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'I'm glad she has her glasses on. That really makes the difference': Grave goods in English and American death rituals

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Abstract

Very little has been written about the inclusion of grave goods in contemporary English or American death rituals. Typically, the study of grave goods has fallen within the spheres of archaeological and anthropological research, with sociological theories of material culture considering how objects left behind by the dead form part of the lives of the bereaved. In this article, the author focuses on the objects that are placed with the recently dead in English and American death rituals. She does so by drawing on data collected from a funeral directors' establishment in England and a funeral home in the USA. Based on this research, she concludes that the practice of including grave goods, such as clothing, eyewear, jewellery, photographs and letters in English coffins and American caskets is common and that this practice should not be neglected when considering the death rituals of different contemporary Western societies.

Keywords

death, England, grave goods, identity, memory, ritual, USA

Introduction

> Dear Gram,
>
> You gave me this cross. And
> Now I am giving it back to you,
> because of your kindness here

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> on earth. And I always want you
> to know you are my best friend
> For ever and ever.
>
> Love,
> Tara[1]
>
> P.S. I hope you don't mind,
> but maybe I will take the
> barbies from your house
> and keep them.
>
> (Letter placed in casket, Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

Deborah Lupton (1998: 143) argues that objects form an integral part of human social relationships. Once an object is acquired by an individual, it can move from the realm of 'mass-produced commodity' into the realm of 'personal possession' because it becomes invested with meaning for the owner and therefore de-commodified. Objects are 'endowed with these meanings through the process of linking them with abstract values that are not inherently attached to them' (p. 140) and, as a result, they become infused with emotion. This is important in understanding how objects with an apparent lack of practical use or value, such as expired driver's licences, old employee name badges, or expired membership cards (here Lupton draws on the research of Nippert-Eng, 1996), can propagate a particular sense of self (Lupton, 1998: 143). David Parkin (1999), in his discussion of objects carried in flight by forcibly displaced people, argues that when a situation arises in which people cannot invest their self in social interaction with the people around them, they invest it in 'non-commodity, gift-like objects which, through their association with stories, dreams and the transmission of skills and status, temporarily encapsulate precluded social personhood' (p. 313). He identifies photographs, letters, clothing, jewellery and other personal effects with little or no utilitarian or market value as objects that can be used as vessels for social personhood, to be filled before flight (objectification) and emptied under more favourable circumstances (reversible objectification):

> When people flee from the threat of death and total dispossession, the things and stories they carry with them may be all that remains of their distinctive personhood to provide for future continuity. Take those away, that little which they have, and social death looms closer, making more possible biological death itself, perhaps preceded by trauma. (p. 314)

De-commodified, or indeed non-commodity, objects such as photographs, jewellery, letters and clothing are often identified as important objects imbued with emotion and identity.

In the context of death and bereavement, research has investigated how the possessions of the deceased are distributed amongst mourners and how these objects perpetuate an ongoing relationship with the dead. Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey (2001: 43) draw on Lupton's (1998: 144) work to argue that, through extensive or repetitive use, objects such as shoes 'become singularised, bearing the stamp of individuality and everyday experience of their owner, and move more towards the ontological state of "self" (subject) than of "other" (object)'. Thus, in consumer cultures, objects such as clothing can become

infused with the self-identity of the owner: ‘Social interaction with and through material forms tends to destabilise subject/object boundaries such that material objects can become extensions of the body and therefore of personhood.’ Hallam and Hockey employ this argument to demonstrate how deceased individuals can retain a physical presence amongst the living through objects that were once their belongings. More recently, Christine Valentine (2008: 159, 162) has argued that material objects such as clothing and jewellery ‘mediate continuing personhood and sustain the bond between the living and the dead’ by evoking ‘an intimate and sometimes sensory experience of presence’. Margaret Gibson (2008: 2) has focused specifically on objects that ‘were once the personal and household belongings of the living, now deceased’, such as furniture, photographs, clothing and jewellery, to explain how the dead continue to have a presence in the lives of the living. Through interviews conducted with bereaved people in Australia, she identified these objects as catalysts for ongoing social relationships with the dead, which manifest themselves in certain ways, such as impersonation and haunting. These studies are useful in understanding how objects engender (an ongoing sense of) the deceased’s self for mourners, and how a relationship with the deceased is actively maintained by mourners via material objects. However, these authors do not consider objects that are no longer within the realm of the living because they have been given to the dead. This is an important category of objects that is notably absent from the literature just cited – not only because it means that these objects are no longer available to be used by the living (after all, if a deceased mother’s wedding ring is buried with her it cannot be passed on to future generations as an heirloom), but also because of what it can tell us about how mourners understand the dead.[2]

The study of grave goods has historically fallen under the remit of archaeology. Mike Parker Pearson (1999: 7) argues that grave goods can vary in type and purpose:

> Grave goods may include items which were possessions of the deceased, or they might be mourners’ gifts to the dead. They may serve to equip the dead body for the world of the afterlife, or to prevent the dead coming back to haunt the living. Grave goods may be selected to serve as reminders of a person’s deeds or character.

Similarly, Heinrich Härke (2007) identifies 11 different categories of grave goods: equipment for the hereafter; inalienable property; potlatch; indicators of rank, status and identity; metaphor; gifts to the deceased; gifts to a deity; remains of the funeral feast; disposal of polluted items; protection from the living; and forgetting. He, too, argues that objects categorised as ‘grave goods’ can vary in type and purpose, and suggests that there are several, often multiple, possible purposes to objects included as grave goods. Both Härke (2007) and Parker Pearson (1999) reason that such inclusions have a direct link to memory. Härke draws on Richard Bradley’s concept of ‘ritual time’ (1991; developed from Bloch, 1977) to argue that the inclusion of grave goods necessitates or facilitates a multiplicity of the role of memory, particularly if the inclusion involves a point at which mourners can observe the objects *in situ* before the funeral: first, there is memory of the past, which is recalled by the objects on display; second, there is memory of the present, which is being created by the ritual and which can be recalled by spectators in the future.

The findings presented in this article can be informed by archaeological theories about the purpose of grave goods. However, one of the problems with archaeological inference is that it is based on conjecture (Parker Pearson, 1999). As noted by Peter Ucko (1969: 262):

> Without a widely orientated approach to archaeological interpretation, the data revealed by the archaeological material itself tends to become swamped by unitary and all-embracing explanation. It is true to say that the careful use of ethnographic data has served to do one major thing – to present the possibility of varied and heterogeneous reasons or causes for a practice.

Parker Pearson (1999: 83) further argues that archaeological rigour is weakened by the ‘uncritical use of ethnographic data, often second-hand or based on few observations and not fully documenting possible variability, potentially resulting in misleading generalizations’. That said, in a volume of papers presented at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in 1997, Meredith Chesson (2001: 7) argued for an ongoing dialogue between archaeologists and anthropologists because they ‘utilise similar types of data and theoretical frameworks in their analyses to explore very complex structures in modern and past communities’. It is of course important to remember that ‘different decisions made by different cultures about what is to go and what is to stay constitute much of the raw material by which we know the past’ (Barley, 1995: 85), meaning that we should not assume *a priori* meaning or purpose behind the objects. It is thus important to consider ethnographic data as being geographically and temporally bound to the setting in which they are collected (Reinharz, 1984). Sociological data collected first-hand can therefore directly inform on this practice, as their collection and interpretation move away from the ‘uncritical’ use of ethnographic data and towards a critical heterogeneity within different Western ritual contexts.

Data collection

In order to contextualise the findings presented herein, a brief overview of the research is necessary. The project underpinning this article was comparative and ethnographic, with two 3-month periods of qualitative data collection – one in a funeral home in the USA, the other in a funeral directors’ establishment in England. The goal was to consider how mourners understand and relate to dead bodies in what might be considered their most mundane setting – the American viewing room and the English chapel of rest – between the moments of death and of final disposal. A second intended goal was to compare mortuary practices in two ‘contemporary Western societies’ so as to dispel the oft-assumed homogeneity of ‘Western’ death rituals.[3]

The chief finding of the project is that within the two mortuary rituals observed, the role of the dead body is notably different. Viewing at Blake’s Funeral Home in the USA is a public, social event where immediate and extended family, friends, acquaintances, work colleagues and friends of the bereaved gather together in the presence of the visible dead body. Viewing times are advertised in the deceased’s obituary as well as on notice boards outside the funeral home premises, and the viewing room is essentially a public space that can be accessed by anyone who chooses to enter it. By contrast, viewing the body at Durnford Funeral Directors’ in England is a family-centred, private activity usually involving only the immediate family and possibly the deceased person’s closest friends. Information regarding the opportunity to view is disseminated via the next-of-kin, who act as gate-keeper to the body. Viewing the body typically occurs in ones and twos rather than in large groups. For example, if disparate small groups arrive simultaneously to view the same individual, they will usually enter the chapel separately, one group

waiting in the reception until the other has left the chapel. Thus, the public nature of viewing at Blake's versus the private nature of viewing at Durnford's leads to different experiences of the dead body for mourners.

The physical space of each premise was considered to both influence, and to be influenced by, the nature of these experiences. As I have discussed elsewhere (Harper, 2010a), there is marked variation between the US funeral home and the English funeral directors': the latter is a private, businesslike space, while the former is a public, home-like space. As a direct result of these variations, the methods I used to conduct my observations varied. At Blake's Funeral Home I adopted the role of 'greeter', a member of staff who welcomes mourners as they enter the premises, guides them to the appropriate viewing room if necessary, and generally assists the public as required. In this role, I was able to observe viewings at length, often interacting with mourners over many hours or days. At Durnford Funeral Directors', I undertook the role of 'receptionist'. This placed me as the first point of contact for members of the public entering the premises, guiding and assisting them as required.[4] In each fieldwork site, the primary method of data collection was observation within the funeral premises; this was supplemented by semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews were conducted at the end of each 3-month period, with mourners whom I had met during the first month of the placement.

Although, as noted earlier, there are significant differences between the American and English rituals observed, there are also notable similarities. In both settings, I was struck by the inclusion of a wide variety of objects being placed alongside the body in the coffin or casket. These included photographs, jewellery, eyeglasses, rosaries, money (coins and bills), articles of clothing, sports paraphernalia, hats, packaged food, walking sticks, alcohol, tobacco, plush toys, flowers, poems, letters and cards.[5] Although all of the objects listed are worthy of consideration, in the remainder of this article I will discuss the most commonly included objects observed, namely clothing, eyeglasses, jewellery, photographs and letters. I will conclude with a brief discussion of objects placed in the coffin or casket during the liminal period (between the moments of death and of final disposal), but removed prior to final disposal. As will be demonstrated, the importance attached to the act of inclusion, and indeed to the objects themselves, is striking regardless of whether it occurs in the public space of the American viewing room or the private space of the English chapel of rest.

Grave goods

Clothing

> Though they cannot feel the cold and do not suffer pangs of modesty, we often like to dress up the dead. They may wear clothes that they never did in life. They may wear their best, or those vestments that will be least missed. They may be dressed in apparel which is made specifically for the dead, a category that includes shrouds and winding cloths … All of these elaborate preparations are for that brief moment when the corpse is displayed for the living before disappearing for ever. It is in those final moments that the living's memories of the dead person are congealed. (Parker Pearson, 1999: 9)

Articles of clothing constitute the primary type of grave goods in both settings as they were never removed from the body before final disposal. Although there were instances of purchased attire in both settings, the predominant choice of dress for the deceased was their

own clothing. There were occasions when the pre-deceased[6] selected their own post-mortem garb. For example, in a case at Durnford's, Catherine chose the dress she was buried in because she had worn it when visiting her (now deceased) husband in hospital and he had said he liked it. In a case at Blake's, Jay had told his wife prior to his death that he wished to be buried in his favourite John Wayne tie; he was subsequently dressed and buried in a black sports coat, black pants (trousers), a green shirt and the requested tie. That said, the data indicate that it was predominantly the next-of-kin, or those making the funeral arrangement, who chose what the deceased would be dressed in. These decisions were often based on selecting attire that was significant to the deceased, or that in some way was considered to represent the deceased's identity. In the case of Kathryn, at Blake's, her two daughters told me that the unexpectedness of their mother's death a few weeks prior to Christmas resulted in her being dressed in the outfit she had chosen as her 'Christmas outfit' the week before she died:

SH: Did you guys choose what your mother wore when she was laid out?
Darla: She'd bought it, with Jody.
Jody: My mom and I went shopping the weekend before, and she'd bought a... Christmas... outfit, to wear. She bought it, might as well wear it.

(Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

Mrs McGloughlin, whose deceased husband was also viewed at Blake's, elected not to have her husband dressed in his shoes because 'shoes were for going to the doctor':

Someone asks if Mr McGloughlin is wearing his shoes or his slippers. Mrs McGloughlin replies, 'just his socks'. One of the young women says, 'That's what he's most comfortable in. That's what he's most comfortable in.' Mrs McGloughlin explains that that's what he was wearing most of the time; shoes were for going to the doctor. Someone asks if his slippers are in the casket, and Mrs McGloughlin says, 'No, I just put some dark socks on him.'

(Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

Mrs McGloughlin's decision, based on her husband's behaviour in life, reinforced his personhood for other mourners present, who identified this decision as appropriate because 'that's what he's most comfortable in.' Thus, the choice made was considered 'right' by mourners because they were able to ascribe and promote pre-mortem characteristics to the dead body as a result. This was also evident at Durnford's. For example, Chris and Ryan told me that their mother was dressed in 'her favourite outfit':

SH: Who decided what she was dressed in?
Ryan: Me dad.
Chris: Me dad picked the clothes, yeah.
SH: Cause it was a skirt, wasn't it? A skirt and a jacket.
Ryan: That she was comfortable with, yeah.
Chris: And a bright coat. [laughs] A very bright coat. But that was me mum, weren't it?
Ryan: Yeah.
Chris: Yeah. Just her favourite outfit.

(Durnford Funeral Directors', England)

In another case at Durnford's, Tony's body was dressed in a funeral gown provided by the funeral directors because of the decomposed state of his body. His family understood this as necessary, but wanted it to appear as though he was wearing his 'Man City' football top. When his estranged wife and brother arrived to view Tony in the chapel of rest they brought the football top with them, which I laid on top of the gown prior to their entering the chapel. After they had viewed him, Tony's brother expressed his satisfaction with, and emphasised the importance of, seeing Tony 'in' this top by exclaiming: 'He'd be chuffed he has his Man City shirt on! He was mad for them!'

The importance of clothing as a signifier of self is well documented. Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 97, cited in Layne, 2000: 327) argues that clothing is 'quite literally at the borderline between subject and object'. This is further reinforced when considered in the light of Lupton's (1998) argument about how commodities become infused with emotion. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that a deceased person's favourite clothing is commonly included as grave goods.

Eyeglasses

Another potent signifier of personhood included as a grave good in both settings was the deceased's eyeglasses. In both settings, the inclusion of eyeglasses as a grave good is notable. They were either placed on the deceased's face or included elsewhere with the body, and were typically not removed when the casket or coffin was closed. In the public viewing space of Blake's, their inclusion was often discussed by mourners, as evidenced during Kathryn's viewing:

> There are three women sitting on the sofa against the back wall, facing the casket. Another woman sits down in the seat next to the sofa and says to the women: 'She looks just like herself, doesn't she? I like her more with her glasses on. I don't know, her eyelashes look so *golden*. I brought her glasses and made them put them on her. I just wanted to check with you that that's okay.'
>
> (Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

Thus, the inclusion of Kathryn's eyeglasses as part of the visual display within the public viewing was cause for discussion about the physical appearance of Kathryn's dead body. In Mrs Dessey's case, upon first arrival at Blake's, her daughter and son-in-law described to me their satisfaction with her appearance, placing particular emphasis on the inclusion of her eyeglasses:

> Her son-in-law says: 'She really was so thin. But they filled out her face.' He gestures to his cheeks and says: 'That's her.' Her daughter continues: 'And I'm glad she has her glasses on. That really makes the difference.'
>
> (Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

In both these cases, eyeglasses remained on the deceased's face throughout the duration of the viewing, and both deceased women were subsequently buried wearing them. At Durnford's, eyeglasses were just as prominently included, despite the lack of public viewing. Although the English data do not contain evidence of eyeglasses being discussed

by mourners within the viewing setting, it is replete with evidence that the inclusion of eyeglasses with the body was considered significant because they were included as grave goods in so many of the cases. The data from both settings therefore suggest the value of including such highly personalised objects as intrinsic to the ongoing death ritual, rather than just the mortuary ritual.[7] Anthony Synnott (1993: 92) argues that the face is the prime locator of identity because it is understood to mirror the soul. Thus, objects permanently associated with the face will be 'transformed through embodied use from an impersonal commodity to a de-commodified aspect of the self' (Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 43). It is therefore unsurprising that eyeglasses can become 'extensions of the body and therefore of personhood' (Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 43), particularly if habitually worn by the pre-deceased. Drawing on the archaeological theories noted earlier, eyeglasses as grave goods can be understood in different ways: as the inalienable property of the deceased, as equipment for the afterlife (so the deceased can see, and therefore function in, their surroundings), to prevent the dead coming back to haunt the living (as perhaps without their eyeglasses they will not be able to find their way to their destination), or to serve as reminders of a person's character.

Jewellery

Jewellery, including rings, earrings, bracelets, medals, brooches, pins, necklaces and the like, was another type of object frequently observed within the casket or coffin. In one case at Blake's, Jordan's mother purchased an expensive gold chain that was placed in Jordan's casket prior to it being closed. She had given him an identical chain as a Christmas gift only a few days prior to his death – 'the only thing he wanted' – and it had gone missing; once a new one had been purchased and placed in the casket, she told one of the funeral home staff: 'I feel so much better knowing he has it.' In a case at Durnford's, Troy's chain was placed around his neck while he was in the chapel of rest, though it was removed prior to the coffin being closed; following cremation, his remains were divided into two urns and the necklace was placed into the urn that was subsequently given to his girlfriend.

As noted earlier, jewellery is often laden with emotional meaning, and its presence in the casket or coffin suggests that it can be considered an extension of the subject. At Durnford's, one woman who came in to view was 'fascinated' by the wedding ring Jean was wearing, tying it in to her own relationship with Jean's pre-mortem identity:

> The woman proceeds to tell me that she is 'fascinated' by the wedding ring Jean is wearing: 'It must be at least 50 years old!' She explains that Jean was her godmother, and that she was bridesmaid at Jean's wedding. She gestures repeatedly to where the band was sitting on Jean's finger by pointing to her own ring finger on her left hand. She says again: 'I'm fascinated by it.' I understand her gestures and statements to mean that she is 'fascinated' by what the ring symbolises, how it has been present through so much of her life and through so many events.
>
> (Durnford Funeral Directors', England)

Thus, the ring is understood as an extension of Jean's self insofar as it embodies her history; tied into this, it signifies the relationship between Jean and her goddaughter. In an example

from Blake's, before Mrs Fox's casket was closed, her fiancé removed (and kept) the diamond engagement ring she had on her left-hand ring finger, replacing it with a plain gold 'wedding' band that subsequently remained in the casket once sealed. The act of exchanging these rings was witnessed by the mourners present during the final viewing period; thus, through this symbolic gesture, Mrs Fox's fiancé altered both his own identity, as well as that of his 'wife', establishing a nuptial bond between them in the presence of those who might otherwise have attended their actual wedding. The inclusion of Mrs Fox's 'wedding' ring as a permanent grave good serves to represent the permanence of their bond. Objects such as wedding rings represent what Lewis Binford (1971: 17) identifies as the social persona of the deceased, reflecting part of the deceased's 'social identities maintained in life and recognised as appropriate for consideration at death'. After all, it is interesting to consider that if Mrs Fox's body were to be examined by archaeologists in future, and the gold band on her left-hand ring finger were understood as a symbol of marriage, Mrs Fox would be interpreted as having been a married woman. The examples from Blake's demonstrate how the public nature of viewing allows the extended family and broader community to share, with the dead body, the (re)construction of identities, while at Durnford's this is a private experience. The symbolic exchanging of rings undertaken by Mrs Fox's fiancé was witnessed by many, while the sharing of stories prompted by Jean's wedding ring occurred between the mourner and her son (who was also present in the chapel), and a staff member, away from Jean's presence.[8]

Photographs

Photographs were also commonly included in both the caskets at Blake's and the coffins at Durnford's. These photographs might depict the pre-deceased at various stages of her or his life, in different settings, and with others; they might also be portraits of other people such as children and grandchildren, spouses, families and so on. At Durnford's, photographs were most frequently left in the coffin once closed. Indeed, there were many examples of photographs placed into the coffin when no further viewing was expected to take place. In Joe's case, his widow Margaret became upset after she realised that she had forgotten to take certain photographs with her to place in Joe's coffin when she and her son went to view him:

> **Margaret**: I was takin' [the photographs] to put in the coffin with 'im you see. You know, of me grandsons, an' me an' 'im, to put all round 'im. An' when I went I hadn't got 'em with me. Well, that upset me. But luckily me son went in the next mornin'.
>
> (Durnford Funeral Directors', England)

Thus, her son returned to Durnford's specifically to place these photographs into the coffin, remaining in the chapel only long enough to do so (less than one minute) before departing. In another case at Durnford's, Mrs Schofield's daughter brought in many photographs (along with several other objects) for placement in the coffin, though she did not want to view her mother. She therefore handed the photographs and other objects to me for placement into the coffin. In a further case, when Vicky and her brother-in-law viewed Tony in the chapel of rest at Durnford's, they deliberately arranged the multiple snapshots they had

brought with them, within the coffin, despite not intending to view him again. These photographs remained in the coffin when it was closed.

At Blake's, most photographs placed into the casket formed part of the public viewing. For example, a small photo album was placed in Jordan's casket, which mourners could flip through while standing at the casket's side. Furthermore, photographs were often propped up against the back of the casket, facing mourners, so that they could be viewed alongside the deceased. In contrast with the practices at Durnford's, it was common at Blake's to remove photographs prior to the casket being sealed, thus contributing to their meaning as decorative adornments of the deceased's body in the viewing room. That said, there were instances of mourners putting snapshots into the casket during final viewing, usually under the deceased's hand, tucked away in the deceased's clothing, or under the blanket. These were not to be removed prior to the casket's sealing. The function of these hidden photographs was therefore not decorative, as they did not form part of the public display.

The inclusion of photographs is notable because they are potent representations of self and identity, not only for the pre-deceased, but also for mourners. If the (re)construction of identity is occurring in a public forum such as the viewing room at Blake's (Harper, 2010a), the inclusion of photographs within the casket contributes to the ongoing (re)construction of the deceased's self and the selves of mourners within her or his social network. However, if the photographs placed into the coffin or casket are not intended to be seen (either because viewing is not anticipated, or because the photographs are hidden away), their meaning and purpose become ambiguous. They can be understood as reminders of the deceased's deeds or character (as argued by Parker Pearson, 1999), or they can be understood in the context of forcibly displaced people, when conditions of distress and trauma mean that 'preserving connections between persons and objects becomes more urgent' (Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 42). For some mourners, objects such as photographs may provide comfort to the deceased as they make an unfamiliar journey to an unknown destination. When describing the items placed in both her mother's and her father's coffin, Mary told me that, on the one hand, the objects had been included for the benefit of the mourners, but, on the other, they were included to make her deceased parents 'feel safe':

SH: What did it mean to you to have those things with your dad?

Mary: That he was safe. That he had part of us with him. I put a teddy in with Mum, because she used to cuddle it here [gestures to her shoulder]. I also put a Mother's Day card that I bought her that year. Similar with me dad: a card. My sister put a note in; that's to do with her. I mean, obviously they were dead. It was for us, I would say, you know. If you think about it properly... it's to comfort us, not to comfort them, in essence, because they don't know anything about it, do they? The rosary beads and the prayer book, obviously to do with religion. And the way we'd been brought up, that's just somethin' they do, the personal little things. I mean, the soft mints I put in with Dad and soft mints I put in with Mum... that was my humour. I have got a quirky humour. But by the same token, Mum and Dad would have *laughed* like mad, and for me to imagine that obviously helps. The teddy, again, was wantin' somethin' that represented Dad with Mum, really. You know, I think we might've actually put a photograph in with Mum. I know we didn't put one in with Dad. We might've put a picture of Mum and Dad [in Mum's coffin] so that they were together. But the Mother's Day card I put in with Mum... the

> words were very, very appropriate, how I felt about my mum. I suppose if you really think about it, it's to make you feel better, isn't it. But... it's wantin' them to know, or... um... wanting them to feel safe really, wherever they're going.

(Durnford Funeral Directors', England)

Letters

The inclusion of letters or cards written to the deceased post-mortem was observed in both settings.[9] On many occasions I came across sealed envelopes that had been addressed to the deceased and placed somewhere within the coffin or casket, suggesting that the contents of the letter were for the recipient only:

> The process of closing Tammi's casket occurs in a flurry of activity. I notice that one of the mourners has put a sealed envelope down under the casket pillow. I quickly cover it up again, feeling like I've uncovered somebody's private secret.
>
> (Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

> I look under the border of Mrs Townsend's coffin. There is one white, letter-sized envelope, sealed, with 'Mum' written across it. It looks quite full. There is also a card-sized envelope with the words 'To Laura, My Flower' written across the front.
>
> (Durnford Funeral Directors', England)

These documents speak of an intentional psychology (Gell, 1998; see also Harper, 2010b) attributed to the deceased by mourners, mediated through the dead body alongside which the documents are placed. This is demonstrated in the fieldnote excerpt quoted at the beginning of this article: the text is from a letter written by Tara to her deceased grandmother. In her letter, Tara gave her grandmother a gift for the afterlife, reinforced their ongoing relationship and asked for permission to keep her grandmother's dolls. I observed Tara writing this letter in the viewing room during one of her grandmother's viewing periods. It was placed in the casket during the viewing, removed prior to the casket being closed, and subsequently placed into an urn along with her grandmother's cremated remains. By writing this letter in the presence of her deceased grandmother's body, Tara created a new memory of her relationship with her grandmother that she will be able to remember in future, should she choose to.

Removing goods from the casket or coffin

The decision about whether or not objects should remain in the casket or coffin was not necessarily straightforward. After all, by including an object as a grave good, it is removed from the realm of the living. For example, in one case at Blake's, several objects were placed in Mrs Klein's casket, including a photograph, some flowers, a blanket called 'Dickie' and a book entitled *Top Ten Reasons Why I Love My Mom* that her teenaged daughter Stacey had made when she was a child. Towards the end of the viewing, Stacey was asked which items she wanted left in the casket and which she wanted removed:

> Stacey comes up to the casket. Mrs Klein's mother says to her: 'You need to decide what you want left in the casket.' Stacey replies: 'I want it all left.' Mrs Klein's mother says: 'What about Dickie?', referring to the blanket that has been placed over Mrs Klein's hands. Stacey replies: 'I want *her* to have it!... I want *her* to have it!' Mrs Klein's mother says: 'Okay. What if you miss Dickie later?' Stacey replies: 'I want *her* to have it. I have another one!' I say: 'And the book?', and Stacey replies: 'I want *her* to have it!' Mrs Klein's mother says: 'And what about the flowers?' The second floral arrangement in the casket is a rose which reads 'mother'. Stacey says: 'I don't know! Should I take it out? I don't know!' Mrs Klein's mother replies: 'It's up to you. Don is taking his', indicating the chaff of wheat. Stacey says: 'Well, I guess I'll take it then.'
>
> (Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

In Mr Finnigan's case at Durnford's, his two daughters elected to remove the two war medals that were originally intended for burial with his body:

> Mr Finnigan's daughters tell me that they've decided to have the two round medals taken off him before he's buried. One of them says: 'We were going to have him buried with them. But we've had feedback from various different people, and we're going to have them mounted in a frame. We have a photo of him in his uniform, so we're going to have them mounted with the photograph. So we've decided to take them out. So... unless he comes to us in a dream tonight saying "I want them left in!"...!' I say: 'Oh, that's really nice.' One of them then says: 'We've brought his cap in. He never went anywhere without his cap!' The other says: 'We kept forgetting to bring it in!' The other continues: 'And we're going to bring in another photograph tomorrow morning. We decided to bring that in as well. That'll stay in, won't it?' I say: 'Whatever you tell us to leave in, we'll leave in, and whatever you tell us to take out, we'll take out. So far the only things we'll take out are the two medals, unless you tell us otherwise tomorrow.' They thank me and leave.
>
> (Durnford Funeral Directors', England)

If objects are removed from the coffin or casket prior to its closing and sealing, they are not grave goods *per se*, as they are not being inhumed or cremated with the body. They are, however, symbolic grave goods as they are incorporated into the mortuary ritual alongside the dead body. They can be further understood by considering Hallam and Hockey's (2001: 43) assertion that in 'contemporary Western societies ... the material resources through which the deceased might retain a physical presence amongst the living become increasingly diverse and flexible.' Thus, objects placed in the casket or coffin that are subsequently removed and retained can be understood to have become a type of memory object: they become associated with the physicality of the dead body, as well as becoming reminders of the pre-deceased to whom they originally belonged, and therefore continue the bond between the (pre-)deceased and the bereaved. In her study of members of pregnancy loss support groups, Linda Layne notes that objects forming a direct, physical connection with the deceased baby's body – such as the blanket used to wrap the baby – are infused with the baby's personhood and therefore represent the baby 'from a distance':

> Nanci Hyneman of the Boise, Idaho, SHARE group tells of how after learning of a baby girl born with Trisomy 18 she made an 'extra small' afghan for this child who weighed only 4lbs. When the baby died, the mother told Nanci that she wanted to bury her daughter in the blanket

> but was having trouble parting with it. Nanci made her another one just like it and the Mom was able to keep the one that was 'filled with her daughter's fragrance' to use 'to sleep with or just hold' when she 'needs comfort'. (Layne, 2000: 333)

Such objects frequently take the form of jewellery. For example, in a case observed at Durnford's, Mrs Black came in to view her deceased husband several times and with different mourners. The first time, she requested that Mr Black's wedding ring be placed on his finger while he was in the chapel of rest, to be removed before the coffin was closed. Mr Black was then viewed several times by his wife and others. Prior to the coffin being closed, the ring was removed and returned to his widow. In a case at Blake's, when the staff asked Mrs McEwan's family if they wanted her to be buried with the silver bangles on her wrists, her son replied:

> My parents didn't have a lot of money but my dad gave her one bracelet for every year that they were married. No, I want those taken off... for the girls.
>
> (Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

'The girls', Mrs McEwan's three granddaughters of approximately 12 to 16 years of age, were present at the viewing and thus would have been in a position to see the bracelets on their grandmother's dead body. When I spoke to Mrs McEwan's daughter-in-law at the outset of the viewing about placing the bracelets on Mrs McEwan, the youngest granddaughter was present and the following took place:

> The funeral director hands me the bracelets, and I put them in an order with the wider ones on the outside and the thinner ones in the middle. I say to Mrs McEwan's daughter-in-law: 'Is this the right order?' She says: 'Half on each wrist. Like this.' She takes them from me, and separates them so that there are more on one wrist than the other. The youngest granddaughter says to her mother: 'Should I stay and help?' Her mother laughs and says: 'No, you can't help.'
>
> (Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

Hallam and Hockey's (2001: 13) argument that 'emotion and identity are … bound into memory as articulated through the interplay of embodied action and material objects' can inform this research. After all, given that Mrs McEwan's granddaughter was actively engaged in the process of dressing her grandmother's body with the bracelets she would eventually inherit, it is not difficult to imagine that her wearing of this inherited jewellery might cause her to enact 'a series of connections and identifications' between her own body and that of her grandmother.

Conclusion

Although the placement of grave goods in the coffins and caskets of contemporary English and American death rites has previously been entirely understudied, their inclusion is significant. Not only do they reflect the deceased's self and identity for mourners, but these objects can also be understood as equipment for the afterlife – whatever form that afterlife might take:

> 'We've put something in his top pocket, if that's alright.' I say: 'Whatever it is, is it to go with him?' He says: 'Yeah. It's just a cigarette, like. He liked a cigarette.' I say: 'That's not a problem.' The eldest brother says: 'No lighter, though. He'll have to get a light off someone else up there', and he gestures towards the sky as he says this. As they leave one of the other brothers says to me: 'Thank you. He looks fantastic.' They walk out. When I go through and check the chapel, I see that, aside from a single cigarette, they have put a shot-sized bottle of Jack Daniels in Mr Atkinson's breast pocket as well.
>
> (Durnford Funeral Directors', England)

> Final viewing begins. Two women approach the casket together. I noticed them at the viewings yesterday. When they arrive at the casket, one lifts up Mr Gillespie's hands while the other pulls out a coin and places it under Mr Gillespie's hands. They then walk away.
>
> (Blake's Funeral Home, USA)

As demonstrated in this article, research into the inclusion of grave goods in different contemporary Western rituals can provide insight into how mourners understand and relate to the dead with whom grave goods are placed. It can also inform the relationship between objects and subjects within death rituals. The objects that constitute grave goods can be understood in different, often multiple ways; as a result, the purpose of including such objects is not always clear, particularly when ownership and identity become fused. Items like Mr Finnigan's cap, for example, can be interpreted as equipment for the afterlife, as protection, or even as the disposal of a polluted item; however, as something he never went anywhere without, it can also be understood as inalienable property because it has become inextricably bound to his identity and personhood. As such, it should – or perhaps *must* – accompany him in his coffin. Although it has been argued that grave goods are a 'wasteful economic loss when they go beyond the token or symbolic because they cater to "imagined interests of the dead" over the "real interests of the living"' (Frazer, 1913: 149, cited in Kellehear, 2007: 36), the data from this research suggests that the 'imagined interests of the dead' continue to inform mourners' decision-making about what goods to include in English coffins and American caskets.

There is great scope for the study of contemporary grave goods to investigate the more traditional interpretations, such as differences in gender, class and afterlife beliefs, as well as the potential differences that exist between grave goods included for burial versus those included for cremation.[10] The practice of including grave goods within contemporary Western mortuary rituals should not be dismissed as exotic or antiquated (as argued, for example, by Parker Pearson, 1982). It is ongoing, and should therefore form an important part of research examining the role played by objects in the relationships between the living and the dead.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article for all participants, as well as for both fieldwork sites.
2. It is important to note that the body of a deceased individual can also be a site of identity for mourners. However, this article focuses specifically on the objects placed on or with the deceased body, rather than the body itself. For a discussion of the relationship between mourners and the dead body, see Harper (2010a, 2010b).
3. One concern with regards to this homogeneity is the assumed application of some of the classic death studies literature to Western countries in general. In particular, the works of Phillippe Ariès (1974, 1981) and Geoffrey Gorer (1965), as well as those of practitioners like Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) and Colin Murray Parkes (1972) (who draw their conclusions from context-specific research), are frequently indiscriminately applied to 'the West', leading to broad-brush stroke statements about Western society hiding, denying, or sequestering death. Most commonly, Ariès and Gorer are utilised to support the assertion that death is 'taboo' or 'denied' in 'contemporary Western society'. The research underpinning this article demonstrates that the nature of how death is understood and experienced is far more nuanced than that.
4. In each setting, I was identified variously as a researcher and as a member of staff. As a rule of thumb in both settings, if a member of staff identified me to mourners as a researcher I would also identify myself as such. If they did not, I would also not do so unless an opportunity in which it was appropriate to do so presented itself. Given the nature of the settings, I decided that I would proffer whatever information was requested by the mourner, allowing them to identify their own boundaries of comfort. The guidelines that governed my behaviour whilst in the field are best summed up by Reinharz (1992: 68), who advocates that the setting should govern what constitutes the 'appropriate' role, rather than methodological ideology. Thus I oscillated between degrees of overt/covertness, insider/outsider and indeed participant/observer (Gold, 1958), judging each situation individually. It is important to note, however, that I never participated as – nor allowed myself to be understood as – a mourner. Given that the population under observation was comprised of mourners, I was essentially always an observer rather than a participant. That said, my apparent role of staff member or employee afforded me a level of participation that would not have been granted otherwise. Thus, while I might not have been a mourner–insider, I was generally accepted as an employee–insider.
5. These are all further to the coffins and caskets themselves, which are also a form of grave good but which will not be discussed in this article.
6. The term 'pre-deceased' refers to the deceased person before she or he died.
7. There is no evidence of contact lenses being included as a grave good in my data. On a purely speculative level, and based on my observations, I would argue that if the pre-deceased wore contact lenses all the time and could not see (or, at least, could not see well) without them, endeavours would be made to include the lenses – possibly in their case – somewhere within the casket or coffin so that they were with the deceased if needed. Although this is speculation, it is based on the observance of why certain objects were included. Future research into the inclusion of objects within caskets and coffins may wish to consider this further.
8. One might speculate that Jean's goddaughter shared these stories with her son while they were inside the chapel of rest, and thus Jean's body was present during that interaction. Due to the nature of viewing at Durnford's, this remains unknown. However, even if this were the case, such a sharing of stories does not form part of the larger community experience.
9. This type of behaviour, writing messages to a deceased person, has been noted by Bethan Jones (1999) regarding dead celebrities such as Diana, Princess of Wales. Of course, in such instances these documents would not be considered 'grave goods'.

10. This study did not find a marked difference between goods included with individuals intended for burial versus those intended for cremation, but that may be because disposal methods were not the primary focus of the research. As the data included in this article indicate, grave goods were included in cases of both burial and cremation, though potential differences in how mourners understood these objects to be used (particularly in cases of cremation) remains speculative. The types of objects intended for cremation may change as the regulations on emissions become ever more stringent; further research would be needed to address this topic.

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