

The Significance of Mourning Wear During the Civil War

By Brooke Fail

Intro

- **Death rates:**

- Mortality rates before the war:

- 1.7 percent to 5 percent (Marshall, 2014).
 - Higher death rates lied in northern states (Marshall, 2014).
 - These death rates are 2 to 3 times the rates of today (Marshall, 2014).

- Causes of death before the war:

- typhoid, tuberculosis, typhus, dysentery, malaria, and cholera (Marshall, 2014).
 - Lack of clean water and advanced medicine (Marshall, 2014).

- Mortality rates after the war:

- Death rates increased by 29.8% (Marshall, 2014).

Intro

- Mourning wear was popularized by Queen Victoria (Lutz, 2016).
 - Her mourning lasted for ten years (Lutz, 2016)
- The omnipresence of death gave birth to a unique way in which women grieved.
- Scarcity of resources made following customs difficult, but not impossible.

Intro

- Mourning was primarily women's work.

“Women's tears consecrated the deaths of their men, ensuring their immortality in Southern memory as in the arms of God -and ratifying soldiers' individual martyrdom. Such deaths not only contributed to Confederate victory but also exemplified the sacred conception of Christian sacrifice with which the South had identified its nationalist effort. And in honoring men's supreme offering, women reminded themselves of the comparative insignificance of their own sacrifice” (Faust, 1990).
- Mourning wear was not vain.

“becomes me fiddlestick” she wrote “what do I care whether it becomes me or not? I don't wear black because it becomes me. I wear mourning because it corresponds with my feelings.” (Faust, *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, 2008).
- Mourning was a way in which women could express their feelings and process the stages of grief along with the stages of mourning (Faust, *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, 2008).

Literature Review

- Stages of mourning
 - Deep Mourning: A year and six months (Lutz, 2016).
 - Half Mourning: six months (Lutz, 2016).

Literature Review

- Gowns in Deep Mourning
 - Color: Black
 - Fabrics: Bombazine, crape, silk, cotton, or wool (Lutz, 2016).
 - No luster (Harvey, 2023).
 - Medium weight (Harvey, 2023).
 - Course hand (Lutz, 2016).
 - Style trends:
 - High neck (Harvey, 2023).
 - Front button-down closure (Regan, 2022).
 - Tight sleeves or coat sleeves (Regan, 2022).
 - Sleeves began past the shoulder (Regan, 2022).
 - The skirt was bell-shaped and gathered at the waist (Regan, 2022).
 - Little to no embellishments (Harvey, 2023).

Figure 1

Death Becomes Her Gallery Views



Note. 2015, photograph of mourning wear, located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, NY, United States.

Literature Review

- Gowns in Half Mourning
 - Color: Black, shades of gray, brown, mauve, or lilac (Lutz, 2016).
 - Fabrics: Taffeta, bombazine, crape, silk, cotton, or wool (Harvey, 2023).
 - Could have higher luster (Harvey, 2023).
 - Medium to light-weight
 - Softer hand
 - Style trends:
 - Neckline could have been lowered (Harvey, 2023).
 - Front button-down closure (Regan, 2022).
 - Pagoda sleeves, tight sleeves, or coat sleeves (Regan, 2022).
 - Sleeves began past the shoulder (Regan, 2022).
 - The skirt was bell-shaped and gathered at the waist (Regan, 2022).
 - More embellishments were permitted (Harvey, 2023).

Figure 2

Photograph of Half-Mourning Gown



Note. By Brooke Fail, photograph of half-mourning gown, 2023, located at the Old City Cemetery in Lynchburg, VA, United States.

Literature Review

Figure 3

Mourning Bonnet



Note. By Brooke Fail, mourning bonnet, 2023, located at the Old City Cemetery in Lynchburg, VA, United States.

- Bonnets
 - Mary Steward style bonnet (Lutz, 2016).
- Veils
 - Made from sheer black organdy (Harvey, 2023).
 - Had a thick black border along the edge (Harvey, 2023).
 - The thicker the border, the deeper in mourning (Harvey, 2023).
 - Attached to bonnet (Harvey, 2023).

Literature Review

Figure 4

Hair Jewelry from the Civil War



Note. By Brooke Fail, hair jewelry from the Civil War, 2023, located at the Old City Cemetery in Lynchburg, VA, United States.

- Accessories
 - Jewelry:
 - Jet necklaces (Harvey, 2023)
 - Hair jewelry
 - “In endowing the human race with hair, nature unwittingly contributed to the nineteenth century a substance which could not have been improved upon for the intimate expression of sentimental feeling. ... It remained for the flamboyant Victorian imagination to develop to the full the possibilities of hair as a decorative material” (Lichten, 1950).
 - Black parasol (Harvey, 2023).
 - Handkerchief with a black border (Harvey, 2023).

Literature Review

- Dyeing methods:
 - The color black:

“reflected the melancholy mood of bereavement, it visually identified the bereaved and it represented a shared language of respect for the dead” (Strange, 2002).
 - Dyeing the color black required more than one dyestuff and multiple trips to a dye pot (Falls & Smith, 2020).
 - Plant-based mordants: tannin (Falls & Smith, 2020).
 - Walnut: rich in tannin and did not need a mordant (Falls & Smith, 2020).
 - Deepening the color with multiple dyestuffs (Falls & Smith, 2020).
 - Iron
 - Indigo

Methods

- The average mourning woman in Civil War America
 - Middle-class
 - Deep Mourning
 - Color: Black
 - Fabric: Bombazine with crape detailing
 - Medium-weight bombazine
 - Light-weight crape
 - No luster
 - Styles:
 - High neckline
 - Front button-down closure
 - Coat sleeves
 - Sleeves begin past the shoulder
 - Bell-shaped skirt that is gathered at the waist
 - More embellishments were permitted

Results

Figure 6

Civil War Mourning Wear Illustration



Note. By Brooke Fail, Civil War Mourning Wear Illustration, 2023, Lynchburg, VA, United States.

Figure 7

Civil War Mourning Wear Illustration



Note. By Brooke Fail, Civil War Mourning Wear Illustration, 2023, Lynchburg, VA, United States.

Conclusion

- Mourning wear represents a big aspect of women's history and their experience during the Civil War
- Although often seen as vain, mourning wear is a beautiful part of history that shows the way in which women used clothing to display on the surface the emotions they felt inside.
- Through modesty, color, fabric, jewelry, and veils, Civil War women used the means they had to create a powerful statement of respect towards those they loved and lost.

References

- Clinton, C. (2015). Mourning in America: Death Comes to the Civil War White Houses . In C. Clinton, *Exploring Lincoln* (p. 71). New York: Fordham University Press.
- (n.d.). *Death Becomes Her Gallery Views*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- Fail, B. (n.d.). *Hair Jewelry from the Civil War*. Liberty University, Lynchburg.
- Fail, B. (n.d.). *Mourning Accessories from the Civil War*. Liberty University, Lynchburg.
- Fail, B. (n.d.). *Mourning Bonnet*. Liberty University, Lynchburg.
- Fail, B. (n.d.). *Photograph of Half-Mourning Gown*. Liberty University, Lynchburg.
- Falls, S., & Smith, J. (2020). Plain-Style People. In S. Falls, & J. Smith, *Overshot* (pp. 62-86). Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Faust, D. G. (1990). Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War. *Oxford University Press*, 1214.
- Faust, D. G. (2008). *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. New York: Random House.
- Godey's Lady's Book*. (1851).
- Harvey, J. (2023, January 20). "Mourning Wear in the Mid 19th Century". (B. Fail, Interviewer)
- Jalland, P. (1996). *Death in the Victorian Family*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lichten, F. (1950). *Decorative Art of Victoria's Era*. New York.
- Lutz, D. (2011). The Dead Are Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair jewelry, and Death Culture. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 131.
- Marsh, D. (2016). Review: Death Becomes Her: A Century of Mourning Attire. *Cambridge University Press*, 217-222.
- Marshall, N. (2014). The Great Exaggeration: Death and the Civil War. *University of North Carolina Press*, 4-5.
- Regan, J. (Director). (2022). *Friday Focus—Women in Black: Fashioning Mourning in the Nineteenth Century* [Motion Picture].
- Strange, J.-M. (2002). 'She Cried a Very Little': Death, Grief and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, c. 1880 - 1914. *Taylor and Francis*, 143-161.
- The Britannica Dictionary Definition of Mourning*. (2023). Retrieved from Britannica.com:
<https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/mourning#:~:text=3,widow%20was%20dressed%20in%20mourning>
- Tortora, P. G., & Marcketti, S. B. (2015). *Survey of History of Costume*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.