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The Influence of the Domestication of Death and Communal Grieving
in Nineteenth-Century Cedarville (1898 – September-December)

Kathy Roberts

2015

A community's view of death reveals its perspective on life. Though death remains constant throughout time, various communities address death differently. Researchers can study a group's worldview by analyzing how the community addresses illness, grieves, and remembers its dead. People have always feared death, but a paradigm switch began in America after the Enlightenment. However, while the secular world transitioned its view on death, Christians remained unique in their view of death, even though their views differed by denomination. While America was domesticating death in the late nineteenth century, the Presbyterian-influenced Cedarville community had a unique perspective of death which included grief as a way to stabilize society.

The Age of Enlightenment followed by the Romantic Era caused Americans to begin to domesticate death. During the Enlightenment Era's emphasis on rationality, people sought to place death within an ordered framework and standardized process. This began "The Dying of Death" in America (Farrell 4). Death scholar, James Farrell, cites one metaphor for this paradigm shift; "Death is regarded no longer as a king of terror, but rather as a kindly nurse who puts us to bed when our day's work is done. The fear of death is being replaced by the joy of life" (5). Modern life increased life expectancy and the pace of life which focused people's minds on living rather than their inevitable dying. In response to the Enlightenment, the Romantic Era attempted to counter the movement's rigid rationality by emphasizing aesthetics, intuition, and emotion. Thus, in the nineteenth century, people's views on death began to reflect Romantic sentimentalism on top of Enlightenment order. Farrell writes, "Sentimental Americans

domesticated death, thus trying to overcome their terror of it, by developing socially acceptable channels for Romantic expressionism” (34). Some of those “socially acceptable channels for Romantic expressionism” included preserving the body, dressing the deceased body in a suit, photographing the body then having a portrait drawn of it, and burying it in a vault. People also announced loved ones’ deaths with mourning cards and publicized their grief through the popular genre of child death poetry. Additionally, Americans in the nineteenth century began burying people in “Garden Cemeteries” rather than in family and church graveyards. These new, rural cemeteries featured “a large expanse of lanes, grass, trees, and shrubbery” (Graham 197). Farrell writes, “At death, said rural cemetery supporters, the individual could expect to commune with God, with nature, and with deceased family and friends” (Farrell 105). Nineteenth-century Americans domesticated death through sentimentality to lessen people’s fears of it.

While secular America was domesticating death to lessen its terror, Christians also transitioned their beliefs about death. Prior to the Victorian Era, American Protestants viewed death grimly because they believed that God smote people with death as a punishment for sin and depravity. Farrell explains that during this time, “Like the Presbyterians, most Americans of the evangelical era believed that God intervened directly with death to chastise his sinful children and to remind survivors of their own mortality” (Farrell 36). As the secular world transitioned their views about death, Protestants also began to see death as more of a natural part of life to transition Christians from this life to the next. Thus, Protestants started viewing death as less of God’s punishment and more as a reason to celebrate the life of the deceased person and gather for societal solidarity. Scholar Margaret Baker Graham explains the transition from Puritan to Presbyterian mentalities as, “Fear of hell gave way to the promise of salvation as Protestants embraced the notion of a God of love rather than a God of vengeance” (Graham 198). In

addition to the increase in ceremony surrounding a person's death, the Christian community evidenced this by the increase in Protestants who visited graves in the nineteenth century. In *House and Home Papers*, Harriet Beecher Stowe explains that Christians' view of death should differ from that of the secular world; "If there is anything that ought to distinguish Christian families from Pagans, it should be their way of looking at and meeting those inevitable events that must from time to time break the family chain. It seems to be the peculiarity of Christianity to shed hope on such events" (Stowe 330). In Victorian America, Christians distinguished themselves by viewing death with hope and using mourning to unite the community. Grief scholar Dana Luciano writes about Protestant mourning, "Grief, effect and sign of a human nature that was to be respected, even venerated, for its capacity to form deep bonds to others, was additionally depicted as an element of a divine plan that, when read and engaged properly, would turn the subject (and, in some deployments, the nation) toward redemption" (Luciano 8). Nineteenth-century Protestants sentimentalized death along with the rest of society, but they also viewed mourning as an opportunity to bring the community together and refocus them toward redemption.

Martha McMillan portrays the nineteenth-century Cedarville community as having a Protestant view of death. The McMillans and much of the Cedarville community was Presbyterian which is reflected in their treatment of Aunt Jane's death. On September 29, 1898, Aunt Jane was badly burned by a "little fluid lamp" she had owned for years. Martha, James, and numerous family and community members cared for her night and day for six days until she passed away. The next day, the community hosted a funeral service for Aunt Jane in her parlor. The reverend gave a message, and several people read scripture and prayed. Afterward, the group went to the community cemetery to bury her. These activities indicate both the

sentimentalization of death and the Presbyterian emphasis of hopeful grieving with the byproduct of communal solidarity. For example, they buried Aunt Jane in a rural cemetery rather than a family or church graveyard. Additionally, Martha comments about Aunt Jane's passing in pleasant rather than grim words. For example, on October 4, 1898, Martha writes, "She peacefully passed away - What a long busy life she had had - How much we will all miss her - She was in her 86" year - but never seemed old - always young." By researching the historical progression of America's views on death, readers of Martha McMillan's journals will realize the Cedarville community's strong Presbyterian beliefs manifest in their communal grieving and perspective of death as a celebration of life.

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