The American Etiquette of Mourning:
The Disappearance of the Crape and Veil

ALEXANDRIA ANDERSON

Abstract

Scholars across a number of different disciplines believe that modern Americans, unlike their Victorian predecessors, live within a death-denying culture. Due to the overwhelming spectacles of death and destruction that occurred during World War I, historians tend to focus on the Great War as the most pivotal period during which public attitudes towards mourning fluctuated. However, there is evidence in etiquette manuals published towards the end of the late Victorian period, and most notably at the turn-of-the-century, that American society attempted to occlude death and mourning from public view, indicating that society was moving towards a death-denying culture much earlier than World War I. This article considers how turn-of-the-century American society became increasingly fragmented as traditional sources of authority were rejected and centuries-old practices ceased. These societal changes culminated in a new modern attitude that focused on life and eschewed the doom and gloom previously associated with grief and mourning.

Résumé

Les chercheurs de différentes disciplines croient que les Américains modernes, contrairement à leurs ancêtres victoriens, vivent dans une culture de négation de la mort. Le nombre élevé de décès et la destruction inhérents à la Première Guerre mondiale ont amené les historiens à mettre l’accent sur la Grande Guerre en tant que principal point tournant pour le changement des attitudes publiques concernant le deuil. Toutefois, on retrouve des preuves dans les livres d’étiquette publiés vers la fin de l’époque victorienne et au tournant du
siècle que la société américaine a tenté de cacher et de mettre à l’écart la mort et le deuil, ce qui indique que la société s’est dirigée vers une culture de négation de la mort bien avant la Première Guerre mondiale. Cet article observe la fragmentation de la société américaine au tournant du siècle alors que les sources traditionnelles d’autorité ont été rejetées au même moment où les anciennes pratiques ont cessé. Ces changements sociaux ont atteint leur point culminant dans une nouvelle attitude moderne axée sur la vie et évitant le châtiment et la tristesse auparavant associés au chagrin et au deuil.

— William Shakespeare Hays “Tie Crape on the Door, Willie’s Dead!” (1875)

“Tie Crape on the Door, Willie’s dead!”, a song written by American poet and songwriter William Shakespeare Hays, describes the typical circumstances of a late Victorian American family who had recently experienced a household death. When the sad event occurred, family members and friends of the deceased gathered to prepare the house for mourning. Black crape was often placed upon the door or bell knob and the shutters were closed. These mourning symbols alerted callers and passers-by that the family of the house had recently suffered a loss. The family and close friends of the deceased donned mourning dress, which was often worn for a prolonged period of time. While in mourning, the American family of the late Victorian period was

typically expected to seclude themselves from society, withholding their attendance at the theatre, dinner parties and other social gatherings. During the period of mourning, the family of the deceased received letters of condolence and visits from close friends but only after the funeral had taken place. Throughout the late Victorian period, mourning was very much a communal task in which both the community and the mourner were responsible for ensuring that the mourning process was executed properly. Etiquette manuals provided detailed instructions to both the friends and family of the bereaved, as well as the bereaved themselves, to ensure that the mourning process, completed productively, would end with the mourner re-entering society.²

Mourning in the twenty-first century is very different from late Victorian mourning customs. Scholars across different disciplines believe that the process of grieving no longer exists in Western culture, noting that it has been replaced by the brief acts of mourning that contemporary society permits.³ Scholars such as Philippe Ariès and Peter Homans argue that unlike

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3. This is not to say that in reality individuals do not grieve. Many scholars believe that outward signs of grieving have steadily declined over time and are no longer permitted. Peter Homans believes that mourning, once a communal activity is now the responsibility of the individual. In “The Decline of Mourning Practices in Modern Western Societies,” Homans briefly outlines the various anthropological, psychological and historical perspectives that maintain there has been a decline in mourning practices over the twentieth-century. See also, Philippe Ariès, Western Attitudes Toward Death, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974) and Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death (1973; repr., New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
their Victorian predecessors, modern Americans live within a “death-denying”
culture.4

While many scholars believe that public mourning practices only
began to diminish after World War I, there is evidence that visible signs of
mourning customs were already decreasing in frequency before this period.5
As the Victorian period came to an end, American etiquette manuals were
already noting particular changes in public attitudes towards death. A close
reading of funeral and mourning sections in American etiquette manuals,
published from the late Victorian period until the end of World War I, reveals
how American attitudes towards death changed, fostering a twentieth-century
culture in which expressions of grief and loss became increasingly hidden
from public view. These changes in the culture of mourning, which occurred
most radically at the turn-of-the-century, were inextricably linked to
concurrent changes in the broader American culture. While it is undeniable
that World War I had a drastic effect on American society, it was before the
war that “a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created
distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space.”6
Before the war, society became much more fragmented as traditional sources
of authority were rejected and centuries-old practices ceased with the rise of
psychoanalysis, new scientific, industrial and technological revolutions, and
urbanization. These changes in society culminated in a new modern attitude
that focused on life and eschewed the doom and gloom previously associated
with grief and mourning. Although this article focuses on how and why
mourning practices changed, the implications of the cessation of mourning

4. Keith F. Durkin, “Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture,” in Handbook of
5. A number of books have been written that look at how World War I transformed
public attitudes towards mourning and mourning practices themselves as nations struggled to
make meaning of the war experience. See Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great
War in European and Cultural History (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1995), and
Jonathan F. Vance, Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War, (Vancouver: UBC
Press, 1997).
University Press, 2003), 1
rituals on post World War I American society needs to be examined. All human beings experience death and loss, yet contemporary American society appears to have little regard for expressing grief. What are the societal costs of abandoning what was once considered such a vital ritual?

The psychiatric community currently distinguishes between grief and mourning as two fundamentally different processes. Grief is primarily defined as the internal “emotional/affective process of reacting to the loss of a loved one through death,” while mourning refers to “the public display of grief, the social expressions or acts expressive of grief that are shaped by the beliefs and practices of a given society or cultural group.” The grieving process is characterized as an internal, passive process whereas mourning is an outward, active process. Although grieving and mourning are defined as two separate courses that a mourner will follow, these two processes can become closely intertwined to the point where it can be hard to distinguish between them. Objectively a relationship does exist between them, as mourning is believed to be a method through which a grieving individual is healed. Both grieving and mourning are responses to the loss of an attachment and psychiatrists believe mourning to be a process that ends with the grieving individual’s reattachment to society. Although this differentiation between mourning and grieving was not explicitly defined during the late Victorian period, it is important to recognize the distinction between the two processes. Etiquette manuals from the late Victorian period to World War I helped guide individuals through the mourning process but they rarely shed light on the psychology of the grieving process. Nonetheless, in addition to discerning how individuals living between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were expected to mourn, a close reading of etiquette manuals reveals the changing attitudes towards grieving and death itself during this period.

9. Ibid., 3.
Arguably, etiquette manuals are the optimal source from which to study the cultural history of American mourning. In “A Philosophy of Etiquette,” etiquette writer and expert Judith Martin defines etiquette as “a system of symbols whose semantic content provides for predictability in social relations, especially among strangers.”\(^{10}\) As Martin explains, etiquette is necessary for the governance of behaviour and “to promote the satisfaction of our fundamental beliefs and interests.”\(^{11}\) Etiquette manuals recognized that individuals may harbour their own thoughts and feelings, but most writers of decorum acknowledged that these thoughts and feelings “if expressed, would cause social disharmony.”\(^{12}\) Historian Dallett Hemphill explains in *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620–1860*, that etiquette books were “devoted to manners alone. They were not much concerned with the relationship between proper behaviour and proper morals.”\(^{13}\) Therefore, it was the duty of an etiquette writer to address a wide variety of situations in which individuals would find themselves in a social setting or engaging in a social exchange, whether that was through writing, attending an event or appearing in the street. Topics such as conversation, letter writing, dress, dinner parties, weddings and funerals were standard sections in etiquette manuals. However, it was arguably in times of mourning and at funerals that etiquette advice was the most needed. As Emily Post explained, “it is in the moment of deepest sorrow that etiquette performs its most vital and real service.”\(^{14}\)

Early American etiquette books were popular and they differed greatly from their English predecessors. In early America there was much more opportunity for social interaction between individuals from varying class backgrounds but an absence of rules to govern these unions. Historian


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 351.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 352.


Andrew St. George believes that throughout the nineteenth century “American manners depended crucially on the comparative lack of social consensus,” and as a result, Americans “began to rely on a growing body of books of instruction.” Therefore, American etiquette manuals, intended for individuals from various classes, were “designed for the enlightenment of the uninitiated.” As America modernized, increasingly becoming an urban nation, there were more occasions for social contact. Susan Goodman believes that people needed etiquette books and universally understood ritual codes of manners more than ever in the turn-of-the-century United States. As Goodman states, “[t]he late nineteenth century was an age that believed anatomy to be destiny, an age when the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes (arguing the methods of the real-life detective, Sigmund Freud) discovered the histories of his clients in their mannerisms.” At the turn-of-the-century, etiquette manuals were so popular that Americans could choose from a number of authors. Although women most often authored etiquette manuals, some manuals were written anonymously or under pseudonyms, and larger volumes were often produced by groups of individuals. Etiquette manuals were inexpensive, written for the market, inclusive and as Hemphill demonstrates, were so popular that some manuals were written hastily to meet demand. Furthermore, technological advancements achieved in publishing and disseminating books enabled etiquette guides to be more available than ever before. For example, when Emily Post published her 1922 etiquette manual, *Etiquette*, she sold approximately one million copies.

There are numerous indications that the rules outlined by etiquette manuals were widely practiced. For example, sections in etiquette manuals that addressed mourning and funerals often included rules for funeral invitations,
periods of mourning, letters of condolence, mourning dress and funerary customs. These guidelines were reprinted and reinforced in newspapers. Journalists used funeral etiquette rules to judge the behaviour of certain individuals. For example, the Lawrence Daily World reprinted a story from the *New York Sun* that chastised the driver of a hearse for disobeying funeral etiquette by stopping an entire funeral procession in Gotham, New York to acquire a cigar from a driver in a nearby car.\(^{21}\) Evidently, mourning and funeral decorum not only reached the public through etiquette manuals but through newspapers as well. Newspapers not only reprinted etiquette rules but also reported on public transgressions and responded to the customs of the time, thereby reinforcing the active use of etiquette manuals by American society.

In addition to being prescriptive, etiquette manuals are descriptive sources in their consideration of public attitudes towards mourning. Although the process of grieving was not addressed directly in etiquette manuals, it is possible to ascertain how grieving was culturally understood by using the mourning advice provided to bereaved families. While etiquette writers “describe how mourning should look, not how it feels,” there are rare moments when the occasional etiquette writer “does forget herself and ventures into the realms of feeling.”\(^{22}\) The etiquette of mourning as described in etiquette manuals can be used as a tool to analyze the changing cultural attitudes towards mourning and grieving, especially during the turn-of-the-century when the processes of grieving and mourning underwent a profound metamorphosis. Etiquette writers often commented upon the change in customs and traditions of their time. Etiquette writer Mrs. Annie R. White explained that “the etiquette of polite society changes so materially in some phases, and with such marked contrast among different peoples and periods, that it is almost a hopeless task to formulate rules that shall absolutely govern with the same unchangeability that stamped the laws of Medes and the

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Persians.” As Mrs. White notes, etiquette authors were continuously challenged by societal changes, and as such they provide an instructive window through which to view those changes.

Compared to twentieth-century America, historians have often characterized Victorian American culture as a culture that embraced death. This assumption is made because of shorter life expectancies, uncertainty due to disease and high mortality rates, closer ties to the community and the church, and the central role of the home in harbouring death. The Victorian attitude toward death has been characterized by historians such as James Steven Curl as a romantically gloomy outlook celebratory of mortality, while the post-World War I generation has been described as a generation that was looking for “a bright and shining world.” However, beginning in the late Victorian period, there is evidence in etiquette manuals that Victorian Americans attempted to occlude death and mourning from public view. Therefore, a close reading of the manuals indicates that society had already taken steps to move towards “a bright and shining world” by the turn-of-the-century, much earlier than World War I.

During the Victorian period the home was the central location in which people experienced death. Most often family members died in the home and the body remained there for some time after death, often having been embalmed by friends who volunteered to help the grieving family. The Victorian family was literally closer to death as they spent more time physically

23. Annie R. White, Polite Society At Home and Abroad (Chicago: Monarch, 1891), 4.
26. In his book on post-mortem photography Stanley Burns explains that most adults were buried several days after death depending on “the time of year, the climate and the travel distances of relatives.” Children were often buried much sooner than adults, however Burns notes an instance of a mother who photographed her child nine days after her death. See Stanley B. Burns, Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America (Santa Fe, TX: Twelvetrees, 1990), captions. In Polite Society At Home and Abroad, etiquette writer Annie White explains that close friends and relatives were expected to assist in preparing the body and making other funeral arrangements. See White, 303.
closer to the body of deceased kin. The laws of etiquette closely contained death and bereavement to within the Victorian home by creating a boundary between those in mourning and the rest of society. Etiquette manuals addressed the friends and outer social circle of those who recently suffered a loss and warned against entering the household of the bereaved. For example, in *Gaskell’s Compendium of Forms: Educational, Social, Legal and Commercial*, published in 1881, G.A. Gaskell was firm stating that, “no one may call upon a bereaved family while the dead remains in the house, and no offense may be taken if they refuse to admit friends and relatives; but cards should be sent, and offers of service sent by note.”

As Gaskell explained, a house in mourning was clearly protected by the outward signs displayed on the house, which “prevent the intrusion of casual visitors.” Such explicit displays of mourning would typically include tying black crape to the doorknob and closing all windows and shutters. In 1877, etiquette writer Eliza Duffey included a subsection under “General Rules of Etiquette Concerning Houses of Mourning” called “Draping the House in Mourning.” Under this section Mrs. Duffey confirmed the popular rules outlined by writers such as Gaskell, writing, “it is desirable, upon death occurring in a house, that some outward sign should be given to keep away casual visitors.” Furthermore, although Mrs. Duffey recognized that it was not desirable for mourners to sit in a dark gloomy room, she recommended that those who wished to observe proper mourning etiquette would “keep their houses in twilight seclusion and sombre with mourning for a year or more, allowing the piano to remain closed for the same length of time.”

Although mourning was a highly visible practice in the late Victorian period, the symbols used to signify mourning were designed to create a barrier between the mourner and the rest of society. Some late Victorian etiquette

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27. Gaskell, 443.
28. Ibid., 443-444.
29. Crape is a type of fabric (silk or wool) that has a crisp appearance. Crape was commonly died black and used for mourning garments. See, Richard A. Wells, *Culture and Dress of the Best American Society* (Springfield, MA: King, Richardson, 1890), 314, and Duffey, 218.
31. Ibid., 223.
manuals justified the seclusion of the bereaved family by explaining that mourning symbols, outward signs of sorrow, protected those who were grieving from “thoughtless or cruel inquiries,” whereas other manuals stated the reverse: by excluding those who were grieving, outsiders were not inflicted by melancholy.\textsuperscript{32}

There is evidence in etiquette manuals printed merely five years after Gaskell’s publication that traditional Victorian attitudes towards grief and mourning were changing. In 1886 Randolph Keim modified Gaskell’s rule to allow close friends and relatives to call upon the bereaved family before the funeral. Keim wrote that, “none but the closest relatives or friends should call upon the family before the funeral.”\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, in 1889 etiquette writer Walter R. Houghton, author of \textit{American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness}, agreed with Keim’s modified rules stating that, “members of the family may be excused from receiving any but their most intimate friends at that time.”\textsuperscript{34} The change, from Gaskell’s explicit rule that \textit{no one} should be admitted into the house of mourning to Keim and Houghton’s guidelines that allowed for the admittance of friends and family, was a minor but important one. While the inclusion of some relatives and close friends into the house of mourning may appear to represent a greater openness towards death and mourning, the admittance of friends and family preceded the imminent demands for mourners to reintegrate into society in a more timely fashion.

By 1890 etiquette writers began to note shifts in the display of mourning symbols and the spaces designated to contain those who were experiencing grief. The space for bereaved family members to find shelter from social obligations became increasingly smaller as it was considered unhealthy for individuals to dwell in dark places of sorrow. In 1891, Annie White stated that “it is a healthy sign when the customs of a people begin to lose their forbidding character, and the surroundings are made more beautiful

\textsuperscript{32} White, 310.


\textsuperscript{34} Walter Raleigh Houghton, \textit{American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness} (New York: Rand, McNally, 1889), 348.
more comforting.” White recognized that the effort to create an environment that is “more comforting” for those who are grieving is a departure from the past. She comments on these changing mourning practices by writing, “the customs of society have undergone a remarkable change within the last decade. A few years ago death and its surroundings were terribly sombre and gloomy.” Although bereaved family members may have felt isolated by being enclosed within a house of mourning, this closely demarked space may have provided a safe haven where grievers could securely express their feelings. As customs began to change towards eliminating the house as a place of mourning by removing signs of grief, mourners were left with fewer spaces in which their grief could be safely expressed.

As the Victorian period came to a close, the removal of signs of mourning from the house of the deceased continued into the twentieth century to the point where it was recommended that all signs of death and loss were actively erased from view. In 1901, a journalist from The New York Sun also noticed the effect of these changes in mourning etiquette, commenting that, “black edged visiting cards and note paper are dropped into disuse along with crepe and closed window blinds and seclusion from all society, and the public attitude toward grief, while less historic than it was 50 years ago, is unquestionably more sane.” The change from closed shutters to open windows signifies a shift in perspectives about the mourning process as mourners were now encouraged to avoid the dark, gloomy recluse of the nineteenth-century house of mourning. In 1905, etiquette author Marion Harland believed that, “after the funeral, and when one’s friends have become accustomed to their sorrow, is the time when grief is the hardest to bear. It is then that the sympathetic person may do much toward brightening the long and dreary days in the house of mourning.” Emily Post similarly advised

35. Ibid., 309.
36. Ibid.
readers to urge those in sorrow to sit in a sunny room, near an open fire if possible.\textsuperscript{39} In her section entitled “House Restored to Order” Post encouraged that directly after the funeral,

some one \textsuperscript{sic} who is in charge at home must see that the mourning emblem is taken off the bell, that the windows are opened, the house aired from the excessive odor of flowers, and the blinds pulled up. Any furniture that has been displaced should be put back where it belongs, and unless the day is too hot a fire should be lighted in the library or principal bedroom to make a little more cheerful the sad home-coming of the family.\textsuperscript{40}

In 1924 etiquette writer Lillian Eichler gave similar advice, recommending that, after the funeral the family of the deceased should find the windows of their house wide-open, “with the warm sunlight streaming through them.” Eichler continued, stating that, “in the house, all signs of the bereavement should be effaced. The furniture should be placed in its usual order. Everything connected with the funeral must be out of sight. The members of the family should be greeted with nothing, upon their return, that would possibly give cause for fresh sorrow.”\textsuperscript{41} By 1924, physical indications of a house of mourning were virtually obsolete. While the total transformation of these mourning practices was not complete until after World War I, attitudes began to change as early as the late Victorian period, with the most dramatic transformation occurring at the turn-of-the-century. At that time, etiquette manuals were advising the friends and family members of the bereaved to restore the home to a bright and cheery state as quickly as possible.

In addition to instructing the friends and family members of the bereaved, etiquette manuals also directly addressed the deceased individual’s close kin. Etiquette manuals in the early 1880s imposed strict restrictions on

\textsuperscript{39} Post, 217.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 222.
the activities of the mourner, particularly regarding socialization. These instructions took the form of spatial restrictions, which limited where the mourner could go, in what activities they could partake, and temporal restrictions, which dictated the amount of time the mourning process should last. In the early 1880s etiquette manuals told mourners that they were not to leave the house of mourning between the death and the funeral “upon any errand.”[^42] After the funeral, mourners were permitted to run errands in town but were advised against attending social gatherings or any form of public amusement until a year of mourning had passed.[^43]

As early as 1887 etiquette author Mary Sherwood recognized that the length of a mourner’s seclusion was changing. She was strict in stating that, “[i]n this country no person in mourning for a parent, a child, a brother, or a husband, is expected to be seen at a concert, a dinner, a party, or at any other place of public amusement, before three months have passed,” further noting that, “the period of a mourner’s retirement from the world has been very much shortened of late.”[^44] At the turn-of-the-century, in 1905, Marian Harland thought that, “the manner of the period of time in which a mourner should shun society is a subject on which one may hesitate to express an opinion, as there are too many persons whose views would not coincide with ours.”[^45] Etiquette writers noticed that not only were periods of mourning continually shortening, but also that it was believed to be unhealthy for mourners to remain in a state of seclusion for a prolonged period of time. After the war, Elizabeth Sangster expressed her concern about long periods of solitude while in mourning, believing it to be “extremely injurious,” to remain in isolation for months or years. Sangster wrote that, “we are not all alike, and to some minds it is fatal to be allowed to prey entirely upon themselves.”[^46]

[^42]: Gaskell, 443.
[^45]: Harland, 161.
[^46]: M. Elizabeth Munson Sangster, *Good Manners for All Occasions: Including Etiquette of Cards, Wedding Announcements and Invitations* (New York: Cupples & Leon, 1921), 208.
Emily Post’s social world allowed for more individual autonomy instead of proposing defined periods of mourning. In 1922 Post reflected back upon the changing attitudes at the turn-of-the-century towards an acceptable period of mourning, stating that, “a generation or two ago the regulations for mourning were definitely prescribed, definite periods according to the precise degree of relationship of the mourner,” and added that, “[m]any persons to-day do not believe in going into mourning at all.” Post recognized that mourning, once a shared process in which both the community and mourner had strict guidelines to follow, was increasingly becoming a fragmented custom in which the individual independently governed its practice. As acceptable periods of mourning decreased and the house of mourning quickly transformed into a bright and sunny world early twentieth-century Americans were encouraged to deny death and re-join the community as soon as possible. Americans were instructed to displace the gloom that came with loss and in doing so those who needed to mourn were perceived as morbid and were left with few resources to guide them through the grieving process.

Profound transformations to the etiquette rules surrounding mourning dress also occurred at the turn-of-the-century. Mourning dress during the Victorian period was a very complex affair and was arguably the most crucial aspect of mourning etiquette. Etiquette rules for mourning dress were detailed and often pervaded the mourning chapter of etiquette manuals. Dress instructions carefully described in remarkable detail the specific shades of colours and certain types of material that mourners should wear, as the colour and type of fabric chosen indicated whether a mourner was in “deep mourning,” “half mourning,” or “light mourning.” Fashions changed from season to season and because mourning attire often required the bereaved to buy a new outfit, mourning clothing could become quite expensive. Despite


48. Deep mourning is usually considered to be the first year of mourning. Half mourning, or second mourning is considered to be the second year of mourning, while light mourning is considered to be the last six months of the mourning period. See Helan Rowe, “Family Fashions and Fancies,” *Good Housekeeping* 9, Heart Corporation (May–Oct 1889), 113 and Duffey, 296–297.
the cost, mourning dress was so essential to the mourning process that families would take great pains to ensure that they were outfitted in proper mourning attire.49

Etiquette writer Mrs. May Sherwood offered a lengthy explanation as to why mourning dress was worn, and she did not hesitate to offer her views on the practice. In her 1887 etiquette manual Manners and Social Usages, she grudgingly explained, “custom, which makes slaves of us all, has decreed that we shall wear black, a mark of respect to those we have lost, and as shroud for ourselves, protesting against the gentle ministration of light and cheerfulness with which our Lord ever strives to reach us.”50 Mrs. Sherwood further explained that mourning dress, “a wall, a cell of refuge,” protected those who were grieving from the untimely cheerful remarks of a passing stranger.51 Although Mrs. Sherwood clearly recognized how miserable of a duty wearing mourning dress could be, she was firm in stating that,

it is well to have some established customs as to visiting and dress in order that the gay and the heartless may in observing them avoid that which shocks every one [sic] – an appearance of lack of respect to the memory of the dead – that all society may move on in decency and order, which is the object and end of the study of etiquette.52

At the end of her section on mourning dress, Mrs. Sherwood speculated that the social custom of wearing black might have been a grave cultural mistake, as she believed that the experience of loss was a time when “bright colors, fresh flowers, sunshine, and beauty” was most needed.53

50. Sherwood, Manners and Social Usages, 189.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 201.
53. Ibid., 211.
Although wearing mourning dress was considered to be proper, as Mrs. Sherwood demonstrated, many women did not relish the thought of wearing mourning dress. Men were not expected to remain in mourning as long as women and often the rules of mourning etiquette for men were less severe than they were for women. In addition to the loss of a beloved one, widowhood was a particularly devastating experience for some women as they lost the role of wife, an identity that defined their sense of worth. As historian Pat Jalland explains, for those women who did not remarry, “widowhood was a final destiny, an involuntary commitment to a form of social exile.”

Etiquette writers in the 1880s realized how oppressive widowhood could be for a woman and began to write about shifting customs that allowed women to more flexibly and hastily integrate back into society. In 1887 etiquette writer Florence Hall wrote that “the old fashioned and extreme tyranny of mourning, which forbade women to appear in the street unless they were covered by a suffocating and unhealthy crape and veil,” was passing away rapidly. Furthermore, Hall expressed her opinion that women who remained wearing mourning dress for years upon years were morbid in mind.

In 1900 etiquette writer Mrs. Daisy May published her article, “Fashions in Mourning: Somber Garments No Longer Need Be Unbecoming,” in the Indiana Logansport Journal. Mrs. May commented on the changing attitudes towards grief and mourning, stating that unlike the good ladies of “sense and sensibility” who were “wont to shroud themselves” in mourning attire, contemporary ladies of the time were inclined towards more

54. Most etiquette manuals prescribed periods of mourning depending on the degree of relation to the deceased. For example, The Handbook of Official and Social Etiquette, stated that mothers and fathers should remain in mourning for one to two years, children above ten years of age: six months to a year, children under ten years of age: three months to six months and distant relatives or friends, according to intimacy: three weeks to three months. See Keim, The Handbook of Official and Social Etiquette, 264.


56. Florence Howe Hall, Social Customs (Boston: Estes and Laurit, 1887), 257.

57. Ibid.
appealing mourning dress. In 1901, the Pennsylvania *New Oxford* also made note of the changing attitudes towards mourning in their article, “Less Mourning Worn: A Marked Change in the Custom Here in Recent Years.” The journalist noted that “there have been many changes in the styles of mourning in the last 15 years. In America, mourning is certainly growing lighter. It is less worn, and less of it worn.” This journalist specifically noted the earlier introduction of colours into a widow’s mourning wardrobe. Unlike the widow of olden times, the contemporary widow began wearing both black and gray and then “plung[ed] into colors with a rush,” hardly ever wearing black after the funeral. The article stated that, unlike ten years ago, the contemporary widow could appear in public places soon after the funeral and could also entertain guests as frequently as she chose. Evidently, turn-of-the-century public attitudes towards mourning etiquette were swiftly changing. Mourning periods became shorter and mourning became less of a gloomy, dark and depressing affair as grievers were expected to embrace bright colours and a joyful attitude much sooner than those just ten years earlier. Although it appears that the push for mourners to quickly embrace a positive attitude stemmed from concerns for the mental health of the bereaved, it is questionable whether a more positive mourning process actually resolved grief or merely displaced it.

Etiquette writers paid close attention to how the mourning outfit slowly dissolved from use. In 1905 Mrs. Marion Harland noted that widows were now allowed to dispose of the heavy crape veil, which was only worn on the day of the funeral. She described that mourning attire was simpler and that heavy materials were now discarded. Harland noted that widows might have chosen to exchange the stage of second mourning or half mourning for heavy mourning, depending on the individuals own preference. She explained

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59. “Less Mourning Worn: A Marked Change in the Custom Here in Recent Years,” *New Oxford Item* [New Oxford, PA], 18 January 1901, 9 (originally printed in *The New York Sun*).
that widows could begin by wearing all white only if “black has been laid aside for what may be called the ‘second stage’ of bereavement.” 62 Harland commented on the changing periods of mourning, upon which there were now too many opinions to suggest one fixed rule. Harland’s observations clearly indicate that at the turn-of-the-century what once was a community-centred culture became more fragmented as the cultivation of “inner life” began. 63 Mourning customs increasingly became individualized and privatized as people were expected to be more self-aware and were allowed to choose the mourning dress that best reflected their sentiments.

Unlike the etiquette writers of the late Victorian period, etiquette writers in the twentieth-century tended to provide a sketch of social observations that described the vogue trends of the time and were less strict in their instruction, allowing the individual to judge whether they would abide by various etiquette rules. Emily Post’s advice was more attentive to the varying needs of different mourners. She noted in Etiquette that unlike the novel sentiment of her generation, in the past one’s true feelings had nothing to do with the outward display of grief that “one was obliged, in decency, to show.” 64 The etiquette observed in Post’s era made more concessions for the judgment of the individual with respect to the mourning process. Post noted that unlike past generations, “[m]any persons to-day do not believe in going into mourning at all.” 65 As the twentieth century progressed, individuals began to discard the mourning dress in its entirety. In 1921, etiquette writer Elizabeth Sangster noted that mourning attire, “once universal in this country,” was no longer adopted by hundreds of families who had taken up their daily routine and accustomed clothing shortly after the funeral. 66 In the twentieth-century, mourners no longer closed their shutters, tied crape on their bell or donned mourning attire after the funeral, leaving very few

62 Ibid., 160.
64. Post, 222.
65. Ibid.
66. Sangster, 205.
symbols to indicate that they had recently suffered a loss, and indicating the development of a death-denying culture.

At the turn-of-the-century, mourning etiquette transformed from a shared set of visible customs that carefully defined the mourning process within clear temporal and spatial boundaries to a process that was hardly recognizable and was dictated by the conviction of the individual. The mourning practices of the Victorians were seen by their twentieth-century successors as morbid, unnecessarily antisocial and unhealthy. Etiquette writers of the twentieth-century not only urged mourners to re-enter society as quickly as possible, but encouraged mourners to forget the past by embracing an optimistic and future thinking outlook. The changing attitudes towards death and mourning at the turn-of-the-century are indicative of a much larger cultural process that was transformed by the emergence of a new modern landscape.

In 1899 historian and literary critic Joseph Jacobs wrote a prophetic essay, “The Dying of Death.” Jacobs argued that in a climate of rapid cultural change, death had begun to lose influence in everyday life. He believed that “the most distinctive note of the modern spirit,” was found in “the practical disappearance of the thought of death as influence directly bearing upon practical life.” Jacobs maintained that fear of death was being replaced by the joy of life, stating, “the flames of Hell are sinking low, and even Heaven has but poor attractions for the modern man. Full life here and now is in demand.” In his essay, he attributed this change in attitude to the “hurry-scurry” of modern life, which left no time for society to think about life’s end. He stated that an increase in town life lead to a “greater readiness to forget the disappearance of friends.” Finally, Jacobs described how the rise of modern medicine had done so much to prolong life that the elderly


68. Jacobs, 265.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid., 266.
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comprised the majority of those who passed away, and modern medicine made the end now seem merciful.71

As Jacobs’ essay explains, a number of important phenomena were responsible for the “dying of death” in culture at the turn-of-the-century. Furthermore, the twentieth-century demand for “full life here and now” can be traced to a number of significant medical advancements. These critical medical breakthroughs promoted a belief that science and modern medicine could prolong life and even postpone death. An article published in the Racine Daily Journal, expressed this new faith in modern medicine by stating that if surgeons of the 1870s were resurrected and saw what surgeons of the twentieth-century could do, they would be astonished to see how their “twentieth-century brothers are balking disease and death.”72 The article praised specific modern medical advancements such as the high success rate of the modern operation due to the use of anaesthesia, which transformed surgery into a “painless, germless and bloodless” procedure.73 The wonder and promise of revolutionary medical advancements allowed Americans to spend less time worrying about death and more time looking forward to a bright and lively future.

Other medical advancements transformed what were once omens of death into forms of public amusement and their astounding abilities amazed the public. In 1895 Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen announced the ability to view the skeleton through the x-ray. News of Röntgen’s rays, or x-rays, reached America by cable in early January 1896.74 Americans were fascinated by this capability and one New York newspaper, the World, described x-ray photography as a new “thrilling form of entertainment.”75 Additional medical

73. Ibid., 14.
advancements at the turn-of-the-century appeared not only as amusements but also as harbingers of hope that death itself could be evaded. Elie Metchnikoff, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1908, hoped that his work would prevent society from the three evils: disease, old age and death. He believed he could find hope in biological science for the present generation and suggested that death itself may be overcome. In his influential book, *The Prolongation of Life: Optimistic Studies*, Metchnikoff stated that “[i]n nature, death comes so frequently by accident that there is justification for asking if natural death really occurs.” In 1912 French surgeon Alexis Carrel won the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for his work in organ transplant which he conducted in the United States. Upon the announcement of Carrel’s prize newspapers began to speculate “whether permanent life might not be possible.” However, this newfound hope and faith in medicine was soon tested.

With the advent of World War I, the twentieth-century world witnessed death on an unprecedented scale. Americans were soon faced with mourning the loss of their fallen soldiers and collective post-war mourning efforts were central to commemorating the war and establishing how the mass loss of life would be remembered. Optimism in America still prevailed, as society was encouraged to be grateful for the heroic service of their fallen soldiers and to celebrate the Allied victory. In 1918, a journalist from Wisconsin stated, “we link this thinking and talking about immortality with an intense desire to laugh, to be amused, to do our best for those who are going and coming and to lead our lives as though war had not smashed a shell across its routine.” The journalist believed that this modern mode of thinking was not consistent with the idea of mourning, however, as historian Jay Winter

77. “He Keeps Hearts Alive in Test Tube and Wins $30, 000 Nobel Prize,” *The Fort Wayne Sentinel* [Fort Wayne, IN], 22 October 1912, 5.
78. See Vance, *Death so Noble*, and Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.
explains, “the Great War, the most ‘modern’ of wars triggered an avalanche of the ‘unmodern.’” Spiritualism was revived as mothers, fathers and widows of fallen soldiers attempted to connect with their loved ones. Although traditional and “unmodern” forms of connecting with the dead surfaced during the war, as the casualty list continued to grow, the subject of mourning dress and the push for women to abandon mourning attire became a chief topic of national discussion.

To encourage optimism and to cope with the overwhelming loss of life, the State Council of Defense, with the approval of President Wilson, proposed to replace mourning dress with a three-inch black band and a gold or white star displayed for each relative lost in the war. Many women supported this movement, as it was less expensive than full mourning garb, less depressing and paid tribute to dead heroes, while others believed that dressing in full mourning should be the choice of the individual. Sophie Irene Loeb, a writer for the Indiana Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette, believed that American women should follow their sisters in England and France who “do not stop for mourning, which is as it should be.” Loeb called for women to “swallow” their “sobs” and move on. She believed that the outward display of mourning was not necessary as, “after all, real mourning only takes place within us.”

In some ways the war, although devastating, strengthened the social optimism that began at the turn-of-the-century and beckoned for people to live “full life here and now.” Although the movement to discard mourning dress in its entirety became a national topic of discussion after the war, the crape and veil had disappeared from use much earlier. Etiquette manuals and newspapers,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, 54.
  \item “Leaders of Women Disagree on Ban On War Mourning,” The Bridgeport Telegram [Bridgeport, CT], 3 July 1918, 10.
  \item See ibid. and Sophie Irene Loeb, “Mourning for Soldiers,” Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette [Fort Wayne, IN], 28 April 1918, 3.
  \item Loeb, 3.
  \item Ibid.
  \item Jacobs, 265.
\end{itemize}
which both described and prescribed public behaviours, clearly indicate that beginning in the late Victorian period and most drastically at the turn-of-the-century, the mourning process quickly changed from a secluded but visible approach to a societal expectation that the bereaved reintegrate back into society as quickly as possible. As the twentieth-century continued, ever-diminishing temporal and spatial boundaries increasingly necessitated that the mourner contain their grief internally until, as Sophie Loeb explained, “mourning only takes place within us.” The drastic change in mourning practices that occurred around the turn-of-the-century, and culminated in a near complete abandonment of mourning in contemporary American society, clearly indicates the need to investigate the cost of losing what was once believed to be a vital component of the grieving process. Can modern systems such as psychoanalysis replace mourning traditions as a method of reconciling grief? If mourning has been lost then it is important for historians to consider what now remains.
Alexandria Anderson is a graduate student in the Department of History at York University and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in history. She received her combined honours BA in English and history at McMaster University. Her research interests include cultural history, gender and sexuality, American history and Canadian history.

Alexandria Anderson est une étudiante aux études supérieures du département d’histoire de l’Université York où elle fait présentement sa maîtrise. Elle a reçu son baccalauréat au double cursus en Anglais et en histoire à l’Université McMaster. Ses recherches portent sur l’histoire culturelle, le genre et la sexualité ainsi que l’histoire canadienne et américaine.