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## Simulacra of the Soul: Postmodern Ethics and the Performance of Dying

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* through the theoretical lens of postmodernism. The paper analyzes how the postmodern narrative performs and problematizes the meaning of dying in an age saturated with simulation, fractured truths, and the erosion of grand narratives. Drawing upon the theory of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality, Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the collapse of metanarratives, the paper argues that death in *Tuesdays with Morrie* is not represented as a biological endpoint but as a culturally and ethically mediated event. Morrie Schwartz, whose dying is staged as a performance that challenges conventional boundaries between life and death, authenticity and simulation, body and soul, the paper argues that *Tuesdays with Morrie* reimagines the dying self not as an essence to be discovered, but as a simulacrum to be enacted and sustained through performance, memory, and love.

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### Introduction

In an era shaped by mass media, hyperreality, and fragmented identities, Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* emerges as more than a sentimental memoir of life lessons from a dying professor. Beneath its accessible prose and emotional register lies a nuanced meditation on death, and ethical life in a postmodern world. Through the theoretical lenses of Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Judith Butler, the text can be read as performance of postmodern ethics, where death becomes a simulacrum,



identity a performance, and morality is generated not from fixed metaphysical truths but from lived contradictions. The novel destabilizes traditional metaphysical notions of the soul and replaces them with a simulacral subjectivity, where ethical selfhood is constructed through dialogic acts, embodied presence, and affective transmission. In doing so, the text resists the erasure of morality in postmodern culture and proposes a new mode of dying that is both ethically generative and narratively transformative. Ultimately, *Tuesdays with Morrie* exemplifies a postmodern ethics grounded not in certainty or transcendence but in relationality, vulnerability, and the performative enactment of the self.

### **Death in the Age of Hyperreality**

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom offers readers a portrait of death that is embedded in the media-saturated landscape of late modernity. The narrative is not simply an intimate memoir of a dying man but a cultural artifact shaped by what Jean Baudrillard Terms “hyperreality,” a condition in which simulations and media representations come to replace and precede the real (Baudrillard 1). Morrie Schwartz’s death does not remain in the private sphere of domestic mourning or religious ritual; it is transformed into a televised spectacle, a consumable and affectively charged narrative in the public domain. Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality refers to this state in which the real is no longer real, but rather replaced by simulacra. In this context, Morrie’s death becomes less a private biological reality and more a public simulation, sustained through repetition, and interviews. Morrie himself acknowledges this mediated construction when he appears on *Nightingale* and speaks of his impending death not as an end but as a beginning of a dialogue: “He was intent on giving as much of himself as he could before he died” (Albom 10). Here, Morrie’s identity as a dying man becomes performative, a kind of moral avatar projected through televised empathy.

This mediated form of death reflects Baudrillard’s second-order of simulacrum, wherein representation no longer refers to a stable reality but to a culturally constructed ideal. Morrie becomes the wise dying man, a figure both authentic and commodified, shaped through gaze of the interviewer, the author, and the public. The reader is not simply grieving with Morrie, they are consuming the idea of a good death shaped by sincerity, wisdom, and vulnerability. This collapse of the private into the public marks a significant departure from traditional rituals of dying. In premodern and early modern contexts, death was often a sacred, communal, or private religious event. But in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, death is restructured as a media event, consistent with postmodern tendencies to blur the boundary between real and its representation. Morrie becomes not just a man but a symbol—a televised moral subject designed



to perform the role of the dying sage. Alбом's narrative, then, while tender and genuine, reproduces and amplifies this role through structured visits, episodic reflections, mirroring the logic of serialized storytelling familiar to television audiences. The memoir becomes, in effect, a simulacrum of spiritual truth, offering not a transcendental vision of death but a media-mediated construction of dying as meaningful performance. Morrie's death illustrates a postmodern paradox: even as death is hypermediated and performative, it becomes a site for ethical reflection. In Baudrillard terms, the real Morrie is lost in the representation, yet in that loss, a cultural function is served—the function of restoring emotional and ethical engagement in an otherwise simulated world. Morrie is thus presented as both subject and symbol, a man dying and a construct performing death.

### **Death as Simulacra**

In Mitch Alбом's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, death is not encountered in its unmediated biological finality, but rather presented as a curated narrative of dignity, wisdom, and as a curated narrative of dignity, wisdom, and transformation—a representation that bears all the markings of what Jean Baudrillard terms simulacra. Within postmodern theory, simulacra are copies that no longer refer to an original reality but instead generate their own self-sustaining truth. Baudrillard outlines several stages in the progression of simulacra, culminating in the “pure simulacrum,” where the sign no longer conceals anything real, but merely pretends to reference it (Baudrillard 6). *Tuesdays with Morrie* shows this logic by transforming the biological and emotional process of dying into a consumable aesthetic experience. Morrie Schwartz becomes less a man nearing death than a performative figure of how to die well. The memoir's structure, which includes, weekly Tuesday meetings, confessional tone, philosophical reflections, mirrors serialized storytelling, where each chapter functions like an episodic release of wisdom. Alбом writes: “The last class of my old professor's life took place once a week in his house...The subject was The Meaning of Life. It was taught from experience” (Alбом 1). This performative framing of Morrie as both instructor and spectacle initiates a process of simulation wherein the experience of dying is abstracted into digestible moral lessons for the reader. The deathbed becomes a stage, and Morrie, its enlightened protagonist.

Morrie's dying is not a solitary or private act but one embedded in media representation. His appearances on the television program *Nightingale* are moments when his illness becomes a public narrative. He tells the camera, “Dying is not contagious, you know. There is no reason to be afraid of me” (Alбом 21). Yet his gesture of assurance also enacts the simulation of death as a normalized, almost therapeutic process. It



displaces the real anxiety of dying with an idealized model of graceful deterioration, where the pain of the body is subordinated to the performance of insight. Morrie's physical decay is visible, but it is framed and mediated by moral messages: love others, detach from materialism, live fully. The result is a death narrative that does not present dying in its raw form but as a symbolic script, tailored for empathic spectatorship. Baudrillard contends that in the hyperreal condition of late capitalism, even death becomes part of the spectacle. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, this spectacle is not exploitative in a cynical sense, but it does participate in the aestheticization of death. Morrie becomes an icon of meaningful mortality, a simulacrum of the dying sage who offers coherence and redemption in the face of biological chaos.

The simulation is further reinforced by Albus's own presence in the text. His return to Morrie after years of disconnection is less a spontaneous act than the initiation of a narrative arc. The memoir's dual timeline—past lessons and present visits—constructs death as something to be learned from, mastered, and crucially, recorded. This recording is not only literal but cultural, transforming Morrie's dying into a reproducible moral commodity. In this way, the narrative functions as a third-order simulacrum: it no longer reflects a dying person's experience, but rather produces the ideal of a good death that exists primarily through its representation. Having stated this, still, it would be reductive to dismiss *Tuesdays with Morrie* as merely a sentimentalized performance. The emotional sincerity of Albus's prose and Morrie's vulnerability suggests that even within simulation, affect and ethical reflection remain possible. In fact, Baudrillard himself allows that simulation can carry emotional intensity, even as it distances us from the real. Morrie's death, then, is not devoid of meaning, but its meaning is mediated, not lived by the reader, but interpreted through layers of narrative framing, emotional resonance, and cultural expectation. It is not death as an end, but as an instructive signifier, circulating in media, literature, and public memory as a model of how to die correctly. In this way, Albus's memoir both critiques and perpetuates the postmodern condition: even the most intimate of human experiences, that is death, must be represented, narrated, and ultimately, simulated.

### **The Collapse of Metanarratives**

Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* asserts that "the grand narrative has lost its credibility" (Lyotard xxiv). Postmodernism, he contends, signals a crisis of legitimation, where the sweeping, totalizing discourses of Enlightenment rationality, religion, progress, and universal ethics are no longer accepted as binding explanatory frameworks. In literature, this collapse of metanarratives gives rise to pluralism, subjectivity, and localized truth. Mitch Albus's *Tuesdays with Morrie* is a poignant



example of this narrative shift. While the memoir initially seems to offer a return to traditional morality through its themes of love, death, and mentorship, a deeper reading reveals that it embodies the very postmodern skepticism that Lyotard articulates: its resistance of universal truths and foregrounds ethical meaning as emergent, contingent, and deeply personal. Morrie Schwartz, the dying sociology professor at the heart of the memoir, does not offer a unified or spiritual doctrine but instead assembles fragments of wisdom drawn from personal reflection, lived experience, and emotional resonance. Morrie's statement: "The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it" (Albom 42). This statement functions as a critique of cultural metanarratives, especially those that promise happiness through consumerism, success, or stoicism. Morrie's rejection of dominant narratives about masculinity, productivity, and the American Dream aligns with the postmodern impulse to distrust hegemonic systems of meaning.

Lyotard emphasizes that in the postmodern condition, knowledge is no longer legitimated by grand narratives but by performativity and immediate utility (Lyotard 46). Morrie's lectures are deliberately framed not as scientific discourses or philosophical absolutes but as intimate conversations. Their value does not lie in universal applicability but in their capacity to connect emotionally and ethically with Mitch, and by extension, the reader. The very form of *Tuesdays with Morrie* is structured as a series of episodic dialogues that resists narrative totality. A striking example of the collapse of metanarratives appears in Morrie's reflections of death: "Everyone knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently" (Albom 81). Here Morrie rejects the institutionalized narratives and reclaims death as a personal, lived, and meaningful experience. Death, in Morrie account, is not a gateway to metaphysical but a prompt to live authentically in the present. In refusing to anchor his life to any religious or philosophical dogma, Morrie exemplifies Lyotard's notion of "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). He borrows freely from different tradition but never insists on one truth. His approach to spirituality is eclectic and experiential. His wisdom, thus exemplifies, not a return to grand meaning but a simulacrum of ethics, that is, evocative, performative, and profoundly human.

### **The Performativity of Dying**

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom documents the final days of Morrie Schwartz, his former professor. What emerges from these weekly conversations is not merely a chronicle of dying but a deeply performative process through which Morrie enacts, negotiates, and redefines the meanings of death and dying in contemporary culture. Judith Butler's theory of performativity, originally conceived in the realm



of gender identity, becomes an unexpectedly fruitful lens through which to interpret Morrie's final performance. Dying, in this sense, is not a passive biological conclusion but an ongoing enactment. Morrie's performativity of dying opens a space for reimagining ethical subjectivity in a postmodern, death-denying world. His approach to death resists the dominant Western medical discourse that often renders death as a final pedagogy. He writes, "When you learn how to die, you learn how to live" (Albom 82). This suggests not merely a philosophical insight but a performative utterance—one that is rehearsed, reiterated, and reaffirmed throughout the memoir. It is a line Morrie repeats to Mitch and to others, a script of mortality that shapes his identity in his final weeks. In Butlerian terms, Morrie's identity as the dying sage is constituted through such repeated speech acts and practices. He sits in his confined home, hosts visitors, gives television interviews—all ritualistic performances through which his dying body becomes a signifier of wisdom, love, and resistance.

This performance is marked by a conscious theatricality. Morrie recognizes that he is performing his dying for an audience, and this awareness does not diminish the authenticity of his experience but instead enhances its cultural intelligibility. Butler argues that performativity is the stylized repetition of acts that produce the illusion of a stable identity. In this case, the identity of Morrie as a dying man is not a natural, but an ongoing performance shaped by interactions, language, and social scripts. His illness undermines the expectation of death as silent. His decision to engage with media, notably the *Nightingale* interview further exemplifies this performativity, presenting death as a dialogic space where values, memories, and philosophies are not just preserved but performed into being.

The performativity of dying also brings to light postmodern concerns about authenticity and the fragmentation of the self. Morrie confesses moments of despair and fear:

Sometimes in the morning, that's when I mourn. I feel around my body, I move my fingers and my hands—whatever I can still move—and I mourn what I've lost. I mourn the slow, insidious way in which I'm dying. But then I stop mourning. (Albom 57)

This reflection disrupts the romanticized script of the brave, enlightened dying man and reintroduces the unstable, fractured subject. Morrie's oscillation between grief and grace, strength and vulnerability, aligns with the postmodern subject who is constituted not by coherence but by contradiction. Yet even these contradictions are performed—articulated and rearticulated until they sediment into an identity that others can witness, interpret, and carry forward. Through this performativity, Morrie also stages a resistance to the cultural hyperreality of death. In contemporary society, dying is often displaced into



simulations—dramatized in media, sanitized in institutions, or obscured entirely. Morrie’s insistence on presence—on the bodily, emotional, and conversational texture of dying—restores a sense of the real to an otherwise hyperreal landscape. “Death ends a life, not a relationship,” Morrie reminds Mitch, collapsing the binary between presence and absence (Albom 174). In performing his death publicly and relationally, Morrie reclaims the ethical space that postmodernity has hollowed out.

Finally, Morrie’s performative dying challenges the cultural metanarratives of progress and individualism. Rather than seeking heroic control over fate, Morrie embraces interdependence, vulnerability, and surrender—values that are often marginalized in neoliberal discourse. His body deteriorates, but his social bonds deepen. He cries openly, receives sponge baths from others, and allows himself to be physically and emotionally dependent. These acts reconstitute dying as a shared, ethical event. As he tells Mitch, “Love each other or perish,” which echoes the central performative truth of his life: that dying, like living, is something we do together (Albom 149). In summation, the *Tuesdays with Morrie* can be read as a meditation on the performativity of dying in a culture that seeks to hide, silence, or commodify death. This performative model complicates traditional notions of subjectivity, and instead suggest that the act of dying, like the act of living, is constituted through repeated, embodied, and socially mediated acts.

## Conclusion

Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie* shows death not as a biological cessation but as a cultural and ethical performance. This is exemplified through Morrie’s dying process constituted through speech acts and gestures that reiterate his identity as a dying saga. Albom’s narrative also shows that dying in postmodern context becomes a simulation of dying, not inauthentic, but socially legible because it is mediated. His narrative further highlights that life and death are not grounded in any universal truth or metaphysical closure but are instead formed through fragmented insights, emotional vulnerability, and embodied presence. In sum, *Tuesdays with Morrie* exemplifies a postmodern ethics of dying, one that resists totalizing narratives, embracing performative identity, and renders mortality as an ethically generative space.

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