

American Attitudes to Death*

CHARLES O. JACKSON

University of Tennessee

In 1959 Herman Feifel edited a volume of interdisciplinary essays titled *The Meaning of Death*. The collection was a valuable contribution in a neglected area. It also marked an apparent change in national mood. After an extended period, death was once more a respectable academic topic of discussion and consideration. In the decade that followed a considerable amount of work was published in this field, ranging from such scholarly yet compassionate volumes as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' *On Death and Dying* to a literature of social criticism epitomized in Jessica Mitford's best-seller, *The American Way of Death*. By 1970, one scholar would observe, more material had appeared on death, grief, and bereavement in the five years following Feifel's book than had appeared in the previous hundred years.¹

It is still too soon to assess the full extent or permanence of this seeming reversal, but at this juncture popular and academic interest in the problems of death and dying seems stronger than ever. The proliferation of the literature continues also. Yet, oddly enough, one area has been almost totally neglected in the new discussion, that being the history of attitudes and responses to death. Here there have been only three volumes of major significance published in the past twenty years.² The first was Robert Habenstein and William Lamers' *The History of American Funeral Directing*, which was issued under the auspices of the National Funeral Directors' Association. It includes valuable data not available elsewhere but lacks interpretation and is by intent a chronicle of the funeral industry rather than

* A book of readings on this theme, Charles O. Jackson, ed., *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, will be published by the Greenwood Press in 1978.

¹ Herman Feifel, ed., *The Meaning of Death* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959); Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Toronto, Canada: Macmillan, 1969); Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963); Robert Fulton, "Death, Grief and Social Recuperation," *Omega*, 1 (Feb. 1970), 24.

² There are two additional volumes which are aimed directly at death-related behavior and thought in the United States. Both include useful historical observation but neither have history as a primary concern. They are Richard Dumont and Dennis Foss, *The American View of Death* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1972); and Arien Mack, ed., *Death in American Experience* (New York: Schocken, 1973). The quality of the essays in the latter varies considerably.

of responses to death. The second and most valuable is Philippe Ariès' *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, which provides an excellent perspective on American attitudes within the larger context of western thought. Given the western focus, however, particulars of national histories must be neglected. The most recent volume is David Stannard, ed., *Death in America*, an expanded edition of the Winter 1974 issue of the *American Quarterly*, where coverage of responses to death in the United States is limited to six articles, themselves confined to single periods or themes.³

Beyond these works, published material of a historical nature is extremely limited. It is difficult to locate and miscellaneous in form – single chapters or a few pages of comment in larger studies, random articles in unrelated journals, and the like. Characteristic of this type of abbreviated coverage is the fact that concern is almost always with fairly specific aspects of American behavior. The present essay seeks to suggest certain master themes or directions which surface in this diverse literature, and secondarily to provide a bibliographic commentary on the most valuable published sources which relate to the history of American attitudes towards death.

Basically that history and its literature revolves around two major occurrences. The first is what might be called a domestication and sentimentalization of death which took place between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The effect of this movement was to increase significantly the role of death and the dead in the world of the living. The second development becomes recognizable by the end of the nineteenth century and accelerates with each decade of the twentieth century, though to some extent challenged in recent years by the new literature on death. This period was characterized by a major withdrawal on the part of the living from communion with and commitment to the dying and the dead. Death became alienated from life and the world of the dead was essentially lost to the living.

Attitudes to death in Colonial America were very different. A more widely held belief in the existence of a concerned God and an afterlife

³ Robert Habenstein and William Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (Milwaukee: Bulfon, 1955), Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1974); David Stannard, ed., *Death in America* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1975). A fourth volume should at least be noted in passing. This is Margaret Coffin's *Death in Early America: History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burial and Mourning* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1976), a somewhat misleading title since comment extends across the nineteenth, and at points into the twentieth century. While worth examination, this volume lacks the stature of the other three works. It is written for popular consumption, is lacking in scholarly development, and is vague on chronology.

meant that death did not constitute an important challenge to the individual's sense of self. While contemplation of that event certainly produced fear and anxiety about what was to come, death was in general accepted as a commonplace if harsh reality to be followed by entrance, at least for the righteous, into a somewhat ill-defined heavenly state.⁴ Death was never denied nor could it be: there was too much of it, particularly among the young.⁵ Since many infant deaths went unreported, exact figures are difficult to establish; one estimate for the relatively healthy Andover area of Massachusetts is that one out of every four children born in the period 1640 to 1749 did not survive its first decade of life. With an average number of 8-8 births per family, every couple embarking on marriage could expect to lose two to three children before the age of ten.⁶ Few people in the colonial period, or for that matter through much of the nineteenth century, could have got very far along in life without losing more than one person in their immediate circle of relatives and friends.⁷ The culturally proper place for death, it should be noted, was in the home with loved ones, including children, gathered to witness the final moments. Ideally, the dying person "presided" over the event in full knowledge of his condition.

Because the great majority of inhabitants of British North America lived in small communities where mutual dependency and primary relationships

⁴ For an excellent discussion of the dynamics of fear among Puritans see David Stannard, "Death and Dying in Puritan New England," *American Historical Review* 78 (Dec. 1973), 1305-30.

⁵ In using the word "denial" I do not intend to enter the so-called acceptance versus denial debate which sets up a false dichotomy of mutually exclusive alternatives. In fact, I would suggest that few commentators in using these words ever intended the dictionary literalism which Dumont and Foss in discussing that "debate" apply to them in *The American View of Death*. I agree with William May and others who point out that the real question is the degree of avoidance rather than one of blind denial. The word denial is used here in this relative sense. On May see "The Sacred Power of Death in Contemporary Experience," Mack, ed., *Death in American Experience*, p. 106. For a well developed argument that American death behavior does represent a high degree of acceptance, see Talcott Parsons and Victor Lidz, "Death in American Society," in Edwin Shneidman, ed., *Essays in Self-Destruction* (New York: Science House, 1967), pp. 133-71.

⁶ David Stannard, "Death and the Puritan Child," *American Quarterly*, 26 (Dec. 1974), 465 (also in Stannard, ed., *Death in America*). The entire article (pp. 456-76) is most germane to the topic of death attitudes in colonial America.

⁷ It is interesting to note, as more than one scholar has done, that in the face of the high degree of infant mortality adults may have developed the psychological defense of deliberately maintaining social distance and limiting emotional investment in very young children. David Stannard, "Death and the Puritan Child," p. 466; Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962), pp. 38-39; Joseph Illick, "Child-Rearing in Seventeenth Century England and America," in Lloyd de Mause, ed., *History of Childhood* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), pp. 310, 324-25; Lewis Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America," *American Quarterly* 26 (Dec. 1974), 485-86 (also in Stannard, ed., *Death in America*).

between individuals were the norm, the death of even a single individual was experienced as a community loss. In turn, the community rallied in a variety of ways to assist the bereaved family in this crisis. Between the two groups the grim business of final disposition of the deceased was accomplished. This normally included dressing, “laying out,” and attending the body in the home (the usual location of response to death) until burial; construction of a coffin; bearing the body to the burial site, and digging as well as covering the grave. In New England, where reaction against “popish” customs in the Anglican church initially minimized the role of clergy in funerary activity, as well as in the South, last rites were the occasion of significant social intercourse, at times festive in nature. Respects paid and interment completed, the impact of death passed with reasonable rapidity, bereaved spouses often remarrying within a short period of time. An interval of less than a year was not uncommon.

By the mid-nineteenth century, at least two highly significant and noticeable changes had occurred in this pattern. One was the greater role given to death in the living world. A second was the more genteel perspective which had developed on dying and the dead. Why the change occurred is not totally clear. Putting the matter in the context of western thought, Philippe Ariès has advanced the thesis that the coming of “romantic” death, an event not desirable but morbidly beautiful and fascinating, represented a passage into the conscious world and a sublimation of a fantasy-association between death and the erotic which had been developing since the beginning of the century.⁸

A more mundane though not necessarily contradictory explanation for the change may revolve around the loss of what historian Cyclone Covey calls the “Pilgrim” posture. This he describes as a world view among the colonists, which persisted in varying degree for 150 years, that life was a pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world to an ultimate home in the next. The “wilderness” was unimportant except as trial and preparation for the coming eternal “home.” Covey argues that this view in large part dissipated in the eighteenth century, so that by 1750 Americans had accepted the “wilderness” as home. They no longer merely endured life but found the world satisfying and lovely. At this point, and with increasing suspicion that “everlasting life” was “everlasting death,” the end of life became a fearful occurrence to be avoided as long as possible, indeed a taboo subject.⁹ The chief weakness in Covey’s theory is the assertion that death became a taboo subject and that the pilgrim posture had passed by the mid-eighteenth

⁸ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, pp. 58–68.

⁹ Cyclone Covey, *The American Pilgrimage: The Roots of American Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1961). See especially Chs. 1 and 6.

century. In his examination of popular culture from 1840 to 1860 Carl Bode found death as one of three major themes, though he left the proof largely to others.¹⁰ Recent scholarship by Lewis Saum argues that the pilgrimage concept, which defined death as an escape from the sadness of the world, continued at least to the Civil War and he makes a solid case for it as a central concern of ante-bellum culture.¹¹

Americans at the mid-nineteenth century probably stood somewhere between the positions suggested by Covey and Saum. Certainly death was a major motif and there was a relative retention of pilgrimage rhetoric, but a significant change had taken place. Death was perceived increasingly within the context of a growing attachment to life and the uncertainty of an existence after death. As death became less and less acceptable, not merely for self but especially for close "others," it was domesticated and beautified. In every way possible the dead would not be allowed truly to die. Those alive would draw the dead world into the living world as never before. One significant expression of this was the vogue of spiritualism which was under way by mid-century.¹² Only in such ways could death be accommodated.

The new "gentility" and "beautification" are readily apparent in a variety of ways. The gradual transformation of design in mourning rings from harsh depictions of death to mere pieces of sentimental jewelry, and the changes in the content of funeral elegies from an obsession with harsh mortuary detail to a less straightforward, sentimentalized form are cases in point, as are trends in epitaphs.¹³ By the mid-nineteenth century the previous robust frankness and sermons of judgment largely disappeared in a new wave of sentimental and genteel expression.¹⁴

¹⁰ Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 269–76. The other themes are Love and Success.

¹¹ Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America," pp. 477–95 (also in Stannard, ed., *Death in America*).

¹² Spiritualism reached high peaks of popularity in the 1850s and again in the 1870s and was in sharp decline by the end of the century. Among the several recent works on this subject two are particularly valuable. Geoffrey Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (New York: Schocken, 1969); and Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972). The latter looks at spiritualism in creative literature up to 1900. The former provides theoretical materials on the origin and dynamics of the phenomenon. It also compares spiritualism in the United States and England.

¹³ Martha Fales, "The Early American Way of Death," *Essex Institute Historical Collection*, 100 (Apr. 1964), 75–84; John Draper, *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* (New York: Phaeton Press, 1929 & 1967), Ch. 6. Useful also is Constance Hershey, "Mortuary Art in Charleston Churches," *Antiques*, 98 (Nov. 1970), 800–7.

¹⁴ Thomas Mann and Janet Greene, *Sudden and Awful: American Epitaphs and the Finger of God* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Greene Press, 1968), pp. 19–20. This source is of limited value being largely an uninterpretable collection of epitaphs.

Perhaps the most interesting reflection of the changing perspective on death is to be found in tombstone sculpture, in which there has been historical interest for a considerable period of time.¹⁵ Particularly noteworthy here are the results of a large-scale study of colonial gravestones done by Edwin Dethlefsen and James Deetz. Early stones in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they point out, stress physical decay, brevity of life, and the harsh certainty of death. The typical carving representation is of a death's-head with a skull and cross-bones. Roughly in the mid-eighteenth century, stones began to suggest a less stringent view of mortality. The death's-head was replaced by cherubs, trumpeting angels and winged souls ascending to heaven. The emphasis was on resurrection and heavenly reward. By the early nineteenth century a transition was in progress to the romantic abstraction of stylized urns, weeping willows, lambs and flowers. Dethlefsen and Deetz suggest also a corresponding shift in gravestone language, from "here lies" or "here lies buried" in the first period to "Here lies the body" (interpreted as that which was mortal) in the second, to the more abstract "In memory of" or "Sacred to the memory of" in the third stage.¹⁶ By the mid-nineteenth century, the language of the third stage shows the living committed to keeping the dead as part of the living world.

This domestication and beautification of death, along with an apparent need for the living to maintain communion with the dead, provide useful perspective on the so-called rural cemetery movement which began in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The significant point here is that in earlier days few were concerned with the physical location of the body's resting place. The dead would not care, and the living with their pilgrimage

¹⁵ Some useful sources are: Harriette Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them, 1653-1800* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967); Allan Ludwig, *Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and Its Symbols, 1650-1815* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1966); Ivan Sandrof, "As I am now so you must be," *American Heritage*, 11 (Feb. 1960), 38-43; Sonia Marsal, "Mortality Writ in Stone: Early New England Gravestones," *Americas*, 16 (Aug. 1964), 22-30; Francis and Ivan Rigby, "Early American Gravestones," *Lithopinion*, 39 (Fall, 1975), 48-63 (this is a photo essay); Avon Neal and Ann Parker "Graven Images: Sermons in Stones," *American Heritage*, 21 (Dec. 1969), 18-29; Dickran and Ann Tashjian, *Memorials for Children of Change: The Art of Early New England Stonecarving* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1974). The last two are the most adept at interpreting the stones in a cultural context.

¹⁶ James Deetz and Edwin Dethlefsen, "Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow," *Natural History*, 76 (Mar. 1967), 28-37; Edwin Dethlefsen and James Deetz, "Death's Heads, Cherubs, and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries," *American Antiquity*, 31 (Apr. 1966), 502-10. An additional article by Dethlefsen alone examines the value of New England cemeteries in general demographic research. See "Colonial Gravestones and Demography," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 31 (Winter, 1969), 321-34.

vision of life did not care either. By the 1830s this was changing; the burial site was given new significance. The initial motivation for this application of landscape gardening techniques to the graveyard, heretofore viewed as an unattractive necessity, was a wish to maintain public health. As burials continued in old unkempt yards many degenerated to an appalling state, becoming crowded and offensive quagmires suspected by the living as a danger to health. Yet in the end much more than sanitation was expected of the new cemeteries.¹⁷

Amid beautiful foliage and rustic environment the old gloom surrounding death would disappear. The dead would now receive appropriate respect in a serene burial site. The living, who in large numbers would use the cemeteries as parks, would find in these carefully tailored settings a source of beauty, succor, and moral instruction. Early visions of the rural cemetery emphasized naturalness of landscape, but increasingly that natural setting took second place to man-made adornments such as statuary.¹⁸ That effort to make the death-setting lovely would progress to the point where critics began to insist that limits be drawn. It was wrong to hide *all* the harsh realities of death. Awe and solemnity should be necessary ingredients.¹⁹

Just as the living chose to keep their dead alive by making their burial site an attractive popular location, the attention of the living also turned to preservative and aesthetic improvement of burial containers and to better preservation of the corpses themselves. The essential point is epitomized in the emerging mid-century transition from the "coffin" to the "casket." The word for the latter, a rectangular case not tapered from the shoulder area as was the former, carried the connotation of a jewel box, a container for something valuable. This shift, combined with the increasing durability and ornateness of burial boxes, represented a gradual transformation from merely encasing the body to presentation of the dead.²⁰

¹⁷ The two most informative pieces on the movement are: Stanley French, "The Cemetery As Cultural Institution: the Establishment of Mount Auburn and the 'Rural' Cemetery Movement," *American Quarterly*, 26 (Mar. 1974), 37–59 (also in Stannard, ed., *Death in America*); Thomas Bender, "The 'Rural' Cemetery Movement: Urban Travail and the Appeal of Nature," *New England Quarterly*, 47 (June, 1974), 196–211. The former takes the broader view.

¹⁸ Frederic Sharf discusses this trend in the prototype rural cemetery of Mount Auburn outside Boston in "The Garden Cemetery and American Sculpture: Mount Auburn," *Art Quarterly*, 24 (Spring, 1961), 80–88.

¹⁹ Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790–1860* (New York: George Braziller, 1966), p. 202. Harris devotes only seven pages to the "rural cemetery movement" but he makes several significant points, not the least of which is the relation of the movement to doubts about immortality.

²⁰ There is little scholarship on early interest in container improvement or body preservation beyond that of Habenstein and Lamers, but their chronicle is essentially sound. See *The History of American Funeral Directing*, Chs. 6 and 7.

A logical extension of “presentation” was greater attention to the corpse itself. As in the rural cemetery movement, this concern was partly a matter of hygiene and sanitation. It took time for increasingly mobile and dispersed Americans to return home for the last rites of loved ones, as well as for those who died away from their home communities to be returned for burial in accord with last wishes. Both meant a need to preserve the body for longer periods than before. The Civil War presented the problem of returning home large numbers of corpses. Yet the aesthetic motive in the quest for means of body presentation is clear and becomes more so with the gradual growth in popularity after the war of arterial embalming. Philippe Ariès points to this concern with preservation as a significant and peculiarly American aberration. He understands it as death denial and seems somewhat unable to explain its appearance.²¹ Yet understood in the context of the trends just described, the concern with bodily preservation is not surprising. The dead had become precious. The attention to the burial receptacle and to the body constituted assurance that the deceased, properly reposed in an aesthetically pleasing setting, almost lifelike in appearance, would not *really* die for a long time to come. It was a natural corollary to the growing commitment to communion with the dead in the nineteenth century.²²

The American impulse to develop a greater relationship with their departed and to place death in a highly stylized, domesticated setting resulted in a complex system of funerary behavior, formal display of grief, the practice of mourning and supporting paraphernalia. Very little scholarship is available on that system in the United States, though there are studies of similar developments in England which can be helpful in understanding the lengths to which such activities could go.²³ British data must be used with caution,

²¹ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, pp. 97–102.

²² Parsons and Lidz offer an interesting observation on this matter quite different from comments by Ariès or myself. They argue that American commitment to presentation of the corpse in an ornate setting, cosmetically “restored” and posed in lifelike fashion, springs less from denial than from two very practical considerations. In the activist society of the United States we attempt to display the deceased in a way to make his former active capacities recognizable. Such appearance facilitates the aim of honoring his worldly attainment, as it facilitates the specific acts of “paying last respects” and “saying good-bye” to the deceased. Secondly, this setting is part of the American orientation toward suffering in general. The logic goes, “if the sick and dying should not suffer, why then must the bereaved be mourners?” Therefore the effort is made not to exacerbate the problem of mourning by calling attention anew to the suffering, loss of capacity, perhaps mutilation which the deceased underwent in dying. See Parsons and Lidz, “Death in American Society,” Shneidman, ed., *Essays in Self-Destruction*, pp. 155–56.

²³ John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1971); James Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Detroit: Partridge Press, 1972). The latter does provide limited comment on the United States. The whole volume is marred, however, by the author’s peculiar attachment to old Victorian cemeteries.

however. While there are many similarities, there are differences as well. Robert Habenstein and William Lamers have noted one in particular: the greater degree of gloom and formality in England, limited in the United States by emphasis on beauty and expressiveness.²⁴ Moreover, in the United States at least, the system varied significantly as between urban and rural settings, notably in the greater simplicity and larger community role to be found in the latter.²⁵ Yet whatever the locale one thing is apparent. As the century moved on, death and the dead, considerably groomed and polished from their ruffian appearance in the colonial period, were assigned an increasingly substantial place in the lives of the living.

By the close of the nineteenth century, however, a second major shift in attitudes towards death and the dead was underway, which would segregate the dead from the living. This alienation would involve a minimizing of the social impact of death upon the community, and an abandonment of the earlier efforts to maintain a relationship with the dead and the dying. At length death itself would become a taboo topic. The pertinent literature suggests at least three main forces behind the new departure: urbanization, with its corollaries of bureaucratic specialization and high mobility; advances in medical science and health care with the attending demographic consequences of that change; and finally an increasingly temporal and secular outlook.

What the process of urbanization has meant for the lives of Americans has produced so much literature that it has become almost an academic subject in its own right. Yet little attention has been given to responses to death in urban America, even though the changes have been profound.²⁶ City life made it more difficult, as well as less appropriate, to maintain the home as the favored location for the occurrence of death, or for ritual response to it. It encouraged also a bureaucratic solution to the problem of the dead and the dying, as it encouraged similar solutions to other social problems. Increasingly the dying would expire in hospitals, not in the home, and body disposal would rest with the professional undertaker. Direct exposure to death and the dead was thereby minimized for many — one of several ways in which Americans came to lose contact with death in this century. The bureaucratization also reduced social impact. When the dying are segregated among

²⁴ Habenstein and Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, p. 393.

²⁵ A useful contrast to urban form may be found in Thomas Clark, "Death Always Came at Night," Ch. 15 of *Pills, Petticoats and Plows* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944), pp. 260–74.

²⁶ The best source, and the one on which much of my comment is based, is a chapter-length treatment by Leroy Bowman in *The American Funeral: A Study in Guilt, Extravagance, and Sublimity* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1959), pp. 112–28.

specialists for whom contact with death is routine, even impersonal, their sufferings impinge little upon the mainstream of life.²⁷

Most important, the secondary and functional personal relationships characteristic of the urban setting worked to destroy the close-knit community and neighborhood where the loss of one was felt by all. This meant decline in the old community support for the bereaved. An obvious contributing factor to the loss of community was the urban corollary of geographical mobility, especially that massive leap in mobility which began after World War II. Here the matter was not merely one of neighbors and friends. Mobility separated and subsequently acted to diminish emotional involvement among relatives as well. After a period of separation, even death meant less. The consequence has been to reduce and make impersonal the impact of the great majority of deaths which will touch individuals in their lifetime.

A second factor in changing attitudes in this century has been medical and public-health advance. That medical science could intervene decisively in the course of most serious illness or could control when and how people die is a fairly recent phenomenon. It goes back little beyond the therapeutic revolution of the 1930s and becomes really evident only after 1950. The effect of this new power upon death attitudes and behaviour has been manifold. For one thing it has acted to destroy the traditional significance of the moment of death. New advances in therapy and surgery make it harder to be certain if illnesses are likely to be terminal. Moreover, it has become more and more probable that the actual moment of death will have little meaning for affected individuals anyway. They may well be hospitalized and unconscious with death occurring as a mere technical phenomenon produced by cessation of care, a decision made by attending physicians.²⁸

In this century the hospital replaced the home as the normal setting for death, in part as a consequence of medical advances dating back at least to the mid-nineteenth century discovery of anesthetics and aseptic surgical techniques. Such factors acted to draw the ill more and more from the home. More recently the general progress in medicine has meant that deaths occur less from immediate and acute condition than as a result of chronic cause, the efficient control of which is likely to require hospital care, perhaps more than once, before the final event. On the other hand, this institutional shift

²⁷ Robert Blauner, "Death and Social Structure," *Psychiatry*, 29 (Nov. 1966), 384. On this point see also Vanderlyn Pine, "Social Organization and Death," *Omega*, 3 (Winter, 1972), 149-53.

²⁸ Philippe Ariès, "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies," *American Quarterly*, 26 (Dec. 1974), 542 (also appears in Stannard, ed., *Death in America*). This article (pp. 536-60) is a superb treatment of the emergence in the West of death denial and death as a taboo topic. Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, p. 88.

probably reflects also the growing unwillingness of Americans in this century to involve themselves in the occurrences of dying and death. Whatever the case, Ariès is quite correct in his observation that in the medical setting, where patient and the family are subordinated to hospital decision and therapeutic technology, the nineteenth century death-bed ritual, with relatives gathered and presided over by the dying person, became less possible.²⁹ In the hospital the terminal patient is largely denied participation in what is happening from beginning to end.³⁰

A second consequence of medical and public health advance, in part related to the non-home location of death, is that death and dying have become less visible and have less impact on the social order of life than ever before in American history. The drastic reduction in child and mid-life death, allows most people to reach advanced age. This too is a phenomenon largely of the present century. The radical social consequences have been discussed in superior fashion in the work of Robert Fulton and Robert Blauner. They agree that because it is the elderly who now do the dying, the impact of death on the social order has been greatly reduced, and the fact of death made less visible. The death of the elderly, who tend to be free of dependent children, and in varying degrees already disengaged by retirement from the ongoing life of the society, and who are dying in a youth-oriented culture, is largely irrelevant to the social order. Because of their culturally defined expendability, and because medical and public health advance means that individuals increasingly grow to maturity without death touching closely their family or friends, natural death, at least, has tended to fade from sight. This occurrence has been accentuated in the past twenty years in the extensive age-grading and isolation of the elderly in the retirement-home and retirement-city movements.³¹ By encouraging the old to congregate and segregate themselves in their own communities, while family and social bonds have had time to loosen before the event of dying, the true conquest of death, Fulton notes sardonically, may have been discovered.³²

²⁹ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, pp. 87–88. A good brief summary of main points from the book on the declining significance of death as an event is Philippe Ariès, “A Moment That Has Lost Its Meaning,” *Prism*, 3 (June, 1975), 27 ff. This entire issue of *Prism* is devoted to death.

³⁰ A useful empirical study on how death is handled in the hospital is David Sudnow, *Passing On: The Social Organization of Dying* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967).

³¹ Robert Fulton and Gilbert Geis, “Death and Social Values,” and Robert Fulton, Introduction to Part IV, “Ceremony, The Self, and Society,” both in Fulton, ed., *Death and Identity* (New York: John Wiley, 1965), pp. 67–75, 333–38; Robert Fulton, “Death, Grief and Social Recuperation,” pp. 23–28; Blauner, “Death and Social Structure,” pp. 367–94. The latter is a perceptive cross-cultural treatment.

³² Fulton, Introduction to Part IV, *Death and Identity*, p. 336.

The final major force on the twentieth-century attitudes towards death and the dead has been the growing secular outlook of the age. This has meant that in a wide variety of ways the impact of death and dying on the living have been drastically reduced since the late nineteenth century. One expression of this has been that death has become a taboo topic in the twentieth century. Philippe Ariès notes a growing desire to withhold from the dying knowledge of the gravity of their condition, as well as a growing denigration of open mourning (and in Europe a drastic reduction in last rites activity).³³ Yet it may be that Robert Fulton and Geoffrey Gorer have identified the more fundamental factor: in a secular society where the culture will no longer support the certainty of afterlife, natural death and physical decomposition become too horrible to contemplate or discuss.³⁴

A second expression of the secular outlook has been the trend toward the deritualization of death. One aspect has been the decline of mourning also described by Geoffrey Gorer. He understands this change to have begun with the disappearance of ritual roles of conduct during mourning and then progressed to the prohibition of all expressions of grief.³⁵ The data for his study is English, but Gorer believes, quite correctly, that the pattern described applies equally well to the United States. He has been criticized for over-stating the Victorian willingness to display emotion and for the failure to recognize that the rules of social mourning had little necessary relationship to feelings of grief. Actually such rules were a way of displaying the nature of a previous relationship with the deceased. They began to wither with the decline in the significance of kinship ties. It is argued further that Gorer over-estimated the influence of World War I on the abolition of mourning customs.³⁶ Gorer himself concludes that the war did not have a great impact in this area on the United States.

While American war losses were small compared to those of England, they were sufficient to force consideration of the national consequences, even the desirability, of large-scale social mourning. The apparent example of minimizing ritual mourning for the war dead in England surely also had some effect. Suggestions advanced with respect to the connection between the reduction in mourning customs and a decline in kinship ties seem a valid hypothesis which would also apply to the American experience, at least by the early twentieth century. Another fruitful area

³³ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, pp. 85–95.

³⁴ Fulton and Geis, "Death and Social Values," pp. 67–68; Geoffrey Gorer, "The Pornography of Death," *Encounter*, 5 (Oct. 1955), 51. Gorer's statement on the emergence and consequences of death as a taboo subject is classic.

³⁵ Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (New York: Doubleday, 1965).

³⁶ Sybil Wolfram, "The Decline of Mourning," *The Listener*, 75 (May 26, 1966), 763–64.

for examination in accounting for the decline in ritualistic mourning in the United States would be the decade following the war. Too much has been made of the so-called revolution of manners and morals of the 1920s, but those years were characterized by a general loosening of tradition and social restraint of which the weakening of mourning customs was a part. Actually, Gorer's chief explanation for the change, which by rough reference he roots in the twenties, is complementary to this observation. He attributes the disavowal of mourning to the increasing pressures over the last forty years from what Nathan Leites and Martha Wolfenstein have called "fun-morality," the ethical duty to enjoy oneself (thereby proving that one is psychologically well adjusted) and the generous imperative to do nothing which would diminish the enjoyment of others. Public and private mourning were at odds with this ethic.³⁷

Related to deritualization and probably related also to "fun-morality" has been a growing criticism of the funeral as ritual. While this criticism has not had the extreme consequences for last-rites activity it has had in Western Europe (described by Ariès as taking the least possible notice of death), it is of long standing. It may be noted as early as the 1890s, when funeral costs become part of the argument for cremation.³⁸ A significant increase in the number as well as in the ferocity of the critics emerges, however, in the late 1950s and 1960s with, and in the wake of, the scathing commentaries of Jessica Mitford and Ruth Harmer.³⁹ Reader receptiveness to such criticism has also increased substantially in recent years. Perhaps this new dialogue is merely one expression of the revival of death as a respectable topic of discussion. More probably, however, there is deeper significance. On one level it may be understood as a continuation and deepening of the previously described dissociation of the living from the dead.

On a second level, this criticism may well reflect growing doubts about the funeral as a viable social institution in view of recent demographic changes. Ritual usage is weakened when those who die tend to be irrelevant to the ongoing life of the family and community. Moreover, in this century the elderly (who do the dying) are separated by varying degrees of geography

³⁷ Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning*, pp. ix-x. While hardly conclusive evidence on the decade, two intriguing contemporary statements directly related to the issue are: Anon., "And the mourners go about the streets," *The Unpartizan Review*, 12 (July, 1919), 173-81, and Milton Waldman, "America Conquers Death," *American Mercury*, 10 (Feb. 1927), 216-21. The former amounts to a classic statement of "fun-morality." The latter observes with some concern the disappearance of the "sense of death" in America.

³⁸ Simple perusal of the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* under the topics of death, funerals, and burial will verify the point.

³⁹ Mitford, *The American Way of Death*; Ruth Harmer, *The High Cost of Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). Harmer is the more restrained of the two.

from their family (usually in the final stages of life confined to hospitals or nursing homes). They do not come to the point of dying before their children have established a family of their own as a center of emotional investment. One consequence of this is that emotional distance has already been established between the survivors and the dying. Many such deaths are, to use Robert Fulton's harsh but correct label, "low-grief" affairs. In these circumstances, survivors require emotionally only a minimal acknowledgement of the passing, and anything else in funeral ritual seems inappropriate and an unwarranted expense. Rejection of traditional funerary custom here, not unlike deritualization as a whole, represents a reversal of the old Victorian need for relationship with and commitment to the dead. It represents in addition a minimization of the impact of death in the society.⁴⁰

Relations between the living and the dead have also been significantly affected by two developments in the management of cemeteries, a traditional bond between the two worlds. One was the spread early in this century of "perpetual care" burial grounds, which substantially reduced the need for grave-site visits. The second was the depersonalization of the burial plot. The so-called Memorial Park movement dating from the 1920s eliminated traditional gravestones and replaced them with ground-level bronze plaques. Yet already by that decade even the stones in conventional cemeteries were becoming standardized, and much simpler than the ornate forms of the late nineteenth century.⁴¹ By the 1930s epitaphs were regarded as old-fashioned and had largely been abandoned. Readily identifiable ground with sculpture symbolically expressive of individual personality facilitated a continued relationship with the dead. Impersonality, carried to the point of ground almost unmarked, made this relationship more difficult.

But the situation of the burial ground is merely one reflection of a more basic matter. As noted above, the worlds of the living and the dead, once joined, have become almost totally segregated in this century. Here rests the ultimate meaning of bureaucratization, the reduced visibility and social impact of death, the trend toward deritualization and the view of death as a

⁴⁰ Comment on this matter is based largely on two very insightful sources: Fulton, "Death, Grief, and Social Recuperation," pp. 23–28; Blauner, "Death and Social Structure," pp. 379–89. See also on this matter Paul Reiss, "Bereavement and the American Family," in Austin Kutscher, ed., *Death and Bereavement* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas Co., 1969), pp. 219–21.

⁴¹ The variety and, by present standards, extravagance which could be reached in nineteenth century markers may be examined in Edmund Gillon Jr., *Victorian Cemetery Art* (New York: Dover, 1972). The volume includes 260 photographs of cemetery sculpture from the New York and New England areas.

taboo topic.⁴² A significant, if not completely typical, expression of the old union, which in limited degree still lingers on in isolated rural areas of the nation, has been provided in two recent collections of oral history, *Foxfire 2* and William Montell's *Ghosts Along the Cumberland*.⁴³ Both are recollections, by southern mountain people largely, of the years prior to World War II. What comes across from the spokesmen of a bygone order is an old pattern of death as community deprivation, the home as the locus of ritual response to death, open expressions of grief, and a clear acceptance of mortality. These were people who had lived the bulk of their years amid well-defined duties to the dead and dying, death omens, belief in after-life, and the sense, apparent in ghostlore, that the dead were never far away. Even those who rejected supernatural events as superstition, participated in the telling and retelling of mountain ghost stories, thus imaginatively keeping death a part of life.⁴⁴ In brief, the dead world and living world were merged. "Passing on" was in one sense just that – a change of status.⁴⁵

The pattern as described above may not be wholly typical of nineteenth-century America, and the simplicity of its ritual would be in sharp contrast to the urban-centered elaborate Victorian behavior described earlier. But in the matter of merged worlds it epitomizes well the earlier age. Death was an integral part of life. Heaven, defined sharply in earthly domestic terms, was the future. The dead, far from having gone, hovered nearby watching

⁴² It is interesting to contemplate these trends within the context of a larger phenomenon which John Lofland labels the "dramaturgic revolution." In this revolution of "styles of doing things," all primal scenes, from sexual intercourse to dying and death, have shifted from "relatively commonplace openness to delicate concealment." Lofland uses as a case study state executions in England and the United States circa 1700 to circa 1950. See "Open and Concealed Dramaturgic Strategies: The Case of the State Execution," *Urban Life: A Journal of Ethnographic Research*, 4 (Oct. 1975), 272–95.

⁴³ Eliot Wigginton, ed., *Foxfire 2* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), Chs. 14–15; William Montell, *Ghosts Along the Cumberland: Deathlore in the Kentucky Foothills* (Knoxville, Tenn.: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1975). While only Chs. 14 and 15 are relevant in the former, the latter is given over completely to death omens, death-related behavior, and ghostlore. Neither volume, however, attempts interpretation.

⁴⁴ Blauner sees a connection between belief in ghosts and demography. He points out that ghosts are most prevalent in societies characterized by extensive child and mid-life death, the deceased having departed with still unfinished business in this world. He concludes that the relative absence of ghosts in modern society is not merely the result of the routing of superstition by science but also reflects the disengaged social situation of the majority of the deceased who are perceived as having completed their earthly course. See "Death and Social Structure," p. 382.

⁴⁵ An example of an area only recently fully subject to the secular trends of this century may be found in Christopher Crocker, "The Southern Way of Death" in Kenneth Moreland, ed., *The Not So Solid South* (Athens, Georgia: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1971), pp. 114–29. Note, for example, Crocker's observation that, in his research locale, hospital visiting does not taper off once the "dying" category is applied. Rather the reverse is true (p. 117).

and waiting.⁴⁶ Perhaps the matter of heaven is the real key to the separation of the living and dead worlds in this century. The secular culture of America will no longer support the concept of after-life and to this extent the dead have been truly lost.

Thus in the second major occurrence of death's history in America, death, dying, and the world of the dead have come to be dissociated from life. The future of this condition remains to be seen. It would seem at the moment that the subject of death is at last receiving its just due. There are those, including Philippe Ariès who see in the new discussion of death in the United States (and he concludes there is no equivalent in Europe) the opening of a new era.⁴⁷ Perhaps this is the case. Perhaps we are witnesses to the first stage of yet another major shift of view on this subject, one in which death will be re-integrated into American life. Perhaps Americans may yet be exonerated from Arnold Toynbee's now classic assertion that in the United States death was un-American. These things may come, but it is well to recognize that they must do so against formidable obstacles. The basic problem will be twofold: how to recover from an earlier age the vision that death, even that of a single individual, has significance and should have dignity; secondly how to defend that judgment against rigorous forces in this century which say otherwise.

⁴⁶ While her aim is much broader, the point of a living relationship with the dead world is well illustrated in Ann Douglas', "Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-80," *American Quarterly*, 26 (Dec. 1974), 496-515 (also in Stannard, ed., *Death in America*).

⁴⁷ Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, p. 103.