



MOURNING & MANNERS

Peggy M. Baker, Director & Librarian
Pilgrim Hall Museum

From prehistoric burials to the 21st century, societies have paid respect to departed members of the community and publicly acknowledged loss. The rituals developed by each society are part of that society's shared standard of conduct – in other words, they are “etiquette.”

During the Middle Ages, English society developed an elaborate mourning etiquette. A variety of rituals evolved: endowing chantries to pray in eternity for the salvation of the dead, tolling of the funeral bell, use of pall-bearers, wearing black cloaks, funeral sermons, eating and drinking after the burial, erecting tombstones and elaborate memorials. As with all social events, there were class distinctions in these burial customs. In death, as in life, etiquette advertised social status.

The Pilgrims did not leave their good manners behind when they sailed to America. In addition to their Bibles, the Pilgrims also owned etiquette books. The inventory of Pilgrim William Brewster contained two: Richard Braithwaite's *Description of a Good Wife*, a versified guide to female conduct by an English country gentleman, and Stefano Guazzo's *The Civil Conversation* (translated from Italian into English by George Pettie in 1581). In the nomenclature of the 16th and 17th century, “conversation” means “conduct” or “behavior.” In the book, Guazzo (who was writing for the merchant class and not for the nobility) said “my meaning is, that civil conversation is an honest, commendable, and virtuous kind of living in the world.”

As well-mannered as the Pilgrims were, however, they turned their backs on the traditional religious rituals. The Pilgrims were good Calvinists who believed in predestination. Prayers for the dead and other burial ceremonies, therefore, served no religious purpose and could even be seen as rebellion against the will of God. The Pilgrims also avoided wearing black and other displays of mourning, which were seen as artificial and ostentatious.

By the mid 1600s, however, ritual began to creep into New England. One of the earliest traditions to resurface was the practice of sending gloves to friends as an invitation to serve as pallbearers. Soon, tombstones were being erected and mourners were once again dressing in black.

During the next two centuries, America – and England – changed dramatically.

As both societies became more urban, the role of women changed. Once women had been partners, albeit silent partners, in a family's economic life. By the 19th century, women occupied a separate sphere of influence – idealized as guardians of society's morality and sense of spiritual purpose. By the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), women were in charge of the ceremonies of society.

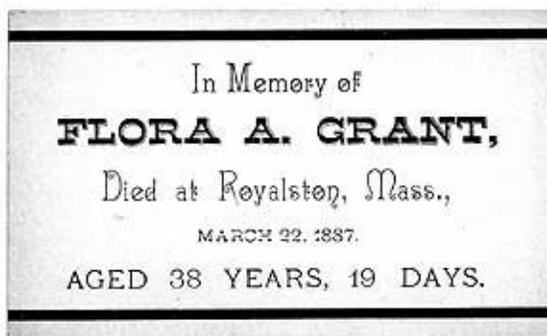
All aspects of ritual gained emotional impact, heightened by imagination. Even death became romanticized. Socially acceptable means of showing grief were developed, following rituals that were well defined by etiquette books (and often calling for considerable effort and expense). By the middle of the 19th century, in both England and America, a growing professional and managerial “middle class” led to the rise of a consumer culture that was not limited to the aristocracy of either lineage or property. Social newcomers were beginning to regularly amass large fortunes. This social upheaval fostered an almost universal feeling of social inferiority, leading to heavier reliance on an increasingly complicated set of etiquette rules, resulting in a more formal style of behavior for all occasions, including mourning.

The English were the first to adopt mourning cards to announce a death in the family.



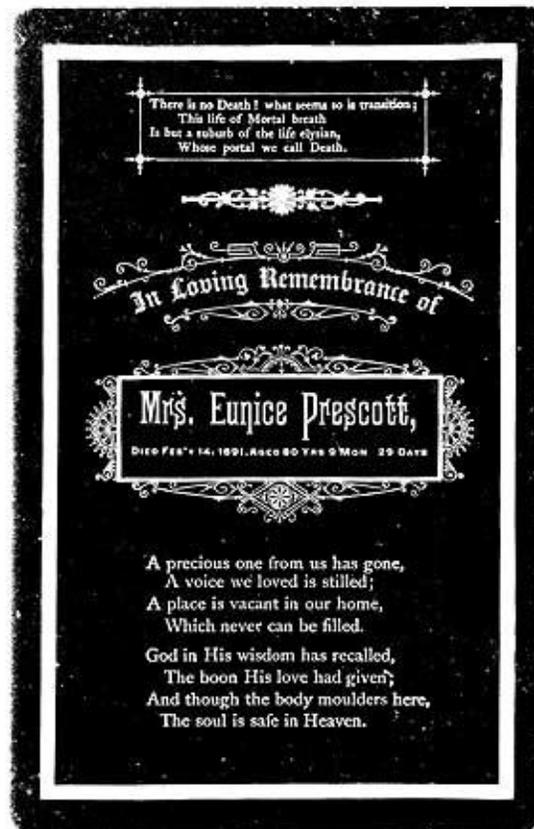
An English card, with floral decorations and an urn on top of a small casket
"In affectionate Remembrance of Sarah Bright Browett, (Beloved Child of Mr. Thomas Browett), who died August 19, 1858, aged six years."

This earliest style of mourning card, highly ornate and embossed, was never common in America. By 1874, however, the *Bazar Book of Decorum* noted that "It is now beginning to be the custom in America, as in England, to send to relatives and friends cards edged deeply with black, upon which is printed or engraved the name of the deceased, with his age, place, and date of his death."



A simpler yet still decorative American memorial card: "In memory of Flora A. Grant, died at Royalston, Mass., March 22, 1887, aged 38 years, 19 days."

A later style of mourning card, with gold engraving on black, was used well into the 20th century.



"In loving remembrance of Mrs. Eunice Prescott, died Feb'y 14, 1891, aged 80 yrs 9 mon 29 days."

The most elaborate rules of social conduct had to do with mourning attire for women. Degrees of black - deep mourning, first mourning, second mourning, half mourning; allowable ornamentation and styles of jewelry; edgings on handkerchiefs; timetables of grief-by-fashion ranging from three weeks mourning for a casual acquaintance to two years (or life) for a husband - the strictures were elaborate and each detail was regulated by custom in an almost universally agreed-upon code, virtually identical across the entire universe of Victorian etiquette books. The rules laid down by Mrs. E.B. Duffy in 1877 are echoed in countless other manuals: "Deep mourning requires the heaviest black of serge, bombazine, lusterless alpaca, delaine, merino or similar heavy clinging material, with collar and cuffs of crape... If the dress is not made en suite, then a long or square shawl of barege or cashmere with crape border is worn. The bonnet is of black crape; a hat is inadmissible. The veil is of crape or barege with heavy border. Black gloves and black-bordered handkerchief... all pins, buckles, etc., must be of jet..."



JET MOURNING JEWELRY.

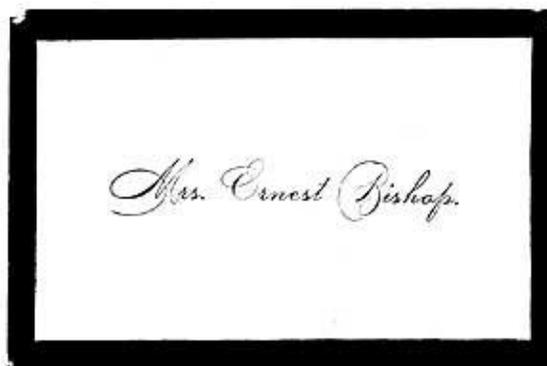
Jet jewelry, as shown in Harper's Bazar 1879, was popularized by Queen Victoria. Jet is a variety of fossilized coal; the most prized and expensive is from Whitby, England. This set is composed of a necklace, bracelet, pendant, locket and earrings.



MOURNING MANTLE.—FRONT.—

A mourning mantle from Harper's Bazar, 1884, with crepe collar, deep cuffs and hem. The veiling on the mourning bonnet indicates this outfit is meant to be worn during deep mourning.

Even at the time, the deeper psychological and social significance of this obsessive attention to mourning attire was not entirely overlooked. An etiquette book published in 1888 by the Butterick Publishing Company – with a vested interest in encouraging bereaved women to don new and distinctive mourning clothing - nevertheless noted that the "masculine interpretation of mourning attire is, perhaps, more nearly right than the meaning which is often ascribed to it by women, and to which the latter yield a sort of homage that they unconsciously allow to overrule their judgment. Men look upon mourning as an outward mark of *respect*. Women are too apt to fear that the omission to clothe themselves in black will be interpreted as an evidence of lack of *affection*."



Victorian etiquette extended to the proper format for calling cards. Butterick's etiquette book advised, "Widows' cards are bordered with black, the exact depth of the border being of course decided by personal taste. Etiquette, however, voices the sentiment of people of good sense and refinement in counseling that if the customary quarter-inch be passed it will only be after careful consideration."

By the late 1880s, some etiquette experts were allowing sensible variations in mourning attire, particularly in the use of the heavy mourning veil. Mrs. Georgene Corry Benham complained in 1891 "It is a thousand pities that fashion dictates the crape veil, but so it is. It is the very banner of woe, and no one has the courage to go without it. We can only suggest to mourners wearing it that they should pin a small veil of black tulle over the eyes and nose, and throw back the heavy crape as often as possible, for health's sake."

The death of Queen Victoria in 1901 marked the beginning of the end for elaborate mourning rituals in both England and America. The 20th century dawned and with it new opportunities for women to participate in careers and in sports and other aspects of public life. In a reaction against the ostentation and rigid social structure of Victorian life, deep mourning became seen as morbid and self-indulgent.

By 1924, etiquette books were advising that “we see less deep mourning worn than formerly, people being guided by their own wishes or by the expressed wishes of the departed, who sometimes ask that no outward signs of mourning be shown for them.”

Deep mourning may be a curiosity of the past but etiquette is still with us. “Dear Abby” and “Miss Manners” still advise as to mourning rituals. Emily Post, in her 1928 *Blue Book of Social Usage* perhaps summarized it best: “At no time are we so indifferent to the social world and all its code as when we stand baffled and along at the brink of unfathomable darkness into which our loved one has gone. The last resource to which we would look for comfort at such a time is the seeming artificiality of etiquette. Yet it is in the hours of deepest sorrow that etiquette performs its most real service. All set rules of social procedure have for their object the smoothing of personal contacts, and in nothing is smoothness so necessary as in observing the solemn rites accorded to our dead.”

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