

Institution: University of Cambridge		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Literature and Language		
Title of case study: A Good Death? Enriching Perspectives on Dying Well in End of Life and Bereavement Settings		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Laura Davies	Role(s) (e.g. job title): College Teaching Officer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2016 - ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2019 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>'A Good Death?' uses historical death literature to facilitate challenging engagements with ideas of death and dying today. Creative resources, workshops and activities empower participants and encourage personal and professional development in a range of settings. The project has influenced behaviour and attitudes amongst two key beneficiary groups as well as wider publics: (i) death-adjacent medical and care practitioners and volunteers and (ii) creative artists. The project involves creative and care professionals in engaging directly with literary-historical research in order to co-create literary and artistic materials and tools for use in their professional practice. Participants gained self-reflection and more nuanced perceptions around language and expression in relation to death and dying.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>Since 2016 Dr Davies' research has focused on the relationship between developments in English prose and attitudes towards death and dying in eighteenth-century life-writing. In a joint publication with Dr Emma Salgård Cunha she examines death tropes within a range of genres including apocalyptic sermons, lay religious poetry, diaries, and works of satire [R1]. Contributing to an emerging interdisciplinary field of death studies, Davies has developed a 'poetics of death' – a means of identifying the ways in which the form and structure of texts generate rather than simply represent meaning – in order to articulate how we can engage with death as that which cannot be empirically known, and as a phenomenon both individual and universal.</p> <p>Methodologically, this work attends to grammatical, narrative and formal structures, genre and intertextuality, and draws on conceptual and philosophical frameworks of performance, excess, and the aporetic. By her examination of literary responses in which moral readings of death exist alongside a recognition of its disruptive ambiguity, and death is conceptualised as both imminent and immanent, she has explored the historical mutations of the 'good death' trope and has challenged existing understandings of the possibilities of eighteenth-century prose [R2, R3]. She has also shown that the work of writing can function as a form of preservation, not in spite of, but rather through the challenge of capturing the corporeality of a once-living subject on the page [R4].</p> <p>A central tenet of this research is that literature is shaped by death but can also influence attitudes to and experiences of it. It identifies, for the first time, a range of ways in which</p>		

writers engage with death (whether to hold it close or to push it out of mind) through narrative, even though it cannot be empirically known to them, or described as first-hand experience. It seeks to reveal cultural complexities that are obscured by the dominance of narratives of secularisation and emergent modern liberalism within historical and literary scholarship on this period. In this respect Davies' research has revealed significant intersections between eighteenth-century and contemporary engagements. But, in contrast to the richness and complexity of the earlier tradition, an interdisciplinary academic conference convened by Davies and Salgård Cunha demonstrated that today the topic is often approached with reluctance and that ideas about 'a good death' tend to be less diverse and nuanced, and often homogeneously medicalised or euphemistic [R1]. Indeed, although 'dying well' is an urgent topic in discussions of ageing, palliative care and bereavement, a 2016 literature review concluded that there is 'little agreement about what constitutes good death or successful dying' and has called for further 'research and dialogue' on the subject (Meier et al., 'Defining a Good Death (Successful Dying)', *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 24 (2016), 261-71).

This project responds to these insights according to three principles derived from Davies' research: (i) an individual's perception of a good death is shaped by the vocabularies, conceptual frameworks, and narrative and representational materials they have experienced (ii) literature is a valuable resource by which to encourage individuals to reflect on their understanding of death and to open up new possibilities without being prescriptive; (iii) guided close reading of literary texts (both historical and contemporary) provides a forum to build confidence, resilience, and resources for discussion, which benefits individuals who work with the dying or bereaved.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [R1] Laura Davies and Emma Salgård Cunha, eds, 'Writing Eighteenth-Century Religion', Special Edition of the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41.2 (June 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1754-0208.12532>
- [R2] Laura Davies, 'Anecdotal Death: Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*', in *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature*, ed. Daniel K. Jernigan (Routledge, 2020)
- [R3] Laura Davies, 'Samuel Johnson and the Grammar of Death', in *Narrating Death: The Limit of Literature*, ed. by Daniel K. Jernigan, Walter Wadiak, W. Michelle Wang (Routledge, 2018), pp. 107-125. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429424663>
- [R4] Laura Davies, 'Performing Devotion: Belief, the Body, and the Book of Common Prayer 1775–1840', in *Humanities*, special edition 'The Anatomy of Inscription' ed. Hunter Dukes, 7 (4), 2018: 100 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7040100>

R1-4 have all been through peer-review and editorial processes at academic journals and presses; they have been published in, and as, significant contributions to the fields of death literature and 18th century studies, and therefore meet the 2* minimum requirement.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The project has engaged end-of-life care professionals, volunteers, creative practitioners and local communities in a series of varied and expanding activities to enrich perspectives on dying well through literature.

Advising practitioners and delivery of professional services

In January 2019, Davies and Salgård Cunha convened an interdisciplinary conference on 'Dying Well', connecting researchers from a range of academic disciplines with specialists working in non-academic fields (palliative care, general medicine, bereavement support, psychotherapy, religion) [E1]. A nurse attendee wrote: '[The conference] has certainly challenged my way of thinking and is helping me to consider the value assumptions we bring to end of life care as clinicians' [E1].

Subsequent focus groups with medical students and end-of-life-care specialists (March-April 2019, including representatives from Arthur Rank Hospice Charity (ARHC) and Cruse Bereavement Care, confirmed that despite recognition by practitioners that literature and creativity are valuable in end-of-life care there is a lack of workplace training and support in this area. The project has created resources and workshops to help meet this need.

Feedback from Cruse bereavement counsellors, 24 of whom attended death literature workshops in July 2019, indicates that the project has been of direct benefit to their practice. One participant wrote '[I will take away] thinking more deeply about the meaning of words [...] I'm very motivated to follow this up with further reading' [E2, p. 2, p. 3]. Follow-up workshops (March 2020) included intention-setting and creative writing exercises to facilitate attitudinal change and promote reflective practice. Participants noted: 'It was very enriching. It opens up reflective exploration which could be useful with clients' [E2, p. 1]; 'I might make the fortune tellers with my clients – I see children and young people as well as adults for Cruse' [E2, p. 4]. Additional feedback and reflection included: 'I might try to write a poem! And then encourage my clients to use words poetically to express their feelings' [E2, p. 5] and '[I'll try] looking at nouns, verbs, adjectives in poems re. death – another way in!' [E2, p. 12].

The project collaborated with ARHC to provide 'enrichment and reflection to [their] staff and volunteers' through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) workshops, delivered online during the pandemic [E3]. ARHC engages approximately '200 members of staff and 650 volunteers ... in a range of patient and non-patient facing roles' [E3]. The project 'supported volunteers in feeling comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions and the literature focus allowed people to open up' [E3]. One participant noted: '[I am] prompted to think more about the unique role that poetry can play with individuals or their friends and family are faced with a life-limiting illness' [E3]. Reflecting on the significance of this collaboration, the Voluntary Services Manager said: 'The "A Good Death?" project is interesting to us because it allows our volunteers to discuss death in a way which is informal, relaxed and non-intrusive ... The very concept of a good death is central to the work we do and so exploring it through a focus such as literature felt like an exciting way to discuss an important topic' [E3].

Reaching beneficiaries through theatre, and impact on theatre professionals

The Co-Director of Menagerie Theatre collaborated with Davies to create new dramatic works connecting her research to COVID-19. Written and recorded during lockdown, three original short audio plays (*Seven Arguments with Grief*, *End of Life Care – A Ghost Story*, *A Look, A Wave*) were released online on 8th September 2020, generating local media attention [E4]. These are freely available on the project website as one element in a range of original resources designed to foster public conversation about literature, creativity and dying well (on average 392 website users per 30 day period as at 08.12.2020) [E4].

The collaboration 'fundamentally influenced [the Director's] creative practice' [E5, p. 2]. He added: 'Reading [Davies's] work on Johnson [...] helped me to think about this whole perspective of language [...] around death and particularly tenses [and] the impossibility of describing it' [E5, p. 4], concluding 'one thing I picked up on from Laura's work [...] is to try [...] to formulate a language, a vocabulary for death' [E5, p. 8].

The plays were incorporated into two online workshops (November/December 2020) bringing artists together with clinical professionals and end-of-life practitioners to 'explore the imagery, metaphors and existential facts of death' [E5, p. 2]. Participants included practitioners from Cruse (Cambridge, West Suffolk and North Wales), ARHC, and Lifeline (A Cambridge mental health helpline). A medical student attendee reported: 'The play is just brilliant and set lots of thoughts going about vocabulary and the ability/inability to express that is forming the central part of this research project.' [E5, p. 2]. A participant added: 'I also really benefited from hearing from the guys at Arthur Rank around life storying [...] I wish this

kind of thing had been available in my nurse training' [E5, p. 14]. Another noted: 'It really reminded me how interconnected the arts and caring roles are' [E5, p. 13].

Community enrichment: promoting reflection on death and dying

Public events facilitated enriching conversations about death in different cultures within local communities. Feedback consistently indicated that participants had acquired new knowledge and changes in perspective [E6, E7 and E8]. In January 2019: a live roundtable conversation between a hospital doctor, Christian minister, philosopher, researcher in Islamic perspectives on medical ethics, and palliative care matron, attended by approximately 100 people. A participant valued the '[c]ross cultural perspectives on death and religion especially amongst shared decision making vs. autonomy' [E6, p. 2]. A two-day event at Cambridge Central Library (July 2019), in collaboration with the Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), engaged 114 people in conversation, with 381 accepting a printed poem and 12 attending a workshop. One attendee, an organiser of the local 'Dying for Life' group noted: 'A number of us (from quite diverse backgrounds) were pulled together... [it] has undoubtedly broadened my perspective on the subject' [E7, p. 1], and a nun participant commented: 'Poetry seems particularly apt for the expression of 'deep' vari-layered experience' [E7, p. 2]. A collaborative event with the Duckworth Laboratory and the MAA targeted young adults (November 2019, 123 registrations [E8, p. 1]). Attendees noted 'interesting similarities across cultures' and that '[d]eath [i]s [an] opportunity for very lively creativity and culture' [E8, p. 3].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] A Good Death: Interdisciplinary perspectives on Dying Well CRASSH conference January 2019: conference information; registrant list: email from nurse attendee.

[E2] 1st/2nd CRUSE workshop feedback form and 3rd CRUSE workshop feedback forms.

[E3] Testimonial from Voluntary Services Manager, Arthur Rank Hospice Charity 09.12.2020.

[E4] Press coverage and website evidence: 6 and 6.1 Cam105 Radio Interview transcript; Spencer, The Cambridge Independent, *Death and Drama in the age of Covid-19*, September 2020; Davies, Horizons, *Beyond the Pandemic, what should we do? Find better ways to talk about death*; google analytics monthly snapshots.

[E5] Co-Artistic Director, Menagerie testimonial; interview with Co-Artistic Director transcript, Interview with actor transcript and 10.1 and 10.2 Drama workshop attendee feedback.

[E6] Roundtable January 2019 feedback summary.

[E7] Workshop attendee evidence: Dying for Life organiser letter 22.09.2020; testimonial from Christian Monastic and former teacher / lecturer 10.10.2020; Library event *A Good Death: Let's start a conversation* feedback forms.

[E8] Deathly Encounters Eventbrite evidence and feedback.