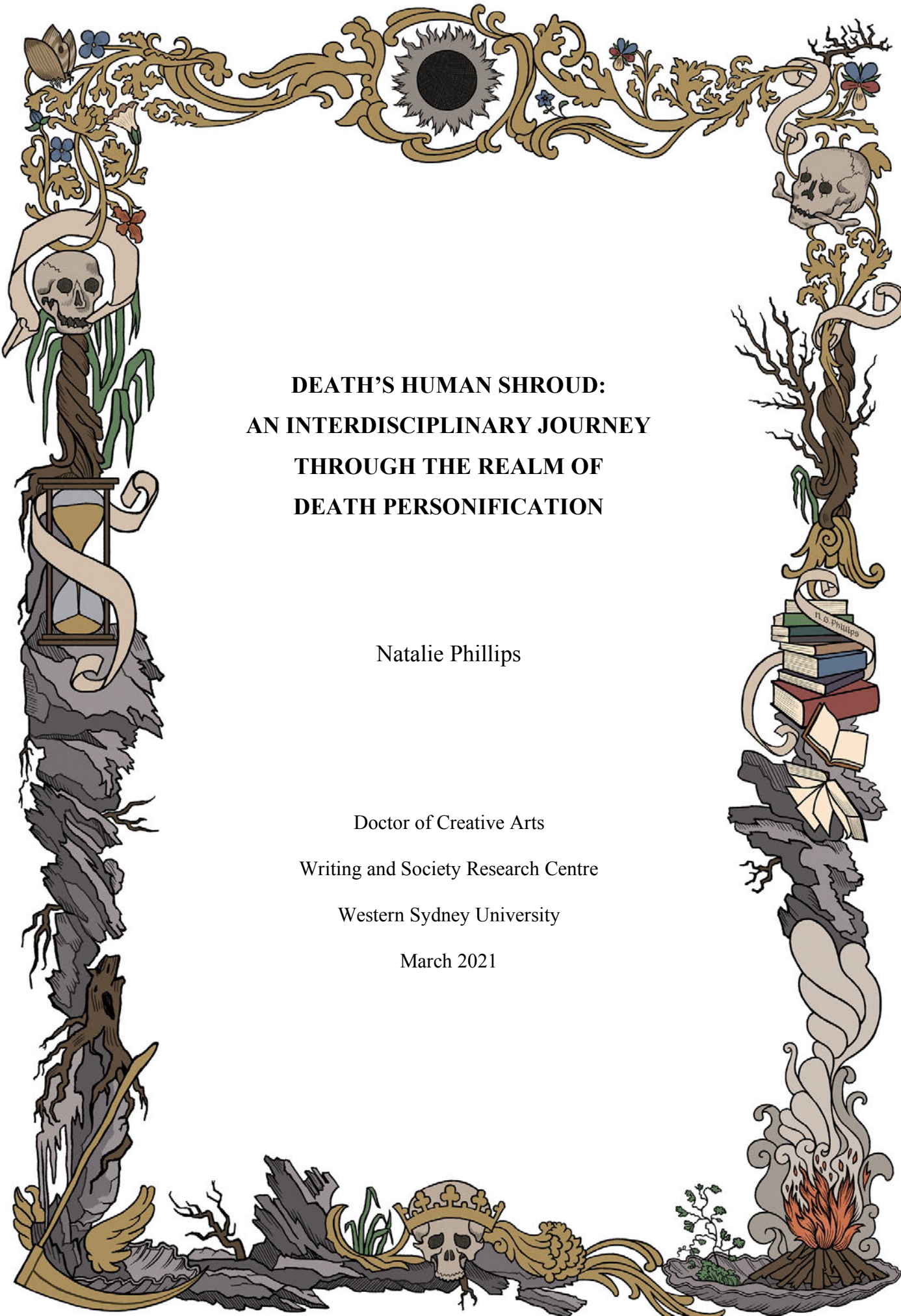


**DEATH'S HUMAN SHROUD:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNEY
THROUGH THE REALM OF
DEATH PERSONIFICATION**

Natalie Phillips

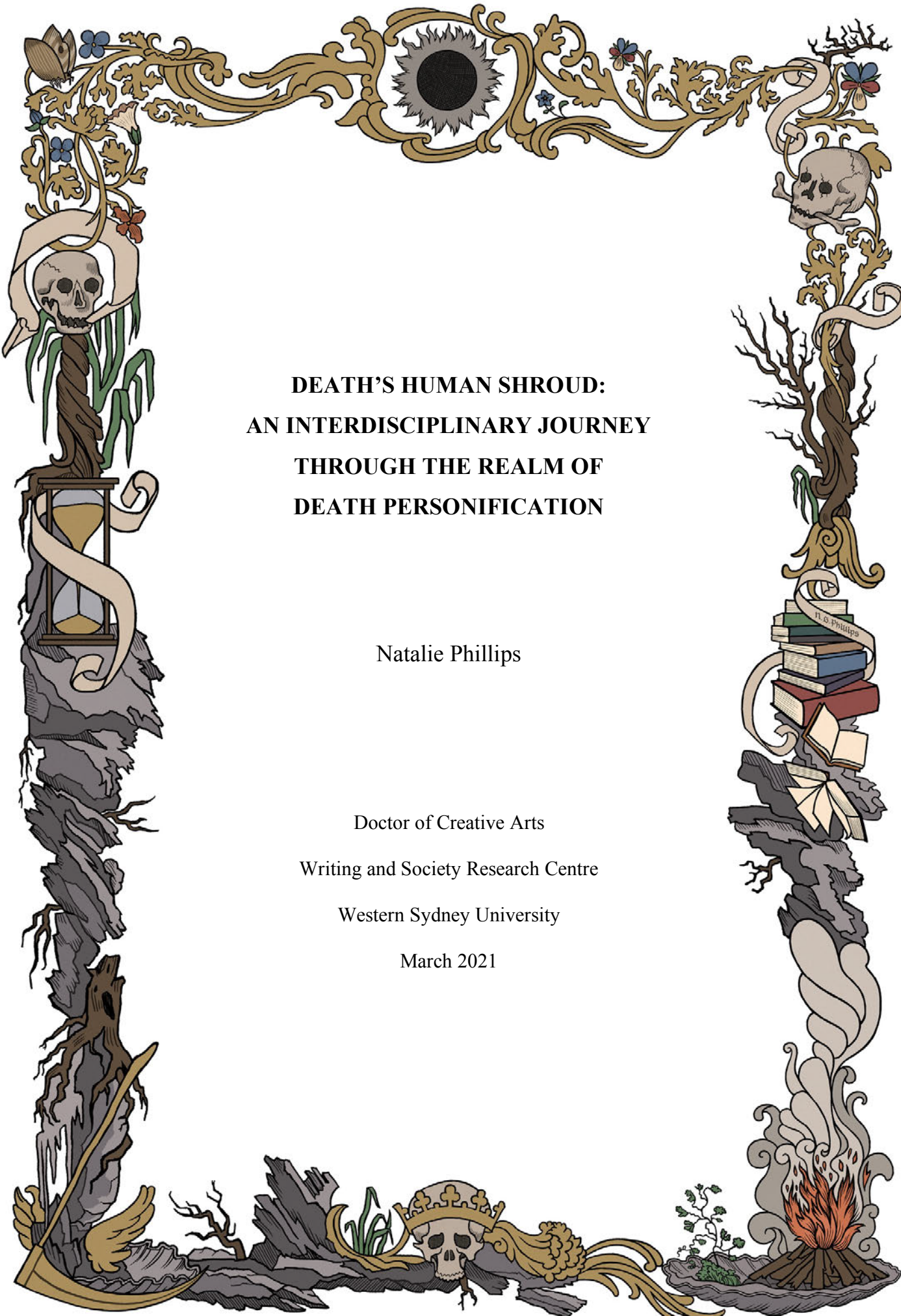
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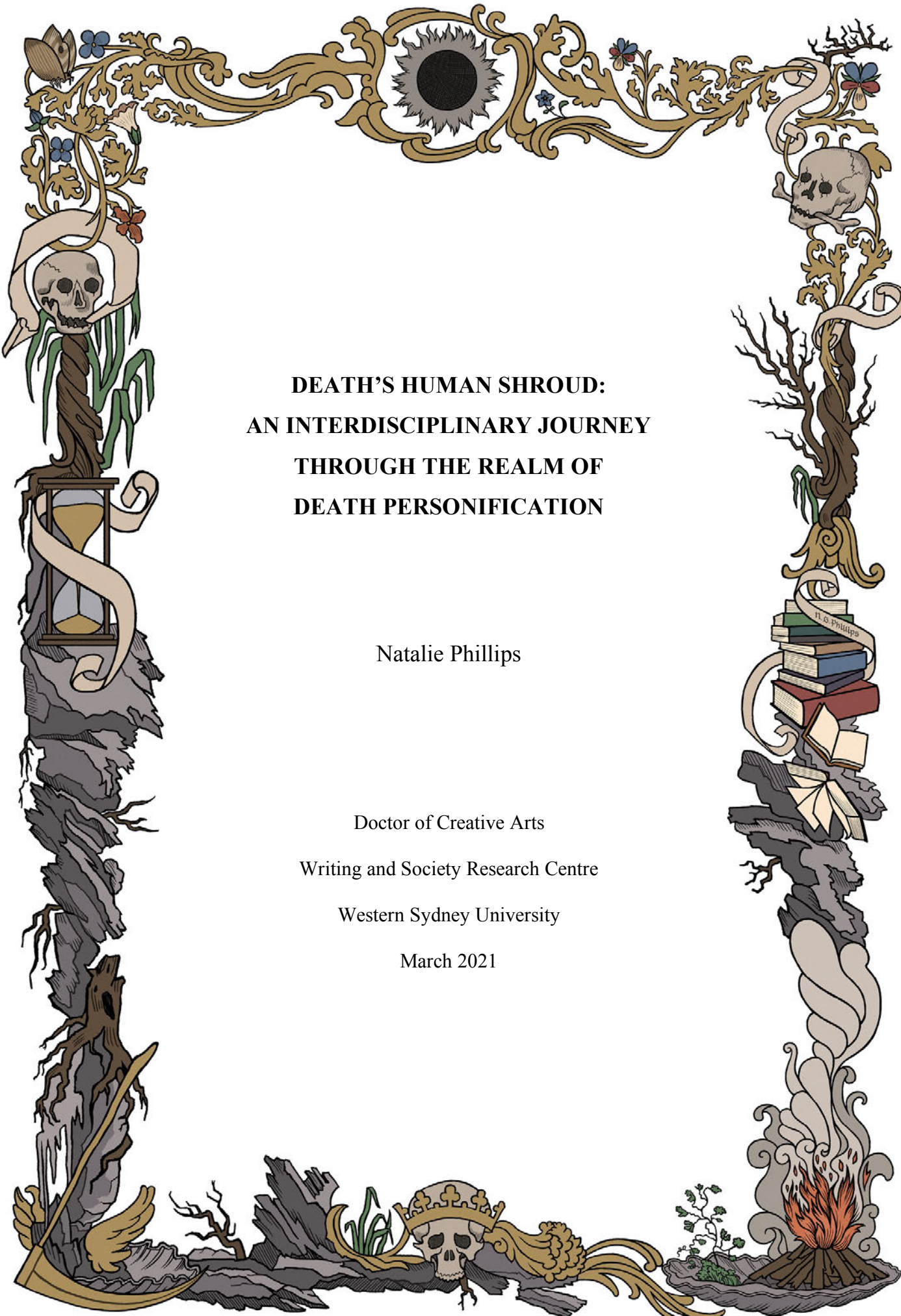
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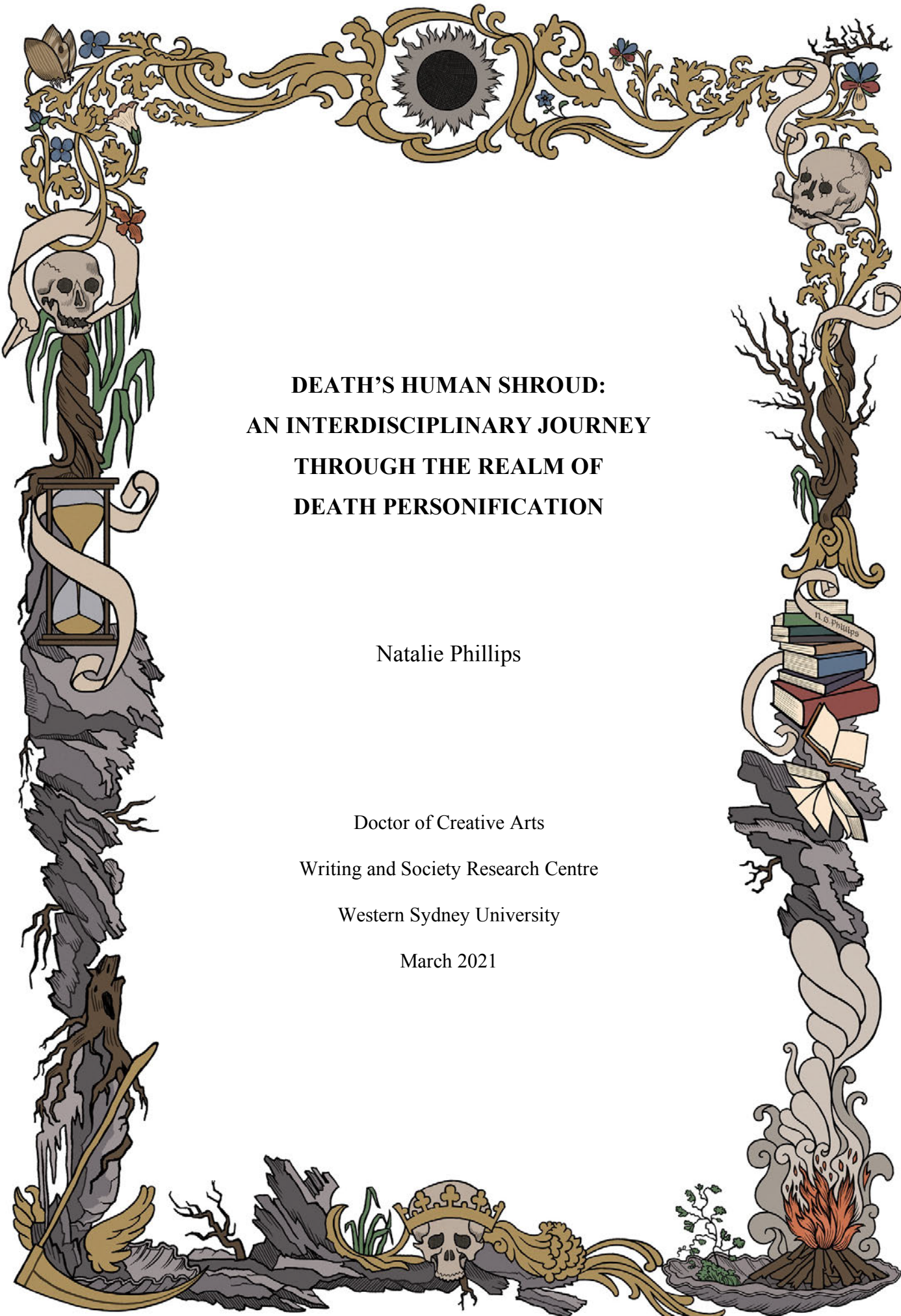
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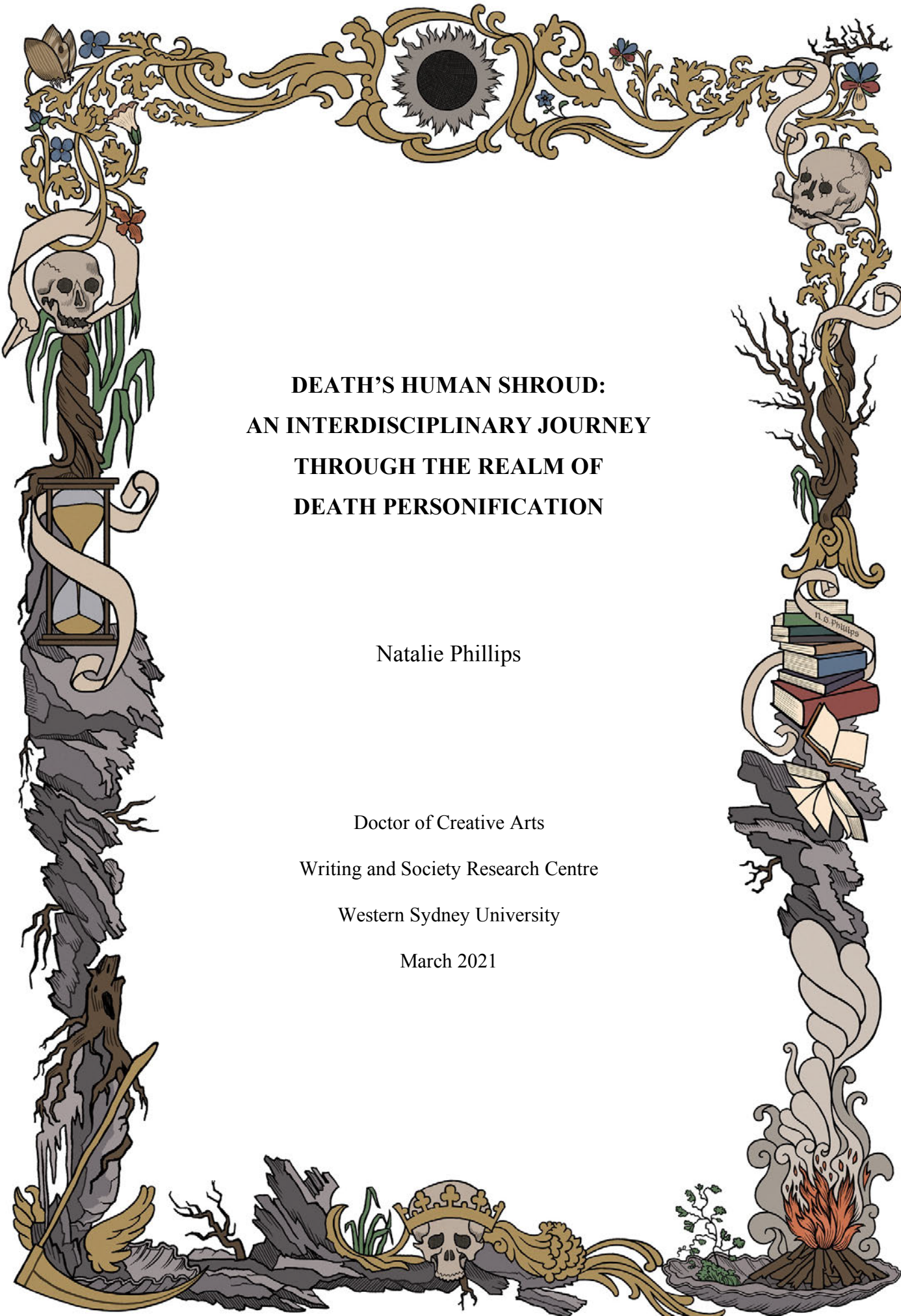
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Thank you to the School for kindly allowing me to include a custom title page. An 18th century artwork by Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (engraved and published by Johann Georg Hertel) served as my main inspiration for the design, with additional elements drawn from old etchings, illuminated manuscripts, and *memento mori* (I have included attribution for these under ‘Title Page Reference Images’). Illustrating this title page was an unexpectedly cathartic process: it became a means of visually honouring the topic of my research while helping to bring my doctoral journey to a close.

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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(Signature)

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a novel and exegesis that aims to start a conversation about the personification of death. Working from an interdisciplinary perspective, I consider the following questions: how did death personification come about? What function does it serve? And how has Death been personified in popular works of fiction?

In my exegesis, I argue that the personification of death is a useful outlet for agency and expression, reflecting an ever-evolving understanding of the concept of death. Taking on an experimental approach, I have structured the exegesis as a symbolic journey through the ‘underworld’ of death personification: a mythical map of concentric circles that represent levels of discourse, discipline, and/or text as they relate to the figuration of death. I begin by considering death-denial theory and its impact on the literature that informs my thesis. I draw upon the insights of Robert Kastenbaum, Edgar Herzog, and Karl S. Guthke, exploring the notion that humankind has an innate desire to construct images and stories around Death. I then turn to close readings of Martine Leavitt’s *Keturah and Lord Death* (2012), Sir Terry Pratchett’s *Mort* (2004), and Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (2013) to consider how these novels explore the subject of death through Death as a character.

Although this thesis is not an encyclopaedic overview of death personification, this area of research has informed my understanding and characterisation of Death in my novel. I argue for the need to explore new stories that feature death personification not only to bring attention to its capacity as an outlet for agency and expression, but to extend the conversations around death that still prove difficult in both public and private circles.

The thesis ends with my creative work, *Westall*, a dark fantasy novel about a young woman whose life is thrown into chaos after meeting a figure who she eventually learns is Death.

Introduction

In the poem “Black March”, Stevie Smith explores the subtext of death through personification.¹ She describes Death as a man who wears grey chiffon, his face concealed, his eyes “As pretty and bright / As raindrops on black twigs” (1975, pp.567–568). It is a poem best read aloud. Smith’s use of enjambment in certain stanzas prompts you to inhale just as the man (that is, Death) is equated to a breath of fresh air. Discovering the poem as an undergraduate, I was struck by its imagery, its free verse form, and the knowledge that it was written near the end of Smith’s life.² Why, I wondered, was her interpretation of death (as a subject and as a character) so wistful and platonic? Why did she view “him” as an old friend, a breath of fresh air, and a change? These questions, in turn, led me to reflect on how I might imagine Death as a person, and became the initial spark that inspired my thesis.

Conceptually, I had thought of death as inevitable and unknowable and, above all, fascinating. Over the course of my doctoral journey, I sought to unpack this fascination and came away with one word: mystery. Death carried as much mystery to me as a cold case, a magic trick, a Zen kōan. It signified a point of no return. An outcome that, from my own perspective, seemed obfuscated by multiple interpretations. I felt torn, knowing that the subjective nature of death is what makes it irrefutably compelling. I pictured Death standing before me, as resolute as a statue, hidden behind a veil I could not reach, nor pull away, until it was my time to do so.

In a TED Talk, filmmaker J.J. Abrams explores the appeal of mystery by presenting the audience with a Tannen’s Magic Mystery Box he bought decades ago and, yet, has never opened: “I realised that I haven’t opened [the box] because it represents something important to me [...] It represents infinite possibility[,] hope [and] potential” (2007). Abrams discusses how mystery can make stories even more compelling. Mystery, as “the catalyst for imagination”, transforms a question mark into a space of creative potential (Abrams, 2007). My novel, revolving as it does around death, became my own personal mystery box, representing infinite possibility.

¹ Smith’s preoccupation with death, while not explicitly stated in the poem, is a significant theme in her work. See: “Stevie Smith and the Metaphors of Disengagement” by Elizabeth Lawson (1984), “Intertextuality, Christianity and Death: Major Themes in the Poetry of Stevie Smith” by Judith Woolf (2019), and *In Search of Stevie Smith* by Sanford Sternlicht (1991).

² “Black March” appeared in *New Statesman* magazine (volume 80, issue 24) in 1970 and was included in *Scorpion and Other Poems* (1972), which was published posthumously after her death in 1971.

The purpose of my exegesis is not opening the “mystery box” of death, as it were. Rather, my aim is to focus on the nature of the box, the stories we create and conversations we share in response to it. When discussing my thesis in different circles—from family and friends to acquaintances and peers—I was met with mixed responses. Reactions ranged from curiosity and delight to shock and discomfort. An innocent question about the topic of my research soon became a conversation I grimaced through, expecting negative feedback. Why was death so difficult to talk about? Was I reading too much into it, my doubt outweighing the opportunity for a constructive and open dialogue on my thesis? Or were my observations credible? If so, why was recoiling over a natural by-product of life a response I anticipated? I thought about how I could bridge this conversational gap, translating these conflicting messages onto the page—a nuanced space in which complex experiences, shared or unfamiliar, spoken or unspoken, could coexist. I thought about how I could map out my research and discuss my findings through engaging and accessible prose.

UPPER HELL

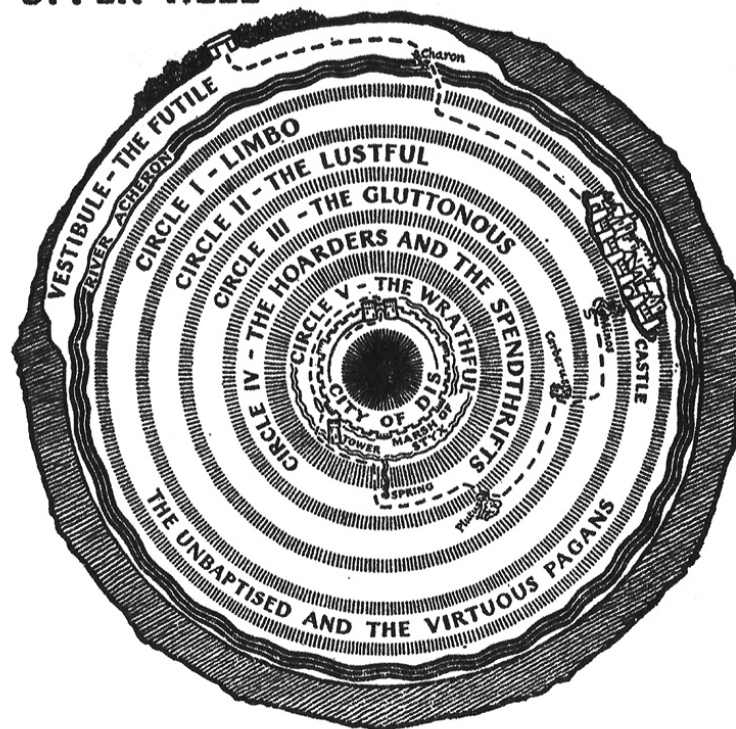


Figure 1: Map drawn by C.W. Scott-Giles, 1949.

THESIS

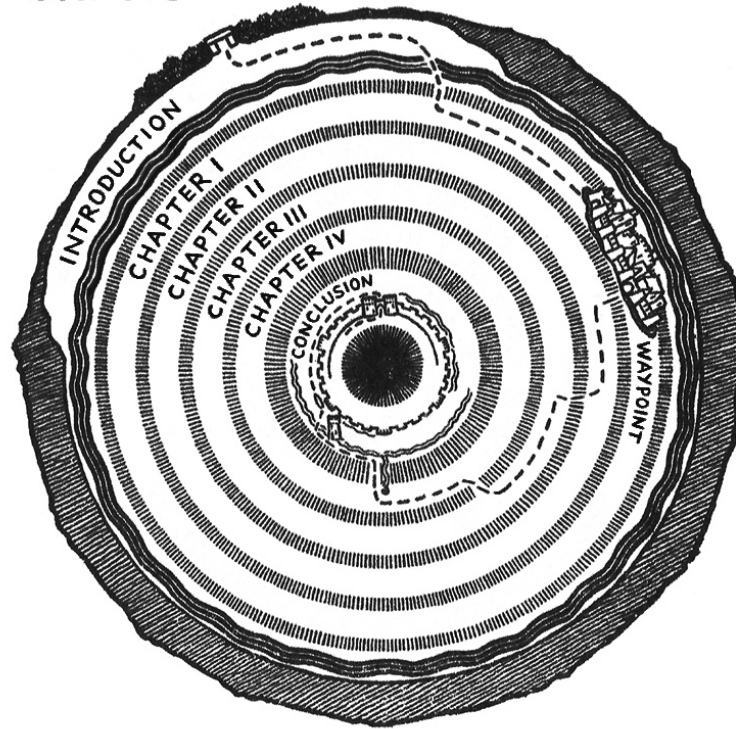


Figure 2: Modified map and visualisation of thesis.

Taking inspiration from Sword, Trofimova, and Ballard—who structure their article on frustrated academic writers “as a maze with five entrances, five exits, and a Minotaur at the centre” (2018, p.853)—I have employed my own experimental design (see Figure 1). Appropriating Scott-Giles’s drawing of Upper Hell in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy 1: Hell* (1949, p. 84), I have divided my exegesis into sections corresponding with a modified version of this map (see Figure 2). These concentric circles represent the ‘underworld’ of my thesis (that is, the core texts and threads that inform my research), starting from the outer circle and moving inwards to the central image that serves as a figurative entryway to my creative work. Here, the black circle in the centre is reimagined as the black sun image that opens my novel. This experimental structure has allowed me to approach my thesis in levels, translating the interdisciplinary territory of my research into a mythical and symbolic guided journey I embark upon with you, the reader.

Sword et al. describe their task of writing about frustration as “a journey of discovery” that led them to the idea of structuring their article as a multicursal maze (LSE Impact Blog, 2018). Their “unconventional choice of structure” was what allowed them to explore “different aspect[s] of writing-related frustration” and “empowered [them] to write through [their] own frustrations” (2018). It was this article by Sword et al. that was pivotal to my thesis, as it

inspired and empowered me to explore my own unconventional structure. In discovering Scott-Giles's map, I found a bridge between the exegetical and creative components of my thesis. This map not only helped me as I navigated my research on death personification, it symbolically translated my journey moving from the exegesis to the creative work.

While visualising my thesis as a hellish landscape may seem a little dramatic, it does mirror some of the difficulties I encountered during my candidature. Facing what I perceived as an ominous mountain of research on death personifications across mythology, folklore, and fiction, I floundered, unable to determine how I would: a) pore through all of this research literature, b) consolidate my findings into an exegesis, and c) respond through the creative practice via my own personification of death. I convinced myself that this imagined path was the only one I could follow, turning my thesis into a source of unease and uncertainty rather than excitement and possibility. I had, in other words, become the architect of my own self-imposed hell.

What followed were a series of false starts that, eventually, resulted in my finding an alternate path through the inferno. Instead of approaching death personification as an encyclopaedic body of knowledge I had to accumulate in its entirety, I focused on the rationale for Death as a human figure: how did the personification of death first emerge? What role does it serve? And how has it been utilised in popular works of fiction? These questions drove my research, allowing me to explore my topic via a focused reading of core texts, rather than becoming lost in a mountain of literature.

In her article "A Question of Genre: de-mystifying the exegesis", Tess Brady describes researching and writing her PhD (novel and exegesis) as a blurring of boundaries:

I was writing a novel and I was writing a PhD. The academic became the creative; the creative became the academic. My desk was covered with the trappings of the academy, with filing cards, photocopies, Manila folders marked 'bibliography', 'Vinland references', 'maps, other' and so on. My desk was also covered with the trappings of the novelist, with photographs and pictures, yellow stick-ons, a feather, a smooth black pebble, a list of characters, a bent and twisted paperclip, red, blue, black pens, marked-up manuscripts. But I could not maintain the division as one slid into the other and the academic and the creative processes blurred. (2000, p.3)

Brady seems to suggest that, in writing a creative PhD, there is a gradual coalescence of the creative and academic, yet my own experience writing a DCA felt more fractured by comparison. While I enjoyed gathering all forms of research—scholarly articles and books, theses, academic blog posts, podcasts, photographs and artworks, highlighted quotes from

novels, writing tips, and scribbled notes of dialogue or descriptions—I struggled with moving between the creative mode and the academic. Unlike Brady, I found it difficult to “[carry] out academic work on one day and creative work on another” (2000, p.3). More often than not, I would devote an extensive period of time to my novel, then take a lengthy break away from creative writing to reflect on and refine my exegesis. Any attempts to divert from this course were met with resistance. My trouble, I realised, was switching between two distinct bodies of writing that each required time to ‘settle into’.

In her preface to *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012), Helen Sword states that “intellectual creativity thrives best in an atmosphere of experimentation rather than conformity” (p.vii). Sword draws attention to scholars whose well-crafted writing both informs and captivates readers. In doing so, she proposes a revolution to academic writing, one which “encourages readers to adopt whatever stylistic strategies best suit their own skin” (p.viii). Sword’s book helped bridge the gap between my creative and academic writing by reminding me that I did not have to master two separate voices—I could find my own voice instead. This emboldened me to embrace a more experimental style and write a thesis that (I hoped) was accessible and engaging to a wider audience.

My exegesis is motivated by three strands of research. In the first strand, I consider the discourse on death-denial theory and how it relates to the literature that informs my thesis. In the second strand, I examine the development of death personification in the context of psychology, sociology, and anthropology to explore how death personification emerged and evolved over time. In the third strand, I undertake close readings of three novels featuring Death as a key character, focusing on the literary techniques and devices each author employs to explore the subject of death. In examining these strands, my aim is to spark interest in the topic of death personification, bringing awareness to its potential as a source of agency and meaning-making.

I have written this thesis for readers interested in an interdisciplinary exploration of death personified. My research is situated in the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, religion, mythology, literary criticism, and creative writing. While I have delved into multiple areas in the humanities and social sciences as part of my research, I am by no means a specialist in them. Adopting what Tess Brady refers to as the “bowerbird technique”, I gathered sources that focus on the purpose of personifying death, in much the same way that a bowerbird “picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours” (2000, p.2). Using this “bowerbird” methodology, I isolated specific pieces of knowledge across several disciplines to develop my own working knowledge of death personification.

By focusing on characterisations of death in fiction, my aim is to consider how creative writing offers an imaginative and immersive avenue for thinking about the subject of death. While the personification of death has been explored widely in popular culture,³ I have narrowed my focus to the following novels: *Keturah and Lord Death* by Martine Leavitt (2012), *Mort* by Sir Terry Pratchett (2004), and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2013).⁴ Through close readings, I consider how Leavitt, Pratchett, and Zusak evoke sympathy for Death as a character, thereby facilitating a more thought-provoking, nuanced approach to the subject of death. I argue that death personification is an ever-evolving device that can be further explored through creative writing and scholarly research.

In approaching the concept of death as a mystery, I do not mean to ignore or rebuke the beliefs, traditions, and theories that have shaped much of human history. Indeed, there are many interpretations of death from cultural and religious perspectives, all of which serve to illuminate this very subject. My decision to approach death via the theme of mystery was informed by my own perspective, my research, and my creative practice. In Gwen Harwood's poem, "Death has no Features of His Own", she describes Death as wearing the faces of others, from "the young eye bathed in brightness" to "the raging cheekbones of a raddled queen" (2011, p. 152). This poem served as the inspiration for my novel. I thought of Death as a character whose features were determined by the individual gazing upon them, their "true" face a perpetual mystery. My research on death personification further solidified this approach, as I picked up on several terms attributed to the concept of death: unimaginable, faceless, featureless, shapeless, unintelligible, unknowable. Translating this idea in my novel, my portrayal of Death became a mirror, reflecting the subjective, cultural, religious, and psychological territory of death. My protagonist served as a commentary on death and grief, undergoing a surreal and treacherous journey from denial and dread to acceptance and reconciliation.

Before sharing this story, however, I must start at the beginning. Returning to my experimental map (see Figure 2), allow me to guide you through the underworld. While the topography of this exegesis is a medley of fields and ideas, I hope my tour through the realm of death personification entertains, illuminates, and sparks your own interest in this topic.

³ More examples of death personification in popular culture can be found here: <https://io9.gizmodo.com/the-10-greatest-personifications-of-death-in-pop-culture-1748726158>.

⁴ These novels were chosen due to their reception, their variation in genre and writing style, and the distinct ways in which they personify Death. In looking at the positive reception of each novel, I would suggest that their popularity and/or acclaim is worth considering. This seems to indicate that the story, the writing style, and the ways in which Death is explored as a character resonate with readers.

Chapter I

Picture an art gallery: all high ceilings, wooden floorboards, life-size sculptures, and old artworks in gilded frames. Imagine that this gallery is filled with interpretations of Death incarnate. There is a painting of Thanatos, the Greek god of death. He appears youthful and poised, dressed in black, his face genteel. In his hand is a burning torch that is lowered to the ground. There is a stone carving of Hel, the Norse goddess of death and the underworld. One half of her face is young and lively, the other half is putrefied. Beside her is Garmr, her guardian hound. There is a watercolour portrait of Santa Muerte, the Mexican folk saint and deity of death. She is a skeletal figure wearing a sweeping rainbow dress, her veil reminiscent of both a nun and a bride. There is a black bust sculpture of Baron Samedi, loa of the dead in Haitian Vodou. His features are carved to resemble a skull. He wears a dress coat and top hat. And there is an etched print of the fourth horseman of the apocalypse. Hatching lines depict a skeleton in black robes, riding upon a pale horse. Hades follows behind him, a monster with open jaws and sharp teeth glinting in the darkness. On and on it goes, image after image, room after room.

Personifications of death abound in art and literature. They can be gods, psychopomps, or characters in folklore, fairy tales, and other fantastical stories. These personifications reflect the many different ways of imagining the concept of death: kind and comforting, terrifying and repulsive, beguiling and seductive. This diversity offers some insight into the rich and complex ways in which the subject of death has been explored. The questions posed in this chapter are: how did such images come about? Why is there a need to personify death? And are there new ways we can think about the figuration of death today?

This chapter breaks down some of the literature surrounding death personification in order to explore the purpose, variety, and significance of such representations. I focus on the variegated and transformative nature of the Death figure, considering the notion that humankind has an innate desire to construct images and stories around death. I begin by outlining four types of death personification distinguished by Robert Kastenbaum in *Death, Society, and Human Experience* (2012), exploring the potential for contemporary interpretations of death personified. I examine Edgar Herzog's "Death-Demon" in *Psyche and Death: Death-Demons in Folklore, Myths, and Modern Dreams* (2000), considering his theory on the mythical and primordial origins of Death as a figure. I then turn to Karl S. Guthke's *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (1999), exploring the significance of gender in the figuration of death. By reviewing this literature, my aim is to glean the rationale

behind death personification.⁵ Moreover, I approach the Death figure as an ever-evolving device, reflecting not only how the concept of death is understood but how it has the capacity to change over time.

Before examining these texts, however, it is useful to consider the death-denial theory that is often associated with individual, cultural, and religious responses to death and dying—that is, the assumed role that fear and denial play in grappling with mortality. In looking at death-denial theory, I ask: is death personification a form of denial that seeks to “deny” the threat of death via personification? Or is it a device that allows people to engage with, rather than deny, the inevitability of death? As any extensive investigation of death-denial discourse would exceed the parameters of my thesis, only a select number of sources have been chosen for discussion. Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* (1977) serves as my stepping stone, and I introduce his theory before addressing a broader exploration and critique of that thesis by Allan Kellehear, Laura Tradii and Martin Robert. This overview is not a comprehensive rundown of the death-denial thesis but, rather, a snapshot of some of the literature on the theory, its chronology, and its main criticisms. In providing this framework, I aim to do three things: 1) help give some context to the literature that is the focus of this chapter; 2) draw attention to the convoluted nature of the death-denial thesis; and 3) consider how the research literature I have examined on death personification is, directly or indirectly, impacted by this theory. Nevertheless, the overall purpose of this chapter is to examine the construction of death personification from an interdisciplinary perspective, exploring the function it serves while indicating the wealth of images that exist.

i. An Overview of Death-Denial Discourse

In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker argues that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else” (1997, p.xvii). As a “self-conscious animal”, humans are aware of their mortality and are therefore “out of nature and hopelessly in it” (p.87; p.26). Becker argues that the need to control fear over death results in a fervent denial of it. According to him, existential dread is overcome by the pursuit of *causa-sui* (immortality) projects,

⁵ Each of the above authors/texts navigates the figuration of death from their own field, area of interest, and time period. Kastenbaum’s book (first published in 2007) looks at death personification through the lens of modern psychology and sociology; Herzog’s book (first published in 1983) through ancient myths and Jungian psychology; and Guthke’s book (published in 1999) through the intersection of art, culture, and gender. While I draw upon points of similarity in how these authors approach the figuration of death, it is also important to acknowledge areas in which they diverge from one another.

elevating the human self towards something more heroic and, supposedly, eternal. In this way, Becker asserts that to be human is to be torn between the symbolic, infinite self and the physical, finite self. One half “up in the stars”, the other half “food for worms” (p.26).⁶

While Becker is not the founder of death-denial theory, his book stems from the salient knowledge of several renowned thinkers, including Otto Rank, Sigmund Freud, and Søren Kierkegaard. *The Denial of Death* continues to surface in discussions around the subject of death, both in academic journals and in news articles. Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski notably draw upon Becker’s work in relation to their Terror Management Theory (TMT). They argue that conflict between the inevitability of death and an animal instinct for self-preservation causes terror which influences human motivation and behaviour (Greenberg et al., 1997).⁷ Articles from *Vox*, *OpenDemocracy*, and *The Conversation* that bring up the COVID-19 pandemic all reference *The Denial of Death*, with topics ranging from the importance of maranasati or “mindfulness of death”, to COVID-19 as “a real-life terror management experiment”, and how news on the coronavirus death toll impacts judgment and decision-making (Samuel, 2020; Rowe, 2020; Comerford & McCabe, 2020). The persistence of conversations around death and denial seems to indicate that the theory of death-denial is prevalent and ongoing. Returning to Becker’s original thesis then, we must ask: is humankind truly haunted by a fear of death? And does such fear inevitably result in repression and denial of death?

Critics of that thesis would say otherwise. In his article, “Are we a ‘death-denying’ society? A sociological review” (1984), Professor Allan Kellehear breaks down the main components of death-denial theory in order to reveal its fundamental flaws. Laura Tradii and Martin Robert explore the discursive implications of the theory in their own two-part article, examining the “genealogy” of death-denial and why it has become “obsolete or altogether counterproductive” (2019a, pp.247-248). By collating the main points of criticism from these scholars and their respective articles, we see an entirely different perspective towards death-denial—one which questions the assumption that modern Western societies fear and deny the reality of death.

⁶ Becker describes religion as one of many “hero-systems”: “It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning” (1997, p.5). Becker seems to suggest that, regardless of one’s belief (or lack thereof), we cling to our own hero-systems in order to feel a sense of purpose and value in our lives.

⁷ Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Lockett have since discussed TMT’s implications in relation to responses to the pandemic in their article “Terror Management Theory and the COVID-19 Pandemic” (2020, p.2).

Kellehear brings attention to the problematic nature of the term “denial”, stating: “As a theoretical construct [denial] has the best of both worlds—valid with and even more valid without—any evidence” (1984, p.713). In other words, when deemed an “avoidance of reality”, denial can be used to explain the absence of fear towards death as proof to the contrary (p.713). Tradii and Robert echo this issue, mentioning how the term “denial” has been criticised for its ambiguity due to a lack of clarity on how it can be classified and quantified (2019b, p.378). Viewed in this light, the indiscriminate use of “denial” encourages the misconception that society is death-denying, revealing how inconstant, subjective, and reductive this term can be.

While Kellehear acknowledges that fear of death exists, he disputes the belief that such a fear is universal, and that the absence of fear must equate to denial. Here, the importance of distinguishing between the fear of death, the “fear of the dying process”, and “a general fear of life” is brought to the forefront (Kellehear, 1984, p.715). In addressing the medicalisation of death, which has “removed and institutionalised” death and disease to hospitals, Kellehear states: “Far from encouraging denial, medicalising death has encouraged periodic medical check-ups which remind people of the increasing vulnerability of their bodies” (pp.716-717). In short, hospitals may serve as an allocated area for the dying but the facts of death and dying are neither denied nor avoided through the medicalisation of death. Tradii and Robert add to this argument by citing further criticism on “the parallel often drawn between denial and medicalisation” (2019b, p.381). They reaffirm that hospices and hospitals, by containing the dying, are not intentionally segregating or concealing the condition of death but are, rather, “the consequence of bureaucratisation” that is an inherent part of a larger social structure (p.381). Further to the above, Kellehear critiques Phillipe Ariès and Ivan Illich’s approach to death-denial, which asserts that forfeiting control over the dying process to medical staff reflects a decline in autonomy and, ultimately, the denial of a “good death” (1984, p.717). This argument is reframed as a clash between the expansion of individualism and institutional conformity (pp.717-718). As made evident through present-day issues such as the rights of the dying, the aged, and the euthanasia debate, what constitutes a good death is a complex matter that is subject to conflict between institutional constraints and individual autonomy.

While there is little mention of taboo in Kellehear’s article, Tradii and Robert expand on this term as adjacent to denial and caught in a paradox: “despite [death-denial theory’s] assumed goal of breaking the taboo on death, it needs death to be denied in order to exist” (2019b, p.386). Several examples are listed to corroborate the existence of a taboo around death: the decline in exposure to the experience of others dying, euphemisms around the deceased, lifelike preservation of the dead, and the depersonalised aspects of medicalised dying

(pp.252-253). Further social practices brought up by Kellehear include the funeral industry, coffins (along with embalming), memorial gardens, funeral flowers and wreaths, religion, and reluctance to openly grieve or discuss death. From a death-denialist perspective, such practices can be viewed as concealing death by “beautifying” it, defying the reality of death through faith, and resisting grief or discussions around death (p.719). In reality, these examples are subject to a number of alternate interpretations: they counter the threatening imagery of death, capitalise or support those made vulnerable in their loss, perpetuate the use of tokens or spaces for social customs, and reveal the complex territory of conversational etiquette around death. In other words, these practices are part of a larger sociological process that seeks to bring a sense of order, peace, and/or reflection, reinforcing the idea that “societies do not deny death but instead organise for it and around it” (p.720).

In exploring how the “death-denial narrative” has become so pervasive, Tradii and Robert examine Anglophone and French literature on death to establish their own chronological overview. They suggest that the beginnings of denial took shape in early twentieth-century literature, where difficulties speaking about the physical realities of death from one’s own culture thus created “the notion that death and mortality were somewhat concealed, insignificant, or not fully integrated within modern Western societies” (Robert & Tradii, 2019a, p.250). This apparent air of distance towards death was a precursor to death-denial’s emergence in the 1950s through the work of Sigmund Freud, Geoffrey Gorer, and Philippe Ariès. Freud, Gorer, and Ariès explored the subject of denial in different ways: the inability to accept the reality of one’s own mortality; reluctance when talking about death via withholding terminal diagnoses; and a longing for the “tame death” of the past (p.252). In a way, their literature can be viewed as a foothold that helped the theory of death-denial burgeon within the span of three decades.

And yet, despite the fact that the theory has received pointed criticism, it continues to gain traction. Tradii and Robert suggest that the reason why it is so widespread is because, ideologically speaking, “[d]eath-denial is a narrative of fall [which] mourns the loss of pre-modern symbolic structures, and the entrance in a dehumanising, mechanised, profit-oriented order” (2019b, p.386). In essence, it is a narrative that draws upon wistfulness: a yearning for the rituals and beliefs of the past that have (supposedly) been lost in our dehumanised, mechanical, and capitalistic present. Nevertheless, Tradii and Robert argue that a clear shift in death studies (made evident by the criticism they outline towards the theory) indicate that categories of taboo or denial are no longer applicable.

Having examined the prominent examples, arguments, and counterarguments around death-denial, what can be gathered from this discourse? My overview, while brief, shows a clear conflict between psychological and sociological approaches to the subject. Yes, fear and denial of death can and do exist—but is this a universal belief, as proponents of death-denial suggest? Kellehear’s systematic review of the thesis reveals how fragmented it is, from its ill-defined terminology, its differing approaches, and the key examples of denial that do not hold up to scrutiny. Tradii and Robert add further to this critique, exploring the chronological scope of death-denial alongside main sources of criticism, arguing that a shift in death studies and attitudes towards death and dying make the theory obsolete altogether. These critiques of the death-denial thesis highlight the dilemma in applying psychological explanations to sociological phenomena. Moreover, they show how the concept of fear, denial, and taboo towards death in Western societies is unsupported.

Yet, as Tradii and Robert suggest, “the [death-denial] narrative still lives on” despite its academic scrutiny and valid arguments made against it (2019b, p.384). It would, perhaps, be easy to fall for such a narrative—to suggest that my own struggles when discussing my thesis topic were indicative of fear, taboo, or denial. Indeed, death-denial served as a hypothesis I explored heavily during the early stages of my thesis. It was only upon reading its criticisms that I was forced to re-examine conversations I had during my candidature. It became necessary to acknowledge that any difficulties I experienced when talking about death in different circles were not indicative of death-denial. Rather, the mixed reactions provoked by my thesis suggested that conversations around death are as subjective, nuanced, and complex as the nature of death and dying in contemporary society.

In learning more about the death-denial discourse, I returned to the foundational texts I drew upon as research with a new perspective. I noticed how fear, taboo, or denial seemed to bleed into the ideas explored in the core texts of this chapter. Robert Kastenbaum, for instance, explores denial as a by-product of death anxiety (2012, p.19; p.28). Herzog writes that awareness of death irrefutably leads to a fearful confrontation with “something wholly incomprehensible” (2000, p.7). Guthke speaks of death images as “personifications of that which is largely taboo in industrialized societies today” (1999, p.10). While each author explores denial or taboo to varying degrees, their works do seem to support the idea of the Death figure as a reaction to a largely negative way of thinking and feeling about the concept of death. This, in effect, supports the concept of death as driven by fear and resistance.

Although the scope of my research on death-denial is limited, this theory can be considered an undercurrent running through the research literature I have explored on death personification. As will be made evident, this research suggests the Death figure serves as a psychological mechanism to express, cope with, alleviate, and even ameliorate death. While the literature may approach death personification as a strategy to help overcome fear and denial, I would suggest an alternate perspective. Namely, that the figuration of death reflects differing understandings of the concept of death. In looking at Death as an ever-evolving device of agency and meaning-making, my goal is to consider how writers and readers alike can engage with the subject of death through fiction. In this way, I would argue that death personification is not another form of denial but, rather, a means of directly engaging with (and revitalising dialogue around) the subject of death.

ii. Kastenbaum's Four Types of Personification

What function does the personification of death serve, and why is it important? One possible explanation found in literature on the subject is that personifying death works as a coping mechanism. In the eleventh edition of *Death, Society, and Human Experience*, Robert Kastenbaum states:

Personifications can help individuals and societies cope with death by (a) objectifying an abstract concept; (b) expressing feelings that are difficult to put into words; (c) serving as a coin of communication among people who otherwise would hesitate to share their feelings; (d) absorbing some of the shock, pain, anger, and fear that is experienced as a result of traumatic events; and (e) providing symbols that can be repeatedly reshaped to stimulate emotional healing and cognitive integration. (2012, p.53)

This explanation reinforces the idea that the figuration of death exists as a strategy to overcome negative feelings towards death. Kastenbaum argues that studies of death personification provide useful insight on ways people can interpret death. He outlines four types of personification discerned from his own interview-based studies:⁸ the macabre figure, the gentle

⁸ These findings are based on surveys from 240 Americans. It must also be noted that Ruth Aisenberg, co-author of the first edition, is omitted from later editions for reasons undisclosed. As I have used an edition which has Kastenbaum as sole author, I have cited only him in relation to this research.

comforter, the gay deceiver,⁹ and the automaton (2012, pp.53-54). This research highlights personal characteristics that his interviewees associate with representations of death. An undergraduate respondent, for example, describes Death in the macabre form: a male figure with jagged and threatening features, hair matted and bloody, fingers and teeth sharp and long. A registered nurse imagines Death as the gentle comforter: an old man wearing a shabby but clean robe, his features strong, eyes piercing, and his bearing much like that of a biblical figure. A young woman pictures Death as the gay deceiver: a woman of strange beauty, with long hair, dark eyes, and pale skin, her manner worldly and well-connected. And, for another woman, Death is the automaton: an undistinguished man who dispassionately goes about his job, unable to be dissuaded or reasoned with. These descriptions reveal how individuals can personify death through the aspects they attribute to the nature of death.

Kastenbaum's research also shows how the Death figure can evolve over time. In the two-and-a-half decades that elapsed between his interview-based studies (done in 1971 and 1996 respectively), noticeable differences include an increase in female interpretations from women respondents, and in men attributing the macabre or automaton form to Death while women seemed to favour the gentle comforter. Such comparative work, albeit brief, provides a glimpse of the mercurial and transformative potential of the Death figure—a point which I will return to when examining Herzog and Guthke's texts. It must also be stated that while Kastenbaum puts forward the notion that studies on death personification are useful to consider, no follow-up research has been produced beyond his 1971 and 1996 interviews. As a result, both studies are significantly outdated. Still, such data does serve as a helpful frame of reference and has resulted in some newer empirical research.

In a recent article in *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying*, Youngjin Kang conducts his own data analysis on Kastenbaum's four types of personification in order to supplement further findings (2019).¹⁰ Kang asks participants to visualise the cause, place, and context of death—in other words, visualising a death scenario—in relation to the macabre figure, gentle comforter, gay deceiver, and automaton. In doing so, he considers what real events these four symbolic forms might represent. His results suggest positive or negative connotations behind the cause of death are a determining factor in which type of personification is chosen. For

⁹ Kastenbaum states that the title for this form of death personification was established “before gay became widely used as a synonym for male homosexuality” (2012, p.54). While this clarification is useful, his wording is pejorative and shows heterosexual bias in language. More information can be found on GLAAD's website (<https://www.glaad.org/reference/offensive>) and the American Psychological Association (APA)'s website (<https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/language>).

¹⁰ Kang includes death personifications preceding Kastenbaum's (and Aisenburg's) studies, showing how death personification has been established in earlier literature.

example, Kang found that the macabre figure was associated with a “bad death” (killing or murder), with participants imagining the death taking place outside (i.e. away from home) in a violent manner (2019, p.14). By comparison, the gentle comforter was associated with a “good death” (peaceful and positive) and was imagined as dying at home of old age, surrounded by loved ones (p.15). The gay deceiver corresponded with a heart attack and was pictured as taking place at hospital more so than outside or at home. And the automaton was associated with cancer, occurring in the hospital environment and surrounded by machines. These findings show that Kastenbaum’s four types of personification can reflect distinct components and conditions of death. What remains unclear, however, is whether these types are an individual response “to experimental stimuli” or whether they are a psychological assessment on how real-life death shapes the process of personification (Kang, 2019, p.17).

Kang notes that while some studies show respondents with higher death anxiety tend to imagine Death as macabre (with those of lower anxiety picturing the gentle comforter or automaton) another study shows death-anxious people favouring the gay deceiver (p.4). Moreover, a third, more recent, study suggests levels of anxiety around death have no bearing on how individuals personify death. These conflicting studies seem to challenge the theory that preconceptions and experiences around death influence how an individual personifies the concept. Kang’s and Kastenbaum’s data is also limited to an American sample population, meaning that their research does not factor in contemporary perspectives across different countries and cultures. What, I wondered, would survey data from an Australian sample audience reveal? Are there newer personifications that can be considered beyond those outlined in Kastenbaum’s research? These questions highlighted a gap in the research, leading me to reflect on how death might be imagined when encompassing different individual, cultural, and religious perspectives.

Despite the limited scope of Kastenbaum and Kang’s findings, a central idea we can gather from their work is how varied and subjective death personification can be. We see how a number of factors can inform the Death figure: a person’s psychology, preconceptions towards death, cultural and religious beliefs, and experiences around death and dying. How we personify Death—whether repulsive and vicious, old and welcoming, beguiling and dangerous, or mundane and conservative—indicates that our understanding of the subject of death is both complex and varied. Nevertheless, Kastenbaum and Kang suggest the figuration of death as a fruitful area for future researchers. While I agree, I would propose the personification of death in fiction as a wellspring that is deserving of further research. As I discuss over the next

chapters, it is through imagining Death as a nuanced and complex character in creative writing that we are offered an alternate means of navigating and discussing the concept of death.

iii. Herzog's Death-Demon

Another distinct approach to death personification can also be found in Edgar Herzog's *Psyche and Death: Death-Demons in Folklore, Myths, and Modern Dreams*.¹¹ Herzog's book serves as an anthropological and psychological survey into how people relate to and reconcile with death, centred on the premise that "humankind has always attempted to come to terms with death by means of images" (2000, p.2). Herzog argues that these inner images reveal different aspects of Death by way of animal and human guises. He refers to these images as "different forms of the Death-Demon": a catch-all term he interchanges with killer-being, death-being, and death-image (p. 42). While Herzog's Death-Demon taxonomy encompasses categories that fall outside personification, these areas are contributing factors to the conceptual evolution of death into its personified form and are, therefore, useful to consider.¹² As Herzog states, these forms represent "the inner crystallization of a numinous experience into an image," with the human "secretly contained within them" (2000, p.76). Exploring some of the Death-Demon's forms—its features and tools, as well as its etymological and mythical threads—I reflect on how these categories inform the Death figure. Before exploring these forms, however, it is important to unpack Herzog's conceptualisation of the Death-Demon. What, exactly, is it? Why is it significant? And how does it relate to death personification?

iiia. Origins, Function, and Taxonomy

Herzog speculates that the "original and natural 'human' response" to dead bodies and the act of killing was likely fear, disgust, and the urge to flee (2000, pp.15-16). He explains that, through the horror of death, a sense of the uncanny emerges: "Horror gets its special character from its incomprehensibility, its formlessness, and from the absence of any image, as well as

¹¹ *Psyche and Death* is a two-part study based on Herzog's lectures at the C.G. Jung Institute. The second study, while thought-provoking, draws more attention to dream analysis for the purposes of psychotherapy and has, therefore, not been considered in this section.

¹² It is important to note that Herzog explores his Death-Demon concept as taking on animal forms (dog, wolf, snake, bird, horse, etc.) as well as the human form. While these animal categories may seem irrelevant to my thesis topic, I would suggest that they are important to consider from a holistic perspective, as they indicate the development of ways in which people began to express the concept of death (that is, turning from animal forms towards the human form).

from invisibility” (p.16). By dying, the dead become mysteriously transformed into “something of the tremendum, the incomprehensible, the wholly other” (p.19). Herzog suggests the Death-Demon originates from this state of horror, forcing the individual to locate a representational object onto which their fear might be displaced. Following this logic, the role of the Death-Demon and, therefore, death personification can be interpreted as a defence mechanism. Like an oyster encasing the irritant in its shell with nacre, humans encase the horror of death with archaic images in order to counteract it. The Death figure, then, can be seen as a human countermeasure provoked by a psychic conflict with death.

Herzog outlines several forms associated with the Death-Demon, some of which include the *hider*, the dog, the wolf, the snake, the bird, the horse, and the human.¹³ These categories, he suggests, demonstrate the multifaceted nature of Death as a figure: “The compilation of the images from separated parts of a variety of death-bringing, devouring, or constricting animals [...] expresses something of the complex nature of the Death-Demon” (2000, p.72). In other words, by encompassing an array of attributes, the Death-Demon explores a manifold of meanings connected to the concept of death.

As a scholar of Jung’s work, Herzog adheres to the principle that inner images are double-natured. By this, he means they emerge from the psyche “as a response to the world and [...] a means of understanding the world” (2000, p.41). These inner images, he states, “are not fixed and rigid but change and develop like living things” (p.42). This is a crucial characteristic of figurations of the Death-Demon, which seeks to provoke terror, conceal, and ensnare. Using these multiple forms, the Death-Demon is reworked and reshaped to “express new aspects of the central theme, new insights into the nature of the problem” (p. 75). The “central theme” or “problem” is the concept of death, which cannot be captured through a single image and must, therefore, be expressed through a series of images in order to convey further aspects. By drawing attention to these forms, the Death-Demon’s kaleidoscopic nature is conveyed: a patchwork of rich and compelling imagery. The following overview provides further detail and examples of the Death-Demon across mythology and folklore:

Hider. This prototypical form of Death-Demon takes its shape through the act of hiding or shrouding, thus conveying “the mystery and hiddenness of death” (Herzog, 2000, pp.33-34). Notable human examples of the *hider*-form include the Greek nymph Calypso (from *kaluptein*, meaning to “hide in the earth”) and the Norse goddess Hel (from *helan*, meaning “conceal”),

¹³ Herzog uses double quotation marks and capitalisation for the “Hider” but does not apply this formatting to the other forms of Death-Demon. To keep these categories distinct and consistent, I have opted to add a hyphen when referring to each form (i.e. *hider*-form, *wolf*-form, *bird*-form).

as both are mythical figures connected to death and the earth (pp.35-36). While not explicitly stated by Herzog, the landscape can also be seen as an instance of the hider-form. Through the “expressive act of burial,” the earth becomes a monster that “opens to take the dead into it, to hide and shroud them in itself” (p.37). This imagery transforms the earth into a mythical hell-mouth, evocative of medieval illuminated manuscripts depicting damned individuals trapped within its monstrous belly. Viewed in this light, caves, chasms, gorges and other such natural formations reveal their symbolic potential as monsters of or gateways to the underworld.

Dog and Wolf. These canine forms of Death-Demon are similarly tied to the underworld. At face value, they convey death through their jaws and fangs, capable of rending flesh and consuming carrion. Yet, on a mythological scale, the dog-form and wolf-form can be seen as guardians and/or psychopomps. In Aztec mythology, there is Xolotl, “the red hound of the dead” whose breath is capable of bringing corpses back to life (Herzog, 2000, p.49). There is Anubis, the half-human jackal-headed god and “Lord of the Grave in ancient Egypt” (p.49). There is also Garmr, the hound or wolf of death in Nordic myth, and Cerberus, the multi-headed “dog-shaped monster” of Hell in Greek mythology (p.51; p.53). Here, dog and wolf characteristics not only express the devouring nature of death, they also transform the beast of prey into an otherworldly custodian of the dead.

Snake. This form reveals the alien and uncanny dimensions of the Death-Demon. Instead of the predatory qualities of the dog/wolf-form, the snake-form brings its own unique terror as it “cleaves to the darkness of the earth,” abruptly appearing and disappearing (Herzog, 2000, p. 4). Imbued with a more calculated manner, the snake-form lies in wait, hidden and “ready to dart out with lightning speed or, lazily malicious, to paralyse with a look” (p.55). A notable example can be found in Greek mythology’s Medusa, the snake-headed Gorgon whose gaze turns people to stone (p.61). There is also Echidna (a snake-woman and consort of the serpentine monster, Typhon) who gives birth to Cerberus, Lernaean Hydra, and Chimera (p.55). Moreover, Cerberus emerges from a bed of snakes, Lernaean Hydra is a many-headed serpentine monster, and Chimera is a lion-goat hybrid with a snake’s head for a tail. These examples explore the snake-form as a monstrous agent of death and destruction that can also

be mutated or spliced with other forms, be they human or animal, in order to express new levels of uncanny horror.¹⁴

Bird. This form has a more direct link to death through carrion-eating birds such as eagles, vultures, ravens, and crows (Herzog, 2000, p.58). In mythology and folklore, the bird-form acts as transporter of the dead, messenger, and (in its more human aspects) seducer. In German fairy tales and ballads, for instance, it is said that three doves “reveal secret knowledge of coming death” (p. 59). In Norse myth, the Valkyries fly into battle, swiftly appearing and disappearing as they retrieve the dead (pp.63-64). In Greek mythology, Harpies are described as having beautiful human faces but with vulture-like bodies, wings, and claws (p.59). The Sirens, similarly, have “charming seductive faces”, luring their wayward victims by singing “the melodies of Hades” (p.60). These examples explore death’s devouring and swift nature by way of beaks, talons, and wings but also highlight new aspects through their ability to communicate perilous information via ill omen and song. In its human and feminine qualities, the bird-form is reshaped into the monstrous *femme fatale*, expressing a seductive yet treacherous interpretation of death. Here, the boundaries between human and inhuman, beautiful and gruesome, seductive and cruel are consciously blurred.

Horse.¹⁵ Although deemed a less prominent form of Death-Demon, the horse-form is recognised for its speed, appearing from nowhere and disappearing into the unknown. While focus is placed more upon the rider, the steed still plays a crucial role as transporter for/of Death. The Valkyries, for instance, have been described as riding horses into battle. Hades, Greek god of the underworld, is said to have carried Persephone away on a chariot (Herzog, 2000, p.67). Odin, god of the dead, has an eight-footed steed called Sleipnir who rides as “swift as the wind.” (p.68). These examples show the horse-form as a harbinger of death, taking the rider to their intended prey and delivering them/said prey “into the realm of the ‘beyond’” (p.67).

Human. Through the human-form, the Death-Demon is made “closer and more familiar and yet, at the same time, more remote and uncanny” (p.72). Herzog emphasises the significance of this form, stating that through it “the nature of the Death-Demon is enriched

¹⁴ Wedged into this category is the “new complex” of the dragon. As snake-wolf, the dragon preys upon its victims, devours them, and lurks in darkness, its bite venomous and tail capable of hurling and constricting (p.55). While Herzog makes no mention of this, the dragon can be linked to the bird-form as it, too, is a flying creature, swooping down to snatch up prey in its jaws or talons. The greed of the dragon (its “nest” of hoarded treasure) corresponds with the devouring and insatiable attributes of the Death-Demon. Viewed in this light, the dragon is a union not only of the snake/wolf-form, but also of the bird.

¹⁵ While Herzog makes no mention of this, the fourth horsemen of the apocalypse is notorious for the pale horse he rides upon and can be seen as another example of the Death-Demon.

and deepened and related to the totality of the universe, the individual and life in a succession of new ways” (p.76). Some of the earliest representations of death can be drawn from the mythical origins of killing, a key example being the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Here, the first murder, by bringing death into the world, symbolically transforms those who kill or are killed into embodiments of death. Another characteristic of this form is expressed through corpse-like traits—“deathly pallor or a dark colour, big corpse-like teeth, and even empty eye socks” (p.79)—conveying the terror of death through gory imagery. This element of body horror is heightened in fairy-tale descriptions of Frau Holle and the Devil, both described as beautiful and captivating front on but hollowed-out from behind. Here, the juxtaposition of seduction and horror expresses another aspect of Death’s human form. This contrast corresponds with how death personification has been explored in the “Death and the Maiden” motif (a point which I unpack in my discussion of Guthke’s work, as well my close reading of *Keturah and Lord Death* in Chapter II).

The symbolic significance of tools is another important element to consider. Weapons and implements (such as tridents, hooks, claws, ropes, and nets) translate as items which the Death figure can use to lacerate, pierce, snatch, drag and catch its prey, helpless within its grasp. Notably, Sirens who lure men to their death have a name derived from rope, noose, or lasso (*seira* or *seire*) in Greek (Herzog, 2000, p.77). The Harpies use their wings and claws to swiftly snatch away their victims. A net is used by the Norse goddess Rán, a rope by Hel, a noose by Kali, and a net or knotted rope by Yama (p.76). These implements all “reiterate the idea that the dead are snatched away into darkness and obscurity” (pp.77-78). The scythe or sickle is another notorious tool, symbolically linking the harvesting of crops to the harvesting of souls. In this way, Herzog suggests that further aspects of death can be explored through external traits and tools. Such traits and tools can also be seen in the novels I cover over the next chapters: Death in *Mort* wields a scythe; Lord Death in *Keturah and Lord Death* is often shown riding on his dark horse (Night) who carries him to and from the realm of the living; and, while Death in *The Book Thief* says that he does not carry a sickle or scythe, he does use his hands and arms to “extract” and “carry” souls away. Without the tools of their trade, these figurations of death cannot fulfil their functions of capturing, harvesting, or delivering the dead. Moreover, the symbolic meaning behind these implements lends in our understanding of these characters and their personalities. We imagine that a Death who carries souls in his arms and hands is gentle and considerate; a Death who harvests souls with a scythe is far more frightening (albeit stereotypical); and a lordly Death on a horse seems noble and chivalrous. Each “tool”, in other words, has a connotation that influences our reading of Death as a character.

iiib. Conclusion

Having looked at some of the main forms the Death-Demon takes, what can we gather from the above overview? Herzog seems to approach the figuration of death as multifaceted, fluid, and subjective. His categories convey different aspects of death and the way we might understand it, yet all are seen as forms that evoke terror, conceal, devour, ensnare, and deceive. Herzog draws upon established figures in mythology and folklore, considering their backgrounds and etymological significance in the context of the Death-Demon. While it may be argued that examining animal forms of the Death-Demon is irrelevant to this thesis, I would suggest that these forms are important to consider. Indeed, several examples explore the hybridisation of animal and human aspects: the dog-form of Anubis; the snake-form of Medusa; the bird-form of the Harpies; the horse-form as seen in the fourth horseman of the apocalypse. Moreover, as Herzog himself suggests, aspects of the human-form are secretly contained within the animal guise, waiting to be revealed. Unlike Kastenbaum, who explores death personification in respect to its ameliorative aspects, Herzog describes the Death-Demon as a psychic countermeasure, suggesting a more innate, reflexive response towards a hostile threat. The Death-Demon, therefore, leans into its monstrous connotations, evoking terror through its supernatural and creaturely qualities. Much like a shapeshifter, the Death-Demon is both mythic and malleable, moving between guises in order to express layers of meaning around the concept of death. If inner images are both a reaction to the world and a way of understanding it, then it stands to reason that Herzog's Death-Demon is an embodiment of death in its most mythic and primeval form.

iv. Guthke's Death Image

A more nuanced perspective on death personification can be gleaned from *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*. Much like Herzog, Guthke explores the idea that humanity has an impulse to construct images around death. "Image-making," Guthke says, "is one of those urges that define humans" (1999, p.8). According to him, "death images" provide valuable insight into how we reconcile with our own mortality as: "they open our eyes for aspects of 'the world as interpretation,' that is, for humans, individuals and groups, orienting themselves in their world by making such images and thereby, ultimately, defining themselves" (p.5). In other words, the death image acts as an outlet and an anchor: it helps us understand our world while, simultaneously, defining our place within it. By navigating what

he describes as the “extensive and multifarious uncharted territory” of death images across different time periods and art movements in the Western world, Guthke offers a new dimension to the literature covered in this chapter (p.6). Moreover, he adds further nuance to the figuration of death—one that was lacking in Kastenbaum and Herzog’s work—by drawing our attention to the impact gender has in the historical art context of the Death figure. Before addressing some of the key examples Guthke discusses in his book, some focus on his interpretation of the origin and function of death images (and how this relates to the research informing this chapter) is useful to consider.

iva. “Imagining the Unimaginable”

Guthke suggests that the power of imagination lies in its potential to give “shape to the shapeless by approximating it to the familiar, thereby endowing it with meaning” (1999, p.8). Citing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s work, Guthke suggests that, through creativity, areas deemed unintelligible or unimaginable are transformed into images which illuminate in unprecedented ways (pp.8-9). He believes the urge to make images is activated when “we experience situations that baffle or overwhelm us” (p.8). Unable to cope, we turn to image-making, creating a shape and order that “familiar patterns of thought” cannot (p.8). Death personification thus transforms the “shapeless and chaotically threatening” concept of death into something “concrete and visible by our creative imagination” (p.8; p.10). Describing this process as an “imaginative coming to terms with death”, Guthke’s perspective corresponds with that of Kastenbaum, and Herzog, as they all seem to converge on the Death figure’s role as a coping mechanism (p.32). By bringing shape to the unintelligible and shapeless, we see the underlying value behind Death personified. Here, the Death figure shows its potential as an imaginative coming to terms with death via fiction and the writing craft.

An important distinction Guthke makes—one that can also apply to the core texts already examined—is no single image is able to express the full horror and allure of death: “Mythologies, folklore, religions, turns of phrase, art and literature, and even our daily lives are full of such visually realized or realizable personifications of that which is largely taboo in industrialized societies today—unthinkable and therefore unimaginable” (p.10). Notwithstanding contention around the concept of a death taboo, there is clear evidence showing how death has been visually realised through a wide array of images. As established through Guthke’s research (as well as Kastenbaum’s four types of death personification and Herzog’s Death-Demon), the discursive sites that Guthke identifies above emphasise the

multifarious nature of the Death figure. In its ability to express and assimilate multiple perspectives, it embraces oppositional characteristics and, moreover, oppositional understandings of death:

At any given time, related and contrary images of death naturally cluster around the dominant ones. Different cultural contexts, different group-specific views as well as different individual attitudes create different images of death. They are male and female images that each comprise a wide variety of further differentiations: old and young, beautiful and ugly, fatherly and motherly, terrifying and seductive, contemptible and venerable, and so on. (Guthke, 1999, p.5)

The personification of death thus resides in a dichotomous space, expressing multiple conflicting images and attitudes. This demonstrates how complex, changeable, and oftentimes paradoxical the Death figure is. Contradictory though it may seem, the purpose of death personification is not to subvert and obfuscate but, rather, facilitate understanding that encompasses different contexts, be they cultural, religious, or individual.¹⁶

In posing the question of why Death is personified as male or female, Guthke interrogates the established belief that grammatical gender is a determining factor. In other words, he considers whether the word for death in the language involved has a masculine or feminine meaning that corresponds with the personification of death in said language.¹⁷ For example, Guthke details how the German word for death (*der Tod*) is masculine, while the words for death in Spanish (*la muerte*), French (*la mort*), and Polish (*śmierć*) are feminine. In these latter cultures, literature and art “regularly personify Death as a woman: beautiful or ugly, old or young, motherly, seductive, or dangerous” (Guthke, 1999, p.7). By comparison, Death in German and English cultures is often depicted as a man, “violent or friendly, inexorable or weak, horrifying or alluring [...] powerful, terrifying, grim, and inexorable” (p.7; p.13). While these examples provide useful context on the nature of grammatical gender in relation to the figuration of death, further investigation revealed “significant, substantive exceptions” (p.7). A German folksong refers to Death as a female reaper, with Germanic folklore and myth

¹⁶ It can be noted that the close readings in the following chapters are based on novels by Anglophone Western authors: Leavitt (Canadian), Pratchett (English), and Zusak (Australian). As such, the Death characters I examine in these close readings serve as three contemporary Western literary personifications of Death. This distinction is useful to consider, as it can give further insight on how each author chose to approach the subject of death.

¹⁷ Guthke also notes some languages without grammatical gender that, notwithstanding, personify death as male and/or female. In making this distinction, however, he mentions little to do with whether he discovered (or consciously sought out) representations of death that fall outside this binary. He states that female personifications of Death are outnumbered by those that are “male or gender-neutral” but seems to favour discussion of masculine-feminine rather than examples of a more non-binary nature (p.240).

described as “equally hospitable to female Death” (p.7; p.18). Roman art shows no female representations, despite the Latin word for death (*mors*) being feminine (p.24). Spanish plays and art feature death in both male and female forms (p.29). And Mexican art, too, depicts Death as a male skeletal figure (pp.29-30). Through these examples, Guthke argues that such contradictions are not arbitrary but highlight a clear “disconnection between grammatical gender and visualization of death” in art and literature across numerous cultures (p.24). Guthke’s second line of argument revolves around the misleading notion that the personification of death is predominantly male: “Death is the male, not the female reaper, the man, not the woman with the scythe, the male, not the female skeleton” (p.13). And yet evidence shows that “personifying Death as male is anything but a universal habit of the imagination” (p.14). He suggests that the history of death personification reflects a small-scale battle of the sexes with “ever-fluctuating fronts which, on both sides, fuse love and aversion, hope and fear” (p.251). Sampling from this history, Guthke asks us to reflect on the purpose of male/female Death, the nature of that dualism and whether male or female personifications of Death are motivated by factors outside of grammatical gender. Returning to the personification of death in fiction, then, how does Guthke’s argument translate? In my close readings of *Keturah and Lord Death*, *Mort*, and *The Book Thief*, I noticed how all three characterisations of Death were described as male. Was gender a crucial factor in their figuration? Could the fact that these characters were written by Anglophone Western authors be an influencing factor? Could each author’s gender be another influencing factor? In Leavitt’s novel, she explores Death in the context of a chivalrous romance, thereby personifying him as a handsome lord. In the case of *Mort*, Death is seen, to some extent, as a fatherly figure. And, in *The Book Thief*, the narrator’s gender is mentioned only in passing. While the notion of grammatical gender is contextually useful in our understanding the figuration of death, it can also be suggested that the gender of death personifications in fiction are subject to the whims and preferences of their authors.

ivb. Adam/Eve/Devil, Paramour/Friend, Madame La Mort

Guthke surveys prominent figures, themes, or motifs that have surfaced throughout the ages. Looking at some of these examples allows us to add yet more layers to our understanding of the Death figure, revealing how gendered representations of death are influenced by a number of factors. Consider the biblical fall of Adam and Eve: Christian belief in the Middle Ages suggests mortality emerged as a result of sin. Accordingly, the first theological interpretation

of the personification of death was either male (Adam) or female (Eve), depending on who committed the original sin that “brought death into the world” (Guthke, 1999, p.40). In a similar vein, the Devil, depicted frequently during the Renaissance and Baroque period, is another interpretation of the original death image. As instigator of sin, Satan is the seductive fallen angel that tempts Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, thus making him “Death’s alter ego” (p.127). In his serpent form, the Devil’s deceptive and calculated nature corresponds with the unsettling terror of Herzog’s Death-Demon. His “male-female changeability” in Renaissance and Baroque works of art and literature is used to explain the ambivalence towards representations of death at that time: “Death was portrayed, as we saw, sometimes as a man and sometimes as a woman, sometimes in the same work, whereas the devil could be not only one or the other, but both at the same time” (p. 127). In other words, Guthke suggests that the fluidity of the Devil, coupled with Adam and Eve’s role in “the fall of man”, explains why literary and artistic work of that time depicts the Death figure as both male and/or female.

The seductive yet monstrous aspects of the death-devil seem to appear also in the Baroque period. Here, the awareness of death becomes a wistful yearning: “no longer inspiring fear and terror, [Death] has become the eagerly awaited lover” (p.93; p.95). In the Death and the Maiden motif, macabre aspects of death are combined with the vitality of love. As Guthke observes, art from this period tends to depict a young woman (partially or completely nude) embraced by Death as a male skeleton/cadaver. In some interpretations, the maiden welcomes or succumbs to the embrace of Death. In others, she pulls away with an expression of fear, agony, and repulsion. Regardless, death is personified as predatory, almost lascivious, offering an oppositional union of love and death that evokes a sense of duality. This idea positions masculine Death as something fearful, seductive, and sinister (a dynamic I explore further in my close reading of *Keturah and Lord Death*).

With the Romantic Age, Guthke argues, a shifting attitude towards death emerges. Instead of the skeletal and monstrous image, Death is given “a kinder face”—one that draws upon the classical image of Thanatos: “the Greek personification of death [...] a graceful, gentle youth turning a still-burning torch earthwards, symbolically imitating the extinction of life” (Guthke, 1999, p.33).¹⁸ This change in visage and demeanour suggests a more positive and unthreatening approach towards the concept of death in this time period. Rather than the decaying, grotesque, and horrifying image of death, Thanatos embodies the beautiful, gentle, and desirable death—

¹⁸ Thanatos’s twin brother, Hypnos, is the god of sleep, providing an intriguing juxtaposition between sleep and death (Guthke, 1999, p.11).

a figure who is “death reconciled with life as life takes its leave” (1999, p.80). While the above aspects of death as friend or paramour suggest a predominance towards more masculine representations in this period, Guthke also explores “the ascendancy of female death images” in Western art and literature of the nineteenth century (p.173). He suggests that this “triumph of female Death” coincides with the battle for the emancipation of women (p.173). This implies that anxieties in men, stirred up by a challenge to the established status quo, helped manifest various female embodiments of death. Here, death is portrayed as an angel, seductress, and mother, symbolically serving as a source of life and of death. As an angel, female Death is seen as winged, often wielding a sword and hourglass, her bearing benevolent yet commanding. As seductress, she is a *femme fatale*, and thus echoes dualistic elements previously expressed through Herzog’s Death-Demon. A “fusion of death and love”, the seductress is both beautiful and monstrous, alluring and repulsive (p.188). And, as mother, she is loving and nurturing, reinforcing her role as a maternal figure (pp.200-202). Collectively, these female figurations of death reflect a dual approach towards death: one as a peaceful and nurturing experience, the other as a treacherous and aggressive experience.

v. Conclusion

Through the work of Kastenbaum, Herzog, and Guthke, we have considered the Death figure in different ways: from a modern perspective in Kastenbaum’s studies, to a primordial approach through Herzog’s Death-Demon, to a focus on gender in Guthke’s “death image”. These three differing theoretical approaches explore how the concept of death can be shaped and reshaped through various images, resulting in an ever-evolving understanding of the subject of death. We see the potential for death personification as a device that effectively explores the concept of death and evolves to reflect changing understandings of said concept, revealing the Death figure’s capacity as a rich area of research. While it can be argued that death personification corresponds with death-denial theory through its origins as a defensive mechanism, it is important to note that the discourse around death-denial is complex and subject to conflicting interpretations. Nevertheless, I consider the personification of death in fiction to be a productive way to generate discussion and understand the complexities around the concept of death in contemporary society—even though it cannot resolve the tangled discourse of death-denial.

Through this chapter, we have drawn small points of comparison from Kastenbaum, Herzog, and Guthke’s research to the literary personifications of Death covered in the next

chapters. While this comparative work may appear minor, such details serve to add nuance to our understanding of death personification in fiction. Moreover, this research was vital to my creative practice, as I found myself prompted to re-examine the ways in which I could personify death: would they be male, female, or neither? Would they wield a tool in order to catch or harvest their quarry? Would they be kind and comforting? Seductive or cruel? Beautiful or gruesome? Would they have animal-like features? Would they draw upon mythological figures mentioned by Herzog and Guthke? These questions invited further experimentation in my novel, revealing the potential of this area of research as a stimulus for writing *Death* in fiction.

I began this chapter by exploring death personification as its own art gallery, filled with endless rooms containing artistic interpretations of the Death figure. In leading you through some of the sections (and sub-sections) of this gallery, I suggest that death personification is a variegated and ever-evolving device. Glimpsing upon the Death figure's transformative and multifaceted nature—one which greatly inspired my research and practice during my candidature—I would argue that the personification of death is a literary device filled with creative potential that is deserving of further scholarly research.

Waypoint

In *My Gothic Dissertation*, a podcast dissertation that draws comparisons between Gothic novels and the perils of the grad school experience, Dr Anna Williams describes herself as a heroine “lured into a crumbling ancient castle” (2020, p.8). Williams transports listeners through narration that is interspersed with audio interviews, sound effects, and music. Here, where she likens herself to a protagonist in a Gothic castle, the gentle sounds of a harpsichord fade and transform into swelling organ music, later followed by an ominous peal of thunder.¹⁹ Unlike Dr Williams, whose ultimate aim is to escape from the castle of the “Grad School Gothic”, my own castle serves as a waypoint—a place of shelter rather than escape (see Figure 2). Let us pause here for a moment. While we may have a long way left to travel in this exegesis, the journey thus far has been on a bumpy interdisciplinary path. We have moved across a turbulent discourse, made our way through a tangle of texts and have arrived, unscathed but perhaps a little winded, before the castle. This castle is a stopping place: a respite of sorts, but also an ideal space for me to apprise you on what will be covered in the next few chapters.

Imagine that, within these castle walls, there are three large tapestries. Each tapestry tells a unique story featuring Death. In the first tapestry, a young woman sits by a campfire in a forest clearing at night. Behind her is Death: a nobleman dressed in black, his face concealed in shadow, his hand reaching out towards her. In the second tapestry, a young man wields a scythe, its blade shining like blue glass. Next to him is Death: a robed skeleton with blue pinpoints glowing in the eye sockets of his skull. Shelves of hourglasses line the background, their bulbs containing varying amounts of drifting sand. And, in the third tapestry, a girl hunches over a desk as she writes. Behind her, books stacked into piles resembling a town are consumed by fire. While Death is not explicitly present in this tapestry, the smoke from the books billows into the shape of a skull.

The tapestries described in the visual scenario above represent the novels that are the focus of the next three chapters. These novels are: *Keturah and Lord Death* by Martine Leavitt, *Mort* by Sir Terry Pratchett, and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Exploring these popular works of fiction, I pose the following questions: how has the author personified Death as a character? What literary devices and techniques lend to their exploration of death in the novel? And how does each author interpret the subject of death in the story? Through close readings, I consider how each author elicits sympathy for Death as a character, resulting in a more thoughtful and

¹⁹ The podcast episode can be listened to here: <https://www.mygothicdissertation.com/prologue>.

nuanced approach towards the subject of death. The point of these close readings is not to examine all aspects of the plot, genre, and characters. Rather, I focus on particular elements of each novel that help explore the subject of death and the character of Death. It is worth noting that, in my research on *Mort* and *Keturah and Lord Death*, I was unable to locate adequate secondary sources focusing specifically on these texts. This obstacle, however, informed my approach in these chapters, as I paid closer attention to author interviews in order to glean further insight on how Leavitt, Pratchett, and Zusak wrote their personifications of Death. Moreover, their insight influenced my own creative practice, deepening my appreciation for how each author explored Death through their writing.

In *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*, Maria Tatar writes, “Words have not just the astonishing capacity to banish boredom and create wonders. They also enable contact with the lives of others and with story worlds, arousing endless curiosity about ourselves and the places we inhabit.” (Tatar, 2009, p.31). While this quote is about the value of childhood reading, its meaning can be applied outside of this context. A reader, no matter what age, can open a book and be transported to fictional lives and worlds. The book becomes an immersive space where the reader can be entertained, educated, and intrigued. Ideas, themes, or questions expressed in that book can kindle a thought-provoking response in the reader, allowing a re-examination of their own perspective. Considering this potential, I would argue that the personification of death is an imaginative device that offers a thought-provoking and engaging exploration of the subject of death. Through the immersive nature of fiction, the creative capacity of this device is brought to attention.

Novels, much like tapestries, are a creative weave. They interlace many threads: of plot, character, genre, theme, and setting. Following these threads, we are transported into fictional lives and worlds. We are shown new perspectives and, at times, challenged to re-examine our own perspectives. Considering this potential, let us now turn our attention to the personification of death in fiction. Returning to our metaphorical map (see Figure 2), let us make our way through the castle and towards the next levels that await us...

Chapter II: *Keturah and Lord Death*

The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature (2010) states that fairy tales are a flexible form, making them "the perfect vehicle for expressing a society's concerns and desires" (Rudd, p.172). In *Keturah and Lord Death*, Martine Leavitt writes a fairy-tale romance that expresses the importance of death. First published in 2006,²⁰ Leavitt's Young Adult fantasy novel garnered a number of accolades: it became a finalist for the National Book Award, was Editors' Choice in *Booklist's* "Books for Youth" category and earned starred reviews from the *School Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly* (2012). The novel's plot centres around Keturah, a sixteen-year-old girl who bargains with Death in order to save her loved ones and her village. In my reading of the text, I examine Leavitt's use of personification, motifs, and layered storytelling, and consider how she explores the significance of death.

One of the main themes of *Keturah and Lord Death* is story. In the prologue, a group gathered around a common fire asks Keturah to tell them a tale of magic, love, death, and daring. The reader is then brought into her narrative, which begins with Keturah following a fabled deer before quickly losing her way in the forest. Leavitt's use of the prologue as a framing device adds a second layer to her novel, emphasising the thematic importance of story. Leavitt then builds a third layer through her use of embedded narratives. Keturah, upon meeting Lord Death in the woods, persuades him to temporarily spare her life by offering a tale that will "heat [his] frozen heart" (p.20). Much like Scheherazade, Keturah weaves her own tales with Lord Death, leaving them unfinished so that she may prolong her life.²¹ While her stories are a means of delaying Lord Death, they also serve as metafictional commentary. In one tale, Keturah speaks of a girl who loves no one, yet longs for a love that cannot be ended by death. In another tale, she reveals Death's secret: that he yearns for a companion of his own to comfort him through the sadness of his work. These nested stories are self-reflexive: they remind the reader of Keturah's role as storyteller and, most importantly, lend further insight on Lord Death. They reveal him as a character who feels a sense of romantic longing.

It is worth noting that every chapter begins with an epigraph summarising what will unfold. These snippet summaries evoke the idea of Keturah resuming her story each night around the common fire. Moreover, they mimic how she resumes her stories with Lord Death.

²⁰ While *Keturah and Lord Death* was published in 2006, the edition I have used is a 2012 reprint.

²¹ Book reviews from *Publishers Weekly* (author undisclosed) and *New York Times* (Polly Schulman) draw this comparison as well. Both reviews can be read here: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-932425-29-1> and here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/books/review/Shulman.t.html>.

The serialised quality of the novel, coupled with its frame narrative, reflexively point back to the theme of story, reminding the reader that Keturah is its creator:

Wouldn't all life end with mine? Reason told me it was not so, but my heart, my heart knew that when I closed my eyes I invented the night sky and the stars too. Wasn't the whole dome of the sky the same shape as the inside of my skull? Didn't I create the sun and the day when I raised my eyelids every morning? (Leavitt, 2012, p.203)

In this thematic passage, the sky is not an open space, but a firmament likened to Keturah's own skull, with day and night brought about by her shutter-like eyes. In other words, the image places Keturah at the centre of her fictional world, reaffirming that she is its architect. In an author Q&A, Leavitt states: "All my stories in one way or another explore the notion that story and language create reality, and that storytellers are in charge of the world" (Warren, 2017). Consciously pushing the boundaries of reality and fiction, Leavitt repeatedly draws attention to the novel's structure and to Keturah's position as its narrator.

While Keturah's role as storyteller resembles that of Scheherazade, her dynamic with Lord Death is evocative of the 'Death and the Maiden' motif prevalent in sixteenth-century art and literature. As evident in the work of Hans Baldung Grien and Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, this motif commonly portrays Death as an emaciated and grotesque figure who amorously embraces an oblivious, frightened, or willing woman. Yet there is much more to this image than its eroticised interpretations, as Guthke suggests:

This motif lends itself to a whole range of emotions: Death may be the terrifying seducer [...] or a "friendly" saviour[,] the fervently desired bridegroom of the soul [or] the lover whose sexual advances are explicitly welcomed [...] or he may be the elegant and gallant heart-throb. (1999, p.12)

In this instance, Leavitt's exploration of the motif leans more towards the latter, portraying Death as a medieval fairy-tale equivalent of Mr. Darcy. He is referred to as 'Lord Death' or 'sir'. He is described as wearing black clothing: a black cape, gloves, and high boots. He rides on a black stallion known as Night. Through Keturah's first-person narration, the reader sees Lord Death as severe but handsome, arrogant in his power, but melancholy in his isolation. The imagery around Leavitt's personification of Death is steeped in contrasts, vivid and surreal: he is pale and concealed in shadow; his eyes are dark, clear, and endless as a night sky; his touch is burning cold; he laughs, and tree branches shake; he stills and the trees grow silent, the air holding its breath; even the shadows that emanate from him are described as boiling, clotting, leaping, and unfurling.

The animism prompted by Lord Death's proximity juxtaposes with his inanimate qualities. His features are described as clean and carved out of stone, his skin absent of the flush of blood, sweat, or tears. When he places a hand upon Keturah's head, she feels it as heavy, "as if it were made of lead instead of flesh" (Leavitt, 2012, p.18). When he nears, she feels no heat from him, and hears no intake of breath. Often, he is seen as utterly cold and still. These descriptions evoke the idea of Lord Death as a living statue. At every turn, the reader is reminded of his non-humanity—of the fact that, although he appears human, he is the embodiment of the "tremendous, incomprehensible and wholly other" (Herzog, 2000, p.19)—and yet he resists this categorisation. Moments of statue-like stillness are contrasted by the power and grace of his limbs, his movement described as "almost a dance" (Leavitt, 2012, p.134). His stony features soften as he yields to Keturah, listening to her stories. There is an unspoken but unmistakeable yearning to Leavitt's characterisation of death, rendering him helpless and more than human in his love for Keturah. Towards the end of the novel, Lord Death—having saved the entire village from the plague at the behest of Keturah—admits defeat and confirms his love for her:

Do you not know you have defeated me? That you have tricked my heart into loving you? Do what you will, marry whom you will, go where you will. You shall live to be a great age, and you shall not see me again until life has pressed its hand so heavily upon you that you wish to see it lift. (Leavitt, 2012, pp.205-206)

While the above quote seems to position Lord Death as powerless due to his love for Keturah, there are hints of this figuration of Death as "terrifying seducer". It is, after all, Lord Death who proposes to make Keturah his bride, who reciprocates Keturah's kiss even after she attempts to push him away, and who uses the hart to lure Keturah into the forest. Are these simply moments of selfishness motivated by love? Or do they reveal a more deceptive side to Death that leans towards the negative imagery shown in the 'Death and the Maiden' motif? Perhaps Lord Death straddles the boundaries of both: he is a personification of death, yes, but also a flawed character who is capable of deceit. Perhaps he represents less of a sinister and skeletal reaper and more of a dark paramour: a symbolic fusion of love and death, Eros and Thanatos, combined.

Leavitt employs several other motifs that bolster the novel's status as a fairy tale. There are repeated references to threes: three days lost in the forest, three suitors (sombre Lord Death, high-born John Temsland, and gardener Ben Marshall), and the three deaths Keturah foresees

while helping her grandmother as a midwife. The use of the number three is a common numerical motif in fairy tales, as Ashliman writes:

The most common number in fairy tales is three [which] is universally seen as a special number. A triangle is the most stable of all simple designs. We start a race with the three-part command “ready, set, go.” The basic family consists of father, mother, and child. And, of course, the Christian Godhead is a trinity, further endorsing the number three’s positive character. (2004, p.7)

Furthermore, the number seven (while not as prominent in the novel) can be seen through the character of Soor Lily, who has seven sons: giant, childlike, and the antithesis of Snow White’s seven dwarfs.²² The number seven, as Ashliman states, “symbolizes completeness, as derived from the seven days of creation and the seven planets of Greek antiquity” (2004, p.7). Leavitt’s use of numerical motifs adds further symbolism to her novel while reinforcing its nature as a fairy tale. Adding to this fairy tale quality is Soor Lily herself (wise woman, witch, mentor, archetypal fairy godmother) who grants Keturah a charmed eyeball to help her find her true love. In this way, Keturah can be interpreted as a Disney-style heroine: she is driven by her quests for love and the safety of her village; she is described as a poor yet beautiful maiden; she is admired by her suitors regardless of her lowly station and lack of demonstrable “talent” (framed, in this medieval context, as skills in the three arts of sewing, singing, and cooking). She also finds her one true love and is granted her “happily ever after” ending.

Unlike folk and fairy tales, however, this story has no tangible villain. There is no wicked queen, stepmother, witch, or devil plotting the downfall of our heroine. While Lord Death is placed in an adversarial role, he does not sabotage Keturah. His intention is not to bring suffering and pain but to perform his duty, a task that he “take[s] no pleasure in” (Leavitt, 2012, p.95). Here, Leavitt explores the personification of Death as a character who wishes to be seen and understood, not demonised. A figure who, despite his power and fearsome presence, yields to Keturah’s demands.

Throughout the novel, Keturah makes several bargains with Lord Death in order to save her grandmother, help her friends, and keep her small village of Tide-by-Rood safe. This motif of bargaining echoes Rumpelstiltskin, the eponymous creature who strikes deal upon deal with the miller’s daughter by spinning straw into gold for her. It is a motif that hearkens back further, to the pact Faust makes with the devil, Mephistopheles, in his quest for knowledge. Temptation

²² The use of three and seven, particularly in *Snow White*, is explored in Liabenow’s thesis: “The Significance of the Numbers Three, Four, and Seven in Fairy Tales, Folklore, and Mythology” (2014).

or desperation (or both) can be seen as a driving force in folklore, spurring characters into action and leading them towards triumph or tragedy. In Leavitt's novel, it is Keturah's need to protect her village that is the catalyst spurring her bold choices, propelling the narrative to its bittersweet ending.

By using the fairy tale motif, the reader is steered from one reality (Keturah at the common fire) to the next (Keturah in the forest with Lord Death). As Leavitt writes in a discussion on the importance of voice:

The fairy-tale voice helps the reader move into the territory of the supernatural, to believe that Lord Death is a handsome man with a cool horse. It helps Keturah tell what could be a sad story in a rather matter-of-fact way, so it didn't become maudlin. (2018, p.10)

I would argue that the fairy-tale voice does more than make the story less maudlin. In framing her story as a fairy tale, Leavitt explores the subject of death in a way that is neither off-putting nor negative for readers. Furthermore, by perceiving Lord Death as a misunderstood and vilified character, this same understanding can extend to the very concept he represents. David Luban states that the "Death and the Maiden" motif was "originally a *memento mori*: a reminder of our ultimate destiny and a warning against vanity and preoccupation with merely superficial beauty." (1998, p.10). While the motif is often eroticised in Renaissance art, its origin as reminder of the inevitability of death is important to consider. Keturah's encounters with Lord Death are their own *memento mori*, reminding her of her own mortality. Each time Keturah successfully evades Lord Death, there are moments of reflection: where she gazes upon her village and cherishes every sight and sound. These moments reaffirm how much Keturah values her life in Tide-by-Rood and make it all the more impactful when she confesses her love for Lord Death.

What, then, does Leavitt's use of "Death and the Maiden" speak to? In many ways, *Keturah and Lord Death* is a story of longing, fear, and sorrow. Keturah longs for love, a home, and a child of her own. She fears that the plague will spread to her village. She is born into sorrow, having lost both her parents at a young age. She successfully resists Lord Death's advances, denying and defying him. She uses his love for her as a way to bargain with him, ensuring that her village is saved, and that her friends are granted their happy endings. She has the autonomy to marry John Temsland and live out her life as lady of her village but, in the end, decides to go with Lord Death. She enters the forest and chooses her fate: her domestic dream (to have a home and child of her own) sacrificed, a dowry of sorts, for her one true love:

“She knew she had never been truly alive until she met [Lord Death], and never so happy and content with her lot until she was touched by the sorrow of him” (Leavitt, 2012, p.207).

The reader is presented with a characterisation of death that, while powerful and otherworldly, is neither evil nor repulsive. In fact, notions of death and the afterlife are challenged. When Keturah suggests that dying is like falling asleep, Lord Death counters by saying “[i]t is like every morning when you wake up” (p.205). When accused of taking Keturah with him to his dark, hellish dwelling, he states, “There is no hell [...] Each man, when he dies, sees the landscape of his own soul.” (p.208). At the end of the novel, when Keturah leaves with Lord Death, she is described as riding into an “endless forest” (p.211). The audience is given enough information to develop an understanding of Death as a character, but not so much that the tremendous and mystical quality of the concept of death is lost. His world is not visible and yet it contains enough detail that it threads over this empty space like darning. Through Keturah’s perspective, we are offered a new way of thinking about the subject of death through her own feelings about Lord Death:

His voice is cold at first [...] It seems unfeeling. But if you listen without fear, you find that when he speaks, the most ordinary words become poetry. When he stands close to you, your life becomes a song, a praise. When he touches you, your smallest talents become gold; the most ordinary loves break your heart with their beauty. (Leavitt, 2012, p.209)

Leavitt’s use of death personification is what helps her explore the subject of death as something that brings value and meaning to life. It is through Lord Death that Keturah sees how precious her life is. She learns to appreciate her “small talents”, and cherishes her time with her friends, her grandmother, and her village far more because of him. John Temsland, son of Lord Temsland (the ruler of Tide-by-Rood) and Keturah’s other suitor, cannot fathom how she could love Lord Death. John, with “his hair the color of harvest-time wheat and his eyes green as bay water” (Leavitt, 2012, p.29), is the visual opposite of Lord Death, reminiscent of a similar opposition between Edgar and Heathcliff in Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*.²³ This dualism lends itself to the fairy tale motif and the significance of two:

Although the number itself is not always named, the feeling of a universal duality of things is never far beneath the main text. Typical fairy-tale settings are both of this world and of another world. [...] Fairy tales thrive on simplification, focusing on polar opposites rather than on the complex continuum that connects them (Ashliman, 2004, p. 7).

²³ J. Hillis Miller explores the idea of “paired oppositions” in imagery, character, and setting in the Norton Critical Edition of *Wuthering Heights* (2003, p.370).

Given this context, Lord Death and John Temsland are polar opposites that reflect the duality of life and death. The visual descriptions of both characters suggest that John is a symbol of light and life, while Lord Death is a symbol of darkness and (of course) death. Leavitt's discussion on theme provides further insight that highlights a thematic intersection of life and death as it relates to story:

I was asking questions about the nature of story, and more specifically, how does death play a part in the story of a life? Is it the true ending of all stories? Do we construct stories to understand death? Or do we model stories, with beginnings, middles and ends, because life has a beginning, middle and end? Is eternity a story we have told ourselves? Or are stories the business of eternity? (2019, p.3)²⁴

These questions spark a broader conversation on the nature of story. Stories, with their beginnings and endings, mimic the dualistic nature of life and death. Much like the Moirai of Greek mythology, Keturah is the weaver of her own tale and her own fate, spinning threads of life as Clotho does, measuring their length as Lachesis does. And Lord Death, like Atropos, who is fittingly referred to as “the ending of all true stories”, is there to cut the threads (Leavitt, 2012, p.207).

In *Keturah and Lord Death*, Martine Leavitt explores the importance of death through a fairy-tale romance. In my reading of the text, I suggest that there are several working parts that help steer this story and its exploration of death. Leavitt's theme of story, with its beginnings and endings, evokes the idea of life as a story that has its own beginning and ending through death. Her use of the fairy tale genre allows the reader to become immersed in a magical world where Death is a Darcy-esque figure, lonely and misunderstood. Through Keturah's point of view, we are shown a different way of thinking about death: as something (or, rather, someone) we can appreciate for reminding us of the meaning and value it/he brings to life. Through Lord Death, we are shown how the concept of death can be understood, valued, and even loved.

²⁴ This same passage is included in the novel's discussion guide (Leavitt, 2012, p.217). As there is little academic work examining *Keturah and Lord Death*, I have gathered sources available through the Leavitt's website, as well as interviews, in order to consider the author's intent in the structuring of this novel.

Chapter III: *Mort*

Imagine a world that is shaped like a disc. This world rests on the backs of four large elephants. Those four elephants stand on the shell of a giant star turtle whose name is Great A'Tuin. *Discworld*—Sir Terry Pratchett's comic fantasy series set in the world described above—is memorable, to say the least. Consisting of 41 novels, the series has garnered international critical acclaim, and resulted in Pratchett's knighthood in 2009 for contributions to literature.²⁵ When asked about the origin of the series, Pratchett says that it “began as an antidote to fantasy” (Naughtie, 2004). During a time when fantasy writing was often derivative of Tolkien's work, Pratchett decided he would embrace the genre's clichés and have fun with them. *Mort*, the fourth novel in the *Discworld* series, is the first book that has Death as a main character.²⁶ The novel's plot centres around a teenage boy, Mortimer, who is hired by Death to become his apprentice. In my reading of the text, I consider how Pratchett's use of personification, setting, and humour explore a funny and serious side of Death.

Rather than veer away from stereotype, Pratchett's personification of death leans into the quintessential image of the Grim Reaper. He is a skeleton who wears black robes, wields a scythe, and rides on a white horse. However, there are added details that make this Death stand out from the skeletal crowd (crew? clutter?) of Grim Reaper imagery. In *Mort*, Death's eyes are blue pinpoints that glow within the empty sockets of his skull. The scythe he wields has a blade so thin it is “a pale blue shimmer in the air that [can] slice flame and chop sound” (Pratchett, 2004, pp.54-55). Death's dialogue, written in small capitals, is described as less like a voice and more like words that arrive in your head. These descriptions help distinguish Pratchett's interpretation of Death from a stereotypical reaper.²⁷

Although Pratchett depicts Death as a terrifying and formidable character, he also puts him in comical situations, demonstrating his capacity to be both theatrical and involuntarily funny. When *Mort* meets him for the first time—on the last stroke of midnight—Death makes a dramatic entrance that is subsequently foiled by slippery cobblestones:

²⁵ *The Shepherd's Crown*, the 41st book, was published posthumously in 2015 after Pratchett's death that same year. His life and accomplishments, including his knighthood, can be read about here: <https://www.terrypratchettbooks.com/about-sir-terry>.

²⁶ Of the 41 novels in *Discworld* series, five feature Death as a main character: *Mort*, *Reaper Man*, *Soul Music*, *Hogfather*, and *Thief of Time*. For the purposes of this close reading, I chose *Mort* because it serves as the reader's first glimpse into the realm of Death.

²⁷ As Herzog notes, the symbolic significance of the tool Death uses is an important consideration. The scythe is a symbol that links the harvesting of crops to the harvesting of souls.

The air took on a thick, greasy feel, and the deep shadows around Mort became edged with blue and purple rainbows. The rider strode towards him, black cloak billowing and feet making little clicking sounds on the cobbles. They were the only noises—silence clamped down on the square like great drifts of cotton wool.

The impressive effect was rather spoiled by a patch of ice.

OH, BUGGER. (Pratchett, 2004, p.22)

Through this passage, the dramatic arrival of Death is undermined by the visual gag of him slipping on an icy floor. There are several instances in which Death's human-like mannerisms are employed with jarring and comedic effect. An attempt to tactfully cough is described as "the pistol-crack of an ancient beam full of deathwatch beetle" (p.29). A sniff of the air is "the kind of noise that is heard on the twilight edges of dreams, the sort that you wake from in a cold sweat of mortal horror" (p.276). His efforts to wink translate as "a small blue supernova [flaring] for a moment in the depths of his eyesockets" (p.51). His laughter is "an earthquake in a graveyard" and, when angered, his eyes turn into "red pinpoints miles deep in [his] dark sockets" (p.310). Our perception of Death is ever-shifting: at one turn, we see him as tremendous and terrifying; at another turn, he is curious and awkward; at yet another turn, he is compassionate and sincere. We learn that he likes cats, that he enjoys eating curry, and that his steed (the famed pale horse he rides upon as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse) is named 'Binky'. All these details add nuance and levity to the conventional Grim Reaper façade Pratchett initially presents us with.

Death's domain is a further extension and reflection of his personality, described as "a landscape that owe[s] nothing to time and space, [appears] on no map [and exists] only in those far reaches of the multiplexed cosmos" (Pratchett, 2004, p.51). Death's garden is a monochromatic colour scheme of black: "The grass was black. The flowers were black. Black apples gleamed among the black leaves of a black apple tree. Even the air looked inky" (p.48). Albert, Death's elderly manservant, plants broccoli that is black tinged with purple. Bone-white carp swim in a pond beneath "velvety black water lilies" and, beyond it, a dark moorland marches towards mountains as "jagged as cat's teeth (p.144; p.51). Albert explains to Mort that Death tries to add colour but lacks the imagination for it, indicating that every aspect of this setting is made by Death himself.

Pratchett's brand of comedy seems to take every clichéd element of Death and exaggerate it to theatrical levels. His overuse of the colour black is what elevates the mood and atmosphere

of Death's domain, the significance of black lending its own symbolic weight. In *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*, the colour black is described thus:

Black envelops and swallows, is cave and abyss, the holes of space and the bowels of the earth, night, melancholy and death. Mourning sinks into black and rests in its muffled sadness. The widow's veil of separation and loss, the judge's robe of sober authority, are black. (Ronnberg & Martin, 2010, p.658)

In the context of death personification in *Mort*, the words *envelop*, *space*, *melancholy*, and *authority* stand out. At the start of the novel, Death's eyes are described as "twinkling eye-sockets encompass[ing] the world turtle, sculling through the deeps of space" (Pratchett, 2004, p.12). This evokes the idea of his gaze as all-consuming, capable of enveloping the vast space of the Discworld. Death serves as an authority figure to Mort, hiring him to carry out "the Duty" of collecting and ushering souls of the dead. Death is also a melancholy figure. Through *Mort*, we see him as an outsider who tries and fails to understand the humans he observes. Pratchett leans into this symbolism of death through colour, but he also subverts it. Death's domain is described as "different colours of black [...] That is to say, not simply dark tones of red and green and whatever, but real shades of black. A whole spectrum of colours, all different and all — well, black" (p.48). Through this description, Pratchett creates a paradoxical image that challenges our visual perception, hinting at colours that lie beyond our understanding.

Death's home incorporates further death symbolism. The interior of the cottage is done in shades of black and purple, and decorated with skull-and-bones motifs, funeral drapes, and big yellow candles. A grandfather clock ticks "like the heartbeat of a mountain" (p.40). A scythe rests in an umbrella stand. These descriptions help to establish Death's attempts at human-like touches to the décor. Ysabell, introduced as Death's adopted daughter, explains to Mort: "Nothing's real here. Not really real. He just likes to act like a human being [...] He can't create, you see [...] Everything's a copy [of something he's seen]" (p.145). As Death is incapable of creating "real time", time stands still in Death's domain (p.149). As a result, Ysabell has been sixteen years old for 35 years. Albert, formerly a wizard on the Discworld, has lived in Death's domain for over 2000 years.

Hourglasses and books serve as crucial symbols for death that are incorporated into Death's line of work. In the "lifetimer room" there are shelves "stretching away into infinite distance", filled with hourglasses representing each life on the Discworld (p.78). The immensity of this space is evoked through the following passage:

The sound didn't just enter the body via the ears, it came up through the legs and down through the skull and filled up the brain until all that it could think of was the rising, hissing grey noise, the sound of millions of lives being lived. And rushing towards their inevitable destination.

They stared up and out at the endless ranks of lifetimers, every one different, every one named. The light from torches ranged along the walls picked highlights off them, so that a star gleamed on every glass. The far walls of the room were lost in a galaxy of light. (Pratchett, 2004, pp.239-240)

Each lifetimer is visually unique, its name and appearance reflecting the nature of its living counterpart. The villainous Duke of Sto Helit, for instance, has an hourglass with spiked iron latticework and black sand. The King's hourglass has an ornate frame of wood and brass, the bulbs made up of faceted pieces of glass. Mort's hourglass is plain and unadorned. Death's hourglass is large and black, elaborately decorated with a skull-and-bones motif, and contains no sand at all. Using the symbolism of the hourglass as a measurement of life, Pratchett adds further detail to Death's domain, his job, and the characters of the Discworld.

While the lifetimer room serves as place for the living or soon-to-be dead, the library serves as an archive: books that represent all of the Discworld's inhabitants, past, present, and future. There are books that are finished (the dead), books that are still being written (the living), and books that are blank (future lives). While most of Death's domain is described in dark tones or colours, the library appears warmer by comparison:

Pale sunlight lanced down from the high windows, gently fading the covers on the patient, ancient volumes. Occasionally a speck of dust would catch the light as it floated through the golden shafts, and flare like a miniature supernova.

Mort knew that if he listened hard enough he could hear the insect-like scratching of the books as they wrote themselves. (Pratchett, 2004, p.119)

The tranquillity of this image is juxtaposed with "the Stack": a subsection in the library that is "as dark and silent as a cave deep underground" (p.206). The Stack contains biographies that are more than 500 years old. While the books are silent, their life stories long-since ended, they are described as dormant, like cats "[sleeping] with one eye open" (p.206). Further down the Stack, the books dwindle and are replaced with clay tablets, lumps of stone, and animal skins. These details all serve to paint a larger picture of how life and death works in the Discworld universe. In the Discworld, people have their whole lives contained in the pages of a book in Death's library. They have hourglasses containing sand that reflects the exact amount of time they will live. Despite the comical aspects of the Discworld, everything has an order, including

Death. And, unlike in *Keturah and Lord Death*, we as readers are shown (rather than kept away from) Death's realm. We see how everything works through the eyes of Mort, Death's apprentice.

A noticeable theme that Pratchett explores is the idea that death is more real than reality. During the first third of the novel, when Mort is shown the proverbial ropes as Death's apprentice, we are made aware of the fact that Death is ignored, even when moving through busy streets, cities, and palaces. Those who see Death are quick to look away, eyes unfocused and expressions puzzled. The fact that Death is ignored is not the result of magic but because, as Mort surmises, "[p]eople don't want to see what can't possibly exist" (Pratchett, 2004, p.57). In other words, the reality of Death, as both concept and a character, is ignored by the living.

During the assassination of King Olerve (arranged by the villainous Duke of Sto Helit), we are introduced to the idea that there is a solid aspect to death. When the king's soul is collected, his physical body is described as a shadowy, ghost-like shape that drops away while his spirit form stands, staring at Death in surprise (p.62). This tangibility in death is picked up later in the story, when Mort is described as emitting "a particularly potent sort of solidness, an extra dimension of realness" (p.160). In other words, by learning Death's trade, Mort takes on his mentor's characteristics and inadvertently becomes "as real as Death" (p.238). He is able to walk through walls. He understands and speaks languages that he had not known prior. At the crux of the novel, Mort is described as stalking and grinning like his mentor, his dialogue taking on Death's distinctive small caps. His eyes, once brown, "glow like blue pinpoints" (p.269).

Mort's transition into the role of Death coincides with Death's transition into personhood. While Mort is busy performing "the Duty", Death goes on holiday, seeking out human pleasures in the pursuit of fun: he plays a game of crap; he learns how to fish; he joins a Serpent Dance (the Discworld equivalent of a conga line); he gets drunk (and subsequently hungover). When interviewed by a job broker, Death discovers that he no longer has the ability to walk through walls. When he realises he is happy in his new-found occupation as a fry cook, his dialogue is shown without its signature small caps and he puzzles "at the sound of his own voice" (p.229). There is a poignancy to this moment, in seeing Death experience what it feels like to be human.

This moment is short-lived, of course. Mort's grievous error at work—sparing the life of Princess Keli, King Olerve's daughter and the next on the Duke's hit list—results in the unravelling of history and the creation of an alternate timeline. It is a mistake that inevitably catches up to him, propelling the story to its climactic end via a showdown between Mort and Death, the student and his mentor. A boy who believes in defying fate for the sake of fairness

and justice, versus a being who takes no sides and believes that the compassion proper for his trade is one with “A *SHARP* EDGE” (Pratchett, 2004, p.68). In the end, Death spares Mort’s life and allows for the alternate timeline to continue—an act of mercy that signals how much Death has evolved during his short time as a human.

In an earlier conversation with Mort, Ysabell puzzles over why Death decided to take her in after her parents died: “He never feels anything. I don’t mean that nastily, you understand. It’s just that he’s got nothing to feel with [...] He probably *thought* sorry for me” (p.146). These revelations shed further light on how Pratchett has explored Death as a character. While he is incapable of human feelings, he tries to think like a human. His home reflects his attempts to create. He observes humans, mimics them, but struggles to understand them. Death’s decision to train Mort takes on a new meaning. Why else would Death hire an apprentice, if not to find someone he could pass the mantle on to? In learning “the Duty” as Death’s apprentice, Mort understands him: “It struck Mort with sudden, terrible poignancy that Death must be the loneliest creature in the universe. In the great party of Creation, he was always in the kitchen” (Pratchett, 2004, p.225). I would argue that this observation reflects a significant aspect of the novel and how Death is personified as a character. Pratchett explores Death as a being who has spent his entire existence puzzling over humans, who tries and fails to quit his job. In doing so, he writes a personification of death that we cannot help but sympathise with.

A significant element of *Mort* is its use of humour, explored not only through Pratchett’s use of personification but through metafiction and self-reflexive writing. In an article on light fantasy in the *Discworld* series, Caroline Duvezin-Caubet writes, “[N]othing is represented seriously in this strange, colorful universe—and yet every metaphor and cliché can (and will) be taken literally and pushed towards absurdity” (2016, para 2). Death is a reflection (and extension) of the Grim Reaper stereotype, defined and shaped as an embodiment of human imagination. Death’s domain pushes the boundaries of that stereotype further: a smorgasbord of death symbols and clichés. In this way, just as Pratchett as pokes fun at the fantasy genre, he also pokes fun at the subject of death.

In their article, “All the Disc’s a Stage: Terry Pratchett’s *Wyrd Sisters* as Metafiction”, Prema Arasu explores the idea of parody as a metafictional device “suggestive of the insidious power of stories” (2019, p.4). While Arasu’s focus is on *Wyrd Sisters* (the sixth *Discworld* novel), this idea can be seen in *Mort* as well. Pratchett “draw[s] upon collected cultural knowledge” through references to other texts (p.7). He pokes fun at the star-crossed lovers trope via footnote and a nod to Cleopatra (reimagined as Queen Ezerial in the *Discworld*, who bathes in asses’ milk and dies after sitting on a snake). He references Helen of Troy (“IS THIS

THE FACE THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND SHIPS, AND BURNED THE TOPLESS TOWERS OF PSEUDOPOLIS?") and Sleeping Beauty ("TOO MANY YOUNG WOMEN LEAP INTO THE ARMS OF THE FIRST YOUNG MAN TO WAKE THEM AFTER A HUNDRED YEARS' SLEEP"), adding further layers of parody and metafiction (Pratchett, 2004, p.298; p.313). These moments of parody draw attention to the novel's construction as a text, disrupting the reader's immersion in the story. In his article, "Toying with Fantasy: The Postmodern Playground of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* Novels", Daniel Luthi writes: "Terry Pratchett [transgresses] boundaries, be it via meta-commentaries or footnotes or characters breaking the fourth wall. By doing so, he reveals the very fictionality of his world, seemingly destroying the literary belief which is necessary for reader immersion" (2014, p.125).

In *Mort*, footnotes (and footnotes within footnotes) are used to interject comments made by an omniscient narrator, thus reminding us of its nature as a text. When a group of thieves begin cursing, their dialogue is delivered in a series of dashes: "'You should'n't – – – them, then,' muttered one of his henchmen, effortlessly pronouncing a row of dashes" (Pratchett, 2004, pp.76-77). Halfway through the novel, it is pointed out that Mort has "changed a lot in the last few chapters", despite the fact that the novel has no chapter divisions and is, in fact, a free-flowing narrative. Pratchett breaks the fourth wall by addressing the audience directly: "A row of dots would fill in the time nicely, but the reader will already be noticing the strange shape of the temple [...] and will probably want an explanation" (p.102). Through these examples, Pratchett repeatedly breaks our immersion in the story. He shows the novel's artificial nature as a text yet makes this metafictional aspect a foundation of *Mort* and, moreover, the *Discworld* series.

Through humour, Pratchett is able to build layers of meaning and story. He also uses humour as a way to explore serious issues. Questions of justice, fairness, and duty are a point of conflict repeatedly addressed in the novel. Mort is unable to accept how unfair Death's job is, to 'allow' a King and Princess to be killed while their murderer would live on to become a King. It is the reason he chooses to save Princess Keli, causing the alternate timeline in the first place. "THERE'S NO JUSTICE," says Mort, as he becomes Death, "[there's] JUST US" (p.272). This pun, alluded to a number of times in the novel, plays on the idea of justice and death. Pratchett's friend and collaborator, author Neil Gaiman, says: "There is a fury to Terry Pratchett's writing: it's the fury that was the engine that powered the Discworld" (2014). It was a fury directed towards "stupidity, injustice, human foolishness and shortsightedness", and a fury which would later be directed towards his diagnosis with early onset Alzheimer's disease (Gaiman, 2014). His moral anger was "balanced by a warts-and-all love for human fallibility",

his cold fury tempered with warmth (Saunders, 2017). In *Mort*, Pratchett uses humour to explore a nuanced understanding of Death: impartial, punctual, and always at odds with the living.

Pratchett's portrayal of Death not only shaped the series he'd spent much of his life creating, it also shaped his own ending. On the 12th of March 2015, news of his death was announced on his official social media account through a series of tweets.²⁸ Collectively, the message reads:

AT LAST, SIR TERRY, WE MUST WALK TOGETHER.

Terry took Death's arm and followed him through the doors and on to the black desert under the endless night.

The End. (Pratchett, 2015)

This message, delivered like lines in a *Discworld* novel, wove Pratchett's death into the world he'd created through a character fans immediately recognised from his distinct small caps dialogue. It was a moment that was "heartbreakingly final" but also poignant and moving (Stampler, 2015). Through it, fans could imagine Pratchett's meeting with Death. Moreover, his personification of death served as another way to deliver the news of his passing in a manner that celebrated his life's work.

While *Mort* is only a glimpse into the larger world of the *Discworld* series, it introduces the reader to Death and his domain. Pratchett plays on clichés and symbolism around Death to evoke humour and push the boundaries of the text through metafictional moments. He uses this humour to explore serious issues: life, death, and the injustices that come with it. His personification of Death is as serious as he is funny, as seen through his attempts to understand and mimic human behaviour. His position as an outsider is what makes us sympathise and care for him. Through *Mort*, Pratchett has shown us a version of Death that we might all wish to meet.

²⁸ News of Sir Terry Pratchett's death (and his collected tweets) appear on *Time*'s website: <https://time.com/3742565/terry-pratchetts-last-tweet-twitter>.

Chapter IV: *The Book Thief*

In *A Velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader*, Holocaust survivor Dr. Helen Fagin writes, “There are times when dreams sustain us more than facts. To read a book and surrender to a story is to keep our very humanity alive” (as cited in Popova, 2018). At the age of 21, Fagin was forced to live in the Warsaw Ghetto, where she secretly ran a school to help educate Jewish children. Despite the prohibition of books, Fagin would stay up reading a smuggled translation of *Gone with the Wind* and retell the story to her class the next day. When asked why she risked death for a story, Fagin says, “Because, for an hour every day, those [students] weren’t in the ghetto—they were in the American South; they were having adventures; they got away” (as cited in Popova, 2015).²⁹

Fagin’s experience shows how books can become a lifeline during the darkest of times. *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak explores a similar theme. The novel, set during World War II, focuses on the story of Liesel Meminger: a nine-year-old girl who is adopted by Rosa and Hans Hubermann, who live in the fictional town of Molching, Germany. It is here that Liesel learns how to read and write and discovers the power of books. Published in 2005,³⁰ *The Book Thief* became an acclaimed international bestseller: it won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, the National Jewish Book Award, the Michael L. Printz Award, and *Publishers Weekly* Best Children’s Book of the Year.³¹ It has since been adapted into film, a stage play, and a musical.³² In my reading of the text, I consider how Zusak uses personification, narration, and embedded narratives to explore the subject of death, humanity, and how books can help us survive.

While *The Book Thief* is considered a work of historical fiction, Zusak explores a more supernatural perspective through his choice in narrator. It is Death who re-examines World War II, and who tells us the story of Liesel Meminger, and the three times he met her. He associates each of these meetings with a colour: white, black, and red. These colours add symbolic weight to the atmosphere of the novel through their correlation with the Nazi flag, signifying the countless deaths that occurred during Hitler’s reign: “They fall on top of each

²⁹ This statement is made by author Neil Gaiman, who is Dr. Helen Fagin’s cousin. Excerpts from his seminar can be read here: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/16/neil-gaiman-how-stories-last>.

³⁰ Interviews celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the book state its publication date as 2006. However, information included on the colophon of the edition cited in this thesis indicate that it was first published in Picador by Pan Macmillan in 2005.

³¹ Details of the awards *The Book Thief* received can be found on the Pan Macmillan website: <https://www.panmacmillan.com.au/9781742613314/>.

³² News about the theatre and musical productions of *The Book Thief* can be read here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/25/books/the-book-thief-as-theater-at-steppenwolf-in-chicago.html> and here: <https://www.playbill.com/article/musical-adaptation-of-the-book-thief-to-have-world-premiere-at-uks-octagon-theatre>.

other. The scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red” (Zusak, 2013, p.15). Each colour represents a moment where Liesel witnesses death and is witnessed by Death:

White. A white-snow sky “stands” outside the moving train as Death collects the soul of Liesel’s brother, Werner: “the boy’s spirit was soft and cold, like ice-cream” (Zusak, 2013, p.21). Werner is buried in the frozen graveyard of a nameless town. It is here that Liesel steals her first book, dropped unknowingly by a grave digger’s apprentice. While Liesel is unable to read, the book is important to her as it represents the last time she sees her mother and brother. Through this passage, Zusak symbolically explores death as snowy, cold, and blindingly white in its imagery.

Black. During “the darkest moment before the dawn”, a plane crashes near a river outside Molching, the smoke described as coughing from the plane’s lungs (p.10). Liesel arrives at the wreckage and watches as the pilot in the cockpit dies. Death says: “Above me, the sky eclipsed—just a last moment of darkness—and I swear I could see a black signature in the shape of a swastika. It loitered untidily above” (p.521). While the dying pilot is a stranger to Liesel, his death serves as a crucial moment where she and Death recognise one another:

She did not back away or try to fight me, but I know that something told the girl I was there. Could she smell my breath? Could she hear my cursed, circular heartbeat, revolving like the crime it is in my deathly chest? I don’t know, but she knew me and she looked me in my face and she did not look away. (p. 521)

Through this passage, death encroaches further into the town of Molching, the black sky, smoke, and swastika symbolic of the darkness of Hitler’s reign. Conversely, however, Zusak uses this moment to give Death more human characteristics: a breath, a heartbeat, a chest, and a face. Rudy—Liesel’s best friend and partner in crime, who officially brands her with the title of “book thief” (p.314)—arrives at the crash site first. He places a teddy bear on the pilot’s shoulder and the pilot thanks him in English before he dies. Through this passage, Zusak contrasts two conflicting aspects of humanity: its capacity for kindness and for violence.

Red. After the bombing of Himmel Street, the sky is likened to soup being boiled and stirred: “In some places it was burnt. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked amongst the redness.” (p.13) Streets are described as burst veins, with streams of blood drying on the road, dead bodies “glued down” like pieces of driftwood after a flood (p.13). Through this passage, the town of Molching is transformed into a bloody soup of death. Here, red signifies a moment of overwhelming loss and destruction, but also represents the heart of the novel.

When Liesel is pulled from the rubble—the only person to have survived, having fallen asleep writing in the Hubermann’s basement—Death retrieves the book she leaves behind, described as “the words who had saved her life” (Zusak, 2013, p.530). This book, titled “The Book Thief” is Liesel’s life story, which Death reads “several hundred times over the years”, carrying it with him in his “vast array of pockets” (pp.15-16). By mentioning the book, Zusak establishes its significance as a framing device and a catalyst for Death’s retelling.

Through Death’s first-person narration, we are shown the world, its horror and beauty, through his eyes. Throughout the novel, he addresses, confronts, and consoles us. He complains about his tiring and ceaseless work. He confides in us about how he copes—by noticing colours, savouring them as though they are assorted flavours of sweets. The colours are a source of distraction, described as the closest thing he can get to a holiday. As Zusak explains:

Death was almost breathing colours in to distract himself from all the misery that surrounds him. That in a way was a metaphor for the idea that this book is about people doing beautiful things in a really ugly time. And that’s what Death is trying to seek out. (Hudson, 2010).

Death’s narrative voice is an important aspect of the novel that explores this idea of “breathing colours”. Zusak imbues his writing style with synaesthetic and anthropomorphic qualities: a colour is perched on Death’s shoulder; a scream dribbles down the air; a felled plane coughs smoke from its lungs; the houses of Himmel Street crowd nervously together; the music from Han’s accordion is “the colour of darkness” (Zusak, 2013, p.108). In using these descriptions, Zusak establishes the idea of objects, architecture, scenery, and sound as living, sensory things in Death’s imagination. This serves as a poignant subtext: that the figure whose job is to take life away simultaneously infuses life into everything he sees.

Unlike *Mort* and *Keturah* and *Lord Death*, Death in *The Book Thief* is not given identifiable features, yet there is the sense that he has a physical form. This is conveyed through several moments: when he carries souls (in his arms and fingers, or on his shoulders and lap); when he blows warm air into his hands to “heat them up” (p.373); when he flinches at the smell of a hospital; when he describes himself as having a “dark-beating heart” within his “deathly chest” (p.262; p.521); and when he carries Liesel’s book in his pocket, the papers suffering “from the friction of movement” over decades (p.378). There are rare moments when he is seen, or when people can smell his presence, but his features are not described. For the most part, Death reads like a phantasmal figure: there, yet largely ignored. In this way, Zusak’s personification of Death seems to have elements of Herzog’s *hider-form*, conveying “the

mystery and hiddenness of death” through his featurelessness (2000, pp.33-34). In other ways, he also presents as a gentle comforter: the friendly Thanatos, there to carry the souls of those who perish in the horrors of war. Moreover, in telling the story directly from Death’s point of view, we are given a perspective that was absent from Leavitt and Pratchett’s novels—one that is startlingly brutal in its honesty. Towards the end of the novel, Death describes his role thus:

It’s probably fair to say that in all the years of Hitler’s reign, no person was able to serve the Führer as loyally as me. A human doesn’t have a heart like mine. The human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle, and I have the endless ability to be in the right place at the right time. The consequence of this is that I’m always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both. (Zusak, 2013, pp.521-522)

This passage evokes conflicting feelings towards Zusak’s characterisation of Death: it shows his capacity to see beauty in the midst of an ugly time while reminding us of his ceaseless work as a “loyal” servant to Hitler. This idea of the beauty and brutality of humanity is a crucial aspect of the novel, steering Death’s retelling of Liesel’s story. It is important to note that the last line of *The Book Thief* (“I am haunted by humans”) echoes the last line in Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It* (“I am haunted by waters”)—a quote that helped inspire Zusak’s interpretation of Death: “I saw that [Death] should be telling this story to prove to himself that humans can be worthwhile, and beautiful, even in the ugliest times” (Stillman, 2012). In witnessing the atrocities of war, Death becomes “unnerved, untied, and undone” by humanity (Zusak, 2013, p.331). Zusak subverts the idea of war as “Death’s best friend” by exploring a more vulnerable and sympathetic personification of Death as a character: a figure who is “tired, and afraid, and haunted by all the cleaning up, especially during wartime” (Zusak, 2013, p.331; Stillman, 2012). This seems to counter negative associations of Death as the threatening macabre figure or unfeeling automaton. Instead, Zusak explores Death as a victim (rather than perpetrator) of humans’ relentless cruelty. In spite of this cruelty, Death continues on. And he tells us the story of a book thief.

The theme of books is crucial in our understanding of Death. While Zusak explores this idea in relation to Liesel, it is important to note that Liesel’s story is one which Death retells to us. In other words, it is through Death that Zusak explores the theme in several ways, reinforcing the power of words, literacy, and how stories can help us survive. In a time where books are banned and burned as propaganda, books are what help Liesel and Max (a young Jewish man who turns to the Hubermann’s for refuge) to survive, in much the same way that Death “survives” by carrying and re-reading Liesel’s story. Liesel, as her nickname suggests,

steals a number of books: *The Grave Digger's Handbook* (snatched from the snow in the wake of her little brother's funeral), *The Shoulder Shrug* (retrieved from the smoking embers of a book burning), *The Whistler*, *The Dream Carrier*, *A Song in the Dark*, and *The Last Human Stranger* (all taken from the library of Ilsa Herman, the mayor's wife). There are also books Liesel is given: *Faust the Dog*, *The Lighthouse*, *The Standover Man*, and *The Word Shaker*. The first two are gifts from her foster father, Hans. The latter two are written, drawn, and gifted by Max, made from the painted-over pages of *Mein Kampf*.

Max's books are inserted into the novel and displayed to us as a series of images. In *The Standover Man*, passages from Hitler's manifesto are faintly visible on wrinkled paper, the erased words "gagging, suffocating under the paint" (Zusak, 2013, p.257). Max shares his story: from infancy and his absent father, to the fist-fighting years of his adolescence, to finding shelter with the Hubermann's and friendship with Liesel. It is a thirteen-page memoir that transmutes his life into children's picture book form. He depicts himself as a bird, inspired by a conversation he overhears: "His hair is like feathers," whispers Liesel to Hans (p.235). Confined as Max is—hiding in dark rooms and basements, without any glimpse of the sun or sky—we see it for the metaphor that it is.

Max's second work, *The Word Shaker*, has no visible traces of *Mein Kampf*. We see only Max's handwriting, and sketches of trees that bear swastika fruit. Equal parts fairy tale, fable, and memoir, the message of his story this: that words have power. Max begins his tale with the Führer, a "strange, small man" who goes about planting words each day and night, cultivating them until they become great forests of "farmed thoughts" (p.475). On the next page, people with smiling faces stand on a conveyor belt, where swastikas are handed out and buckets of words are poured into their heads—an assembly line of mass-produced propaganda.

Much like *The Standover Man*, Max includes Liesel and himself as nameless characters in *The Word Shaker*. Here, Liesel is the "small, skinny girl" who bears the title of "word shaker": one who climbs up the trees of farmed thought, dropping words to the people below. She becomes friends with a young man (that is, Max) who is "despised in her homeland, even though he was born in it" (p.476). Max's illness while hiding in the Hubermann's basement is replicated in this tale. The word shaker, worried over her friend, sheds a tear that lands on the young man's face and dries into a seed of friendship. Liesel plants this seed and it grows rapidly into "the tallest tree in the forest", much to the Führer's outrage (p.477). Attempts are made to chop down the tree, yet it withstands the Führer and his henchman's attacks, unmoved and unmarked. It is only once the word shaker and the young man leave the top of the tree that the damage it sustained is revealed.

As nested stories, *The Standover Man* and *The Word Shaker* serve as self-reflexive mirrors. They transport us into the world of *The Book Thief* while simultaneously representing a means of escaping it. Zusak takes the pages of *Mein Kampf* and transforms them into tales of friendship and empowerment. The book Max had once carried with him—fleeing to the Hubermann’s with the hope that Hans would take him in—goes from a symbol of his oppression, to a lifeline, to a source of liberation. The many layers of storytelling in *The Book Thief* are what blur the boundaries of author and reader. We read Zusak’s novel from Death’s perspective, yet this perspective incorporates multiple points of view: from Liesel’s autobiographical work titled *The Book Thief* (which is then retrieved and retold to us by Death), to Max’s own stories (shown to us by Death), to the passages included from the fictional books Liesel reads over the years. In essence, we have a *mise en abyme* of storytelling, encouraged by none other than Death. He speaks of “spoiling the ending” of the book (Zusak, 2013, p.263); he asks us to wait “a few pages” before he gets to the meeting of Liesel and Max (p.182); he scatters small facts and moments throughout the novel that allow us to dip into the minds of different characters.

In an article on metafiction in *The Book Thief*, Ellen Spacey states: “While Zusak’s novel uses these techniques [nested stories and Death as authorial narrator] to remove the discomfort of metafiction, he also momentarily takes away that comfort to jostle the reader and inspire a closer examination of the novel” (2015, pp.72-73). Zusak explores the intersection in which stories, narrator, history and death converge, encouraging layers of tension between author and text. He inspires a closer examination of our mortality and our humanity through several nested narratives, emphasising the thematic power of books through the literary device of death personification. Here, books serve as a means of survival, both figuratively and literally. Liesel survives her grief by learning from the books that she steals and the books she is given. She survives the bombs that fall upon Molching because she falls asleep in the basement, having stayed up writing her own book. And, through that book, Death survives the toll of his work. This reinforces the importance of books as a central theme of the novel. Death, tired and broken as he is, is unable to ignore Liesel’s story. He keeps it with him in his travels, rereads it, and marvels at how she could endure so much.

When asked about why the book resonated with readers of different ages, Zusak states that he wrote the novel without considering the “book’s audience in terms of age” (Stillman, 2012). In an interview celebrating the book’s 10-year anniversary, Zusak says, “I never thought anyone would read it, and maybe that’s why I wrote it the way I did and how it became successful. I didn’t think of the audience at all” (Biedenharn, 2016). His motivation was to

write someone's "favourite book" because, in his words, "A loved book transcends the category that it's in anyway" (2016).

Jenni Adams suggests that the crossover³³ nature of *The Book Thief* and its double narrative approach are what complicate and undermine the novel. In her article, she explores double narrative through Zusak's choice of Death as narrator: "a figure which serves simultaneously to confront the adolescent reader with the fact of death (in both an abstract and a historically located sense) and to offer protection from the most unsettling implications of this fact" (p.223). In other words, "doubleness" can be seen in Death because he is both a source of consolation and confrontation, thus evoking a sense of ambivalence. Adams also draws attention to the dilemma of Holocaust literature for young people, as it "negotiates the conflicting imperatives of protection from and exposure to trauma" (p.223). She argues that, in representing the Holocaust in a text for young readers through the perspective of Death, it softens "the finality of death by offering a redemptive aftermath entail[ing] a form of narrative fetishism" (p.226). Furthermore, she suggests that Death's caring nature, when considered in the context of the Holocaust, reveals the ethical dilemma of using this double narrative approach. According to Adams, it risks "distorting the reality of these events" to young readers by offering narratives of escape and consolation (p. 26). In her examination of the crossover novel, Falconer writes:

It [crossover fiction] prompts a reader to interrogate everything that happens in these in-between territories, invites us to measure our difference from the recent past and the speed with which we are hurtling towards new concepts of self, of childhood, of ageing and dying. Crossover fiction is fiction that calls into question the boundaries which used to define children's fiction by prescribing what it should contain or exclude (p.27)

The Book Thief does, indeed, seem to call into question these boundaries. It considers the past, the intersection of death and childhood, and draws upon childhood stories and research Zusak conducted to write his novel. However, I would argue that Zusak's intent is not to offer a "consoling fantasy" but to personify death in a way that is neither unfeeling nor sadistic. He explores Death as a figure who is haunted, tired, and afraid due to the horrors he has seen throughout history. Zusak uses Death's perspective as an outsider to ask questions about humanity—specifically, its capacity for kindness and cruelty. He tells the story of "the book

³³ While Adams does not define what a crossover text is, she does cite Falconer, who explores the working definition of the crossover novel as "'ostensibly written for children' which 'adults should read too'" (2008, p.27).

thief” in order “to prove to himself that humans can be beautiful and selfless as well” (Hudson, 2010). In writing the novel, Zusak interviewed his parents, drawing upon the childhood stories they told him of living in Germany and Austria during World War II. It was Zusak’s parents that taught him “a love of story” which resulted in *The Book Thief* (Stillman, 2012). While it is important to acknowledge the impact of consolation and confrontation in the context of Holocaust literature, I would suggest that Zusak’s intent was to ask broader questions about death in the context of humanity: how can we, as humans, contain such beauty and such ugliness? How can we endure the brutality we inflict upon one another? I would also suggest the ethical dilemma of consolation versus confrontation is inherent to any literature intended for young readers that explores the subject of death and trauma. It is important, then, to be mindful of this issue while still offering new ways to generate, discuss, and understand the concept of death in fiction for all ages.

In *The Book Thief*, Zusak offers a thought-provoking re-examination of World War II from the perspective of Death personified. Death’s narrative voice imbues colours, sounds, and objects with a sense of life that juxtaposes with his own nature as an embodiment of death. Death’s perspective does raise questions about the complexities of consolation and confrontation in literature for younger readers. In the end, however, it is the theme of books and their importance that helps Liesel survive and which, in turn, helps Death himself. It is in telling this story from Death’s perspective that Zusak shows us how people can be selfless and kind in spite of overwhelming cruelty. This suggests that stories are, indeed, a lifeline in dark times, and can help keep humanity alive.

Conclusion

On his invention of the kaleidoscope, Sir David Brewster writes that he derived its name from the following Greek words: καλός (beautiful), εἶδος (a form), and σκοπέω (to see) (1858, p.1). As an “Optical Instrument”, the kaleidoscope serves a visual and aesthetic purpose: a magical display of symmetry, light, and colour in motion, capturing infinite varieties of patterns. In much the same way, the personification of death can be viewed as a kaleidoscopic device. While the “beauty” of the Death figure may be subjective, this device allows people to “see” death in “a form” that is human. Such a form helps us conceptually navigate death, giving “shape to the shapeless by approximating it to the familiar” (Guthke, 1999, p.8). And, much like a kaleidoscope, the figuration of death can change, showing us new “patterns” and, consequently, hinting at an “infinite variety” of interpretations of the concept of death over time.

The aim of my exegesis has been to open a dialogue on death personification: to consider why it exists, what purpose it serves, and how it has been explored in literature. In structuring my thesis as a mythical and symbolic “underworld”, my intent has been to translate the topic of death personification as an interdisciplinary journey I embark upon with you, the reader. On our journey through the realm of death incarnate, we have peered into death-denial theory, noticing how aspects of this thesis correspond with literature examining the rationale for death personification. Surveying Kastenbaum, Herzog, and Guthke’s theoretical approaches to Death as a figure, we have seen how they all explore death personification as an imaginative strategy—a psychological countermeasure to defend against, cope with, and alleviate the threat of death. While this does suggest that personifying death can be viewed as a form of death-denial, I would offer an alternate perspective. Namely, that the Death figure is an imaginative device expressing the complexity (and subjectivity) of death and dying in contemporary society. Through the figuration of death, we are offered a thought-provoking, engaging means of facilitating further understanding and discussion of the subject of death.

This thesis, while not a comprehensive outline of death personification, explores the purpose and origins of the Death figure. It would be a daunting task, indeed, to record all examples of death personification across folklore, mythology, and religion. Still, in considering specific strands of thought on death personified, I often found myself lost in a multitude of images and ideas. This research revealed the rich potential of the figuration of death and how I could explore it in my thesis. It sparked my imagination and kindled my awareness of its immersive capabilities in fiction.

Through our trek across Death in fiction, we have seen how novels can explore the subject of death in different ways. From Lord Death, the nobleman who yearns for love and companionship; to Death of the Discworld, a skeletal reaper who persists in his failed attempts to understand humans; and Death the narrator, who is haunted by humans and must remind himself of our capacity for good through the life story of a survivor. In these novels, we have seen how Leavitt, Pratchett, and Zusak converge in evoking sympathy and understanding towards their respective personifications of Death. This understanding and sympathy is what, in turn, offers a more nuanced approach towards the concept of death itself.

Early into my doctoral journey, I had thought of death personification as a curious device I wanted to learn more about. Many years later, I continue to be fascinated and inspired by its potential. The personification of death is, indeed, a source of agency and expression. It allows us an outlet to explore the concept of death, gives us insight into the ways in which we understand death, and shows us that this understanding is both complex and diverse. While conversations about death and dying can be difficult to navigate (as my own experience suggests) there are ways in which we can facilitate further discussion in this area. By focusing on the topic of death personification in fiction, I suggest that it is an immersive and creative way of exploring, discussing, and writing about the subject of death that is deserving of further scholarly research.

Now, nearing the end of our conclusion, we arrive not at the end of the journey, but another beginning. Returning to our experimental map (Figure 2), we stand before a yawning portal that will transport us to a fictional world. This portal, re-imagined as the black sun, signals the opening of my novel, *Westall*. In it, another kind of conversation on death awaits, and another kind of personification of death awaits with it. I hope this work of fiction proves just as engaging, thought-provoking, and inspiring as the research literature it draws upon.

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