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LIVING DEATH:
THE HAND OF DEATH
IN FIVE OF
JANET FRAME'S NOVELS

A thesis presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements
of Master of Arts
in English
at Massey University

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1993

ABSTRACT

Who is alive and who is dead within a literary text is the result of the discretion or point of view of the narrator. The narrator has the power to act as the hand of death to create and destroy as they write characters in or out of the novel. This process is demonstrated through the actions of individual characters. By judgments which come solely from their point of view, they are able to declare other characters dead, while they themselves remain alive. This thesis examines this theme in five of Janet Frame's novels: Owls Do Cry, The Rainbirds, Intensive Care, Daughter Buffalo and The Carpathians.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank
my supervisor, Dr. Doreen D'Cruz,
Mum and Dad,
and my friends,
without whose support
this thesis would not be done.

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INTRODUCTION

"Of course it is Death," he said. "What else is there to tell stories about? Did you never learn, when working fractions, to find the common denominator?"¹

So spoke Uncle Blackbeetle to Erlene, in Scented Gardens for the Blind, when she asked him if he was about to tell yet another story about death. After reading all of Janet Frame's novels, Uncle Blackbeetle's philosophy seems evident in all her works. As all of Frame's novels arguably, have a theme of death, my selection of works for examination in this thesis has been on chronological grounds. In this way a development of the theme can be traced over time.

Her first novel, Owls Do Cry, and to date, latest novel, The Carpathians, are the subjects of the first and last chapters of this thesis. The three middle chapters consider three novels that were published at about the mid-point of Frame's writing career as it stands. They are The Rainbirds, Intensive Care, and Daughter Buffalo published consecutively in the years between 1968 and 1972. The concept of death is treated in a consistent manner throughout the five novels this thesis considers. However, the language and metaphors used to describe this concept varies from novel to novel.

One major influence on Frame is that of the poet Rilke, who has special relevance to the topic of death. Rilke is a poet whom Frame herself obviously enjoys. In his poetry he shows death and life to exist in union with each other. Rather than seeing them as opposites, he perceives them to be complementary parts of one whole. Frame shows the influence of Rilke on her work in the way she defines life and death. Rather than seeing them as separate or exclusive categories, a character's life or death is often constructed from the highly subjective realm of individual perceptions.

The poet, Rilke, thought that by acknowledging death to be part of your life you would be able to live more

fully or 'authentically'. Because you had faced your own death, he thought you would also face your own life. As explained in the following chapters, some critics have felt that Frame's novels give us examples of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' characters. However, this thesis disagrees with their precepts. Rather than the narrator making moral judgments, it is often the characters who judge each other. Very often these judgments touch on whether they think other characters are metaphorically alive or dead. However, rather than life and death being a judgment of the narrator, it highlights the processes of fiction-making, which involves the supersedence of points of view. One character's point of view can supersede another by describing others through their eyes, therefore having their judgment foregrounded.

This connection between point of view and death shows the closeness of the concepts of creation and destruction. The creation of fiction involves the destruction of the points of view of the characters being written about, as ultimately all points of view are perceived through the eyes of, and controlled by, the narrator.

This thesis also disagrees with the argument that if people would simply face the inevitability of their own death they would be 'authentic'. Although it is advantageous to see death as a part of life, on another level it also has to be acknowledged that death is ultimately unknowable. The boundaries of our knowledge as humans about death is limited to our speculation about it while we are still alive. Once we are dead we no longer possess a language that could communicate our experience to others. Therefore inherent in acknowledging death in your life is the willingness to contemplate the unknown. Although Frame writes about death, she does not come to a set definition of it, because it is always unknowable. Rather, death is always considered from the perspective of what contemplating it can add or take away from life.

In Owls Do Cry, Frame's first novel, the Withers family is introduced. Each of the main characters has their own

section where their point of view is presented. Through their individual perspectives they judge each other to be alive or dead. These judgments blur the distinctions between the categories of life and death. For example, Toby judges his sister Chicks to be dead because he thinks her life is based on shallow materialism. However, Chicks judges from her perspective that her sister Daphne is dead because of her lack of material goods. This fluidity in the use of the concepts of life and death reminds us of Rilke's idea that life and death are not opposites but complementary parts of a whole.

Just as life and death cannot be divided into separate categories, neither can the characters be divided into those that are authentic or inauthentic. The characters all acknowledge death in their lives to a certain extent. They also all judge each other to be alive or dead. However, we cannot conclude that this makes some characters authentic and others inauthentic. All characters show varying degrees of authenticity, rather than some being superior to the others in some way. All characters have the power to construct the others, and judge whether they perceive them to be alive or dead.

In The Rainbirds, Frame's seventh novel, characters also construct each other to be alive or dead in a way which seems to bear little relation to another's physical life or death. When Godfrey Rainbird is pronounced dead, he is merely wrongly diagnosed, and awakens from a deep coma only days later. Although he is still alive, many other characters judge him to be now some kind of representative for all dead people.

The Rainbirds uses the concept of death as an instrument of judgment, as does Owls Do Cry. However, unlike Frame's first novel, The Rainbirds explores what this concept might actually entail, rather than taking for granted that the reader knows what death is supposed to represent in a particular context. Godfrey's experience shows us that although it is important to acknowledge death in your life, it is also important to acknowledge that

death is unknowable. When Godfrey awakes from his coma he has no special knowledge of what death might be like, although many around him assume that he has. Language, and the processes of fiction making are used to construct preconceptions of death. However, death itself is beyond language.

Intensive Care demonstrates the difficulty of arriving at any set definition of death. As shown in the preceding chapters, although death can be an existential fact, it can also be used as a means of describing or constructing others. However, in this novel the process is intensified to a more extreme extent. For example, Tom, a major character in this novel, dreams of drowning his wife in a slurry pond. Through his constant dreaming he denies the existence of the people around him, therefore he denies them the right to their own point of view. Other individuals in the novel can symbolically kill other characters in this way. The futuristic third section of the novel demonstrates how political propaganda is capable of enacting this process on a wide scale. The Human Delineation Act shows a group of people's dreams, or points of views being inflicted on others.

Inherent in this process is death. Just as Rilke points out the union of life and death, so creation and destruction are closely related. In Intensive Care, the creation of dreams entails the destruction of the point of view of the person who is being dreamed about. Existential death can result when the person dreamed about asserts his or her point of view to the dreamer. Tom kills Ciss Everest who he dreams about, when the 'reality' of her existence does not match the dream of her he was living with.

As in the other novels, we see that merely acknowledging your own death does not make characters authentic. Tom faces his own death, but this leads him to be a destructive rather than a creative person. Rather than showing one point of view to be authentic, the text shows many different points of view. The end of the novel shows us that one perspective can never suffice for all

people. Although the H. D. Act is successful at first, it is only a matter of time before divergent points of view reappear.

In Daughter Buffalo we see how the expectations we have affects our reading of a text. Daughter Buffalo is in many ways different from the other novels and does not fit neatly into the model this thesis promotes. However, the chapter on it discusses the ways it does or does not fit into the model already in place.

Firstly, we must note that the novel does not fulfill other expectations we might have, as well as not treating the topic of death in a way that relates to other novels. It seems to be more like a collection of anecdotes than a novel, and a significant portion of the text is written in poetry. The two main characters, Talbot and Turnlung are on a quest to find 'death education'. They construct each other's lives and deaths as a way of trying to arrive at this. However, the characters are extremely inconsistent, making it hard to fit them into any model or make any definite statement about them. They want to get to know death, but they often turn away from their best opportunities to learn more. They want to know death, while they realize that this is not possible. Like in other novels, this one attribute does not make any character 'authentic'. It seems at this stage time to wonder if Frame has any message or any character she totally endorses.

Talbot and Turnlung proceed through the book unable to make any genuine relationships that will hold their memory beyond their own deaths, that is they make relationships with animals. As memory is one thing that prevents death from being complete, Talbot and Turnlung draw from memory in their reminiscing of their death education, while with typical inconsistency wish death would come to complete their lives.

In The Carpathians, Frame's latest novel to date, the links memory has to the concept of death is developed more fully. The legend of the Memory Flower and the scientific discovery of the Gravity Star are closely

connected to the processes of memory and death. The Memory Flower 'grows from the dead' because it has the function of symbolizing people and events that now do not exist physically because they are in, and belong to, the past. The Gravity Star distorts memory and the destructive element of death, by making the past become present. What was far now becomes near because time has been distorted.

This conflation of things which were once considered opposites reminds us of Rilke and the effect of his writings on Frame's work. In The Carpathians we can see that his influence continues. Other 'opposites' which are merged in the novel are creation and destruction. Fiction making encapsulates the processes of creation and destruction through the manipulation of point of view. Through point of view the author creates a character and also destroys that character by stealing his or her unmediated point of view.

When the Gravity Star works its effects the disruption it causes means people no longer exist because they have had their points of view taken from them. However, rather than this being a judgment on the people who 'die' it is a reflection of who was holding their points of view as they are being described. Mattina escapes the Gravity Star with her point of view intact, mainly because she was in control of describing others. However, Mattina's possession of her own point of view is not permanent. When she returns home to U. S. A. her husband is able to take over her point of view as she dies.

This process of characters taking over others' points of view has been intensified throughout Frame's works until it is shown very clearly in The Carpathians. However, even in Owls Do Cry, Frame's first novel, the beginnings of this theme can be observed. Although the point of view of the narrator seems overriding at first, individual characters can negate each other's points of view.

NOTES

¹ Janet Frame, Scented Gardens for the Blind (New York: Braziller, 1964) 172.