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Woman and Death in Nineteenth Century America

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By Kathleen Boswell

Abstract: *The nineteenth century saw a shift in the perceptions of death, as historians have noted how Victorian peoples (1837-1901) had a strange fixation with morbidity that we today find odd. This article seeks to understand these fixations with death within the context of nineteenth-century femininity, or what has been termed the Cult of Domesticity. As the topic of women and death is sparse, the examinations of leading death historians are compared while some new historical perspectives are used to address some gaps between death and domesticity. The context of Victorian societal norms is examined, along with popular mourning practices and the reasons these practices gave comfort to those still living. Periods of social upheaval are also examined in this paper, like the effects of disease or mental illness and the American Civil War (1861-1865), as these events exacerbated the already shifting fixations on death. It is through the examination of morbidity that historical empathy with atypical topics can be achieved, while a greater understanding of the United States can be achieved through examinations of American women in the nineteenth century.*

As we exit the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19 or COVID) pandemic, our lives have been forever altered and we find ourselves contemplating the effects of the loss of life on our futures. But despite the tragedy the COVID pandemic caused, it is important to remember those who have passed and that pandemics like this have happened before. One of the most notable examples

of previous pandemics is the 1918 Influenza Pandemic (1918-1920), nicknamed the Spanish Flu. Much of the information practices seen during COVID can be traced back to the 1918 pandemic.[1] This shows how valuable reflection on the past can be for future generations, especially in times of turmoil. The historical boundary for the topic of death should be pushed further back in time, as much can be gained through the examination of lesser-reviewed topics. Because this topic is so broad, the examination within this article will focus on women in the nineteenth century and their experiences.

A woman's role in Victorian society (1837-1901) was elevated to a cult-like status during the nineteenth century. In the United States, an obsession over etiquette and a person's place in society became a focal point of that century's culture. Strict societal rules needed to be followed in order to obtain status and acceptance and death was no exception. The cultural standards upheld by the broader society subjected women to executing prescribed methods of burial and drawn-out mourning rituals. When examining the overall opinions of historians on the subject of women and death, one finds that there is a gap in historical research. Women of the nineteenth century were placed within specific societal standards through the process of grieving, which was enforced with strict etiquette, though many expectations were next to impossible. The strain society had put on women coupled with the vast amounts of misunderstandings revolving around a woman's body, and the upheavals of society due to war or disease, resulted in a great many stressors for both women and the general population. The death rate of women and children was far higher than today, making the reality of death a more central aspect of a woman's life, although death was already prevalent in the lives of many during this period. There is a historical disconnect between the examination of death and the examination of women during the

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[1] Matthew Boyce and Rebecca Katz, "The 1918 Influenza Pandemic and COVID-19," *American Experience PBS*, March 18, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/1918-influenza-pandemic-and-covid-19/.

nineteenth century. However, this disconnect can be remedied through the examination of funerary and mortuary practices, the sphere of domesticity, sickness, and mental health, and the American Civil War (1861-1865).

The Importance of the Study of Death History

There is a tendency for people to shy away from morbid or uncomfortable historical topics, making the historiography of death sparse. If the study of death in general is infrequent, then the research connecting women and death is further scattered. Death history can be seen as a morbid topic because it forces us to acknowledge our own mortality and the inevitable death of the people we hold dear. However, if the context of uncomfortable historical topics is better examined, we might also discover something beneficial to our society. This period of history directly influences some modern aspects of grieving. For example, the Civil War helped to change the public's opinion on embalming, as men who died far from their families could be embalmed and brought back to their homes for burial.[2]

　　　Before conducting an examination of women, it should be understood that major cultural shifts can also be seen in the way a culture acknowledges death. Nineteenth-century death obsession can be seen as incredibly morbid by today's standards. It may seem that today Americans have moved away from the macabre standards of the past, however, the line on what is and is not taboo has simply shifted to include what matters to Americans today. This includes topics like the Right to Die movement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recently overturned Roe V. Wade. Gary Laderman discusses this in *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* which gives an overview of America's practices involving death and explains the evolution of mortuary rituals through the nineteenth century. Laderman rejects

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[2] Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 113.

the idea of a disconnect between the past and today's idea of morbidity, as he feels that the American conception of death today is still firmly rooted in "extremely emotional issues… including abortion, euthanasia, violence, suicide, genocide, and AIDS."[3]

Laderman is heavily influenced by Philippe Aires' work in *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present,* in which Aires stresses the emotional disconnect that began in the nineteenth century.[4] Aries explains that this emotional disconnect is caused by a change in personal attitudes, as previously the focus of death was on "one's own death," the nineteenth century shifted to focus on the death of another person.[5] Aries stretches the history of death even further back in time than his contemporaries, by examining how medieval sentiments on death were marked with a calm acceptance.[6] Aries elaborates on the long period of death acceptance in history and our modern perceptions of death by saying: "People had been dying like that for centuries or millennia. In a world of change the traditional attitude toward death appears inert and static."[7] Some level of disconnect may be correlated with the breakdown of social norms in times of turmoil, such as epidemics of disease or the American Civil War. This explains a later, twentieth-century emotional disconnect with death, which may have been caused by the tumultuous nature of two world wars and the Holocaust (1941-1945).[8]

Mortal Remains: Death in Early America is a collection of articles based on a symposium held in 2001 with the same name and edited by Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein. These articles allow for the more unseen sides of death to be better examined. The overall goal of *Mortal Remains* is to examine what Isenburg

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[3] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 7.
[4] Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M Ranum (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), 13.
[5] Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 55-56.
[6] Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death,* 13.
[7] Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 13.
[8] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 7.

and Burstein describe as "neglected aspects of American culture."[9] The history of a woman's role in death should be included among these neglected aspects, as women's history can be misappropriated, and the original contexts can be lost or changed to fit a new narrative. With this in mind, it is important to note that the average woman discussed in this essay is usually White, protestant, and within the newly emerging middle class. This leaves a window of opportunity for the historical analysis of poor women, women of color, or queer individuals and their experiences with death in the nineteenth century that hopefully will be examined in the future.

The introduction to *Mortal Remains* also gives an examination of the ways in which historians, and average people, rationalize death. By using the phrase *life goes on,* we, as modern-day people, "are doing more than sighing in the acceptance of some passage, we are also asserting the power of the living to rationalize and remember death in new ways."[10] These re-remembrances of deaths that have long passed can be extended into the methodology of history, as events can be re-analyzed in their full context and with a complete view of information. Parallel to *Mortal Remains*, Matthew Dennis' "Natives and Pioneers: Death and the Settling and Unsettling of Oregon" also stresses the need for re-examining historical interpretations to include past intentions, especially when the dead have long passed and can no longer speak for themselves.[11] Dennis' article suggests that perceptions of historical events can change with time and that today's people will often have a very different perception of events than the people who were alive at the time.[12] The reality of

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[9] Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1.
[10] Isenburg and Burstein, *Mortal Remains,* 2.
[11] Matthew Dennis, "Natives and Pioneers: Death and the Settling and Unsettling of Oregon,"
Oregon Historical Quarterly 115, No. 3 (Fall 2014): 288.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5403/oregonhistq.115.3.0282.
[12] Matthew Dennis, "Natives and Pioneers," 292.

historians being the only voice for the long dead is extended into women's death history as well. For example, the Temperance movement was spearheaded by progressive-minded women during the nineteenth century but could also be viewed as extreme to a modern woman whose life is so far removed from the historical context of the time. Today's historians should ask themselves if the people of the past would agree with their modern interpretations of their lives, and in the context of this article, readers should ask themselves if the mourning practices featured in this article are truly morbid.

The Cult of Domesticity

The family structure was incredibly important to a Victorian woman, as her life revolved around the need to care for and curate the household. A home decorated with finely made crafts showed guests that the female domain was well cared for. A need to purchase or craft items for the home became more prominent during this time, as the purchasing of goods was considered to be under the woman's sphere of influence.[13] Spurred by the advanced technology that allowed for industrialization, the growing middle classes caused an increase in consumer culture and in turn heavily impacted the nineteenth-century funeral industry as wakes were often held in the home. Despite the feminine social structures of the nineteenth century revolving around the home, domesticity was supposed to be inclusive of many aspects of a proper woman – even a woman who chose to incorporate herself in social advocacies.

  To better understand the historical discourse of a woman's social standing during this period, readers should first be reminded of Barbara Welter's influential article *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,* which stresses the four major aspects of

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[13] Helen Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 136.

an ideal woman: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[14] Expanding upon the core values of domesticity, Ellen M. Plante's book *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* also gives a broad overview of the domestic social standards of women of the nineteenth century while also giving readers a glimpse into a woman's daily life. Throughout the book, Plante uses the term *cult of domesticity*, a variation of Welter's *Cult of True Womanhood*, to refer to the reverence the home was given.[15] From these examples, the condition of a woman's home was directly correlated to her value and self-worth.[16]

There are recent debates on the legitimacy of Welter's original analysis on domesticity.[17] *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States*, written by Teresa Anne Murphy, focuses on women's nationalism and debates the prevalent ideas on citizenship in early American history. Murphy's examinations center around what she calls *domestic citizenship,* a term she uses to describe the blending of domestic values and the yearning some women had for a place in the newly formed United States. Murphy argues that the overall goal of female historians at this time was not to earn citizenship for women but to "create an alternative to full citizenship."[18] Murphy's writings, along with Mary Kelly's "Beyond the Boundaries," help to dispel the idea that women at that time were all compliant domestic beings. Kelly breaks down Welter's four sub-divisions of domesticity, stating that the values of a *true woman* may have been empowering to women instead of restricting.[19] Murphy's major theme throughout the book revolves around domestic writers, which included female

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[14] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," in *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1966), 151–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179.
[15] Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 68.
[16] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 68.
[17] Mary Kelly. "Beyond the Boundaries," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 73–78, https://doi.org/10.2307/3125096.
[18] Teresa Anne Murphy, *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 193.
[19] Mary Kelly. "Beyond the Boundaries," 75.

historians, though these historians in the nineteenth century did not always agree on how much participation women should be allowed to have, if any. Murphy elaborates on this herself in her thorough examination of how women studied history in early America by stating, "One of the most important studies of nineteenth-century women's history argues that it involved no political engagement."[20] It should not be lost on the reader that the nineteenth century included the height of the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) and encouraged individuality among women and other minority groups, which in turn influenced women to participate more in social reform.[21] Those women who were involved with social reformations during the nineteenth often focused on the politics of the home, like abusive families or childcare.

Although Plante's book mostly examines the social structures of women, she also includes the changing family structure in her analysis. Children were beginning to be viewed as innocent, which strayed away from the protestant view of inherent evil residing within each soul.[22] Therefore, as seen in Murphy's *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States,* women needed to be educated, and in turn, they could better educate their children. However, Murphy's examination also shows that an educated woman was seen as threatening to the status quo of society.[23] Plante's analysis aligns with Murphy's, as Plante examines how women authors of the nineteenth century were harshly criticized because what a woman read or wrote could

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[20] Murphy, *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States,* 5.

[21] Lance Sum, "The Omnipresence of Christianity in the United States: An Analysis of the Second Great Awakening (1790-1850)," (Master's thesis, Bard College, 2023), 3, https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=history_mat.

[22] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 79.

[23] Murphy, *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States,* 31.

negatively impact their morality.[24] Instead, women were encouraged to read magazines or periodicals that sought to teach a woman her proper place in society, both Plante and Murphy's books highlight *Godey's Lady's Book* as a popular method for women to understand their place within domesticity while expressing their opinions on where a woman stands within society. Magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* were also a method of understanding how women should conduct themselves, for example, it offered ladies the correct attire for mourning.[25]

The question arises, why were women of the nineteenth century so hyper-focused on domesticity? Murphy's answer: Many women's histories at this time were examining the faults of women in the past. One of these past faults was consumerism, which nineteenth-century women could see increasing with the rise of industrialization.[26] Industrialization was dependent on laborers, and this even included some middle-class women working outside of the home. Murphy gives an example through Paulina Wright Davis's 1853 examination of the evolving industrialization in America, Davis argued: "that women's [home] work became devalued as a result."[27] Industrialism also led to excess wealth within the middle class, which meant that they could now afford to memorialize their loved ones in the manner they saw fit.

Another reason for the advocation of domesticity was because it could elevate women to a companion of men, instead of just subservience.[28] To be a good companion, a good mentor to her children, and a good citizen, meant that a wife needed to be educated. In response to the growing support for women's education, women began to involve themselves in politics and

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[24] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 170-171.

[25] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 201.

[26] Murphy, *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States,* 18-19.

[27] Murphy, *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States,* 126.

[28] Murphy, *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States,* 24.

began voicing their own opinions through their historical analyses of the women who preceded them. Murphy found through her research that domestic histories created by women at this time were unifying.[29] However, this same type of womanhood also stressed that a woman's place in society was without political rights. With the context of women's roles during the nineteenth century in mind, readers can now understand the surrounding circumstances of domesticity as we explore funerary and mortuary practices.

Nineteenth-Century Funerary and Mortuary Practices

In any period of history examining methods of mourning can provide insight into what a culture views as important, and this is especially true in the nineteenth century. This period of American history saw an increase in obsessions with memorializing the dead. What was worn during mourning and the objects people purchased or crafted could show their personal relation to the deceased, following the mourning etiquette showed respect for both the dead and the living. Though the nineteenth century saw an increase in industrial-made goods, handmade crafts were still widespread and could showcase a woman's tactile skill in homemaking. What a woman made often depended on her class, as a middle-class woman could afford to stay at home and care for the family. If the family could afford it, more elaborate and time-consuming memorialization practices would be used. As the century progressed, a woman's role in mortuary practices moved from an active role to a passive one. Women and their associations with domesticity helped to encourage this passive role, as more gruesome death aspects were believed to be too much for a woman's light and pure demeanor.

To understand how women and death history connect, an understanding of death rituals in the nineteenth century must be

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[29] Murphy, *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States,* 133.

established. Gary Laderman is one of the leading historians on the examination of death in America and one of the main themes in his *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* explains why burial practices are important; they give closure to the living.[30] A variance in gender examinations can be studied in both Laderman and Ellen M. Plante's book *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History*. Laderman describes the careful preparation of the body along with more physical aspects of mourning, while Plante describes the intense social aspects. Plante's analysis of mourning includes descriptions of a woman's roles in middle-class, nineteenth-century America which was much more restrictive compared to women before or after this period. It is interesting to note that both authors mention that women were not required, or sometimes even not allowed, to attend the burial. Laderman suggests that this was because of strict societal standards set on women.[31] These strict standards can be seen through the obsession with domestic values that arose during this period.

A change occurred around the social aspects of womanhood in the nineteenth century, as the social conditions women were subjected to meant that some aspects of death were viewed as too gruesome for a delicate woman to see.[32] In fact, Laderman states that women were expressly separated from mortuary rituals as the nineteenth century came to a close, claiming that women were "replaced by male professionals with technical expertise in the treatment of the dead."[33] This is more closely examined in Georganne Rundblad's article "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," in which she shows the importance and prestige "shrouding women" had in their

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[30] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 3.
[31] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 157.
[32] Georganne Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," *Gender and Society* 9, no. 2 (April 1995), 181, http://www.jstor.org/stable/189870.
[33] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 157.

communities in the first half of the nineteenth century.[34] Shrouding Women bathed, dressed, and arranged a body for burial before the rise of the funeral industry.[35] Rundblad notes a special trust was given to Shrouding Women, as they were highly trained in natural methods of body preservation which their communities relied on.[36] Shrouding women were exclusively female, with male involvement in body preparation being especially strict to the point where men were expressly banned from the room when the body was being prepared.[37] Men were excluded from body preparations perhaps because it was commonly a woman's role to care for the newborns and the sick, which could easily extend into elderly and death care. However, shrouding women's prestigious positions within communities would diminish as embalming practices increased. Again, the grim work associated with embalming a body was seen as a man's task, which pushed women into a more passive funerary role.[38] This passiveness can be seen in Figure 1, which shows an advertisement from a funerary magazine titled *The Casket,* which Rundblad examines in their article. This advertisement showcases a woman placed on a pedestal, symbolizing the elevated status of young White women while admiring herself in a mirror, which shows the woman's vanity toward herself. Rundblad notes that women within advertisements in the later nineteenth century "were limited to the role of prop" instead of actively engaging in mortuary practices.[39]

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[34] Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 174.

[35] Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 178-179.

[36] Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 179-180.

[37] Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 180.

[38] Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 183.

[39] Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 186.
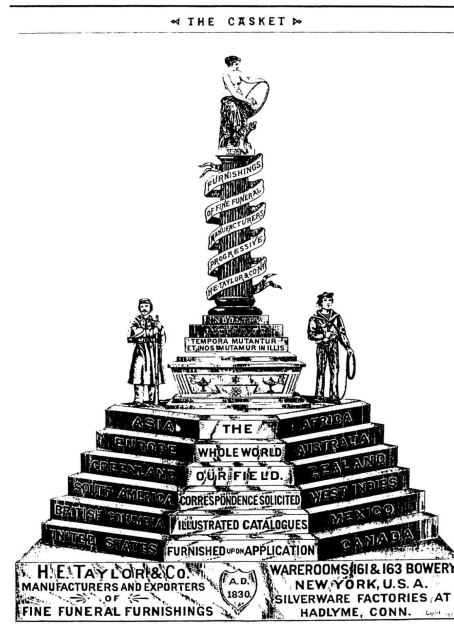
Figure 1: An advertisement from the mortuary magazine The Casket, which features a woman in a passive role in funerary rituals.[40]

Another aspect both Plante and Laderman mention in their respective works is the mention of funeral mementos, like hairwork, which was a common craft for women to make during mourning.[41] Hairwork is the practice of using human hair to form personal keepsakes memorializing a lost loved one. Hairwork and other forms of creative expression in mourning incorporated themes popular within the nineteenth century, mainly Greek or Roman revival, Romanticism, and Christian themes.[42] For

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[40] Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," 186. It should be acknowledged that this image was first examined by Rundblad in their article. I attempted to find my own advertising example from issues of *The Casket,* however my access to issues is limited. So, I decided to include it in my article too, as this advertisement is a prime example of both funerary and domestic values in the 19th century.

[41] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 166.

[42] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 17.

example, it is common to find hairwork chains with Christian symbols as shown in Figure 2. Nature was another incredibly common theme women chose when working with hair, as this period saw an uptick in nature appreciation. Hairwork could be crafted into flowers, trees, or other plants that were framed. These framed artworks usually included hair from multiple people, often with varying colors of hair, to form a harmonious bouquet or reef of hair. The hair used could be from both the dead or the living and sometimes was used as personal gifts. For example, men were given watch chains made from their still-living lover's hair.[43] More subtle forms of hairwork include thinly woven sheets of hair placed in a locket or draped carefully over an image to form the branches of a willow tree or ground up into a pigment and used to paint small mourning scenes.[44]

Figure 2: A pendant that incorporates a cross, made of woven human hair and capped with gold ends.[45]

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[43] Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America*, 140.

[44] "Mementos of Affection," *Google Arts & Culture*, Accessed December 6, 2023, https://artsandculture.google.com/story/mementos-of-affection-cincinnati-art-museum/kgUx-6ikEsZhIA?hl=en. The Cincinnati Art Museum curated an excellent collection of hairwork with descriptions and dates of each.

[45] Unknown Maker, American *Cross,* Early 1800s, Hair with gold caps, 5.1 cm, RISD Museum. https://risdmuseum.org/art-design/collection/cross41001?return=%2Fartdesign%2Fcollection%3Fsearch_ap

Helen Sheumaker, in *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America* breaks down the emotional connection to such a strange art form. While Sheumaker expressly claims hairwork as a feminine art form, she does state that some men enjoyed this activity as well.[46] Laderman examines why these mementos became so popular: people "expressed a need for maintaining physical proximity and resisting the finality that comes with bodily disintegration."[47] A self-instruction book marketed towards women and published by a male entrepreneur named Mark Campbell gave weaving patterns that could be followed from within the comfort of the home.[48] Campbell shows himself as the demonstrator for his book, as shown in Figure 3. The inclusion of men suggests that, despite hairwork and associated mourning crafts being women-centric, the need to express grief through tactile arts has always existed beyond genders. Despite the need to grieve being universal, there was still a negative connotation when men attempted to enter the sentimental world of women's domesticity.[49] Men's inclusion in hairwork exemplifies the diversity between gender norms during this period. However, men's inclusion in the craft is an exception, which rejected previously dominant historical ideas, like those examined in Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood," which focuses on the restrictive and gendered standards of the

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i_fulltext%3Djewelry%2B%26field_type%3DAll#content__section--use--1185196. Christian symbolism was common in memorial hairwork. The hair chains featured in this pendant are similar to the hair chains demonstrated in Mark Campbell's manual on hairwork.

[46] Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America,* 125.

[47] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 76.

[48] Mark Campbell, *Self-Instructor in the Art of Hair Work, Dressing Hair, Making Curls, Switches, Braids, and Hair Jewelry of Every Description,* (New York: M. Campbell, 1867), Project Gutenburg ebook, (2013), 8, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/38658/pg38658-images.html.

[49] Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America,* 136.

nineteenth century.[50] Both men and women were forced into rigid boundaries, but as previously discussed, there is room for examinations of the people who did not conform to this period's gender roles.
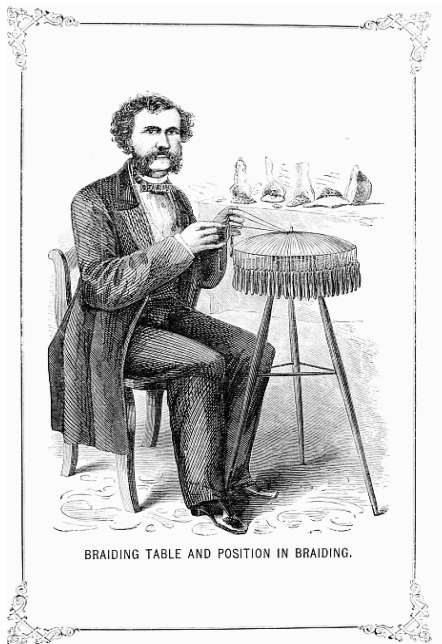

BRAIDING TABLE AND POSITION IN BRAIDING.

Figure 3: Though the braiding table was marketed towards women, Mark Campbell chose to demonstrate the correct use of a braiding table for hairwork in his instruction manual for hairwork chains.[51]

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[50] For more on the rejection of Welter's influential article see: Mary Kelly's "Beyond the Boundaries," in *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (2001): 73–78, https://doi.org/10.2307/3125096.

[51] Mark Campbell, *Self-Instructor in the Art of Hair Work, Dressing Hair, Making Curls, Switches, Braids, and Hair Jewelry of Every Description,* (New York: M. Campbell, 1987), Project Gutenburg ebook, 8, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/38658/pg38658-images.html. Campbell's book is heavily marketed towards both genders, as there are advertisements for a cure-all with their benefits towards men and women on page 269-270. This cure-all was also manufactured by Campbell.

Remembrance practices evolved through the nineteenth century and as technology progressed. During the early period of the nineteenth century, painted memorial portraits were a popular way to memorialize loved ones. These types of portraits were embroidered and then filled in with watercolor paint to create more detail.[52] They were often created by schoolgirls as practice for both artistic skills and proper grieving.[53] An example of a memorial portrait can be seen in Figure 4, with closer inspection of the portrait showing the intricate stitches that make up her dress and revealing the level of care placed in the craftsmanship. Later in the nineteenth century, photography became a popular form of memorialization. In most death portraits the deceased were situated in a way that allowed them to appear to be sleeping, as seen in Figure 5. Physical depictions of the dead coincide with Aries' proposition that people tended to grieve for longer periods during the nineteenth century, instead of the idea of letting go that mourners often utilize when grieving today.[54] Both constructed objects, like hairwork or photographs of the deceased, help create a sense of permanence for a grieving person.[55]

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[52] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 197.

[53] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 197.

[54] Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 13.

[55] Maureen Daly Goggin, and Beth Fowkes Tobin. *Women and the Material Culture of Death*, (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), 2.

Figure 4: Memorial portrait of Catharine Schultz. Her dress is embroidered with silk string, while her body has been painted. Shultz died at the age of forty-three, but this portrait portrays her at around the age of fifteen, suggesting a need to express an idealized version of the deceased.[56]

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[56] *Memorial Portrait of Catharine Schultz, 1789-1832*, c.1838 Oil paint and silk thread on silk, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, United States, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/16588.

Figure 5: A daguerreotype of a deceased woman named Harriet Lamb. In this photo, Lamb has been placed, as if sleeping, in her coffin. The inclusion of photography moves away from the idolization seen in mourning portraits.[57]

Poems were another popular way of expressing oneself throughout the Victorian era. Many of the surviving poems we have today were kept in personal journals or diaries, and the contents range from the death of a child to the memorialization of a friend. Nineteenth-century women's death poems can also be found published in newspapers or periodicals from the time. More popular writers would release a collection of their poems to be purchased as books, which often contained multiple poems referencing death within. An example of a particularly moving

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[57] Marcus A. Root, *Portrait of Harriet Lamb*, 1/2 plate daguerreotype, Philadelphia: 1853. Lamb-Sykes Family Papers Collection at the University of Michigan William L. Clements Library, Michigan, https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/death-in-early-america/post-mortem-photo-types.

poem from the time contains themes of the viewing of the long past dead, the death of a young child, and the attempt to understand the nature of death:

> *All waiting: the new-coffined dead,*
> *The handful of mere dust that lies*
> *Sarcophagused in stone and lead*
> *Under the weight of centuries:*
> *Knight, cardinal, bishop, abbess mild,*
> *With last week's buried year-old child.*
>
> *After the tempest cometh peace,*
> *After long travail sweet repose;*
> *These folded palms, these feet that cease*
> *From any motion, are but shows*
> *Of—what? What rest? How rest they? Where?*
> *The generations naught declare.*
>
> *Dark grave, unto whose brink we come,*
> *Drawn nearer by all nights and days;*
> *Each after each, thy solemn gloom*
> *We pierce with momentary gaze,*
> *Then go, unwilling or content, to*
> *The way that all our fathers went.*[58]

The questioning of death proposed in this poem was still a new occurrence that began in the eighteenth century, flowing into the nineteenth century, and differs from the quiet acceptance that came before.[59]

When the poem's author compares the death of a child to that of high-ranking church officials, the reader is reminded of *the great equalizer*. The great equalizer is a term for the concept that all beings are made equal through death. Though the anonymous

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[58] Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, "The Cathedral Tombs" in *Poems*, (Boston, Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 221-222.
[59] Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 13.

author lived in the United Kingdom at the time of the poem's publication, it was reprinted in the United States presumably because of its popularity. Another change that occurred during the nineteenth century concerned whose death was the focus. While previously the focus was on "one's own death"; the focus shifted to "the death of another person."[60] Women seem to be especially vibrant in their questioning of death because they not only dealt with the death of loved ones but faced the possibility of their own mortality during childbirth.

Apparel etiquette standards during mourning periods were especially restrictive for both genders. The time dedicated to wearing mourning clothes varied depending on a person's personal or familial relationship with the deceased.[61] However, women's mourning dress and the accompanying period of observance were even more restrictive and went on for a longer period.[62] Plante states that strict adherence to mourning rituals was expected to be practiced by women.[63] This responsibility was also coupled with the need to purchase or make new mourning clothes for the upcoming funeral.[64] Magazines and other printed publications often devoted entire sections to adherence to correct mourning attire. However, these practices varied as the nineteenth century progressed and customs changed.[65] Plante makes note of the few similarities that authors of mourning etiquette manuals of the time concurred upon, stating that "Most authors agreed that 'deep' mourning prohibited wearing kid gloves. Rather, cloth or silk were an acceptable substitute. Also, no jewelry was to be worn for the first month, and trim work (embroidery, puffs, plaits on dresses) was not allowed. Mourning handkerchiefs of fine linen were required to have a black border, as were mourning cards."[66] This

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[60] Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 55-56.

[61] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 197.

[62] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 199.

[63] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 197.

[64] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 199.

[65] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 201.

[66] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 201.

very public display of mourning was attributed to being respectful to the deceased person but also shows the outward need for grieving that verge on the performative.

Despite women's roles becoming more passive, this does not mean that women themselves were passive mourners. Expressions of grief were very important to the people of the nineteenth century and women still had to show their community support. Calling cards were popular before the widespread use of phones, as visitors could leave them by the door if the homeowner was gone.[67] Most women's calling cards were often decorated with floral motifs. Figure 6 shows a mourning calling card, which is indicated through the black border.[68]
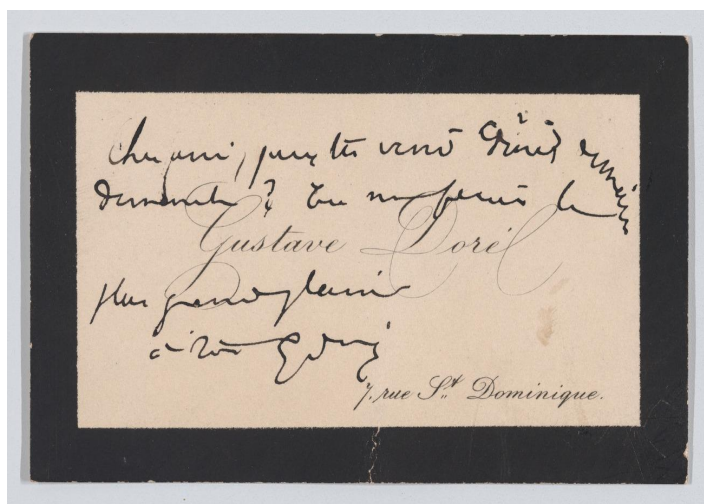

Figure 6: A man named Gustave Dore's calling card.[69]

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[67] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 124.

[68] Anonymous, "*Gustave Doré, calling card,*" Engraving. 2 ⅜ in x 4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/722745.

[69] Anonymous, *"Gustave Doré, calling card."* This card shows a black border, which is customary for a person in mourning. Though this calling card is from France, cards like this one were used in nineteenth-century America as well.

Contributions to Death: Sickness, Mental Health, and War

As many of the books examined in this essay mention, life expectancies during nineteenth-century America could be very short. Historians sometimes debate whether mortality rates are skewed because of the high mortality rate of infants and children. However accurate the death statistics are, the reality of death was vivid in the minds of Americans in the nineteenth century, especially women who were preparing for birth. Plante lightly touches upon the topic of death in her book as she examines etiquette rituals that nineteenth-century mourning involves.[70] The preparation mothers took on as they awaited childbirth often included the acceptance of death, as many women heard or saw others die from childbirth.[71] As technology progressed, new treatments and medicines were being applied to women in labor. This could include potentially toxic chemicals, like chloroform, but also drugs like opium and laudanum which were administered to relieve labor pains.[72]

The idea of revolutionary medical practices extends into women's mental health as well, with the nineteenth century seeing the rise of the "new treatment," or what was believed to be more humane treatments of mental health. Yet, while there was a push to treat those in need of mental aid with more stability, the reality was far from ideal.[73] In a time when women's mental health was terribly misunderstood, the dangers of being emotionally unwell could tarnish a woman's reputation, or worse, it could cause her to

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[70] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 196-201.

[71] Robert V. Wells, "A Tale of Two Cities: Epidemics and the Rituals of Death in Eighteenth-Century Boston and Philadelphia," in *Mortal Remains, Death in Early America.* Edited by Nancy Isenberg and Adrew Burstein. 56-67 (University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2012), 61.

[72] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, 73-75.

[73] Colin Jones, "The 'New Treatment' of the Insane in Paris: The Formation of the Lunatic Asylum under the French Revolution," *History Today*, (1980): 10. This article shows the way in which the "New Treatment" disguised the ongoing brutality against mentally ill individuals.

be locked in an asylum indefinitely.[74] It is here that we do not see the physical death, but the social death as women were now out of society's vision and therefore forgotten. Outside institutions, attempts to cure a woman's "hysteria" could range from bed rest and exercise to more dangerous prescriptions. For example, cure-alls were commonly prescribed and marketed to women. However, it was known that these medicines contained high amounts of alcohol, which could lead to addiction.[75] This incomprehension coupled with the strain of unrealistic standards in the cult of domesticity, shows the mental strain that women were subjected to. Plante concurs with this sentiment as she describes the nineteenth-century women's lifestyle as having "had a negative impact on [women's] general well-being."[76] Plante continues by suggesting that one of the common causes of mental anguish was as a woman aged, she was outliving her usefulness because women were the primary caregivers and age reversed their caregiving role onto their families.[77] Historically, women were the caregivers to children, the elderly, and the sick and dying, but as they aged they could no longer properly hold these customary roles.

Caring for the sick was often seen as a woman's duty to her family and community because compassion was seen as a virtue. The spread of disease during the nineteenth century created epidemics within highly populated areas, and the worse those epidemics became, the more societies' funerary structures began to break down. Robert V Wells's "A Tale of Two Cities: Epidemics and the Rituals of Death in Eighteenth-Century Boston and Philadelphia" examines how epidemics can lead to the "temporary abandonment" of normal death rituals.[78] The social rituals

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[74] Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House; Or Nellie Bly's Experience on Blackwell's Island,* (New York: Norman L. Munro, 1877), 162. Nellie Bly's undercover journalism of an American insane asylums during the nineteenth-century showcases multiple women assigned to internment, despite being completely sane.

[75] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 185.

[76] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 185.

[77] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 178.

[78] Wells, "A Tale of Two Cities," 56.

associated with death were the first to break down, as fears of catching the sickness influenced people to stay apart. Wells includes examples of the social breakdown witnessed by a woman named Elizabeth Drinker during a yellow fever epidemic in 1793 in Philadelphia:

> On September 4, she recorded the "sad story" of a young woman who had been serving as a nurse, but when she herself took sick, neighbors sent her off. Eventually, a magistrate arranged for a cart to take her to the hospital, and there she was denied admittance, only to be found dead in the cart the next morning. The story of Robert Broker was further evidence of social disarray. The night Broker died of yellow fever, his wife went into labor. She called out her window for help, but no one responded until the following morning, when she, too, was found dead, though the newborn was alive. Given Drinker's own eagerness to care for her family and friends, this violation of social duty must have appalled her.[79]

Elizabeth Drinker's account is an example of what an already vulnerable woman can be subjected to when faced with extreme circumstances. Not only were yellow fever epidemics common but also "whooping cough, cholera, diphtheria, influenza and tuberculosis."[80] Women were often the primary caretakers for their sick family members in times of turmoil. However, as seen in the case of Shrouding Women, women were also discouraged from becoming physicians as it was believed that the vulgarity was too much for a delicate woman to handle. This was not the universal opinion of all nineteenth-century persons, as seen in an 1875 issue

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[79] Wells, "A Tale of Two Cities," 65.
[80] Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America,* 178.

of *Godey's Lady's Book*, where the argument for the inclusion of female physicians was made.[81]

Concerns with the decay of bodies also became an issue as medical professionals during the nineteenth century worried that putrefaction could be dangerous to nearby communities.[82] As cemeteries near cities became overfilled, the rural cemetery movement was born which was the practice of moving cemeteries away from populated areas. This idea is reinforced in Laderman's *The Sacred Remains,* which describes the need to lay bodies to rest in a natural setting.[83] The push to lay individuals within the beauty of nature coincides with the nature appreciation seen in morning rituals, like previously discussed hairwork bouquets. Laderman adds that another contributing factor to rural cemeteries was the church's loss of power, as "the church began to lose its close association with the space of death."[84] Industrialization and urbanization were increasingly associated with disease and sickness within cities, to combat this, people began wanting to lay their loved ones to rest in beautiful pastures instead of city cemeteries.

Waves of disease were not the only major event during the decade that caused an upheaval of social norms. It is estimated that the death toll during the American Civil War was about 600,000 in both the North and South.[85] Before the acceptance of embalming, the remains of soldiers were buried in nearby cemeteries or mass graves. Laderman also recognizes the impact the Civil War had on death culture and the role women played as families and nurses to soldiers. Despite the breakdowns of funerary practices during wartime, there were attempts to give the bodies of soldiers who passed in makeshift hospitals proper burials. Laderman mentions

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[81] Sarah J Hale and Louis A. Godey, "Ladies Physicians in England" in *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine,* Vol 90., (Philadelphia, Jan - June 1875), 185, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00322058h&seq=7.

[82] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains, 1799-1883*, 96.

[83] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains, 1799-1883*, 69.

[84] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains, 1799-1883,* 69.

[85] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains,* 1799-1883, 96.

"Hospital Nurses, along with members of the Sanitary Commission and Christian Commission," who buried soldiers in simple coffins with a White grave marker inscribed with the information of the deceased.[86] Laderman parallels the improvised funerary practices during the war with the fact that burial practices could become cruder as one got closer to the front lines, noting the accounts of tightly packed graves and mounds of unburied amputated limbs.[87]

Much of the feminine perspectives of the American Civil War come from the memoirs of nurses. According to Ashley Byock in her examination of nurse's memoirs, most of the context within was about the mechanics of hospitals and the suffering of dying soldiers in contrast to "the epic scale of the war's battles, generals, and even political contexts" that can be seen in a male perspective.[88] It should be noted that most published memoirs were from the perspectives of northern women, who had better access to publishers, leaving a slightly skewed historical representation.[89] Despite this, the memoirs of female nurses in the Civil War show an attempt to bring the normal social aspects of domesticity to the chaotic sidelines of the war.[90] One theme Byock finds throughout many memoirs is "the re-unification of family… as the nurse becomes the mother/wife/sister of the soldier and attends to him in place of these women."[91] Survivors of the Civil War, from both the North and South, male or female, had to collectively mourn the massive amounts of dead.[92] Death was a great unifying aspect of nineteenth-century people, yet the limitations of technology meant that some aspects typical in nineteenth-century mourning were unachievable during the war. However, some women still

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[86] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains, 1799-1883*, 107.

[87] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains, 1799-1883*, 108.

[88] Ashley Byock, "Domesticating Death in the Sentimental Republic: Commemoration and Mourning in U.S. Civil War Nurses' Memoirs," *Women and the Material Culture of Death*, (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), 158.

[89] Byock, "Domesticating Death in the Sentimental Republic," 158.

[90] Byock, "Domesticating Death in the Sentimental Republic," 160.

[91] Byock, "Domesticating Death in the Sentimental Republic," 161.

[92] Byock, "Domesticating Death in the Sentimental Republic," 159.

journeyed to battlegrounds and hospitals in search of lost loved ones.[93] As grieving families do today the retrieval of remains can help to form some form of closure from seeing and preparing the body as they normally would have.

The Impact on Today

It is true throughout American history that mortuary practices aid in easing the suffering of the living, but that can be specifically applied to the nineteenth century as the connection with death is a prominent aspect of this period's culture. As the decade progressed and technology advanced, funerals made their way further from the homes of women and instead became another product of industrialization. Indications of the funeral industry that are so familiar to us today are traced back to the nineteenth century. Yet there seems to be a modern disconnect between today's America and death that has evolved since the nineteenth century passed. This idea is only emphasized by Laderman's proposal that, through the trauma caused by the violence in the twentieth century, acceptance of death culture was less prevalent and resulted in "the gradual displacement of death in daily living."[94] To corroborate this Philippe Aries explains the calmness people preceding the nineteenth century had as they prepared to die, as they were portrayed "with no theatrics."[95] Aries continues his comparison of the old and new by saying: "the old attitude in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where we dare not utter its name… I do not mean that death had once been wild and ceased to be so. I mean, on the contrary, that today it has become wild."[96]

Though the beautifully macabre is now a taboo in our society, it has not altogether disappeared. A fascination with death persists through the popularity of true crime, and other morbid

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93 Laderman, *The Sacred Remains, 1799-1883*, 111.

94 Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 7.

95 Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 13.

96 Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 13-14.

media, which has its own deeply misunderstood history.[97] Today as in the past it is important to process grief through memorializing the dead. Women today still provide a sense of comfort to their families and friends during periods of mourning, but this role is not only designated to them. The people of the past were not afraid to face death head-on because they dealt with it so frequently, but with the upheaval of norms caused by the COVID pandemic, we now relate to the past a bit more than before. Even though life expectancy today has increased with modern medicine and science, current citizens should remember to live life more fully because we too will transition to the next phase of existence, a fact that the people of the nineteenth century knew so well.

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[97] For more on the roots of America's obsession with true crime see Daniel A Cohen, "Blood Will Out: Sensationalism, Horror, and the Roots of American Crime Literature" in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 31-55.

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