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## Materials for Mourning: Bereavement Literature and the Afterlife of Clothes

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### Introduction

There is a ready assumption in the contemporary West that clothing is a matter of limited significance, of interest only to the shallow and flighty woman. This position has been effectively critiqued by Carter (2003) who points out that this assumption is rooted in dualistic thinking and misogyny. This article further problematizes the idea that clothing is trivial by using bereavement literature to illustrate the crucial role played by clothing in mourning and the construction of memory in Western societies shaped by Judaeo-Christian beliefs.

Bereavement literature is an autobiographical form of writing that has become increasingly popular since the 1980s. Autobiographical writing is never merely a recitation of personal history, but rather a reflection upon what has happened, what this means and how it has shaped the life and identity of the writer. In writing autobiographically – and in grief memoirs in particular – the writer works towards a reflexive understanding of their own identity and life-story (Giddens 1991: 51). The reader is offered an intimate account of the struggle to construe meaning, but ironically the inner truth the writer pursues can only be expressed to an audience via familiar, even hackneyed, metaphors and tropes (De Man 1979: 920ff). Thus bereavement literature delivers what purport to be unmediated “insider accounts” of loss, but these texts are constrained by conventional formats and shaped by established cultural meanings. Grief memoirs are thus created at the interface between personal experience and culture and offer an opportunity to explore memorial practice both through what people do and the stories they tell to explain this behaviour.

The fact that there is a growing market for bereavement literature has been linked to the perception that modern grieving can be an isolating experience and reading grief memoirs gives mourners access to people in a similar situation (Leader 2009; Prodromou 2012). However, it could also be argued that these texts, in their idealisation of human bonds, offer the same sorts of pleasures to their readers as popular romances.

Bereavement literature tends to be written (or at least polished for publication) at a specific point in the grief process – the point at which recovery suddenly seems possible (Boston 1994: 163). The texts thus offer “compensatory paradigms”, in which authors portray recovery through self-help or enlightenment, or describe transition to a new form of normality in which loss is accepted as a perpetual wound which also gives access to an ongoing connection with the deceased (Prodromou 2012). The two approaches align with two contrasting theories of grief, one seeing the mourner’s task as detaching emotional energy from the love object in order to invest it in another (Freud 1917), the other emphasising the maintenance of bonds between the living and the dead (Klass et al. 1996; Valentine 2009).

In this article, I will review and discuss the way in which bereavement literature deals with the clothing of the dead. Many writers confirm the power of clothing to call the dead to mind: some authors go further, seeing their loved ones not only as represented by the clothing but as present

within it. The dual nature of this power is noted: if it is the presence of the dead that is evoked, this can be comforting, healing; if it is the manner of their death, or the fact of their absence that is underlined, it is deeply distressing. Strategies for controlling the evocative power of clothing are described by several writers. The literature also shows how clothing may become a medium for shaping and sharing memories of the deceased in a social context or for identifying with and impersonating them more privately. Fears that attachment to clothing may be a symptom of illness or disordered thinking are discussed, as is the complex and upsetting process of finally disposing of the clothing the dead leave behind.

In the sections that follow, italicised quotations come from either grief memoirs or (in the cases of Stallybrass and Daste) from personal reflections on cherished objects: non-italicised citations may indicate either that there are examples of a particular phenomenon in a grief memoir, or that this has been noted in a previous study.

### **The power of clothing to recall the dead**

Mourners instinctively use the sensory properties of clothing in an attempt to re-establish contact with those who have died.

*“What do you do with your child’s clothes when they still smell of them? You don’t. You leave things as they were. I am not alone when I take Caron’s clothes out of the wardrobe and smell them. It is hard, but I wouldn’t want to lose that connection.”* (Hunniford 2008: 82)

This can have a positive and transporting effect; the intimate possessions of the dead not only evoke their presence but provide a portal through which the mourner has access to the happier times of the past.

*“I close my eyes, my face already wet as I find her red sweater to pull it to my face as though I am hugging her tight..... I smile. I am with her in Bordeaux and we have all the time in the world.”* (Daste 2011)

However such memories can also underline loss and prove the catalyst for an outpouring of grief

*“the lovely clothes you always wore, pretty tops – I could see you in them, and when I smelt them, everything smelt of you. So powerful, so painful. I sobbed and sobbed.”* (Carol Chase, cited in Hunniford (2008: 271f)

The power of such memories means that mourners seek to control the experience, to enjoy the momentary presence of the deceased without suffering the harsh reminder of loss. Control is not always possible however: items may be encountered unpredictably and overwhelm the mourner with a tide of memory and grief (Thompson 2007).

*“I found your scarf behind the washing machine today. The red paisley scarf I gave you, I don’t know how many years ago, lying dusty on the floor. So poignant, that scarf in the dust. It’s the unexpected I can’t cope with..”* (Truman 1988: 54)

Various strategies are deployed to avoid being taken unawares. The bedroom of the deceased may be avoided (Thompson 2007), the clothes packaged safely away (Mara 1998) or the bereaved may keep evocative objects firmly in view so they cannot be surprised by them (Greene 2001: 54f). Some objects have to be disposed of because they are too upsetting to contemplate.

Why is the clothing of the dead so evocative? Perhaps because of its contradictory nature. It evokes, on one hand, the familiar, the safe and the beloved; on the other, the alien and the unknown. Its ephemeral quality collides with our longing for immortality. It forces upon our consciousness “the presence of absence” (Barthes and Leger 2010: 69).

The clothing of the dead forces the bereaved to act or react: to keep it, to wear it, to hold it or to anxiously avoid it. It appears to have agency (Hallam and Hockey 2000: 115f) and this is disturbing. Such clothing may be experienced as truly haunting, as pulling at the consciousness of the bereaved, forcing images of the dead upon them and impelling them to reject the cultural imperative to suppress their thoughts of the dead (Gordon 2008).

After photographs, clothing is the item most frequently retained as a reminder of the dead (Gibson 2008). While photographs are ‘dedicated’ memory objects, created specifically to document the past, items of clothing are ‘emergent’ memory objects, created for another purpose but acquiring layers of associations through everyday use (Hallam and Hockey 2000: 50). Clothing is destined to become imprinted with memories because of the durability of textiles (most have the capacity to outlive the user) and the way in which they retain the shape and smell of the wearer (Stallybrass 1999 p30). A garment is rendered unique by the body that wears and shapes it. Criminals have been identified by unique wear patterns on their jeans (Hauser 2005), and shoes, through wear, are transformed from objects of mass production to unique items which form part of the intimate self of their owner (Lupton 1998).

The self is shaped through experience of clothing (Miller 2010: 25-28). The infant’s experience of mother and self is mediated through the clothing both wear. Clothing constrains the way we move and interact; it teaches us which parts of self are shameful and which are for display. The self also comes, consciously and unconsciously, to express itself through clothing. An outfit will encode gender, status and age as well as communal values, personal attitude, affiliations and taste (Wilson 1985). Thus clothes shape people and people shape clothes. As a result of this symbiotic relationship, personhood comes to extend beyond the margins of the body to permeate clothing and valued possessions (Hallam and Hockey 2000: 42); a process that Parkin (1999: 303-4) refers to as ‘socio-material prosthesis’. There is little wonder that when someone dies their empty clothing should have the ability to poignantly evoke their presence.

### **Shaping and sharing memories**

Not all memories evoked by clothing are good.

*“They found Maman lying on the floor in her red corduroy dressing gown.... ‘I never want to see that dressing gown again.’”* (De Beauvoir 1965: 9 & 48)

The first sorting of a dead person's clothes is often a purge of those items which evoke particularly troubling memories and ideas. Those who have nursed parents or partners through a long decline will quickly discard the clothing associated with this stage as part of a strategy to reach beyond the tragedy of the moment and uncover more positive memories of the person who has died (Sheepshanks 1997: 150f). Parents' underclothing is disposed of promptly, and with some sense of discomfort, to avoid confronting the notion of their sexuality (Gibson 2008: 110). As the clothes are filtered away, sometimes over many years (Golden 1995:19) those which are kept appear to be those which recall the relationship when it came closest to ideal (Miller and Parrot 2009: 514): children will keep items that represent (good) parenthood, lovers will cherish items associated with romance.

Traditional and gendered ideas about roles and relationships inform the filtering process: the items kept when a woman dies often recall either her nurturing role or a glamorous "party self", while men may be remembered through clothing associated with a work role (military buttons, ties) or the clothing worn to pursue a sport or hobby (Gibson 2008: 26). This incremental restructuring of the array of objects that represent and evoke the dead person can be understood in anthropological terms as the translation of a specific, flawed individual into a generic and perfect ancestor (Miller and Parrot 2009; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Gibson 2008). This manipulation of material items parallels the way in which, through ritual and conversation, mourners edit and condense the known life of the deceased into a "durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their on-going lives" (Walter 1996). Thus the complexity and ambivalence of a whole life is reduced to an agreed storyline within the communal mythology.

*"Right from the moment she died my major preoccupation was with the meaning of her life...At the point of her death it suddenly seemed desperately important to be able to come up with some sort of positive summary of her life."* (Ardill 1994: 86f)

The propensity of clothing to externalise memories and link them to widely understood symbols of masculinity, femininity, duty and virtue allows it to catalyse the very kind of conversations in which family stories are negotiated and confirmed.

*"She was a very perfect mother. We had Chilprufe vests and a rocking horse.....She bought cheap and serviceable material and sewed dresses for herself in an hour."* (St Clair 1994: 39)

Clothing also helps to preserve and disseminate family stories once their content has been agreed upon. Some mourners use clothing as a strategy for bringing the dead into conversations, when their insatiable wish to talk about the one they have lost is thwarted by the reticence of the wider community (Ashenburg 2003: 206) or when they want to introduce the story of the deceased to a family member who does not remember her (Monckton 1994: 86). Other mourners use or give the clothing of the dead in a way that specifically aims to create a thread of continuity between family stories of the past and those of the present and future

“It gave me joy, and would have pleased Charlie, that William wore to his own wedding the *morning coat that had been made for Charlie for ours.*” (Sheepshanks 1997: 151)

### **Identifying with and internalising the dead**

Clothing unites the dead and the living most profoundly when it becomes a medium for identification and internalisation. The author James Barrie tried to assuage his mother’s grief at the death of his brother David by copying David’s stance and mannerisms and wearing his clothes, effectively reanimating the dead boy through his own body (Gibson 2008 p142). Dressing as the dead is a behaviour also noted by bereavement counsellors (Pincus 1976) and there is some evidence that seeing the dead person recalled in this way may be of comfort to other mourners (Evans 1995: 153).

Identification addresses several needs, as well as offering comfort to both the individual and other mourners it may arise out of a sense of obligation to the deceased. The guilt experienced by survivors simply because they were not the ones to die (Lindemann 1944) might make stepping into the role of the dead seem like an act of compensation (Gibson 2008: 146). Survivors may wish to complete life tasks on behalf of the deceased (Knatchbull 1995 : 3) or there may be a feeling that impersonation creates a form of immortality for the deceased (Gibson 2008:139).

Clothing, by representing social roles, facilitates identification. Stallybrass (1999) argues that inherited clothing can pass on a role identity in a similar way that the plot devices of Renaissance theatre allowed a servant in his master’s clothing to be taken for an aristocrat, or a woman disguised as a man to be taken at face value. The daughter who puts on her mother’s dress or apron is also assuming elements of her mother’s role and fully expects this assimilation to be recognised. For Freud, identification and incorporation – the recreation of the lost individual within the ego of the mourner - is a natural response to loss and crucially shapes future personality (Freud 1986: 134).

Identification often characterises the early stages of grief, and coincides with the desire for contact with the dead and somatic comfort:

*“Mummy is wearing all your clothes, the jeans you drew on, a Frankenstein stitch on the thigh, and a black top with a black fake fur collar. She wears the Ugg boots we bought in Cambridge last Christmas because you used to wear them.”* (Thompson 2007 : 41f)

Incorporation comes later; when there is recognition of the dead person’s influence in one’s own body and a happy acceptance of this. What starts with experiencing the dead person through wearing their clothes becomes a permanent effect. The dead shaped their clothes and their clothes shape the living.

*“Allon was dead....[but] if I wore [Allon’s] jacket, Allon wore me.”* (Stallybrass 1999: 28)

Habit, appearance and attitude may all be permanently altered.

*“I put on clothes that she might have worn, try on new glasses that turn me back into her. I worry what it means to be recreating her, but it’s also a kind of security when she stares back from my mirror, looks through my wardrobe, uses my kitchen. And it looks good.”* (Ainley 1994: 199)

Incorporation often provides the mourner with a sense that they have “resolved” the loss: the dead person is not gone, they are held fast within .

*“Losing her from my external life meant I could turn my attention inwards and see how insistently she is present in my psyche ..... It’s as though I am carrying her in my body, just as she did for me once.”* (Ardill 1994: 89f)

### **Healthy grieving or disordered thought?**

Many writers on grief warn about the dangers of attachment to the possessions of the dead. Queen Victoria’s insistence that the clothes of her dead husband were laid out in readiness for him daily was seen as a sign of madness by many of her contemporaries (Jalland 1996: 319f; Rennell 2001). Gorer (1965) spoke of the “mummified grief” of those mourners who leave unchanged the rooms previously occupied by the dead, and Parkes (1972) warned that attachment to material reminders was “acceptable only as a temporary defence mechanism that allows bereaved people to gradually adjust to ‘reality’” (Hallam and Hockey 2000: 24).

Parkes appears to allude to the theory that the clothing of the dead can function as transitional objects for the bereaved. This argument suggests that bereavement reactivates the fear of abandonment that we all experienced in infancy (Bowlby 1980); thus we respond as infants respond, crying, pining, searching for the one who has gone (Parkes 1972) and seeking comfort in physical contact and being safely wrapped (swaddled?) in comforting cloth. This explains the frequent attachment of mourners to heavy coats and jumpers previously used by the deceased: warm and comforting garments which “[mimic] the effect of an embrace” (Gibson 2008: 120). A parallel is drawn between the small child’s transition from part of a mother-child dyad to an individual who can tolerate separation, and the situation of the bereaved person who loses the protection of a cherished relationship and must stand alone. The child takes confidence from a transitional object (often a blanket or a shawl which smells of home and mother) which is experienced as somewhere between “me” and “not me” and can thus mitigate the sense of isolation (Winnicott 1971). The mourner wearing the clothing of the dead may be doing the same (Gibson 2008: 32).

Writers of bereavement literature are aware of both the comfort to be found in clothing that mediates the presence of the dead, and the very real fear of madness.

*“There was one garment I couldn’t part with and kept for myself. This was a very soft and light Puffa jacket which I had bought for Charlie about two years before he died..... He had loved it. After he died I wore it constantly, and felt some sense of closeness to him by doing so”* (Sheepshanks 1997: 151f)

*“Mummy wears your school blazer and I sleep sometimes with your sweater bound around my neck or I use your school clothes for a pillow.”*(Thompson 2007: 125)

*“We all fear madness, but it is present in the hidden heart of all grief.”* (Jones 1998 : 57)

The madness of which Jones speaks has two components. There is a sense that the deceased is present and a belief that he or she will return. The dead one is seen in crowds (Jones 1998: 69f), sensed in empty rooms (Monckton 1994) and communicates by manipulating the physical environment: they present the mourners with “signs”, rainbows, feathers, helium balloons and flickering light-bulbs (Cameron 1985; Hunniford 2008; Monckton 1994). This sense that the deceased is immanent, permeating their surroundings, makes the things they have left behind both a potential point of contact and a symbolic lexicon through which they may communicate.

There is a sense too that

*“it is all a mistake, the death has not happened, a magic wand will wave and we shall wake from the walking nightmare to go back to the time before.”* (Jones 1998: 57)

This conviction may be accompanied by magical thinking; a conviction that by retelling the story of the death a different outcome might be achieved (Didion 2005: 35). There is a twisted logic that turns the guilt of the survivor (“it was my fault he died”) into a belief that the sin can be expiated and the death reversed (Didion 2005: 52 & 184). Mourners who take this view have an additional reason to safeguard the belongings of the deceased. Joan Didion refused permission for her husband’s organs to be used for transplant and kept a selection of his shoes:

*“How could he come back if they took his organs, how could he come back if he had no shoes?”* (Didion 2005: 41)

*“I did not believe in the resurrection of the body but I still believed that given the right circumstances he would come back.”* (Didion 2005: 150)

For most writers, by the time they publish their memoir, this sense that the dead are present or likely to return is starting to fade, but even as the signs and portents are rationalised some writers remain convinced that this episode of “disordered thinking”, this thirst for interpreting symbols and coincidences, has afforded a glimpse of a different kind of reality, one that is potentially more true than our workaday perceptions.

*“it is extraordinary how things do hit one simultaneously, and I marvel at it because it’s a part of the reassurance that there is a purpose and a meaning to everything and everything is really all part of the same great story.”* (Booker 1992: 30)



Such claims of enlightenment should not be dismissed out of hand, but it is important to recall that memory and meaning-making are neither random nor entirely personal; we are socially conditioned to find some things more significant and evocative than others (Gordon 2008: 17 & 59), just as there are cultural proscriptions on certain kinds of thought and behaviour (Seremetakis 1991 cited in Hallam and Hockey (2000): 11). Western culture permits us to feel close to the dead during the mourning period, but the discourses of mental health command that this is a short-term and private encounter. It may be for this reason that the bereaved find cause to surrender the clothes they have kept

*“the clothes had been boiling merrily all night....the Puffa was a limp and shrunken rag of indeterminate colour .....I minded very much at the time; it seemed one more severed link, but perhaps it was a good thing really: it had served its purpose.”* (Sheepshanks 1997: 152)

### **Divestment**

The clothing of the dead ultimately needs to be “dealt with” by the survivors. This is more than a practical chore, for in dealing with clothing families agree how the dead person will be remembered and start to restructure their own lives. Bereavement literature testifies to the difficulty of this process (Golden 1995).

Writers warn of the risk that in the shock and anger of early bereavement, treasured possessions may be destroyed, permanently erasing potential links with the dead

*“Chests of drawers tumbling on to the bed, clothes, shoes, make up, bedclothes, jewellery, just thrown into suitcases.....here I was, sentimental, nostalgic me, working like a fury to clear up, clean up and clear out.... How silly to wish I had done it differently.”* (Posener 1994: 208)

As noted earlier, there is often an urge to destroy items with negative associations, yet in the early stages of bereavement all the possessions of the dead may seem negatively charged, and their potential to generate positive memories may not be recognised until it is too late.

*“My friend Rod literally cleared out his partner’s clothes immediately, only keeping a belt and a sweater, a decision he later regretted. I suppose at the time, though, it must feel cleansing”.* (Hunniford 2008: 119)

Gibson (2008) suggests several reasons for hasty disposal: it may be a way of blocking memories and shunning the task of contemplative adaptation to the new situation (p17); it may be an act of angry retribution against the one who has abandoned them by dying (p17f) or it may be a way of signifying to friends and family that they are “getting over it” and “moving on” (p16). It is also a way of taking control of the situation and enacting the loss on one’s own terms, replacing “the unplanned biological death with an ordered and ordained social and ritual death” (Miller and Parrot 2009 : 507) though this is a strategy more effectively employed at a later stage in bereavement.

Disposing of the clothing of the dead means that the reality of the death must be confronted

*“I think Mummy has slipped back or, worse, gone to a place that even she didn’t realise existed.....she has been sorting through your clothes.... and I fear that these acts have forced her to look directly at the truth. You are not coming back.”* (Thompson 2007: 140)

This confrontation may imply that the relationship between the living and the dead is being reassessed or dismissed and mourners are sensitive to this, experiencing the disposal of clothes as disloyal and destructive. Some mourners express a concern that the dead person is being erased, forgotten, violated, discarded or even dismantled.

*“As I threw out garment after garment..... I experienced a mounting sense of horror and a need (which I suppressed) to howl and scream. It was as if it was my mother I was throwing away.”*(McLeod 1994: 166f)

*“We packed away his toys and clothes.....I felt as though I were dismantling an expression of Matthew’s personality, destroying something that was intimately his.”*(Jackson 1987: 97)

These sentiments suggest that mourners have a very real sense that people are somehow present in the clothes they leave behind: that the boundary between person and possession is porous. This goes beyond the perception that the social self is a clothed self (Gibson 2008: 104): mourners describe a link that sits somewhere between the symbolic and the physical. Items function as symbols, pointing beyond themselves to multiple memories and meanings, but there is also a sense in which the person and their possessions interpenetrate, recalling Parkin’s notion of ‘socio-material prosthesis’ (1999: 303-4) and Sartre’s insistence that possessions are part of the individual’s elemental drive to experience him or herself as complete (Sartre and Barnes 1957).

While disposal of the clothing of the dead is never easy, there often comes a point at which it feels appropriate. Memory stimuli which are primarily sensory seem subject to erosion, the smell of the deceased fades from their possessions (Aldiss 2000: 191), even the shoes which “he was printed into” are denatured by time (Gillilan 1992: 57f). Equally the connotations of an object may change over time. When a cherished jumper evokes, not memories of a loved one, but the memory of grieving, it will lose its value as a memorial object (Gibson 2008: 121).

In an attempt to defer the distressing moment of disposal, or perhaps as part of a process of gradual detachment, many bereaved people move the belongings of the dead to a liminal area, a loft, a storage room or under the bed (Hunniford 2008) before committing to disposing of them. This underlines the ritual role played by the clothing of the dead. As items that symbolise past owners, mourners may use clothes as ritual objects which are manipulated in order to move the dead from the centre to the periphery of their daily lives as well as to determine which aspects of their life will be memorialised. It is through such processes of incremental and selective divestment that the dead are transformed into ancestors (Metcalf and Huntington 1991) and the survivors detach from the relationship (Miller and Parrot 2009) and reinterpret their own identity (Hawkins and Muecke 2003: xiii).

Items are selected for disposal in accordance with unappreciated but relatively consistent principles. Items will be kept if they illustrate key family stories, particularly those stories which “mythologize some greater image or idea of the family” (Curasi 2004: 616, cited by Gibson 2008) or if they evoke idealised elements of the dead one’s personality and relationships (Miller and Parrot 2009) or those quirks in personality that are remembered with affection. Everything that is retained can be used to illustrate the “durable biography” which is being written into the history of the family (Walter 1996).

Families will often consult over which items to keep (Sheepshanks 1997: 151) and the process of sorting these items can lead to shared grieving and communal memory-making

*“[My sister] came and spent a day helping to sort through Ian’s belongings. It was a day of laughter and tears. .... At the end of this day both Pat and I were emotionally drained....but felt that we had moved on in our grieving.”* (Scoble 1995:170)

Clothing is disposed of according to a strict moral code, perhaps because the bereaved do not feel that the rights of ownership have fully passed to them (Gibson 2008: 15). Generally speaking it is deemed wrong to sell it for profit even when an expensive or “designer” item is concerned. In the mourner’s view, commodity value is eclipsed by the item’s role as a relic of the dead (Gibson 2008: 4 & 10). Most items that are disposed of therefore become gifts to friends (often with the obligation to remember attached) or they are donated to charity (Gibson 2008: 4). Charities with meaning for the deceased are often chosen, allowing the subsidiary comforts that something good is coming from the death and a service to the deceased has been performed. Jackson (1987) travelled to India to donate his son’s clothes to a Mission School and described the bond he formed with the boys of the mission as “a living memorial to Matthew”.

Before disposal, items are carefully processed to remove the traces of their close association with their former owner. They will be washed and ironed (Jackson 1987:162) and stored in hidden places (Posener 1994) in the hope that their potency will evaporate and disposal will be less traumatic (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005).

Problems may arise with clothing which carries positive memories of the deceased but which does not hold a place in family mythology and is not appropriate for gifting or donation. Consigning such things to the dustbin may be unthinkable so these clothes remain in a limbo state, in the hope that a use will be found for them later.

*“I kept some of Caron’s socks – I mean what was I going to do with her socks?.... I just couldn’t throw them all away. A lot of her stuff I keep in a drawer, even though I would never be able to fit into anything. But you never know.....”* (Hunniford 2008: 119f)

## **Conclusion**

There is nothing foolish or ephemeral about clothing; we shape it and are shaped by it. It is part of our social persona, the self that others know. When someone dies their clothing offers a way

of remembering and re-evoking intimacy with the dead, and remembering, in cultures founded on the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is a sacred duty and a way of seeking meaning.

Wearing the clothing of the dead can also be a way of processing loss, of receiving comfort and allowing ourselves to be shaped by those things which were shaped by the dead; thus clothing, unexpectedly, allows the dead agency in the present.

The role played by clothing in the translation of dead peers into ancestors is usually overlooked. The notion of an “ancestor”, someone who is dead but is nonetheless experienced as moral guide, exemplar and source of emotional succour, is not a familiar concept in the modern West, but, when academic scrutiny is turned upon the post-Christian death rituals of Britain and America, ancestor creation practices are abundantly clear. Ancestor creation has two key elements, and clothing has a role to play in both. First, the biography of the deceased must be mythologised, and, second, the nature of the bond between the bereaved and the one who has died must be transformed.

As we have seen, decisions about which items of clothing should be kept, which disposed of, facilitate the translation of biography into myth. Evidence of weakness is removed, inconsistencies edited out and the aspects of the life most in keeping with communal ideals are celebrated and enlarged until, at length, a mythic version of the life story is created, in which issues of historical accuracy are subordinated to the need to create an appropriate emotional response.

We have also seen that clothing helps modify relationships between the living and the dead through its capacity to serve as transitional objects and support rituals of divestment. At the point of bereavement, mourners yearn for those they have lost and long to recover the relationship exactly as it was; at the end of the mourning period, the bereaved are content with a transformed relationship, one in which they commune as much with an archetype as with an individual, but from which they still draw strength. Clothing as a transitional object will have supported many mourners in this psychological adjustment, many others will have (unconsciously) used the process of disposing of intimate possessions of the dead as a ritual process to overwrite the shocking rupture of biological death with an ordered and acceptable separation. When clothing facilitates the transformation of the dead into ancestors, it can hardly be inconsequential.

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