

6-2020

Death Positivity: A New Genre of Death and the Genre Function of Memento Mori

Melony Elsie Del Real

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DEATH POSITIVITY: A NEW GENRE OF DEATH
AND THE GENRE FUNCTION OF MEMENTO MORI

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
English Composition and English Literature

by
Melony Elsie Del Real
June 2020

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Approved by:

David W. Marshall, Committee Member

Alexandra Cavallaro, Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Caitlin Doughty's "death positivity" as an evolved form of the medieval *memento mori*, and how this medieval genre serves as a genre function for current day thanatophobic audiences. This is specifically done by analyzing Doughty's book titled *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, as well as some of her other death positivity mediums. By modeling her rhetoric of death positivity after *memento mori*, Doughty can effectively deliver her anti-death fearing message to the very audiences that fear death.

Furthermore, analyzing Doughty's rhetoric as operating within the genre function, a concept put forth by Anis Bawarshi, reveals death literature as being highly navigatory in nature; that is, navigatory of the specific ideological and social environments to which the death literature is being delivered. While in the medieval period, *memento mori* was used as a Christian device to encourage audiences to live pious lives, *memento mori*, through death positivity, now must address a far more diverse, even secular, audience. By doing this, her content achieves her goal of sculpting death positivity as a type of "activism." In this way, we can observe that death positivity, as a new genre of death, must rhetorically highlight positive thinking of death in different ways than it did in the past. Recognizing this feature of death in literature can reveal new ways of critically reading death in literature and drawing analyses of the social and ideological implications of its presence in texts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My most sincere thanks to my committee members, Dr. Marshall and Dr. Cavallaro, for their wisdom, expertise, and unwavering support in the development of this thesis. I have learned so much, and I look forward to pursuing more projects like this one with the skills and methods they have equipped me with.

Along with my committee members, I would like to thank the faculty and staff of the CSUSB English department, who continuously work to make it the best environment to learn in. Being a part of this community for the past six years has been an absolute joy, and I look forward to sustaining the wonderful relationships I have developed there.

Lastly, I would like to thank the librarians and staff of the Pfau Library, who provided constant support throughout the research process of this thesis. Whether it was meeting for research consultations or helping me acquire difficult-to-find sources, their assistance was invaluable for my project.

Thank you all!

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my family—Mom, Dad, Mel—for continuing to encourage me and my higher education goals for the past eleven years. My endurance, wisdom, and motivation undoubtedly stem from you, through all your outstanding examples. I hope to always make you proud of me. I love you guys!

I would also like to dedicate this to my Patrick, who repeatedly offered me his assistance throughout my writing process, but which I always turned down because I am adamant about working independently. I love you!

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CHAPTER ONE:
CONFERENCE PAPER PROPOSAL

Humor in Death Positivity

In his book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker, a renowned anthropologist, analyzed how human societies, as close as 200 years ago, still celebrated death as a part of life, but now, a general fear of death has accrued. In battling these evolutions of humans' relationships with death, and indeed philosophies, activists like Caitlin Doughty are working to bring about a new healthy way of thinking of and living with death. The ways in which activists must do this, then, is impacted greatly by their need to navigate around thanatophobia—marking the exigency of this topic in today's death-phobic society. How can they (activist like Doughty) successfully address a need for revised attitudes toward death when a vast majority of addressees have an ingrained, innate denial and fear of death? The method that Caitlin Doughty has adapted through her books and webseries has been to present these topics in an uplifting, oftentimes satirical, humorous way—a method with genre roots connected closely to the medieval form of *memento mori*.

It is my goal in this project to highlight Doughty's concept of "death positivity" as an effective, evolved form of *memento mori*. There is much to be said on this evolution, as an artform and a lifestyle, and much of the rhetorical development on this genre comes from *memento mori* being set in a Christian-dominated Western world, to its now more scientifically-grounded, secular form

found in Doughty's memento mori. As a researcher, I'm primarily invested in analyzing the ways in which she structures her rhetoric for her audiences—through humor—and primarily how she evolves memento mori's goal of making light out of a typically dark topic to better suit modern audiences. What does she do, in her genre adaptation of memento mori, that is similar and different to the memento mori of the medieval period, and how does that make it more effective nowadays? Analyzing this rhetoric through genre and audience can reveal why her ideals are just as necessary now as they were prior to the modern medicine era that we are currently in.

CHAPTER TWO:
CONFERENCE PAPER

Humor and the Genre Function of Death Positivity

“Remember—you will die.” This is a closing statement that marks the conclusion of several videos from Caitlin Doughty’s Ask a Mortician series—a series that has garnered nearly 99 million views as of November 2019. It’s a conclusion that, to the unsuspecting listener, may spark a variety of reactions—surprise, anger, fear, maybe even “duh”. The process of instigating these reactions fulfills the goals that Doughty aims to accomplish in her web series, as a platform devoted solely to encouraging “death positivity” in modern Western audiences. This concluding statement, “remember you will die,” follows videos whose death-related topics range from historic mishaps of using poisonous materials as makeup, past utilizations of post-mortem body parts as medicine, and the dangers of climbing Mt. Everest—all of which are discussed with primarily humorous tones. Doughty uses her platform on YouTube to make death-related topics like these memento mori learning moments, all to contribute to the overarching goal of death positivity.

And so, what does all of this mean—death positive, memento mori, perhaps most pressing, rhetorical humor in terms of death? In this paper I am essentially doing three things: first, I am distinguishing memento mori, commonly referred to as an “emblem,” as a genre; secondly, I am observing the current-day movement of “death positivity” as a genre function of memento mori; and lastly, I

am analyzing the rhetorical tools that Doughty, as an advocate of death positivity, must take in her work in order to make productive use of this movement—which, in doing so, aligns death positivity as a genre/function of memento mori. To set up my argument, then, I must define four key concepts that will drive my research, because I realize that not all of my listeners are acquainted with genre theories, nor are they all as death obsessed as me and the scholars I am engaging with.

The definition of “genre” that I will be applying to Doughty’s work is borrowed from Tsvetan Todorov’s article “The Origin of Genres.” He defines genre as “classes of texts,” that is, distinguishable aspects of texts that connect texts either for stylistic or thematic similarities (Todorov 161). This definition can extend to all types of texts, not limited to literary, as I will be doing in this essay through Doughty’s YouTube videos. The concept of the genre function, then, is better described with the context of memento mori laid out beforehand. Memento mori is the Latin phrase for “remember death,” or “remember that you will die (“Memento . . .”). It is a philosophical emblem that dates back to Greek times, where it was oftentimes a philosophical tool that notable thinkers such as Marcus Aurelius and Socrates dwelled on (Holiday & Hanselman). The primary motive for evaluating the memento mori emblem in these times was to remind individuals of their mortality so that they would remember to be humble, and to make their life count in learning and thinking. Later, this phrase was adapted by Romans, where its form as “memento mori” took shape, and it was employed for the same

purposes as the Greeks'. Finally, in the medieval era, this emblem was again adapted, still in its memento mori form, but this time by the Christian church (Pollard-Smith). It was used to encourage its Christian audiences to lead good, pious lives—essentially, to remind audiences to “remember you will die, and so live a good life in order to be rewarded in the afterlife.” Memento mori, while an emblem, served as a stylistic genre for philosophical contemplations on death in a variety of different texts in various environments—social, political, religious, etc., it has kept its same meaning and motive throughout the centuries.

The genre function, then, is as the title implies—it is how rhetoricians use genres to function in a new environment—how previous genres are adapted and utilized to fit a new platform for new purposes. In this way, Caitlin Doughty utilizes the genre of memento mori in her advocacy of this new movement called “death positivity.” Because memento mori was such a prominent emblem in previous centuries, it is clear that, when thinking about death and dying, doing so in a life-motivating way, as memento mori did, is effective because it actively works to mitigate the reluctance of a death-phobic—or thanatophobic—public. Part of Doughty’s task in enacting the genre function of memento mori to her content is inadvertently adapting the genre for modern audiences. The methods she uses to discuss death positivity must be attentive to the changes that western cultures have experienced since memento mori was originally sculpted.

To illustrate my argument thus far, I would like to focus on Doughty’s video titled “Why Are You Afraid of Death?” I will focus primarily on this one because it

provides us with the most literal engagement with thanatophobia, that is, it confronts audiences with ideas of their own death and the fear thereof. This video provides us with remarkable content to analyze, as it is one in which she combines a variety of her rhetorical tools in addressing the most ubiquitous issue in a channel and platform devoted to the concept of death and dying. Rhetorical tools including humor, direct engagement with audiences, and ethos and kairos, are all explored.

The video starts off with one of Doughty's most common greetings which offers us our first point of analysis. Doughty, who is seated in a cozy living room with a human skull casually decorating a side coffee table in the background, greets her audience with a warm "Welcome back, Deathlings" (*Why Are you Afraid of Death?*). Like many online figures who tag nicknames to their audiences, Doughty does the same in dubbing her audience with the unique label, "Deathlings." It not only fits her niche of death positivity advocate but is also packed with rhetorical purpose. The pun of this label is obvious, alluding to "duckling," but its meaning implies more than just an affectionate infantilization of her audience, rather, it reminds them that they are all on route to death—which reverberates with memento mori rhetoric. Because she opens up many of her videos with this greeting, "Hi Deathlings. . .," it becomes clear that this is an intentional grounding of her audience with a memento mori theme right from the start. By capturing her audience with the fact of their mortality, she coaxes them to accept their pending death as part and parcel to their lives, and what's more,

their identity. Doughty also utilizes the visual ossuary aesthetic, with the skull adorning her coffee table in addition to her talk about death. This rings with the rhetoric of memento mori of the medieval use, where reminders of death and dying were literally carved into churches themselves, through ossuary designs and the presence of graveyards at the entrance to churches or sermon halls (Ariès). Being confronted with death directly, whether verbally or visually, is a tactic that Doughty adopts from the memento mori style of the medieval and previous centuries. Doughty, then, goes on to the topic of the video—finding out one’s fear of death in tackling that fear and moving towards “death positivity.”

She starts this with a pop culture joke, recognizable to Disney fans. She works this in while she reasons that “. . . if you don’t know what the fear [of death] is, it’s just gonna be one big, black void of threat. Like death!” (“Why . . .”). The punch line to this joke is her reference to a *The Lion King* scene, where the name Mufasa makes a character shudder, just like the word “death” might make a thanatophobic person shudder. In a video concerned with prompting audiences to face their fear of death by facing the topic head-on, rhetorical moves must be made to make such a feat doable. Doughty, then, must employ gallows humor—that is, humor in which “. . . misfortune assumes a kind of inevitability about which one can do nothing, like the weather or death” (Speier 1354). Gallows humor, as a form of comedy towards grim topics, comes most prominently in topics of death, and so Doughty adopts it as an essentiality; without humor in her discussion of death, she risks being perceived as simply macabre, or even

depressing, which would further iterate thanatophobic ideologies that she is actively against.

Tapping into references that may resonate with audiences coincides with another of Doughty's most effective strategies in making topics of death approachable to thanatophobic publics—that is, her devotion to creating a highly joke-oriented discussion on the fears of death. Throughout her videos, including this one, Doughty persists on maintaining a charismatic, upbeat tone, even on the most grim, melancholic topics. The video moves from its peppy introduction, equipped with gallows humor jokes, to one that directly aims to assist its audience in tackling thanatophobia. She lists a series of 7 most common fears of death that people have, prompting audiences to listen to each one, and see which one resonates the most with them, in order to start addressing those fears (by way of “conquering” them). Doughty states: “What if you’re a number two [in the list she discusses], afraid that all of your plans and projects will come to an end. I know a little something about this, as I am number two myself, both in sex appeal ranking and in death fears” (“Why. . .”). Before offering methods of coping with these fears, Doughty takes an opportunity to slip in a joke—not only to be relatable with audiences, but also to lighten an otherwise dark discussion. In Rowe and Regehr's article “Whatever Gets You Through Today. . .” the use of gallows humor in emergency medical fields is explored as an essentiality to professions like it, and a poignant notion is touched on—the idea that gallows humor “. . . is a means of managing the emotional toll on emergency service

professionals faced with trauma, horror, and death” (449). In this same way, Doughty treats the topics of death and dying as interrelated with humor. Discussing death without humor, especially to a thanatophobic public, becomes essential.

As mentioned, the topic of this video assigns Doughty the task of mitigating audience reluctance towards the content, especially when considering that it is targeting a largely thanatophobic audience. Just like her strategy of assigning the “deathling” fan label, which makes her videos personable in that it identifies her audience, and referencing pop culture in her gallows humor jokes enables familiarity and empathy with audiences, Doughty works to put forth a friendly persona—a rhetorical strategy that works up her ethos, and also pays attention to her audience’s need. Her ethos, that is, her reputation as a mortician and researcher in death topics, enables an innate kairos methodology—that is, it sites a specific time in which an argument is necessary and can be most effective. By adapting her argument or discussion around the context of to whom the points are being made, she is more likely to reel in audience members who, despite their thanatophobic inclinations, find her content to be palatable (Sherwood 46). Doughty places marked effort in keeping to the role of the happy-go-lucky, joking mortician that hosts these videos through a gallows-humor centric mode in order to garner and keep her audiences’ interest.

One last point of analysis that I would like to observe for this paper is Doughty’s most literal adaptation of memento mori—a tool that she, sadly, does

not use in this specific video, but does in several others. Similar to how she opens her videos by greeting her “Deathlings,” she also closes off her videos with a friendly “remember—you will die,” as explored in the opening of this essay. This final reminder to audiences is the most explicit portrayal of the memento mori rhetoric, and it corresponds well with the rest of the genre functioning aspects of memento mori that Doughty employs. Perhaps the fact that Doughty does not use it in every single video, nor nearly as regularly as she hones her fan label, “Deathlings,” is telling. Because her YouTube platform aims to target and mitigate the impact that thanatophobia has on audiences in what she has established is Western culture, she must rely on the more subtle, elusive rhetorics that enable her videos to flourish. Perhaps without engagement with humor intertwined in a casual memento mori fashion, her platforms would not have garnered as much attention as they have.

To take a further look at the ideological environments surrounding this movement, the history of memento mori cannot be forgotten. Because the memento mori emblem existed as an ideology in theistic times (Greek, Roman, and Christian predominantly) it is natural that, in our modern day and age, the form needs to adapt to be a more post-theistic framework. By viewing the rhetoric of memento mori, that is, the emblem that reminds individuals in high statuses or audiences in churches, that they will die, as a genre, we can identify strategies within its execution in various settings that make it an effective class of text. Analyzing death positivity puts memento mori into the current day, with the

concept of genre function at work. At its core, the genre function is an extension of a preexisting genre in that it recognizes and follows the influences of genre features that came before the text it is being applied to. It is a way to recognize and analyze the methods in which past genres are adapted and evolved to fit new purposes, which in this case, are the purposes that must fit Western societies who have experienced changes, not only with relationships toward death, but with theism and secularism as well.

In his previously mentioned article, Speier asserts that: “[a]bove all, we know that we all must die, and the comedy of a macabre joke consists not just in its implicit death wish for another [as in aggressive political gallows humor], but especially in the bizarre impression that death makes on the living. Macabre jokes make death and mourning banal” (Speier 1396). While memento mori was commonly conveyed in churches or other public spaces in the medieval period, public spaces can now be digital, and so Doughty utilizes the platform of YouTube, and rather than reminding audiences of death with the goal of influencing them to live pious, Christian lives, she must remind her audiences that death exists in the first place, and so live life with whichever open-ended motive in our much more secular and multi-faiths world, and, ultimately, create a death plan (one of her primary advocacies throughout her platforms).

Furthermore, her YouTube platform provides audiences with the space to engage with each other—she continuously prompts them to use the comment section of the website to share ideas and experiences on the videos’ topic, and,

in the video explored in this study, prompts audiences to reflect on their own relationship with death and dying.

The exigency of this topic (rhetorical discussions of death) is ever present, because death is, as life, ever present. While the movement of “death positivity” may seem like only a morbid interest that very few people have, it is an ideology that can potentially make reparations to the separation we have from death, and the anxieties or fear of death that come along with that disconnect. Analyzing Caitlin Doughty’s rhetoric reveals a poignant truth to us—how topics of death and dying need to be sugarcoated with a layer of gallows humor in order for the content to be palatable. The significance of this bleeds into our relationship with death as a society as a whole; with the funeral industry profiting from the commodification of the corpse, we refuse to ever really face death in the western world today which further reinforces thanatophobia.

By viewing Caitlin Doughty’s work as rhetorically utilizing gallows humor to present her death positive content to a thanatophobic audience, we can see genre functional aspects of memento mori at play and the significance of this ancient emblem as a genre. Acknowledging this reveals an interesting commentary on the relationship between modern Western societies and death—and it becomes evident that this can be a profitable point of analysis in other works. For instance, the ideological frameworks behind horror tropes such as ghost and vampire fiction, the motives behind dystopian texts, even the resurgence of Dia De Los Muertos in Disney’s *Coco*—it seems to me that they all

originate from an innate thanatophobic place. Death motivates a lot of things in life—art, philosophy, religion, human behavior—and so taking a critical analysis view of its involvement with this type of popular media literature can prove to be, not only very rewarding, but also reparative.

CHAPTER THREE:
JOURNAL ARTICLE

Death Positivity: A New Genre of Death and the Genre Function of *Memento mori*

Journal Article for Submission to *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*

“Death positive” is the overarching concept that self-proclaimed “death acceptance advocate” and licensed mortician Caitlin Doughty currently works to popularize, predominantly focused on targeting Western cultures. The concept focuses on normalizing death curiosity to inspire more confident and productive ways of living. Doughty targets Western cultures (America, Canada, and the United Kingdom) because she and other scholars believe that such cultures commonly exhibit “death denial” tendencies—a phrase adapted from Ernest Becker’s 1973 book titled *The Denial of Death*. In this book, Becker explores the history of Western relationships with death and traces how they have drastically changed for the worse over roughly the last two-hundred years, leading to a fear or denial of death in some societies, called thanatophobia. This includes familiar reluctances toward death, such as the embalming process’s nature of reversing/stunting decay, revulsion by the corpse due to supposed lack of sanitation, and the fear/unfamiliarity of death and dying. These reluctances lead to an avoidance of death topics as a result and the acknowledgment of death entirely. Because the scholars that Doughty engages with are based on this niched focus on western attitudes towards death specifically, conversations of

and about death in this paper will be narrowed to its presence in western, American culture, unless otherwise specified.

As a western society, we commonly stigmatize conversations about death. In their book *Death in Literature*, Hakola and Kivistö lay out the various forms of death's purpose and portrayal in literature as "having narrative power" over fictive stories (x), providing authors with "cultural and symbolic immortality" (xiii) and for audiences, displaying fictive death-content that "they would prefer to avoid in their own lives" (xiv) but are still fascinated by. While all three of these tracings of death in literature still ring true to this day, the latter point especially resonates in our current age. With death and dying being a regular part of the media that modern audiences consume, whether fictively or non-fictively (i.e., the news), death has been marked as something Western audiences ought to be fascinated by, but only from a distance. Death in literature serves, for audiences, as a safe and distant portrayal of the inevitability of death, but as literature grows into non-traditional platforms in our highly digitized age, discussions of death, too, must evolve because the nature of death, as part and parcel to the mortal condition, remains the same. Navigating rhetorical ways to discuss and explore death topics is essential in combatting death denial, especially when the targeted audience is part of the thanatophobic crowd. Caitlin Doughty, then, works to bring about new ways of navigating death discussions and, in fact, new ways of integrating death into daily life by advocating death positivity. She believes that death positivity can offer people an empowering perspective to enhance their

lives; because the inevitability of death so commonly paralyzes western cultures, equipping people with death positivity can enable them to live life more fully.

The rhetorical moves that Doughty must take in these critiques and advices are thereby grounded in highly rhetorical methods, which are, as a result, selected in consideration of her audience's fears and needs. Moreover, these moves operate in conjunction with classic rhetorical strategies like genre, logos, pathos, and ethos; all of which operate within a specific kairos moment, guided by the ideological environment in which Doughty creates content. Her method of constructing death positivity in her book *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (as well as in her video web series, website, and social media) stem primarily from the medieval concept of *memento mori*—the Christian concept of “remembering death” to live good lives.. It is in this way that I analyze *memento mori* as a genre function for Doughty's project of death positivity and how her adaptation of *memento mori* functions effectively alongside rhetorical strategies for modern western audiences. The implications of this genre function through Doughty's book can reveal how death positivity is rhetorically rich because it reveals nuanced ideological issues that current western societies face in regard to death. Furthermore, this study of death positivity as a genre can offer analytical points for a new method of literary analyses, which will be explored in the conclusion of this essay.

Definitions

Genre and the Genre Function. The concept of the “Genre Function,” as explored in Anis Bawarshi’s article of the same name, exemplifies one such way in which genre studies can offer deeper analysis of ideological environments, by examining genres through their evolutions and contexts. Bawarshi follows a similar definition of genre, albeit, extended, as he defines genres as “. . . typified rhetorical ways communicants come to recognize and act in all kinds of situations, literary and nonliterary” (335). It is through this definition, that he strives to “. . . investigate the role that genre plays in the constitution not only of texts but of their contexts, including the identities of those who write them and those who are represented within them” (Bawarshi 335). By borrowing Foucault’s concept of the “author function,” which is the critical theoretical move of conceptualizing the author as a literary entity within the work that is being analyzed, Bawarshi argues that genres can serve a literary importance as well. In the same way that we can see a text as inherently tied to the author that created it in order to reveal unique implications about a text, we can do the same with genres. A genre function, therefore, is an analytical method with a central focus on how texts (as he says, literary and nonliterary) are rhetorically shaped and influenced by the genres that they operate under.

By understanding genre in this way, we can analyze texts as undeniably tied and connected to the contexts surrounding them, including environment, ideologies, societies, politics, etc. This is a task I am undertaking in regard to

memento mori as a genre function for death positivity. Carolyn Miller, in her essay “Genre as Social Action” observes how, when genre is selected specifically to satisfy the needs of a specific society, it becomes “. . . more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action” (Miller 153). This concept in connection with Bawarshi’s genre function work to identify and analyze rhetorical uses of genre as catering to their ideological environments toward a specific goal (which in this case, is toward death positivity).

Memento Mori and Death Positivity. It is with these definitions of genre and the genre function in mind that I will now introduce the concept of *memento mori*. *Memento mori* is the Latin phrase for “remember death,” or “remember that you will die” (“Memento. . .”). It is, at its root, an emblematic concept that dates back to Greek times (although it was not “*memento mori*” in Greek), where it was oftentimes a philosophical tool that esteemed thinkers such as Marcus Aurelius and Socrates dwelled on. The primary motive for evaluating the *memento mori* emblem in these times was to remind individuals of their mortality so that they would remember to be humble, and to make their life count in learning and thinking. Later, this phrase was adapted by Romans, where its form as “*memento mori*” took shape, and it was employed for the same purposes as the Greeks’. Finally, in the medieval era, this emblem was again adapted, still in its *memento mori* form, but this time by the Christian church (Pollard-Smith). It was used to encourage its Christian audiences to lead good, pious lives—essentially, to

remind audiences to live righteously to be rewarded in the afterlife. Because emblems are themselves genres of the medieval period in their quality of symbolic imagery packed with philosophical meaning (Wade), *memento mori* becomes, too, a distinguished genre, through its recurrent appearances throughout the centuries, serving ideological, political, social, and artistic ends.

Memento mori proves to be a rich genre, as it can be identified in a variety of different texts and contexts, including art forms such as the written¹, in visual forms², as well as in non-art form texts³. Through *memento mori*'s presence in the classics that are still important and revered today, it is evident that this ancient emblem, and by extension, genre, is still strong and relevant to this day.

And so, “death positivity,” as dubbed by Caitlin Doughty, is a concept that she, and other figures in the death industry (Becker & Ariés), are trying to grow in current Western societies. Their motives behind this are to encourage healthier relationships with death and dying in these societies, much like the motives of the ancient *memento mori*. Contrary to its use as a Christian device to encourage pious living, the evolved genre of *memento mori* is being utilized now to instill reparative ideas toward death for modern societies. In this modern day and age,

¹ Death is very frequently a driving plot device in literature, encompassing a “veritable change in state, a transformation from one kind of being to another kind of (non)being. . . death both affects characters and leads the story in some direction” (Hakola & Kivistö x).

² *Ars moriendi*, “the art of dying” art form subscribes to “good death” notions, detailing coming to terms with and accepting death as in line with Christian doctrine of the time, as does *Le danse macabre*, “the dance of the dead,” which is the popular medieval image of *everyman* dancing with death, as death is the great equalizer (Aberth).

³ Death relics, tombstones, graveyards, etc., most oftentimes elegiac in nature, are created to honor and remember the dead and, in doing so, acknowledge death.

memento mori shines through death positivity in its attempt to mitigate what death scholars have identified as a social issue—thanatophobia, or the fear of death. Doughty and her colleagues are adapting *memento mori* methods in order to make the concepts of death and dying palatable to an overarchingly thanatophobic audience. Their goals are largely driven toward creating spaces where more honest discussions of death can come about to combat thanatophobia. Doing so, they believe, can repair Western cultures' reluctant relationship with death, citing the Western industrialization and commodification of death as a primary reason for this issue.

By recognizing the exigency of this issue in relation to Western society's relationship with death, new angles for approaching the topic in texts can be revealed. Applying this concept to *memento mori* demonstrates how the genre form proves to be extendible in modern times, exceeding its use throughout various discourse and historical contexts. While its form most commonly took its shape as an emblem, its use for ideological, political, social, and artistic ends is still relevant in modern societies. This phenomenon is what I am tracing in this paper, as I analyze *memento mori* as a rhetorically astute genre function for death positivity.

The Ideological Environment: A Predominantly Secular, Thanatophobic Audience

Bringing *memento mori* and Doughty's movement of Death Positivity into conversation together, as two movements that are centuries apart, calls into question the beliefs of the actual audience that Doughty is targeting with her

books⁴. While *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* shares some key similarities with the emblem forms of *memento mori* of the medieval and renaissance times, the audience to which it is geared has largely different theological beliefs. In these past eras, we see *memento mori* commonly appear, as aforementioned, in churches and graveyards (Ariès). These environments seem expected. They are fitting places to hone mortality and death, as Christian churches are occupied with the Christian arc of the afterlife, and graveyards mark individuals who have come to complete that arc (Boase). And yet *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* was published in an arguably much more secular time, that is, a time when confronting death is not as received in as wide a population percentage in churches as it was in the very religious times of the medieval and renaissance periods, where to be part of a community was contingent on accepting a faith as part of your identity (Pollard-Smith). This cultural shift⁵, one that navigates away from a religious-centric society to one that is more secular in nature, makes new methods for conversations of death necessary, and is the primary endeavor that Doughty undertakes.

⁴ Besides *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, Doughty has now published two more books: *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs*; the former explores the death rituals from different cultures other than Western (albeit, with the exception of Colorado's open pyre-funeral region) and the latter explores "questions asked by tiny mortals [aka children]." All three of the books are sold at mainstream and independent bookstores, from *Barnes and Noble* to commercial airports.

⁵ Deborah Lutz highlights this phenomenon, as well as the separation from death and dying that we see in our Western societies now, in her essay on death relics, writing: "Scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century death culture tend, on the whole, to agree that towards the end of the century, a process that began earlier reached a completion. The death of the other not only became less of a shared experience among a community, but last things such as final words and remains were increasingly to be pushed back to the back of consciousness and hence to the lumber room of meaning and importance." (127)

This is a big reason why Doughty's work, along with the works of other current thanatologists, is so fascinating. It is evident that their studies have come about as an astute response to the twentieth and twenty-first century's distance with death and dying. Kairos, the rhetorical tool of recognizing the timeliness of a piece and thus tailoring the execution of the argument's structure in consideration of the situation, is an absolute necessity for Doughty's audience. This is because not only is her targeted audience presumed to be thanatophobic, they are, comparatively, more secular than societies have been in the past. The *Pew Research Center's* latest report on religious demographics in the U.S. reveals that 26% of Americans claim to be non-religious, whether that be atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" (Smith). To address this, then, *memento mori*, showing its face in the new form of "death positivity," must shed light on death in different rhetorical ways. If life everlasting is no longer a guaranteed way to convince people to remember death and "seize the day" positively, toward living good lives, other methods must be taken to persuade audiences. While *memento mori* is a great genre-foundation for the task (because it offers audiences an avenue of thinking about death in not-so thanatophobic ways), the essentiality of its evolution and adaptation for today's ideological environments is critical.

Digging in: Doughty's Rhetoric in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, Doughty's first book, has sold nearly 18,000 copies. As a text, it serves as a solid foundation for the topics and themes that Doughty explores throughout her content. As a narrative, this text provides readers with

some fundamental death topics that Doughty recurringly touches on, such as her journey in coming to terms with death and dying, as well as her experience with working in the funeral industry itself. These are all concepts that are directly connected to *memento mori* in that they serve as a sort of guide for readers on how to confront and accept death as a part of life. In mainstream bookstores it is ordinarily categorized as a “self-help” book, being located on shelves under this section, and further subdivided into the category of “bereavement and grieving,” a subcategory which speaks volumes to its necessity in a thanatophobic culture. I say this, because there is no section for “death positivity” texts on book retailer shelves, and so the sections in which texts like these are found are in sections that essentially stigmatize death and navigate away from death positivity. A presupposition is implied from bookstores that topics of death are only ever discussed in tones of grieving or bereavement. This, at its core, sets the necessity and exigency of the death positive movement for Doughty.

The navigation-essentiality of death positivity strikes me as interesting, as Doughty’s overall demeanor throughout her mediums, when handling death topics, is an overtly positive one (hence “death *positive*”) and so it is indicative that her books are displayed on bereavement and grieving sections. While Doughty’s book (and her other platforms) delve into topics of death in order to mitigate distances that Western cultures put up in separating death as alien from life, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* is still largely balancing between these two ideologies. One which operates alongside the thanatophobic tendencies that

Western cultures demonstrate through their reluctance and unfamiliarity with death, and the other which works to mitigate those gaps and integrate death recognition into daily life, so as to encourage better living. In order for Doughty to effectively grab her audiences' attention, she must work within the limitations and parameters of the thanatophobic public that she is addressing. In addressing this specific audience, Doughty is required to take into consideration questions of publications, vendors, and sale layouts, *along with* the rhetorical angles she must take in making her content appealing to the targeted population of this ideological environment.

Readers can find some pivotal rhetorical moves in her navigation of the thanatophobic ideological environment. Right from the beginning of the book, in the "Author's Note," Doughty sets the goals and mood of the text, writing, after a brief description of the execution of Mata Hari and her request to be executed without a blindfold, that:

Looking mortality straight in the eye is no easy feat. To avoid the exercise, we choose to stay blindfolded, in the dark as to the realities of death and dying. But ignorance is not bliss, only a deeper kind of terror. (ix)

This opening works excellently with the genre function of *memento mori* in a few ways. It addresses mortality to the audiences directly—the very same tradition that *memento mori* did. It reminds me, specifically, of how several renaissance churches exhibited *memento mori* themes through designing sermon halls and

graveyards with the ossuary aesthetic, that is, ordained with skeletal remains, oftentimes ornately decorating the space in fantastical shapes and artistic displays (Ariès). By confronting audiences with their mortality through death emblems, whether it be by symbolism, skeletons, corpses, or painted images, *memento mori* does what Doughty hopes to accomplish in this passage. She completes the difficult feat of making audiences “look mortality straight in the eye” through her writing—rhetorically illustrating a literary visual. Furthermore, she deliberately addresses the readers in a unified manner, “we,” rhetorically including readers as intrinsically connected, not only with this phenomenon, but also in this ideological environment.

Writers such as Doughty have marked this phenomenon in modern Western cultures—this choice to remain “blind,” by systematically distancing death from our usual idea of life. In an article on the rhetorical uses of humor in breast cancer campaigns⁶, writer Christopher Duerringer observes this same ideological gap that death literature must navigate, writing: “. . .in post-Enlightenment, liberal societies such as ours, death represents a *disruption*, an *aberration*, in the imagined cycle of life. . . Death marks the obliteration of the self, something we can hardly imagine [italics added for emphasis]” (348). A recurring feature of death writing seems to be this recognition of voluntary blindness toward death, which Doughty strategically uses to open up her book on

⁶ In this article, Duerringer observes humor as a method of navigating breast cancer conversations away from death. He further finds that humor, along with the sexualization of the female body (breasts) are the primary methods used in advocating for breast cancer awareness, and speculates at the implications of this for a thanatophobic society.

the topic of death. To counter this phenomenon, Doughty further extends the imagery of sight in relation to mortality and death, asserting that refusing to acknowledge death's presence makes one "blindfolded," and "in the dark to the realities of death," which perpetuate thanatophobia. This proves to be a tactful rhetorical move for the audience Doughty is writing to because it addresses the "blindfolds" that thanatophobic societies wear right at the start of the book. By acknowledging this, as Duerringer calls it, "ideological gap" and immediately combating it, Doughty's death literature orients itself immediately with breaking down those stigmas, as is the purpose of the book. The nice literary imagery of needing to take off the "blindfold" in order to truly "see" the realities of life coexisting with death offers readers a poetic visualization of how the process of coming to terms with death and dying may look to the thanatophobic individual, hoping to combat their fear.

This powerful opening to her book furthermore offers readers a kind of disclaimer. That this book will prompt audiences to face their mortality, and in continuing to read further, audiences seem to be a step closer toward confronting the anxieties associated with death and dying. Doughty provides another blunt example of the nature of death and dying, and artfully keeps with the visual and symbolism of sight, recalling the first time she worked with a corpse at a crematorium:

Byron's lifeless eye sockets stared up at me as I tried to remember what his face had looked like as he slid into the flames just two

hours before . . . But that face, that human, was gone . . . The man who was Byron—father, husband, and accountant, was now entirely in the past tense.” (Doughty 8-9)

Because the ideological framework behind the thanatophobic culture Doughty is targeting is revealed as one in which death is rationalized as the very counter-acting of what we as humankind suppose ourselves to have overcome through advancements in medicine and science, this passage resonates very strongly. The deceased man she characterizes as “Byron,” having died of lung cancer, epitomizes this reality in the opening chapter of Doughty’s book. It becomes evident that recognizing mortality is acknowledging, as Duerringer artfully describes “. . . the phantom that lurks behind our conversations about prevention and cures—the very real probability of disease and death” (358). Doughty, as well as fellow scholars like Duerringer, assert that overcoming the fear of death starts at realizing this ideological framework, and how it has negatively distanced death from daily life, making way for a much less realistic understanding of life for western societies.

Byron’s passage also serves as a sentimental reminder of the *memento mori* framework that Doughty is operating with through the visual of the skull. As previously explicated, while in the medieval and renaissance periods *memento mori* was used with a sense of hope for heaven in the afterlife, the emblem would not work as effectively in current, vastly more secular societies. Because of this, the adaptation of *memento mori* through death positivity must take a more

secular shape—one that is concerned more with conquering death fears for the sake of *living* life. As previously mentioned, attention to *kairos* is an essentiality for Doughty’s argument structure because she is deliberately tailoring her writing for a specific moment in time, with an intended audience in mind. This moment includes vastly different mediums that were not available for ancient *memento mori* pieces, as well as markedly different theistic ideologies within society. She highlights this by concluding this section with an apt *memento mori* moment, writing “. . . I thought of the skull lodged in my own head. How it would . . . emerge after everything that could be recognized as Caitlin—eyes lips, hair, flesh—was no more” (Doughty 9). The symbolic nature of the skull as only being revealed post-mortem has always served the mission of *memento mori* and Doughty clutches on to this genre characteristic because of its effective symbolism. While in medieval *memento mori* the skull represents the completion of the afterlife arc and the unification that comes to all with death, this was, in actuality, a very broad way of stripping individuals of their identities after death. The catacombs of Europe, in France and Austria, namely, with walls lined with skulls, comes to mind—all of these nameless skeletal visages left behind are the only remaining proof of those nameless persons’ existences.

It is this sentiment that Doughty rebukes as a more progressive adaptation of the skull *memento mori* emblem, that the skull can represent a new way of thinking of death, positively. She frames skulls as symbolic, not only of the ever present nature of death and its unification through the universal symbol, but also

symbolic of the person who lived and thereby the life they lived and the person they were. Doughty goes on to write “[m]y skull might be crushed too, fragmented by the gloved hand of some hapless twentysomething like me” (9). This hearkens back to her previous *memento mori* reflection, how death may reveal her own skull in the crematory room one day, and how someone like she may have their first cremation experience with her cadaver, thereby offering a lasting, memorable legacy that her skull alone may not be able to grant. Rather than stripping the identities of deceased, Doughty seems to offer consensus that, while skulls are unifying in their universal and generally sameness image, the memory and legacy that individuals leave on others is more poignant than that of the organic, physical death that her audience fears.

Along with offering her audiences rhetorically symbolic and empathetic methods of thinking about death, Doughty readily enacts a rhetoric of *logos* throughout her book, that is, an appeal to logic and reason, because these appeals, grounded in research and evidential content, can very well persuade already reluctant audiences on the topic. For instance, one of the heaviest critiques that Doughty takes on the current death industry and its received reactions from modern Western audiences, is its persistent lack of talking about death in the simplest terms. An example of this is the habit of using euphemisms and other such coaxing tools which further separate the reality of death from societies. Consider, for instance, the several euphemisms we encounter in Western English-speaking cultures regarding death—“pass/ed away,” “departed,”

“gone,” “stillborn”—these all work to elusively distance the realities of death in our lives. Of the latter phrase, “stillborn,” Doughty observes that these euphemisms serve difficult subjects, noting how “. . . we say a child like this is stillborn, but speakers of other languages are rather more blunt: nacido muerto, totgeboren, mort-né—‘born dead’” (88). By offering readers this critique of death being largely misconstrued in western thanatophobic societies⁷, she offers them an angle from which to recognize how thanatophobia is perpetuated. Discussing them, then, in a critically engaged way and cross evaluating the terminology with that of other languages grounds her argument in a logical manner that may prove more effective than a cynical one without evidence.

She takes this critique further but in doing so it becomes evident that she must do so with caution. Rather than critiquing this language outright, as these very euphemisms are usually spoken by the bereaved who would simply rather not speak of a loved one’s death bluntly, Doughty equates them with the visual shields from death that are practiced in most western funeral practices. One such visual shield she suggests is the embalming process, which does not “. . . reflect the normal biological processes of death, . . . [because they] are not what a family wants to see” (Doughty 116). Instead of encountering the realities of death, the current death industry encourages grieving members to accept a simulacrum form of the deceased. One that has been made to look “‘peaceful,’

⁷ As a reminder, “western” in this essay is referring to the predominantly American speaking cultures thanatologists like Becker, Ariès, and Doughty target in their scholarship, as detailed in the Introduction.

'natural,' and 'at rest,'" despite the very unnatural processes that makes these scenes of death possible (117). Earlier in her book, Doughty astutely notes that "[t]oday, not being forced to see corpses is a privilege of the developed world," which rings true historically, and still to this day, geographically⁸(49). These allusions to the singular nature of western culture's relationship with death as one that is privileged and uncommon beckons to audiences that their relationship with death is not necessarily realistic in the grand scheme of the global population. This is, indeed, a harsh distinction to pose to thanatophobic audiences, but a necessary one for her argument, to motivate progressive responses to death in Western cultures. While Doughty relies on logos, she is sure to do so with a strong regard for who her audience is, and what their reluctances are.

Along with using logical discussion methods (logos) to discuss and explore death topics, Doughty also incorporates uplifting, humorous tones to mitigate reluctances thanatophobic audiences may have, falling in line with pathos tools of rhetoric. Bawarshi explores this feature of genres and composing, writing that "[t]he speaker's speech plan is mediated by her chosen genre; so is her style, because each genre embodies its own typical conception of the addressee (98) [citation provided by Bawarshi]" (348). In defining Doughty's work as largely adapted from the *memento mori* genre, the way she must handle language is revealed to be navigatory in nature—that is, she must navigate her supposed audience's reluctance toward death. While she is managing the act of

⁸ Doughty explores this more in depth in her second book titled *From Here to Eternity*

making death topics palatable for thanatophobic audiences, Doughty appears to also recognize that there are undeniably disconcerting truths about death that thanatophobic individuals will simply have to overcome before overcoming their reluctances. She recognizes this, writing that “[t]he most salacious stories . . . had the power to disrupt people’s polite complacency about death. Rather than denying the truth, it was a revelation to embrace it, however disgusting it might sometimes be” (Doughty 125). In acknowledging this, Doughty establishes a major task in her work, that is, presenting disturbing content (especially disturbing to thanatophobic publics) through tones and rhetorical tools that will prove effective for her audience. She does this predominantly by navigating tones of informative qualities (as previously explored) as well as humorous qualities.

Doughty’s navigation of the essential ways in which *memento mori* must be evolved to fit current audiences demonstrates the rhetorical balance that she is attentive to throughout her writing. While the Author’s Note chapter of *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* delves into the history and theories behind thanatophobia in Western cultures as well as sets up Doughty’s first experiences in the death work field, the rest of the book busies itself with expanding on her criticisms of the death industry and further recounts stories of her experience. In these experiences, Doughty shares instances where she witnessed thanatophobia as a byproduct of the death industry, which she then directly critiques. The primary shift between these first two chapters and the rest of the book is Doughty’s tone,

as it shifts into one heavily reliant on humor throughout all the gruesome, macabre content that is explored. Steve Sherwood, in his article “Intersections of Wit and Rhetoric: Humor as Rhetorical Enterprise,” explains such moves, saying “[w]it is opportunistic and its impact hinges on timing and circumstance. For this reason, what is amusing. . . in one rhetorical situation will often not amuse or persuade in another” (46). In this way, the language and style of discussion for the death topics that Doughty undertakes in the first three sections are characteristic of a fairly stoic and informational tone. This is in direct contrast to the majority of the rest of the book, where Doughty, after having “set the stage,” so to speak, takes on a much more humorous one. This rhetorical navigation of writing tones with which to open a book directed toward thanatophobic individuals works due to its underlying appeal to her specific audience’s needs. In order to hook her audience’s attention, Doughty must ease the topics she discusses to readers. Humor is an excellent method of doing this, and so she must set up her book’s contents leading up to this device strategically *before* she can move toward making her audience feel (pathos) humor toward death.

Because of this, making audiences laugh at death topics is a difficult endeavor that Doughty must undergo in order to engage her presupposed thanatophobic audiences. As previously alluded, with the separation of tones from the first three sections of the book and the humor that follows the rest of the book, the application of humor in the socially deemed dismal and heavy topic of death becomes evident only after Doughty has established the thanatophobic

ideological framework of Western Culture for audiences. Across her various mediums, she frequently makes jokes leading up to, or following, death topics. *Gallows humor* works especially well in topics of death because, as its name implies, it is humor that is used to counterbalance the dark nature of grim topics—which is perhaps most needed in topics of death (Speier 1354). It is not until the third chapter in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, titled “The Thud,” that Doughty begins to truly delve into the rhetorical prowess of gallows humor. After all, the first couple of chapters needed to reel her audience, as supposed members of the intrinsically thanatophobic western societies, in. Starting off this book with humor right from the start may have risked being unappealing to an audience who does not even know *how* to laugh at death, let alone critique the ideological environment’s framework that instills this fear of death at all.

The third chapter, then, “The Thud,” discusses her first encounter with death as a child, beginning with the tropic joke: “They say the way to figure out your porn-star name is to combine the name of your first childhood pet with the name of the street you grew up on” (Doughty 25). Using this joke as a device to set up the scene of the traumatic event that Doughty delves into a couple pages later enables her to hook her audiences’ attention. Imagine if she started the chapter with “When I was eight years old I witnessed a little girl plummet to her death in a mall.” Audiences already reluctant towards the topic and nature of death may be further motivated to put the book down. Navigating her audience’s needs is essential for Doughty’s writing genre and the effective enactment of

memento mori. Instead, then, Doughty relies on using humor and jokes as an exposition device. She provides some more comical descriptions of the town where she grew up, and later witnessed the traumatizing death, to coax some more death topics to her readers. She describes her home with imagery where one might “. . . sprint up the front walkway during coconut season lest an overripe coconut hurl itself down onto your head” (Doughty 25). Doughty’s intertwining of comedy and imagery paints visuals that effectively set up the ubiquitous nature of death, as witnessed in the mall. Doughty describes Hawaii in much the same idyllic nature as it is commonly portrayed, and yet she juxtaposes this with the reality of death in illustrating her acknowledgment of death being present everywhere.

After detailing the incident—Doughty’s witnessing a girl who fell from a mall escalator 30 feet high—she writes:

Until that night I hadn’t truly understood that I was going to die, that everyone was going to die. I didn’t know who else had this debilitating piece of information. If others did possess this knowledge, I wondered, how could they possibly live with it? (30)

This passage reflects Doughty’s own struggle with thanatophobia at an early age, which works to build a sense of pathos for her audience. In detailing that she too struggled with the reality of death, readers are inclined to find her and her writing relatable. This necessity, of providing these reparations for readers through pathos and its effective operation through humor in writing, makes Doughty’s

work rhetorically attentive to her audience's needs. This type of handling of humor in Doughty's writing encapsulates a quality of death positivity that contributes to the evolved form of *memento mori* and thereby its genre function. Adapting humor in non-traditional contexts in order to navigate audiences' reluctances, becomes a defining feature of the genre function of *memento mori* for death positivity.

Critiquing the funeral industry's methods as a part of what perpetuates thanatophobia in Western audiences is another way that she employs pathos in her writing in order to sculpt her death positive movement. For instance, following a rhetorically humorous description of an experience she had while working at the crematory, where a grieving daughter thought her mother was "a ticking time bomb of highly hazardous deadness that was going to infect her whole family," Doughty takes some time to alleviate this very fear that some readers may share (174). She assures that "[e]mbalmers embalm because they think it makes the corpse look better, because they've been told that it's what's 'right' and 'decent,' and because it makes it easier to control the viewing. Also, they get paid for it" (Doughty 174). Doughty's tone here is one of a laxed critique. She does not acknowledge that embalming is an absolute necessity in the post-death situation because she, and most other death scholars, assert that corpses really are not hazardous or dangerous and embalming is, therefore, not required. Providing this example for readers who may share this same reluctance toward death due to an aversion to the corpse's supposed unsanitary nature marks Doughty's effort to

provide real-world examples of the corpse in a family home, and how these situations can be negatively handled, versus positively handled. Incorporating in this disclaimer the rhetoric of pathos makes it so that the content is commiserating with thanatophobic readers.

This passage takes a rhetorical step forward, too, in demonstrating ethos rhetoric. By explaining the non-necessity of embalming, Doughty, as a licensed mortician, enables ethos through her credibility in the field, as well as her own intentions of reshaping ideas of death and the death industry more positively. Later in the book, Doughty explores her ideal crematory, writing “[s]omeday, I would like to open my own crematory. Not an industrial warehouse, but a space both intimate and open, with floor-to-ceiling windows to let the sunshine in and keep the weirdo death stigma out” (233). As a licensed practitioner in the field, Doughty’s noting of funeral homes having a “weirdo death stigma” is critical and accusatory of the standards that many funeral homes fall in line with. By writing this, Doughty is directly attributing funeral homes like these as part of the issue; they perpetuate death stigmas because they are disturbing to be in, and certainly uncomfortable to grieve in when cremating a loved one. By allowing herself to openly critique the industry as a direct result of her own work experience within the industry, she separates herself from the industry that continues death stigmas, rather, aligning herself with a new, progressive ideology of death care. Furthermore, offering up ideas for an ideal crematory that she can open one

day⁹, reveals her good intentions for the field, driven by her expertise and credibility.

Doughty's critiques of these features of the funeral industry work for thanatophobic audiences in that it establishes the systemic standards that perpetuate the issue. In grounding these standards, Doughty creates a sense of camaraderie with audiences that fear death, which in turn, rhetorically sculpts her pathos to readers. Take, for instance, when she writes that "[t]he headstone is placed on top of the whole affair, like the cherry on a death-denial sundae" (Doughty 159). In expressing her aversion and disdain for the embalming process that is so encouraged in the funeral industry, she uses a combination of both imagery and humor to communicate this with her audience. For thanatophobic individuals, reluctant with topics of death, the imagery of a headstone, let alone an embalmed body, may be difficult to fathom, but Doughty makes the imagery work in keeping with her adapted *memento mori* standards. Going back to Carolyn Miller's concept of genres fulfilling social action, we can see that by adapting distinctive images of death tropes and emblems, Doughty accomplishes a pragmatic use of the genre function of *memento mori*. This allows death positivity to accomplish similar tasks that *memento mori* served in its time, but in a much different ideological environment than that of medieval societies. The process of shaping death discussions to be palatable by death-

⁹ Doughty actually did, a year after the publication of *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, open up a funeral home called *Undertaking LA*, which in 2019 became *Clarity Funerals*—the mottos for both of these funerals homes have stayed in line with her ideologies for compassionate, affordable funerals, and the goal to keep the “weirdo death stigma” out.

phobic members of modern Western society, makes her work a social action in that it addresses an issue (thanatophobia) and combats it directly through rhetorics such as ethos, pathos, and logos.

At this point, it is evident that the rhetorics that Doughty enacts in her writing are formed as a response to the ideological environment discussed previously in this essay. As Bawarshi writes, “. . . we recognize, interpret, and, in the spirit of reader-response theory, also construct the discourse we encounter using the genre function. Genre, in short, is largely constitutive of the identities we assume within and in relation to discourse” (343). In the same way that *memento mori* was employed in the past to audiences who were surrounded by death due to the lack of medical advancements in uplifting, afterlife-promising strategies, Doughty, too, utilizes *memento mori* rhetoric as an uplifting, positive approach to discussions of death. Rather than employing *memento mori* for the reasons that Philippe Ariès outlines a basic social quality, as death was ubiquitous in medieval and renaissance societies¹⁰, Doughty hopes to reorient the motives of *memento mori* for modern audiences. This is a phenomenon she refers to as the “‘medicalization’ of death. . . [when medicine began to] address life-and-death issues, not appeals to heaven” (43). And yet, what of “appeals to heaven”? Because the promise of afterlife was a pivotal, if not *the* central point of *memento mori*, inspiring Christians to lead good lives, it seems as though death

¹⁰ Indeed, in his *Western Attitudes Toward Death*. . . Ariès writes “The fact that the dead had entered the church and its courtyard did not prevent both from becoming public places” (23). In the same section, Ariès elaborates on the etymology of the word “cemetery” as a term for a place of social gathering, being extended within and outside of places where the dead were buried.

positivity must offer a similar promise—which Doughty delivers to her predominantly secular audience. To mitigate the exponential growth of secularism in modern cultures it becomes clear that *memento mori* of the medieval and renaissance eras must transgress into more modern modes, thus the developed, evolved, and adapted genre of death positivity.

To substitute the comforting responses to the reluctances of death that the earlier forms of the Christian *memento mori*, Doughty offers readers an alternative to the comforts traditionally granted by theistic practices for death—“the *good death*.” Doughty defines this in her book as having an attitude toward death shaped by “being prepared to die,” having one’s post-mortem “affairs in order,” and with “good and bad messages delivered that need delivering” (Doughty 222). It encapsulates a laxer attitude toward a death that one is always prepared for, as they accept and acknowledge their mortality and the fragility of life. This concept, though it may be unsettling and unfamiliar to the audience Doughty writes to, reflects very similar attitudes toward death displayed by religious doctrines. Furthermore, accepting such a mentality emphasizes the need to live a good life alongside mortality, which is certainly a goal that readers of Doughty’s book may be seeking. Offering audiences this alternative to theistic comforts toward death rewarded by religion puts the challenge to the reader, as Doughty emphasizes that “[y]our relationship to mortality is your own,” a powerful declaration on a topic in which thanatophobic readers generally feel *powerless* (222). I would like to furthermore observe that a distinctive quality of the very

same ideological environment that Doughty is writing to in modern western societies are their environmental concerns. If the good death prepares one to die after having lived a good life, the good life also means having lived consciously of one's actions, contributions, and legacies left on the world¹¹.

In concluding her repertoire of pathos with her readers, Doughty proclaims that: “[t]here is no Art of Dying manual available in our society, so I decided to write my own” (Doughty 221). Rhetorically shaping her book to appeal to audiences that she supposes are thanatophobic is crucial in the genre that she is working in and developing. By establishing that the past (prior to the thanatophobic tendencies Western societies have developed circa the 20th century) had better, more intimate relationships with death and dying, Doughty critiques modern societies' refusal to hone similar relationships, and in revealing such discrepancies, offers readers alternative ways of thinking about death. Doughty concludes her book, writing:

We can wander further into the death dystopia, denying that we will die and hiding dead bodies from our sight. Making that choice means we will continue to be terrified and ignorant of death, and the huge role it plays in how we live our lives. Let us instead reclaim our mortality, writing our own *Ars Moriendi* for the modern world with bold, fearless strokes. (Doughty 234).

¹¹ This is an interest of mine—how death positivity or rhetorics of the “good death” carry implications away from anthropocenic ruins and encourage environmental consciousness.

By providing this declaration as the conclusion of the book, Doughty abandons humorous tones for, instead, more empowered and unified wording. Jokes aside, she emphasizes the importance of overcoming thanatophobia for her audiences and the empowering life-potential that can result from doing so. Satisfying the conclusion requirements, it takes into consideration all the death topics explored in the book thus far and includes the reader in its discussion. Furthermore, it invites readers to continue with conversation, to develop their own relationships with death and dying—as challenging as that may be for a thanatophobic public.

The Exigency of Death Positivity and Further Platforms

The December 22, 2019 issue of *the New York Times Weekly* honed a black and white cloudy sky cover, with the words “Living With Death” adorning it. In the magazine, the feature article “The Movement to Bring Death Closer” explores bereavement practices wherein family members spend time with their loved one’s corpse for multiple day-long increments, taking time to prepare it and adorn it in whichever customs they wish, usually premeditated with the deceased’s input (Jones). This feature of death positive practices in mainstream media points to a revival in this genre of *memento mori* for a new generation. Remarkably, more and more modes of death positivity are appearing throughout mainstream media, and while thanatology/death studies have always been present (for instance, with the groundbreaking book *The Denial of Death* having come out in the 70s, and the popular television series *Six Feet Under* having aired from 2001-2005), there does seem to be a resurgence following the work of

Doughty. I believe that this has mainly to do with her choice to make her content diverse and accessible in multiple mediums and formats.

While she has published three books now, available in print and digitally, the mediums that Doughty works most readily through are largely web-based, with her open access website *The Order of the Good Death* as one of her central platforms alongside her *Youtube* channel, *Ask A Mortician*. On this website, Doughty collaborates with other death-interested professionals, ranging from fellow mortician/funeral industry workers, artists, and scholars who study death topics. Through this website, Doughty and her colleagues highlight key resources that are related to their death positive goals, and in their “Blog” section, post death-related articles. This section includes entries with titles such as “Known to God: Mourning an Unnamed Child” that, despite their heartbreaking content, still strive towards enabling death positive mindsets in its readers through means that are rhetorically sculpted in similar ways exhibited through Doughty’s *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. The motives of these entries, and certainly the rest of the content found on this website, are designed to encapsulate *memento mori* themes in innovative ways.

With content like this featured on her collaborative website, Doughty’s audience has the ability to navigate death positive topics with regard to their specific needs. In the “Death Salon” page, a list of textual resources is provided, subdivided by subject (History, Science & Medicine, Sociology & Anthropology, etc.) to better assist visitors on a variety of approaches they can take to exploring

death positivity. In our highly digitized age, it is clear that movements are most prominently done online now. As such, the environment of online platforms have been labeled “interactive and participatory Internet” environments, where engagement between online content and audience can be had through interaction such as providing resources to audiences, as well as providing that audience with a common ground from which to discuss ideas (Gallagher).

Tracing this through Doughty’s platforms, in the “About” section under *The Order of the Good Death*’s mission tab, viewers are greeted with a heading that reads: “Welcome to the Order. Welcome to your mortality.” This heading reverberates with *memento mori* subtext in its death-related focus. By continuing to read the website’s mission and history, readers acknowledge and accept the presence of mortality, and subsequently, death. Along with this, the website features a merch section, with clothes advertising death positivity, like shirt prints that read simply “Death Positive,” with a skull taking the place of the “o,” and another shirt that reads “Future Corpse” five times, subsequently fading to black each time, down the front of the tee. These features on Doughty’s website accomplish what Miller, in her essay “Genre as Social Action,” emphasizes as the importance of studying genre. That is, seeing the rhetorical moves of a genre that results with action, accomplished by utilization of a genre, because “. . . a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). Doughty’s work, especially because the targeted audience is a thanatophobic one, must

navigate effective genre forms in order to effectively reach and resonate with audiences.

Doughty's utilization of these content mediums allows her, especially, to reach broader audiences. For instance, her *YouTube* platform *Ask a Mortician* has garnered over 117 million views as of March 2020. The content of her videos are, as I explore more in depth in my essay "Humor and the Genre Function of death positivity," highly rhetorical in their treatment of death topics towards a thanatophobic public. The interaction she encourages from her audience through the *YouTube* comment platform emulates the interactive environment she tries to create in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. However, the engagement that is possible through *YouTube* is more direct, as responses and questions can be made (which Doughty interacts with regularly). This feature of this platform of hers makes it so that death positivity can truly be a community-oriented and accessible movement.

Conclusion

Considering that Doughty labels herself as a "death acceptance advocate," and calls her death positive movement an activism aligns her products with social action qualities. These qualities establish her credibility and relatability simultaneously, helping her ethos in that she shares her experience and critiques of the funeral industry, informing audiences of that industry's part in perpetuating thanatophobia, as well as build up her pathos because she is a figure aiming to help individuals who fear death. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*

provided a foundation for Doughty’s written content, and paved the structure of her website, *The Order of the Good Death*. This site now works especially well because of the accessibility of being operated via an online platform. This is important because the prevalence of this topic is revealed in modern times in conjunction with notions of “the bad death” and thanatophobia—both of which make it so that the genre of death positivity is presented with an opportune moment (kairos).

Facilitating a culture that is death positive promotes lifestyles that are conscious of mortality, and furthermore, conscious of the mortality of everyone in society. Doughty uses this rhetoric to establish that once a society realizes that everyone is on the same journey to death, differences become obsolete, and the legacies they leave might be encouraged to be more positive ones for future generations. This ideal is chased by Doughty and her fellow scholars on the platform targeting thanatophobic audiences, with an overtly optimistic idea that recognizing mortality may optimize tolerance and mitigate prejudices that currently lead to injustices or “bad deaths.” For instance, in the entry featured on *The Order of the Good Death*’s blog section, “Known to God. . .,” Pietersen reflects on how funeral and mourning processions are for the living rather than the dead, noting poignantly that: “Death happens and then death leaves, a very literal *memento mori* that can be a much-needed jolt to those who remain, but the process of dying lingers, sometimes over years, and exposes all the weaknesses we try our best not to accept [*italics added*]” (Pietersen). The presence of entries

such as this one on the website, let alone Doughty's premier book *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, make progressive use of an otherwise distant and forgotten genre—*memento mori*—and it also works toward acknowledging a place in modern societies for ideals such as death positivity.

Death positivity, as a new genre of death, captures the essence of *memento mori* but makes it compatible for modern times and for modern audiences. Working within the genre standards established by *memento mori* allows Doughty to follow key elements of death discussions that proved effective in the past, and with some adjustments, would work nowadays. Extending this evolved genre form to literary studies further reveals new ways of analyzing the presence or discussion of death in texts, as it calls specific ideological environments into question. This is because the manner in which death is presented and manifested in texts can reveal the struggles that targeted audiences are most likely facing in regard to mortality; analyzing such qualities in texts can provide new ways of marking the exigency and importance of texts in relation to the society from which they are written. Being attentive to this new genre's appearance in some popular culture texts may reveal pivotal shifts in cultural relationships with death and dying, including continual shifts within and from philosophical and ideological frameworks.

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