resonance of the traditional death-bed lingers. Second, it has a summarising function for the whole life; it looks back, sets right, and brings the whole into a consistency, which acts as a preparation for dissolution. Any novel which does these things has also to keep the focus substantially on the dying person, and not merely deal with the reactions of bystanders. So how do fictions measure up to these?

Four recent novels indicate how hard it is to find fiction that does not at some level evade the issue, though they all take us nearer to understanding. *The Blackwater Lightship* (Toibin, 1999) centres on Declan's dying of an Aids-related illness; but although physical decline is charted accurately, the emphasis is far more on the impact all this has on Declan's family and friends, so much so that the novel ends before the death. At the close, Declan is terminally ill, and disappears off the pages into hospital; this is a telling comment on the fear and forbidden nature of death but it does not give us any sense of goodness. Rather different is another novel about Aids-related dying, *The Facts of Life* (Gale, 1995); Jamie, the young man who is dying, refuses hospital and insists that a good death is a

basic human right. Again, physical processes are fully covered, as well as Jamie's awareness that the rather matter-of-fact conversations that surround him do not correspond to the imagined deathbeds of his childhood.. What is odd about this novel is that with a New Age flip it presents the moment of death as an encounter with a friendly vanilla-scented nurse called Sally, who tells Jamie that it is time to get up. When he replies that he cannot, she says "Take my hands". Whilst this certainly presents the angel of death as a warm and comforting figure, it is difficult to know how to fit this into the book's philosophy – or any other.

More helpful, perhaps, is *The Stone Diaries* (Shields, 1993), which traces the long life, and dying, of Daisy Goodwill Flett. It is a peaceful, nursing home death – not least for relatives, carers, staff and religious professionals, about whose needs the novel has some sharp observations to make. The good death here is to be found in the time and space Daisy is given, and her sense of the rightness of the process. She has the opportunity to survey her life, as a series of transparencies; although she is embarrassed by 'the carpenter from Nazareth', she comes to discern her original, essential self as 'Something holy. Torn from God's great forehead.' Death eventually is welcome: 'You might say she breathed it into existence, then fell in love with it.' (Shields, 1993) But there is also sadness in this death. Shields draws our attention to the aloneness of dying; Daisy needs listeners to the story of her life, she knows 'I'm still in here', but she is treated as an object. Her moments of courage or shame lack a witness. If our age has a concept of the good death, it also has a pervasive unease, not so much about bodily decay or powerlessness as about being unheard, deprived of the ability to communicate who we are and what we know. The dying lack hearers, and become figures of fantasy onto whom visitors project their own needs.

These novels, whilst widely read, belong more in the field of literary fiction than popular; so to broaden the scope, it is worthwhile to look at the death of a character popular both in novels and television adaptations, Inspector Morse. The character, who constantly investigates violent death, often in bizarre circumstances, is permitted to escape it himself; because the figure is developed in a long series of novels, he becomes almost a part of our lives, someone who seems "known". So the reader experiences

a sense of shock, almost as if a contract is broken, when the character dies. But how Morse dies, in *The Remorseful Day* (Dexter, 1999) mirrors several of the themes we have been exploring, and may illuminate current hopes and anxieties. Morse has lived fully, but unwisely; he has developed diabetes, collapses and is hospitalised. Dexter gives Morse a good death in several respects: he is prepared; he knows he is dying; he chooses to face this with dignity, if not equanimity. Moreover, his personality is intact, and his mind clear, if wandering – he contemplates the gender of angels, the etymology of medical terms, and whether the Lord's Prayer is appropriate as his epilogue. He decides it is not, and, like the Classically trained stoic he is, settles for a calm, rich, melancholy Shakespearean allusion instead. So this death is good in its readiness, its aptness and its individuality. But once more that note of failed communication is sounded; it accents less loneliness this time than a gentle but peremptory incompleteness. Morse's last words, thanking Lewis, are unheard by the nurse; Lewis never knows, but we, the readers do, so in a curious way the traditional deathbed rounding-off does take place.

However, what is striking is how rarely modern novels deal with the good death; finally, this article proposes a slightly fuller reading of one novel that does put the subject at the centre, *The Good Husband* (Godwin, 1994). Gail Godwin's novel deals with various kinds of death – with stillbirth, the death of creativity, the death of a marriage – but half the book is concerned primarily with the dying of Magda Danvers, a teacher and writer. It does not shrink from surveying vulnerability, loss of dignity and privacy, physical processes and emotional concomitants; but it focuses on a bitchy, impatient, questioning and articulate figure, who wants above all to understand what is happening to her, and who demands to be nourished in and through it. Dying is seen as unpredictable, individual and mysterious. The book is too complex for the whole text to be reflected here, but it extends our consideration of the good death by exploring three characteristics in detail; finding a language; the telling and ending of stories; the ordering of loves.

Finding a language involves the sifting, replenishing and re-framing of the images that shaped a life in order to sustain dying. It acknowledges that not everything can be discussed, so the discovery of the

appropriate metaphor is a short cut into dealing with painful and powerful feelings. Magda learns to name her cancer. By calling it The Gargoyle and The Great Uncouth, she sums up pithily her rage at the grotesque power that pain has over her; she also assumes some authority over it, because to name something, like Adam, is to have command. In naming, she objectifies it, so distinguishing the illness from death itself. Death can then be named more benignly as the Big Other or, an image drawn from Donne's poetry, as The Good Husband. Magda needs labels and images that pay tribute to her sense of the importance of the act in which she is engaged; in Donne she finds a startling image which transforms Death into a light-bearing figure, a bridegroom who moves through a dark room carrying a taper. This inversion, in which death becomes the agent of illumination and a kind of nurturing love, provides her with the picture she needs, so that she can move forward without fear or sentimentality. As she has acquired a language, she has become interested in her own death, gives a kind of value to it and recognises its importance.

But she also chooses a metaphor which sums up her life and vocation. She has been a student and teacher; for her, death is now the 'final teacher', and her rejection of chemotherapy is shaped by her insistence that she should spend the time she has left 'studying for my Final Exam, rather than studying my disease'.(Godwin, 1994). For Magda, taking exams is a challenge she relishes, a testing of her mettle against a set of demands; this, for her, is a healthier approach than concentrating on disease. She is sustained by a sense of self that amounts almost to arrogance, but the metaphor is roomy enough to permit the growth of humility also. She realises that this is not an exam in which she will come first, and that it may indeed be one where everyone gets the same grade in the end. Evaluation entails reevaluation. Her metaphor tells her she is facing something very like a familiar part of her life; she knows how to cope with this. But she also has to learn something new at this stage; simple repetition is not permitted.

The good death also involves the telling and ending of stories, although increasingly these take place in Magda's mind. The novel proposes a richness of inner consciousness when external functions are largely failing. Listeners misunderstand Magda, or believe she is 'not herself', but the reader knows she

has never been so much herself. Stories do several things for her. They establish connections; she perceives what links her story, a growing cancer, to Alice's, a baby born dead. They provide her with the mental and spiritual nourishment she craves; sustenance is vital for the dying. Most of all, they allow a person to lie helpless and learn from her own past. Magda has the privilege of time to mull over her life, and she can review the whole because there is an impending ending. Those in the middle can never imagine what will happen next; meaning is unravelled from the end, and it is in the light of that finality that we can narrate the central truths of our lives. This becomes her work; to give attention, to make sense of the whole as unmaking takes place. The interior monologue, sometimes dreamlike and irrational but insightful, allows her to take stock, to sum up her achievements and failures, and brings about a sense of completeness. Storytelling simplifies, identifies, prioritises; the good death needs this kind of scrutinising operation in order to stay loyal to 'soul history rather than case history' (Godwin, 1994). This work will end alone; but it needs exchange, with a listener, a past self, a tradition, to flourish in the earlier stages.

Finally, the good death involves the ordering of loves. Magda sees this putting in order all that has been loved – people and ideas – as a 'big question' on the Final Exam. She has always known that to love someone can be like 'a flash of God', but now that love itself has to be stripped down. Her life has been characterised by intensity, curiosity and attachments, some of which have taken her by surprise; these qualities are a part of the potential for the sacred in her world. But in dying she has to strip away accretions and to let go, to loose the entanglements that have held her. Magda has to face unpalatable facts; she is now ugly, and does not make sense to those around her. But there are compensations; she can now see through the watchers, see them as they are precisely because she wants nothing from them: 'Once you get yourself out of the way, you can see everything the way it is. Your self isn't blocking the world from you, once you have side-stepped its shadows.' (Godwin, 1994) She cannot communicate this knowledge to them; but her lifelong quest of vision finds its true home in a powerless freedom from wanting. A part of this movement is to push herself away from those around her, liberating herself and them; and although she is impatient to finish the story, what she has learned at

the end is the supreme importance of waiting. She, 'now with herself out of the way, wanted to be still and wait for what came into the place she had cleared out.' (Godwin, 1994) The novel persuades us that herein is the goodness of death; it can be a learning process in which a life is gathered up and cleared out, so that in the emptiness something else can happen. Magda, whose name recalls Mary Magdalene and apostolic potential, comes close on her deathbed to Barth's definition of an apostle, as one whose value lies in poverty, in 'what lies beyond his horizon and beyond his power. The importance of an apostle is negative rather than positive. In him a void becomes visible.' (Barth, 1960). Perhaps the good death involves such qualities of apostleship.

In conclusion, then, Godwin refines and extends the theme of the good death. But relatively few contemporary novels have the confidence to explore this area, and when they do, a dialogue with anxieties and uncertainties may speak as loudly as affirmations. Godwin has spoken of the unpopularity of this novel compared with her others; whilst other reasons might be advanced, one wonders whether it does not represent a real reluctance to confront a difficult subject. Nevertheless, for those who want a perceptive and thought-provoking reworking of the theme, it offers a good starting point.

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