

The Discourse of the “Good Death” in Nineteenth-Century Fiction and a Historical Case Study

ABSTRACT

What people said on their deathbeds preoccupied 19th-century Protestants. Fear of the void after death or of punishment in the afterlife made death terrifying. The process of dying, however, was ritualized to negate these terrors. Having a “good death” constituted reassurance for the dying, comfort for the family, and a lesson for the community. Such comfort was available even from fictional deathbed scenes, where sentiment and imagery softened the harsh reality. This interdisciplinary study explores the similarities between real and fictional deathbed narratives, using a sample of 19th-century novels, two historical deathbeds from Scotland, and a case study of an actual deathbed from the West Indies. The pattern of the good death – in both fiction and biography – includes specific elements such as witness, testimony, requests and advice, music, scripture, and confident hope of Heaven. Some deathbeds even became virtual stages or pulpits, with the dying person at the centre.

Keywords: Victorian deathbeds, Presbyterian missions, Victorian novels, colonial Jamaica, Eliza Hitchcock Davidson

Diskurz »dobre smrti« v pripovedni prozi 19. stoletja in zgodovinska študija primera

IZVLEČEK

Protestanti so v 19. stoletju veliko pozornosti namenjali besedam, izrečenim na smrtni postelji. Ljudje so se bali smrti zaradi strahu pred praznino ali kaznijo v posmrtnem življenju. Strahove so poskusili pregnati z ritualizacijo postopka umiranja. “Dobra smrt” naj bi pomirila umirajočega, potolažila družino in predstavljala nauk za skupnost. Tovrstno tolažbo so ponujali celo prikazi umiranja v fikciji, kjer so kruto stvarnost omehčala čustva in podobe. Pričujoča interdisciplinarna raziskava ugotavlja podobnosti med resničnimi in fiktivnimi prikazi umiranja v romanih 19. stoletja: na primeru dveh škotskih zgodovinskih romanov ter na primeru resnične, zgodovinsko izpričane smrti v Zahodni Indiji. Vzorec dobre smrti – tako v leposlovju kot v biografiji – vključuje posebne elemente, kot so priče, pričevanje, prošnje in nasveti, glasba, sveto pismo in upanje na pot v nebesa. Nekateri opisi ljudi na smrtni postelji so se spremenili celo v navidezne odre ali prižnice, na katerih je bila v ospredju umirajoča oseba.

Ključne besede: umiranje v viktorijanski dobi, prezbiterijanski misijoni, viktorijanski romani, kolonialna Jamajka, Eliza Hitchcock Davidson

1 Introduction: The Signifying Death

Deathbeds were once communal scenes of testament, witnessed by family members and surrounded by pastoral care (Masur 2015, 12; Bross 2001, 332). Moreover, what the dying person said in their final hours was once considered to have serious consequences for their soul and was thus worthy of being recorded. For example, Puritan deathbed testaments from Martha's Vineyard were explored by Sarah Rivett, to reveal "a written record of divine translation from death to life, from the visible to the invisible world, from the dark glass of limited perception to unfiltered revelation" (2017, 472). Such translation of an event into doctrinal fulfilment made the articulate death a valuable motivator for the living, while it assured a happy afterlife for the dying. When Lisa Shaver studied memoirs and obituaries from 19th-century Methodist deaths, she found that one function of women's "deathbed pulpits" was the motivation and instruction of the living (Shaver 2008, 20; Zaaraoui 2017, 14). According to Kristina Bross, deaths of "Indians" in Puritan North America were always interpreted as a sign from God (Bross 2001, 325), and converts rapidly learned the deathbed speech conventions that would assert their "Christian identity" to a sceptical community (Bross 2001, 332). Professions of faith on one's deathbed could mark one as a "visible saint" (Bross 2001, 332) and thus were valuable currency for both missionaries and their dying converts. Deathbed speeches fulfilled multiple functions (Shaver 2008, 20), and often featured prescribed rhetorical strategies, actions, and gestures.

The poignancy of a speaking death was enhanced when the person was female or a child (Masur 2015, 40-41; Cassidy 2002, 210, 213, Rivett, 2011, 17; Martineau 1844, 104-5). In the case of a child, elaborate professions of faith were not expected, but even minor utterances or gestures took on significance to the survivors. Churchgoing women, however, were expected to make what was called a "good death", in the process achieving the social dominance (though fleeting) denied them in life.

To 21st-century sensibilities, the fascination with the process of dying can seem morbid, even when its prominence arises from its indexical function as pointing to the future of the dying person's soul.¹ Nineteenth-century readers loved a saintly invalid and relished reading of an eloquent demise, whether in a memoir of a neighbour or fellow congregant (White 1985, 5; Bross 2001, 332), or in the case of literary heroines (Zaaraoui 2017, 13; White 1985, 5), where the aesthetics of death prevailed. "Do not the most common-place writers of fiction crowd their novels with death scenes . . .? and do not those who stay home learn all they can of the last words and demeanour of the sufferers?" asked Harriet Martineau from her sickroom in 1844 (1844, 104). Fictional deathbeds allowed for a form of "shared, public mourning" (White 1985, 5) among the reading community. Among the earliest deathbed narratives in the English novel is that of the heroine in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), which falls outside the scope of this article.² Prime examples of popular fictional deaths include those

¹ Interest in literary deathbed scenes has not, however, completely disappeared in the 21st century. See *The Guardian's* 2009 feature "Ten of the Best Deathbed Scenes in Literature". In a contemporary update to the issue, Heather Duncan raised the question of potential "death practices" (2018, 95) for the 21st-century, once digitalization makes a personal afterlife a serious possibility, not a matter of faith, as with the spiritual afterlife sought on Victorian deathbeds.

² Clarissa's deathbed resembles the 19th-century pattern in being emotional, pious, witnessed, and self-directed. Having accepted her fate, Clarissa makes an extended exit, sending copious letters (Richardson 1863, 297), requesting pillows

of Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* (1847), Beth March from *Little Women* (1868), Little Eva from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and, best known of all, Little Nell from Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41).

I will examine some of these literary deathbed scenes for their narrative tropes and rhetorical strategies. These fictional deathbeds will be juxtaposed with two historical deathbeds recorded by biographers, and finally with one extended deathbed scene from the mid-19th century, to explore the differences in the aestheticization of death, ritualization, and the notion of the deathbed as a staged spectacle (Zaaraoui 2017, 13).

2 Fictional Deathbeds

The deathbed scene in fiction did not occupy the cultural foreground until near the middle of the 19th century. Fictional characters did die in earlier novels, but with less emphasis upon the deathbed as a separate tableau with a motivational function. Deathbed scenes from Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826) are instructive in this regard. This work imagines a plague pandemic, originating in the east and spreading to England. Despite the innumerable deaths in this novel, few are foregrounded as individual losses. Even when treated in detail, these early deathbeds lack the evangelical tone of fictional deathbeds a generation later.

Writing in the 1820s and out of the Romantic movement, Shelley offers nothing like the sentimental deathbed of the mid-Victorian age. *The Last Man* belongs to an indeterminate genre, part science fiction, part Gothic melodrama, in which proselytizing Christian belief plays no part. The novel's many deaths generally occur off-stage or are briefly sketched. Here, for instance is the death of the Countess of Windsor, who is among the last survivors: "In the morning we had seen her apparently in health – in the evening, Lucy, before we retired to rest, visited our quarters to say that she was dead" (Shelley 1994, 414).

More extensive description marks the death of Evadne earlier in the novel, when the plague has not yet taken hold. Hers constitutes the antithesis to the "good death" that will be illustrated later. First, it is not a deathbed at all, since it takes place outdoors on an abandoned battleground, a piece of "corse-strewn earth" (Shelley 1994, 180) and is thus beyond the realm of the domestic. The good death optimally occurred at home, within the domestic sphere (Zaaraoui 2017, 13). Second, the dying person, though dressed as a soldier, is a woman, a Greek princess, and the doomed lover of Raymond, one of the novel's protagonists. Next, there is the attitude of the dying woman: far from offering blessings to witnesses, Evadne calls down vengeance on Raymond for having deserted her:

Many living deaths have I borne for thee, O Raymond, and now I expire, thy victim! – By my death I purchase thee – lo! The instruments of war, fire, the plague are my servitors . . . Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction – O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee! (Shelley 1994, 181).

(297), offering blessings and forgiveness (302–4), and issuing orders about the disposal of her body (298). This last constitutes the real distinction between *Clarissa* and its successors: Richardson's dying heroine is flesh and blood, described as a "corpse" and needing a coffin, a hearse, and aromatic herbs to mask the odour (1863, 326–27). Such physical frankness is absent from the 19th-century examples examined in section 2 "Fictional Deathbeds".

She briefly anticipates meeting Raymond in Heaven (Shelley 1994, 181), but otherwise her dying address comprises equal parts prophecy and threat. Hers is not a soul-comforting death, nor an instructive moral lesson. Instead, this is a gothic death, filled with disguise, wilful passion, transgressive roles, and an intensity of earthly emotion that will be absent from the Victorian deathbeds explored in the next section. With her Romantic sensibility, Shelley emphasizes individual self-determination over any surrender to the arms of a Christian Jesus.

The Romantic aspect of Shelley's death scenes becomes even more apparent in the scene where little Evelyn dies, near the end of the novel. The death of a child or adolescent would later become the ideal nucleus for the "good death", but Shelley's child, though cherished, dies in a natural and not a moral universe. The son of Lionel, the narrator, Evelyn is among the band of English plague survivors that has fled to Italy (Shelley 1994, 434). Given his youth, he could have represented the last hope for humanity's continuation. Unfortunately, he is "seized with sudden fever" (Shelley 1994, 434) and dies of typhus within a fortnight. His is a tender deathbed, as carefully witnessed as any of the mid-Victorian ones, but *what* is witnessed differs substantially:

His little form and tiny lineaments encaged the embryo of the world-spanning mind of man. Man's nature, brimful of passions and affections, would have had an [sic] home in that little heart, whose swift pulsations hurried towards their close. His small hand's fine mechanism, now flaccid and unbent, would in the growth of sinew and muscle, have achieved works of beauty or of strength. His tender rosy feet would have trod in firm manhood the bowers and glades of earth. (Shelley 1994, 434–35)

On display here are Shelley's own feelings of maternal loss, her interest in natural philosophy and in the capacity of human beings to feel passion, appreciate natural beauty and add creatively to that beauty. The father's deathbed wishes do not concern an afterlife but comprise regret that Evelyn has been denied the chance of a fulfilling life.

This child's passing conveys no message of salvation, an absence that the narrator notes explicitly: "I have heard that the sight of the dead has confirmed materialists in their belief. I ever felt otherwise. Was that my child – that moveless decaying inanimation?" (Shelley 1994, 435). In Shelley's novel, even the death of a child does not become a didactic spectacle enacting the drama of faith fulfilled.

Over the next generation, however, the deathbed agenda changes between Shelley's Romantic era and the Victorian atmosphere of domestic piety in which Charles Dickens serialized his novels. I now turn to deathbed scenes from major novels of the 1840s and later, starting with three that epitomize the pattern of the good death in literature.

Since the death scene of Little Nell in Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* has sometimes been taken as the pattern of the Victorian deathbed (Masur 2015, 75), I begin with an analysis of its components.

Like other good deathbeds, Nell's is witnessed; there are people "all about her at the time" because her death is expected (Dickens 1868, 324–27). Second, it takes place at a temporally

liminal time – soon after daybreak. The dying individual both receives messages and utters blessings. Nell is too young to preach on her deathbed, so a simple “God bless you” suffices. The good deathbed is also a lucid one. Gestures include the request for an embrace or kiss, a smile, and the intimation that such a facial expression is unique and angelic. Dickens gives Little Nell a restrained death scene, with little melodrama and no gore, although much sentiment. The moment of death has passed when the reader is admitted to the death chamber, and much of what we think we know about Little Nell’s death is due to George Cattermole’s woodcut illustration of the scene.³ Cattermole shows Nell lying under the coverlet in a bed with an elaborate headboard. With no physical indications of disease or suffering, she looks tranquil and older than her years. Her eyes are closed, and her right hand clasps a book. The room has arched windows and faint indications of drapery. The most striking element in the illustration is the carved headboard, which rises over Nell’s head as if it were a dream emanating from her. It depicts the Virgin Mary with the infant Christ on her lap; it is thus the illustrator and not the writer who introduces the concept of sacrificial death.

Another best seller from the mid-19th century was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). This popular account of life on a Louisiana plantation created a cluster of stereotypes: Topsy, Little Eva and Uncle Tom himself. The atmosphere of the novel drips with Christian fervour, and even so young a child as Eva St Clare knows that she will die soon: “‘Uncle Tom,’ said Eva, ‘I’m going there’ . . . ‘*I’m going, before long*’” (Stowe 1994, 227). Although this remark comes in Chapter XXII, the actual deathbed occurs four chapters later, in XXVI, titled “Death”. The scene is Eva’s spacious bedroom (Stowe 1994, 246), to the décor of which Stowe devotes a lengthy passage. The scene is reminiscent of Cattermole’s illustration of Little Nell’s death. Stowe clearly constructs Eva’s room as a shrine: there is a “statuette of Jesus”, and a “sculptured angel with drooping wings” along with rose-buds, rose-coloured damask and a great deal of marble and alabaster (Stowe 1994, 247). Although Uncle Tom brings a floral offering to the Jesus statuette each morning, this shrine is the home to a more recent saint in the form of the dying child. It is for Eva that the drooping angel holds out “a crown of myrtle leaves” (Stowe 1994, 247). Eva is fully conscious of her plight and takes charge of the deathbed, giving orders freely: “I want to see all our people together. I have something I *must* say to them” (Stowe 1994, 250). Here, “our people” means the enslaved population of the estate, and Uncle Tom is present as a prime witness to this most public of fictional deaths. In a most un-childlike way, Eva preaches from her deathbed:

If you love me, you must not interrupt me so. Listen to what I say. I want to speak to you about your souls . . . Many of you, I am afraid, are very careless. You are thinking only about this world. I want you to remember that there is a beautiful world, where Jesus is. (Stowe 1994, 251)

In the middle of this outpouring, Stowe gives the child a sudden realization that reading the Bible is unavailable to these enslaved people as a means to salvation: “O, dear! You can’t read – poor souls” and she hid her face in the pillow and sobbed . . .” (Stowe 1994, 251). Stowe

³ The illustration was titled “At Rest (Nell dead)” and appeared in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, part 39 on 30 January 1841 when it was serialized in the journal *Master Humphrey’s Clock*. A reproduction is available at <https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/cattermole/9.html>

foregrounds her main anti-slavery message. Through the scene, the dying child advances to a position of almost adult conversational privilege (Stowe 1994, 251–55) before the release comes. The change is initially visible on Eva's face where "there was no ghastly imprint, – only a high and almost sublime expression" (Stowe 1994, 256). By the next page, her final words appear:

The child lay panting on her pillows, as one exhausted, – the large clear eyes rolled up and fixed. Ah, what said those eyes, that spoke so much of heaven? Earth was past, and earthly pain; but so solemn, so mysterious, was the triumphant brightness of that face, that it checked even the sobs of sorrow. They pressed round her, in breathless stillness.

"Eva," said St. Clare, gently.

She did not hear.

"O, Eva, tell us what you see! What is it?" said her father.

A bright, a glorious smile passed over her face, and she said, brokenly, – "O! love, – joy, – peace!" gave one sigh, and passed from death unto life! (Stowe 1994, 257)

Stowe's Eva, therefore, though a powerless child, is made "powerful by selflessly dying for others" (White 1985, 7, 9). This release of social power through the spectacle of the "good death" will prove to be traceable in the historical case study of Eliza Hitchcock Davidson's death.

Almost a generation later, Louisa May Alcott described the death of Beth March, one of the sisters in *Little Women* (1868). Alcott titled the chapter "The Valley of the Shadow" (1915, 522), referencing Psalm 23. As with Nell and Eva, the death is anticipated, the family has "accepted the inevitable" (Alcott 1915, 520) and set up a room for Beth's last days. Like Nell and Eva, though older, Beth is given saintly attributes, for she is like "a household saint in its shrine" (Alcott 1915, 521). Though her body is described as "feeble" and a "wreck" (Alcott 1915, 522), Beth has no grisly physical symptoms. Instead, Alcott highlights the contrast between body and soul, the latter being both serene and "strong" (1915, 522). Though cast as a saint, Beth is additionally imaged as a pilgrim ("the first pilgrim called was likewise the fittest" (Alcott 1915, 522)), in obvious reference to one of the sisters' favourite books, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which lies upon the table next to Beth's deathbed (Alcott 1915, 524).

More articulate than Nell and less bossy than Eva, Beth declares that she has learned to face death without fear, and even with happiness: "I don't fear it any longer", she avers to her sister Jo (Alcott 1915, 526). One unusual feature of this deathbed is the poem written by Jo (Alcott 1915, 524–25). Found within the pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the poem points to Beth's "serene and saintly presence", while confirming that Jo feels the painful experience has taught her a valuable life lesson: "And while learning this hard lesson, / My great loss becomes my gain. / For the touch of grief will render / My wild nature more serene." Thus, Beth's deathbed acquires agency among the living. Moreover, having read the poem Beth is reassured about her quiet, domestic life: "Then I don't feel as if I'd wasted my life. I'm not so good as you make me, but I have tried to do right" (Alcott 1915, 525).

Alcott's deathbed scene overtly alludes to the literary trope of the articulate deathbed: "Seldom except in books do the dying utter memorable words, see visions, or depart with beatified countenances, and those who have sped many parting souls know that to most the end comes as naturally and simply as sleep" (Alcott 1915, 526). Beth's end comes "in the dark hour before the dawn" (Alcott 1915, 526) and is compared to the going out of the tide. There are no parting words but "one loving look, one little sigh" (Alcott 1915, 527).

Despite having set aside the literary deathbed in a lightly mocking tone, Alcott cannot completely leave it behind; Beth's deathbed scene conforms to much of the pattern: the liminal departure time, the lucid messages, the didactic effect of the death on surviving family members, and the deployment, not here of music, but of poetry and didactic literature.

The deathbed scene in Ellen Woods's sensation novel *East Lynne* (1861) provides a contrast. A small boy, William Carlyle, has been ill for a while, and the doctor has even ordered his lessons to be stopped because "he'll never want them" (Wood 2000, 582). The disease affects his lungs (2000, 623) and is probably consumption (i.e. tuberculosis): "The brilliant hectic flush had gone from his cheeks, his features were white and wasted, his eyes large and bright" (Wood 2000, 641). This deathbed scene is notable for its length and the fact that the narrator's attention is not solely on the dying child, but equally on his main attendant, who is his disguised mother, Lady Isabel. The second notable feature is the medicalization of this death; in contrast to Nell in Dickens, bodily symptoms are described in detail, including ague, sweating and paroxysms (Wood 2000, 643–44). There is emphasis on the "hollow breath" and the "blue, pinched, ghastly look" (Wood 2000, 649). William Carlyle emerges as a suffering body. Despite the materiality of this deathbed, some emphasis is placed on the dying boy's destination after death. He is assured repeatedly that he will be going to Heaven:

There will be the beautiful city with its gates of pearl, and its shining precious stones, and its streets of gold; and there will be the clear river, and the trees with their fruits and their healing leaves, and the lovely flowers; and there will be the harps, and music, and singing. (Wood 2000, 641)

As with evangelical deathbeds, this child is confident in the coming embrace of Jesus:

"Madame Vine, will Jesus come for me, do you think, or will he send an angel?"

"Jesus has *promised* to come for his own redeemed – for those who love Him and wait for him." (Wood 2000, 641–42)

Nevertheless, he is not uniformly joyous, for he is anxious to establish whether his biological mother will be there in Heaven, too: "[D]o you think mamma will be there?" (Wood 2000, 642).

Overall, then, a happy afterlife, united with his family, takes its importance not from doctrinal or spiritual certainty, but from the exigencies of the plot. William is made to yearn for family unification in Heaven, so that the disguise worn by Lady Isabel will slip and thus advance the plot. Eventually, William dies while "Madame Vine" (his mother) is paying no attention but is wrapped in her own trauma, "Lost in thought, in anguish past and present, in self-condemning repentance" (Wood 2000, 652). It falls to the nurse to discover that the boy has finally died:

Joyce, advancing with a quiet step drew aside the clothes to look at William. “Master says he has been wanting me,” she observed. “Why – oh!”

It was a sharp, momentary cry, subdued as soon as uttered. Madame Vine sprang forward to Joyce’s side, looking also. The pale young face lay calm in its utter stillness; the busy little heart had ceased to beat. (Wood 2000, 652)

After the boy’s death, attention shifts to the indulgent grief of his mother. Unlike Little Nell in Dickens’ novel, the child’s death has no function in *East Lynne* other than as a catalyst for the revelation of Lady Isabel’s return, disguised as the family governess. Her emotional outpouring might once have constituted atonement for family abandonment. However, her remorse for her actions far outweighs her grief at the boy’s loss. Unlike Nell, Beth and Eva, William is neither saintly, ethereal nor angelic, and his deathbed offers no doctrinal reassurance for the reader: the boy does not profess his faith, nor ask for hymns or lines from scripture. And although there is always at least one person with the child, his death is in no sense witnessed; not even his mother is paying attention in his final moment.

3 Historical Deathbed Narratives

Before turning to the historical case study, I will establish the context by looking at two actual death scenes that were recorded by a third person. Both took place in the mid-19th century and in Scotland. Unlike the Jamaican case study, both involve dying *men*, and men of consequence within their church and community.

The earlier of the two biographies narrating a deathbed scene is that of Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813–1843), a minister in the church of Scotland, who died in 1843 at the age of 30, never having been in robust health (Millar 1900). He worked as a missionary and was famed as an ardent preacher (Millar 1900). The account of his deathbed was written by his friend Andrew Bonar, who had accompanied M’Cheyne on a mission to Palestine in 1839. Bonar narrates how his friend insisted on conducting regular pastoral duties until he “felt chilled and unwell” (1848, 144). “He believed that he had taken the fever, and it was so. That night he lay down upon the bed from which he was never to rise” (Bonar 1848, 145). M’Cheyne accepts his approaching death, while quoting from Psalm 126 (undoubtedly thinking of its closing lines: “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. / He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Bonar 1848, 145). To this, M’Cheyne adds verses from Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11: 28–30). There are the expected joyful exclamations from this deathbed, in which we glimpse the oratory for which M’Cheyne was famed:

When his servant entered the room again, he exclaimed with a joyful voice, “My soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and I am escaped.” His countenance, as he said this, bespoke inward peace. Ever after he was observed to be happy. (Bonar 1848, 145)

Since the young preacher had a “refined musical taste” (Millar 1900), it is unsurprising that hymns featured in his dying moments:

On Tuesday (the 21st) his sister repeated to him several hymns. The last words he heard, and the last he seemed to understand, were those of Cowper's hymn, *Sometimes the light surprises the Christian as he sings*. (Bonar 1848, 146)⁴

M'Cheyne succumbs to delirium at the end, but even in this he quotes scripture, 1 Corinthians 15:58, "dwelling with much emphasis on the last clause, *"forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord"* (Bonar 1848, 146). Otherwise, his delirium takes the form of loud prayers for his congregation. His biographer stresses the "happy frame" (Bonar 1848, 146) of the dying man along with his care for those he was leaving behind.

M'Cheyne dies in the morning, after having made a symbolic gesture: he "lifted up his hands as if in the attitude of pronouncing the blessing, and then sank down". There is no indication of suffering at the moment of death: "Not a groan or a sigh, but only a quiver of the lip" (Bonar 1848, 146).

M'Cheyne's deathbed resembles fictional ones in its uniformly positive tone. His biographer acknowledges delirium, so the dying man is not always lucid; nevertheless, even in delirium M'Cheyne spoke as a preacher. He never lost his sense of his role in his community. The deathbed is closely attended, lovingly witnessed, and recorded in detail, down to the chapter and verse of the hymns and gospels that he recited. Additionally, his discourse includes a lesson for the living ("You must be awakened in time, or you will be awakened in everlasting torment, to your eternal confusion" (Bonar 1848, 146)). Despite M'Cheyne's youth, he is not ascribed any angelic appearance or divine aura. He dies as what he was – a committed member of the Church of Scotland, secure in his own salvation.

A later deathbed scene, that of William Cunningham (1805–1861), was recorded in detail by Robert Rainy and James Mackenzie in 1871 (*Life of William Cunningham, D.D Principal and Professor of Theology and Church History, New College, Edinburgh*). This 1861 death deserved notice because Cunningham had been a famous theologian (Rainy and Mackenzie 1871, 222 ff.) and founder of the Free Church of Scotland (240 ff.). This deathbed scene conforms well to the fictional pattern. The main feature of this deathbed is its sense of active agency: Cunningham sends messages, makes a will and bequests, delegates functions, and counsels his visitors:

He gave particular directions as to all necessary things he wanted done, even to the inscription on his tomb-stone, and the persons he wished to be present at his funeral; and said much to soothe and comfort those he was leaving behind him. (Rainy and Mackenzie 1871, 477)

In contrast to some fictional deathbeds, Cunningham's is one where interaction with the world is far from over. As with M'Cheyne, Cunningham finds comfort in specific doctrines; he asked for his Bible, and two books: *The Confession of Faith*⁵ and John Newton's the *Olney*

⁴ The hymn's actual opening lines are as follows: "Sometimes a light surprises / The Christian while he sings; / It is the Lord who rises / with healing in his wings" (Newton 1825, 256–57). The hymn's title is "Joy and Peace in Believing", and it is numbered XLVIII in this edition.

⁵ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* was standard for Church of Scotland and Presbyterian adherents.

Hymns (Rainy and Mackenzie 1871, 475). Because of his weakness, the hymns were read to him “to which he listened with great pleasure” (Rainy and Mackenzie 1871, 476). Although he had hoped to sing them, this is prevented by his wife, who thinks the exertion unwise (Rainy and Mackenzie 1871, 475). The *Olney Hymns* are an oddly simple selection for a theologian, full of “Evangelical commonplaces” (Hartley 1949, 221), representing the lowest common denominator of expressed faith. Additionally, Cunningham asserts confidence in his destination: “We shall meet at the right hand.” The biographer admits to some slight “wandering” in Cunningham’s mind towards the end but maintains that “even then at times he spoke quite collectedly” (Rainy and Mackenzie 1871, 477). His “last articulate words” were “I am going home quietly” (Rainy and Mackenzie 1871, 477).

4 Religion in Post-Emancipation Jamaica

As I turn to the main historical deathbed, that of Eliza Hitchcock Davidson, some socio-historical background becomes necessary because Eliza died in the British colony of Jamaica in 1859. At the time of her death, the sugar colony had put slavery in its past (Abolition Act 1834), but already had a population dominated by people of African descent and of mixed race.⁶ Eliza belonged to the thin stratum of urban middle-class whites and to the Free Church of Scotland, one of multiple denominations on the island.

One missionary, the Reverend James Phillippo, left an account of the spiritual state of the island’s people, among whom the initial upsurge in church membership after Emancipation had given way to apathy and even backsliding in some rural congregations. Baptist mission churches like Phillippo’s struggled to keep their congregants in line and their home churches supportive of the mission. What Phillippo witnessed among the post-Emancipation population where death was concerned provides context for the account of Eliza Hitchcock Davidson’s death.

At the end of a long career devoted to the freed people of Jamaica, Phillippo testifies to the particular devotion of women to the church (1843, 147). Nevertheless, he reports being distressed by “revolting” funeral practices among the freed slaves (Phillippo 1843, 94); these un-Christian practices start with drumming, extend to dancing and drunkenness, and end with the practice of corpse prophecy (Phillippo 1843, 94). In other words, Phillippo registers the ways in which religion in rural Jamaica was becoming syncretic, moving away from the practices of the home church. Death and dying are singled out by Phillippo as significant elements for assessing the maintenance of doctrinal orthodoxy among the population, because death is the time “when the reality of religion is brought to the test, and no where is it more severely tested than in a land where sickness so often terminates fatally and with so little warning” (Phillippo 1843, 147).

Phillippo devotes considerable attention to accounts of “negro” deathbeds (1843, 149–50). He records that dying “negroes” exhibit “a tranquillity which death could not ruffle,

⁶ See Chapter 1 (1–22) of Michelle Gadpaille’s *The Ethical Atlantic: Advocacy Networking and the Slavery Narrative, 1830–1850* for a fuller discussion of the issues surrounding abolition in the British colonies.

and a confidence which the king of terrors could not shake" (149). The truly pious in his congregation die with confidence in "their happy prospects" (Phillippo 1843, 159), and he uses these instances as testimony aimed at the living. In the case of one aged female congregant, Phillippo paints a vivid picture of the death chamber: "numbers of persons of all classes successfully crowded around her bed", such that "her chamber seemed the verge of Heaven" (1843, 151). Concomitant with the two Scottish deaths, this one was accompanied by reading of scripture, singing, prayer, and holy conversation (Phillippo 1843, 151). Phillippo mentions "one little black boy" who died imploring his schoolfellows to repent (1843, 151) and reciting poetry, including "Pope's Ode".⁷ His account of the death of a female schoolteacher comes closest to that of our case study, Eliza Hitchcock Davidson, for this teacher's death is happy and triumphant, and includes a recitation of the *Nunc dimittis* and Bible readings. Moreover, at least seven later conversions among young people are attributed to this deathbed scene (Phillippo 1843, 153).

Phillippo is thus a biased but credible reporter on the religious situation in Jamaica. His faith and missionary zeal do not cloud his observation of what the congregation really believes and how they behave. The most relevant detail from his account is that women bear the major burden of faith and church service, and the role of women in this context becomes relevant when we turn to Eliza Hitchcock Davidson, who belonged to a branch of the Free Church of Scotland in Jamaica.

5 Case Study of a Deathbed: Eliza Hitchcock Davidson⁸

In 1859, a young woman lay dying in a hot room in Kingston, a port in the British colony of Jamaica. Born Eliza Hitchcock, she had married Joseph Davidson, an emigrant from Scotland (Aberlemno, via Glasgow) who, though a businessman, functioned as an elder in the local Presbyterian church. We do not know the cause of Eliza's death, but she was 33 years old in 1859 and had five children.⁹ There is, however, no mention of this being a tragedy in childbirth, and she had been in "the very picture of health" (Watson 1859, 150) until a few days prior to her death. She might have fallen victim to a tropical disease, such as yellow fever, an outbreak of which had recently swept through the troops at Newcastle, a military camp in the Blue Mountains above Kingston (Lawson 1859). However, this outbreak of yellow fever occurred too early (in late 1856) to have been the culprit (Lawson 1859). Another potentially deadly foe was cholera, which had visited the West Indies, including Jamaica, between 1850 and 1856 (Jenson and Szabo 2011). Eliza might also have died from malaria, dengue fever, typhoid fever, scarlatina or even from the unknown scourge mentioned by Reverend James Watson at the time: "a fever of an entirely new type for the West Indies" resembling a "malignant typhoid" (Watson 1859, 149).

⁷ It is uncertain which of Alexander Pope's poems is meant; none of his works with "ode" in the title seems appropriate to a deathbed. It is likely that the poem meant is Pope's "The Dying Christian to His Soul" which ends with the line "O death where is thy sting?"

⁸ Full disclosure: Eliza Hitchcock Davidson is among the author's ancestors.

⁹ "She has left behind her five little children, over whom she watched, while living, with the most affectionate solicitude" (Watson 1859, 150).

5.1 Revd James Watson as Deathbed Recorder

Although the Davidson family was neither rich nor prominent in the colonial society of Kingston, we know a great deal about Eliza's deathbed because it was recorded by the Revd James Watson and published in the *United Presbyterian Missionary Record* (August 1, 1859). The unusual level of detail in this account of a female deathbed permits us to compare it to the fictional pattern observed in Victorian novels. It also raises the question of why Eliza Davidson's passing deserved such public record.

The elaborate account kept by the Revd Watson over several days shows that Eliza was determined to have the "good death" prized by her co-religionists, called by Watson the "happy death" (1859, 149). Unlike the pious Black Jamaicans whose deathbeds were praised by Revd Phillippo, Eliza had been highly educated in Scotland (Watson 1859, 150) and attended church in Edinburgh under the ministry of Dr Tweedie (150). Eliza's spiritual struggles as a student under Dr Tweedie were recorded by her and made available to the Revd Watson when he was writing up her deathbed:

From the notes of a manuscript book that lies before me, I learn that she had been, while attending a boarding school in Edinburgh, admitted to Dr Tweedie's candidates' class in 1845–46 ... In due time she was admitted a member of the church; and her journal on that occasion, and for some months after, breathes the most ardent and devoted love to the Saviour. (Watson 1859, 150)

Eliza, then, was privately a writer of sorts and took her spiritual notebooks with her even across the Atlantic, although these do not survive.

Writing in *The United Presbyterian Magazine*, the Revd James Watson spoke candidly of the reliance of missionary work on donations from home congregations, and therefore on interesting accounts in missionary magazines to drum up support. As Cheryl Cassidy points out, the obituaries of heathen converts dominated accounts sent back to mission headquarters (2002, 207). "In missions", writes Watson wearily, "as in other things, novelty wears off" (1856, 276). Where once the mission field in a colony like Jamaica had been open for conversion, history had moved on. And what would replace the early accounts of multiple conversions, growing congregations, eradication of heathen practices and the building of new churches on the green hills of Jamaica? Among Baptists, Methodists, and Moravians – all pioneers in the mission field on the island – the situation by the late 1850s had reached a plateau. Emancipation had been achieved, free villages had been founded, churches built, and congregants attracted. But as Phillippo also attested, not every Sunday attendee was a solid conversion. There was backsliding, congregations varied in size, and regular churchgoers tended to be female. Where to find exciting material to fill the pages of the *Missionary Magazine*? Perhaps one answer lay in the riveting deathbed scene of one who, though not a convert, was a literate, and outspoken Presbyterian: enter Eliza Hitchcock Davidson.

5.2 Elements of the "good death"

Eliza's deathbed has two layers: first, her deliberate choice of discourse and behaviour, and second, the Revd Watson's shaping of these into a narrative of triumph over death. Together,

they construct the desirable death through the five elements that would later characterize Victorian fictional deathbeds.

5.2.1 Witness

As with almost all the deathbeds – fictional or historical – Eliza’s was witnessed: her husband, mother, children and neighbours were there, and the recorder of the scene, the Revd James Watson, was by her bedside intermittently over several days. His act of witness proved particularly important because of his senior role in the Free Church of Scotland and presumed capacity to judge the quality of a “good death”, but also because his account is layered over a reading of Eliza’s own manuscript writings about her faith. The dying Eliza called for everyone to watch and “would say to those who stood by her bed, ‘Come, see how a Christian can die’” (Watson 1859, 151). Watson was sufficiently impressed by this exhortation that he repeated it on the next page. An important set of witnesses were her five children: “The scene of taking farewell of her children was a touching one. She gave them very suitable parting words – spoke and shook hands with each, commending them to God, and telling them not to cry, that she would meet them all again in a better and brighter land” (Watson 1859, 151).

5.2.2 Scripture

In parallel with the two historical deaths in Scotland, Eliza used texts from scripture to explain her faith and add comfort to her deathbed: “On the Friday preceding her death she spent almost the whole day in repeating texts of Scripture, interspersed with hymns and paraphrases, and portions of the psalms” (Watson 1859, 151). Eliza’s selections from scripture were diverse, including the Psalms, Isaiah, 2 Timothy, 1 Corinthians (twice) and John (four times). Her deathbed allusions extended to Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (a choice shared with the sisters from *Little Women*). The amount of scripture remembered, recited, and recorded is remarkable. As a result of this scriptural erudition, the Revd Watson concluded that her death amply demonstrated “the supporting power of the Gospel in view of meeting the last enemy” (1859, 150).

5.2.3 Music

Eliza’s musical preferences are fully on show: like her compatriots in the Free Church of Scotland, M’Cheyne and Cunningham, Eliza desired to die to the accompaniment of the sacred music she had loved in life: “Her mind was evidently well stored with some of the most beautiful hymns in our collection. The number, the selectness, the suitableness, of some of these hymns which she repeated were very remarkable and striking... The hymn beginning “I know that my Redeemer lives; what joy the sweet assurance gives!” she repeated to the end” (Watson 1859, 151–52).

Among the hymns that Eliza performed on her deathbed were staples of the hymnal:

“Jesus, I love thy charming name” (Watson 1859, 152)¹⁰

“The hour of my departure’s come” (Watson 1859, 152)¹¹

¹⁰ Philip Doddridge, Hymn 325, in *Hymns Founded on Various Texts in the Holy Scriptures*, 1766.

¹¹ James Smith, “The Dying Christian”, in *A Selection of Spiritual Poetry*, 1855.

Her preferred hymns came from both the adult and the Sabbath-school hymnals (Watson 1859, 152). The little Sunday-school hymn book was even brought directly into the death chamber by her husband (Watson 1859, 152). The last hymn she recited was one called “Heaven”, taken from a monthly magazine, *The Mother’s Friend* (1848). Like William Cunningham, Eliza wanted to sing but was prevented because of her deteriorating state: “Her friends said she was not able to sing, and it would fatigue and excite her too much. She said, Oh, no. And immediately began, in a sweet, touching, plaintive strain, to sing herself: the rest joined her; and they sung, amid tears, and weeping, and joy, the whole hymn to the end” (Watson 1859, 152). Unlike Cunningham, Eliza had her own way.

5.2.4 Requests and Advice

This deathbed was also marked by a quantity of demands. Eliza’s words have a ring of determination that is difficult to reconcile with her feeble bodily state. “On my first visit to Mrs Davidson, she said very emphatically, ‘Mr Watson, *I am dying*’” (Watson 1859, 150). Eliza took control of the conversation and had to be reminded not to boast about her certainty of salvation: “Speaking of death having no terrors for her now, she was reminded not to boast. Oh no! no! said she, there must be no boasting” (Watson 1859, 151). Having something to prove, she sends for a neighbour to witness the quality of her death:

Then remembering that one of her neighbours had asked her, some weeks before, if she was ready to die, when she replied she hoped so, but she was not sure – remembering that conversation, she had that neighbour immediately sent for. And when she came into the room, she fastened upon her a look of intense earnestness, and said, “Puley, you asked me some months ago if I were ready to die; I was not then, but I am now ... I have sent for you to urge on you special preparation, for it is hard work to die. Remember, Puley, it is not long prayers, it is not going to church, – no, no, it is coming to Jesus.” (Watson 1859, 152)

Looking beyond her neighbour, Eliza also “sent a message to the church and another to the Sabbath school” (Watson 1859, 152), while also commending the pastor’s labours.

5.2.5 “The Triumph of Faith in Christ” (Watson 1859, 149)

Eliza is confident not only of her capacity to face death with dignity and joy, but also of her fitness for the role of main actor in the spectacle of death, which she envisages as a triumphant didactic spectacle, not one of victimhood. The Revd Watson describes Eliza’s deathbed as “among the most triumphant I have ever witnessed” (1859, 149), thus certifying that her deathbed discourse proved the possibility of personal triumph over death. Taking centre stage for once, this wife and mother found that her Presbyterian faith suddenly raised her up and gave her power to compel others in ways not previously available to her.¹² Eliza’s conscious conversion of her dying into a functional spectacle is matched elsewhere only by the demands

¹² Shaver speaks of dying Methodist women as having been “customarily silenced” (2008, 20) during their lifetimes, and White’s study of the death of Eva in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* suggests that a curated deathbed provided an opportunity for a child, woman or other marginalized person to gain social and spiritual ascendancy over others (White 1985, 9).

of Stowe's Eva – and then only partly. Eva's role is intended to convert Stowe's readers,¹³ while Eliza was unaware that she would ever have readers, and aimed her performance at the immediate spectator group.

Such newfound assertiveness on a deathbed is explained by one scholar as the result of a "conflict between engagement and withdrawal" (White 1985, 12) for women in Victorian culture. Trained to see the domestic role of wife, mother and Sunday-school teacher as her only sphere, a woman like Eliza nevertheless sought validation through her faith. In this more egalitarian sphere, Eliza found fulfilment and vindication. There is even a tinge of vindictiveness in her passive-aggressive call to her neighbour to "see how a Christian can die". Puley stands condemned for not being a true Christian, or not in the sense that Eliza and Joseph Davidson recognized. Though Eliza does not boast, her deathbed account does reveal a sense of social and spiritual triumph (White 1985, 13). Dying well makes Eliza, in her mind, superior to those like Puley who remain living in a condition of dubious salvation. Eliza's good death cannot be fully "self-sacrificial" like the child's deathbed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (White 1985, 15). Readers feel an assertive protest on the part of Eliza against some unspecified scepticism about the quality or utility of her faith. Eliza had no official position as the wife of a church elder, but still she had a public role. Not a missionary in life, she becomes one through this performative deathbed, as the Revd Watson affirms: "I improved her death last Sabbath day in *two sermons* ... On both occasions the attendance was large, and a very deep and I hope hallowed impression was left on the minds of us all" (1859, 152).¹⁴ Significantly, obituaries of female missionaries who died abroad in service to their church often essentialized these women (Cassidy 2002, 210), reducing them to the template of acceptable womanly virtues of duty and self-sacrifice. In Eliza's case, however, the Revd Watson has been unable to fit his subject neatly into the template, although he does his best in the article for the *Missionary Record*.

6 Conclusion: Comparative Deathbed Spectacles

Table 1 shows that many of the elements of the "good death" are shared by both the fictional and the historical deathbeds.

There is no clear division between Victorian fictional deaths and the three biographical accounts. The Revd Watson wrote Eliza Hitchcock Davidson's deathbed with many of the features of fiction: direct speech, entrances and exits from the death chamber, emotional exclamations, and moral messages. Nevertheless, one account does stand out in Table 1: that of William Carlyle from *East Lynne*. The column of negatives indicates that the goal of a child's deathbed in sensation fiction differed, with no emphasis on the sacrificial death, nor on the deathbed as a catalyst for greater faith. In contrast, the deathbed of Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exhibits a profile almost identical to that of Eliza Davidson from later in the same decade. Meanwhile, the male pastors check all the boxes except the "angelic". The

¹³ Conversion more to the cause of Abolition than to the Christian faith.

¹⁴ By "improve" Watson meant the older sense of "to make my own use of", not that he changed Eliza's discourse. Her good death was successfully instrumentalized to create material for two whole sermons, and thus used to encourage similar piety.

TABLE 1. Deathbeds compared: Y = yes, strongly present; y = yes, somewhat present; n = no, mostly absent; N = no, completely absent

Element	Little Nell 1840/41	Beth March 1868	William Carlyle 1861	Little Eva 1852	M'Cheyne 1848	Cun- ningham 1871	Eliza H. Davidson 1859
Witness(es)	Y	Y	n	Y	Y	Y	Y
Joy, confidence	Y	Y	n	Y	Y	Y	Y
Music, hymns	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Angelic demeanour	Y	y	N	Y	N	N	Y
Advice, exhortations	y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Scripture readings	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Requests, summons	y	y	y	Y	Y	Y	Y

three historical deathbed profiles converge around similar themes. One crucial distinction concerns self-dramatization: M'Cheyne and Cunningham arranged their exits as quiet moments of witness, while Eliza was in no way quiet. Though submissive to her God and her fate, she mounts a spectacle of resisting all doubt about salvation. The account clarifies that Eliza wrung from the experience of dying all the credit available – both sacred and social – making a spectacle to demonstrate “the worth and excellence of personal religion” (Watson 1859, 149). The success of her staging of her own deathbed extends to the existence of this biographical account, which displaced potential narratives of other congregants and more mundane mission activities in the pages of the *United Presbyterian Missionary Record*.

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