

Henry James's Black Dresses: Mourning without Grief

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A short story that Henry James published in 1900 puts forward an unlikely appraisal of gifts collected for someone now dead. “They’re not sad,” a character insists to the narrator; “they’re too lovely to be sad. They’re happy.”¹ The correction is surprising to the narrator, and it is likely surprising to the reader, too, for the memorial described would seem only to emphasize the missing life it commemorates. But the story, “Maud-Evelyn,” turns on the premise that a dead girl can be kept alive through such gestures, comfortingly if not literally, so that her parents avoid the sorrow of bereavement. This premise does not fit easily into Sigmund Freud’s theory of mourning, published in 1916, with its emphasis on the painful process of detaching from the loved one. Yet neither does James’s idea match earlier, Victorian and antebellum, modes of mourning that activated grief in order to build communities among the living. Indeed,

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¹ Henry James, “Maud-Evelyn” (1900), in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1898–1910*, ed. Denis Donoghue (New York: The Library of America, 1996), p. 200. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

in “Maud-Evelyn” and other stories, James’s representations of mourning circumvent what is both common and fundamental to these two models: the feeling of pain, or, more simply, grief itself. James’s contribution to the literary history of mourning registers a perspective that effectively separates mourning (the social acts that indicate the event of death) from grief (the painful emotions ensuing from loss).

James’s vision of mourning remains distinct from others that scholars have detected in nineteenth-century literature. In the last few decades, scholars have demonstrated the limits of Freud’s early-twentieth-century paradigm for interpreting the depictions of mourning that preceded it. In 1994, Esther Schor argued for distinguishing a psychological account of mourning, like Freud’s, from a cultural one that “interprets mourning as a discourse among the living.”² The cultural framework more aptly fit, Schor wrote, depictions of mourning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (*Bearing the Dead*, p. 4). Schor’s scholarship has been extended by Kurt Fosso’s study of how the bonds of mourning function in William Wordsworth and by Adam C. Bradford’s study of how mourning rituals certified, for Edgar Allan Poe’s readers, “the continued vitality and accessibility of an otherwise lost but now immortal loved one.”³ Shifting from mourning behavior to affective experience, Dana Luciano has emphasized grief’s productive temporal confusions.⁴ Shifting again, from culture and affect to ontology, Branka Arsić has articulated Henry David Thoreau’s idea that one who grieves cedes his vitality to the external world.⁵ None of these accounts of mourning can be easily folded into Freud’s paradigm, and they reflect different worldviews, especially with regard to how the living relate to the dead, as well as the extent

² Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), p. 3.

³ Adam C. Bradford, *Communities of Death: Whitman, Poe, and the American Culture of Mourning* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2014), p. 11. See Kurt Fosso, *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2004).

⁴ See Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2007), p. 20.

⁵ See Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2016), p. 375.

to which the bereaved person is preserved or, most profoundly for Arsić, destabilized. Yet all of these studies assume a tight association, and even a conflation, between mourning and grief. Fosso spells out this assumption, noting: “the terms *grief* and *mourning* are often interchangeable in Wordsworth, and in my analysis as well” (*Buried Communities*, p. 7). For the other scholars, too, *mourning* and *grief* work to complement, more than distinguish, each other. Even when Arsić parses the two terms, it is to highlight their tendency to be conflated: “Freud’s understanding of mourning comes to dominate twentieth-century philosophies of grief” suggests that his intervention has been to render the terms indistinguishable (*Bird Relics*, p. 370).

James’s writing disentangles the two terms and suggests the value of doing so. He uses the term *mourning* in a particular and explicit manner, to indicate a phenomenon different from the affective experience of bereavement. The word often appears in character descriptions. In *Washington Square* (1880), Catherine Sloper is in “deep mourning” after her father dies; in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Miss Jessel is “in mourning”; in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), Milly Theale is, too.⁶ Characters “in mourning” appear in shorter and less-famous tales as well, including “The Friends of the Friends” (1896), “The Altar of the Dead” (1895), “Maud-Evelyn,” “The Private Life” (1892), and “The Real Right Thing” (1899). If *mourning* worked for James as a synonym for *grief*, then these many mourners would be featured in many sad scenes. Yet this is not the case: the characters said to be in mourning rarely express the pain of loss. In most cases, James does not delve into their mental and emotional responses to death, nor do their bereaved states tend to become narratively urgent. The obverse is true as well: when writing about the pain of loss, James does not register it as mourning. In “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903), for instance, which narrates John Marcher’s sense of a lost opportunity, and

⁶ Henry James, *Washington Square*, in *Henry James: Novels 1881–1886*, ed. William T. Stafford (New York: The Library of America, 1985), p. 179; Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1892–1898*, ed. David Bromwich and John Hollander (New York: The Library of America, 1996), p. 672; Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove: An Authoritative Text, the Author and the Novel, Criticism*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), pp. 76–77.

which closes as he “flung himself, on his face, on the tomb” of May Bartram, Marcher is not said to mourn or to be in mourning.⁷

What James means by mourning, as distinct from grief, refers to the rituals of his era and imaginatively interprets their implications. In late-nineteenth-century etiquette manuals, *mourning* refers to a set of practices but also, less intuitively, to the most iconic object of these rituals: a black dress. When James writes that a character is “in mourning,” he designates her physical state of being inside such a costume. As I will argue, James’s emphasis is neither on her observance of social niceties nor on her privately painful thoughts. Rather, he marks mourning as an external object, one that both conceals and touches the body day after day. Such physical emphasis provides a platform for rethinking both what mourning is and what it makes of those who perform it. In many of the stories mentioned above, the character’s “mourning” is significant not for what it shows—whether her social performance or her bereaved state—but for what it obscures. Specifically, the mourning blocks rather than expresses the characters’ feelings, leaving us with opaque black fabric rather than keen emotional insight, leaving the latter unexpressed. The sense of mourning as external stuff repeats in two other stories that dramatize responses to death: “Maud-Evelyn,” with which I opened, and “The Altar of the Dead.” In these texts, characters process loss with material objects that facilitate social relationships with the dead, that make the dead available for continued attachment. These acts, like wearing the black dress, elide grief, for the attachments to the dead are not characterized by pain.⁸ Grief

⁷ Henry James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1898–1910*, p. 541. The paradox is also evident in scenes of *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Ambassadors*, which I discuss below.

⁸ James’s characters are not melancholics, even though their losses might seem unresolved, because there is no indication of any division within the ego. James’s characters appear to be living persons committed to maintaining relations with dead ones. The closest version to James’s vision I have found in the psychoanalytic annals appears in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s 1972 essay “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation,” where they describe a man who goes out to dinner, apparently alone, but orders and then consumes, with the indulgence of the waiter, an entire meal for his deceased and absent wife. “Nothing of the sort would ever happen in cases of incorporation,” Abraham and Torok explain; “Once an incorporation has occurred, no one at all should be apprized of it. The very fact of *having had a loss* would

remains in James's oeuvre another phenomenon, marked by remorseful distress, like that of John Marcher, in the face of an opportunity that has been irreversibly missed. James's observation of the difference between mourning and grief becomes, then, not only a philological record but also a path for rethinking what *mourning* can mean when it is dissociated from both pat social conformity and the pain of loss.



My argument requires James's current readers to make an interpretive shift that would not have been necessary for his contemporaries. Where his texts say "mourning," I propose, one should understand mourning rituals. More specifically, one should understand mourning rituals rather than, and even exclusive of, an emotional experience of grief. Because the observance of mourning rituals declined dramatically in the second decade of the twentieth century—and because they are nearly obsolete today—it can be difficult to imagine how prevalent they were, and, especially, how they could remain distinct from emotional experience. Yet the rituals were oriented almost entirely toward providing visible signs of loss. As one American etiquette manual from 1877 puts it, the point was to produce "some outward sign" of death: "It is desirable, upon a death occurring in a house, that some outward sign should be given to keep away casual visitors. The usual means of doing this is by tying black crape upon the bell or doorknob."⁹ Additional "outward signs" included the use of black sealing wax for correspondence, according to one 1891 manual,¹⁰ or, according to others, stationery edged with "a black border of more or less width, according to the degree of mourning to be exhibited" (Duffey, *Ladies' and Gentleman's Etiquette*, p. 123), although the risk that "very broad borders of

be denied in incorporation" (Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume I*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994], p. 129).

⁹ Mrs. E. B. Duffey, *The Ladies' and Gentleman's Etiquette: A Complete Manual of the Manners and Dress of American Society* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1887), p. 218.

¹⁰ [Abby Buchanan Longstreet], *Social Etiquette of New York* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1891), pp. 243–44.

black look like ostentation, and are in undoubted bad taste," is also noted (and the same caution recommended for black-bordered handkerchiefs).¹¹ Visible restraint was valued, especially in the social habits of the bereaved person, who was not to "engag[e] much in the amusements and gayeties of life before six months have passed after the death of any near friend" (Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages*, p. 199). While the exact timeline for such reentry depended upon the genealogical closeness of the bereaved to the deceased, the death of someone close consistently involved regulation of social appearance. The term *mourning* could refer to the observance of these behaviors, taken more or less as a whole. In this sense, being "in mourning" was something like being "on a diet": it was a temporary state, defined by certain practices, and electively entered although socially expected.

The most iconic of these practices, wearing black, could serve as a metonym for the whole, and so being "in mourning" could also refer to being encased within mourning clothes. The duration of the mourning period was subdivided, so that the bereaved would progress from deep mourning to half mourning, and this transition was principally marked by shifts in attire, from dark heavy wools to lighter silks. Perhaps because being in "deep mourning" was largely a matter of wearing very black, nonreflective clothing, the phrase comes to refer directly to the clothing. Here is one such formulation: "Widows wear deep mourning, consisting of woollen stuffs and crape, for about two years, and sometimes for life, in America" (Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages*, p. 191). In this case, mourning is worn, not practiced or done. A similar formulation allows that "in winter dark furs may be worn with the deepest mourning": one set of fabrics is sanctioned as an addition to others.¹² *Mourning* could also refer to clothing without a modifier, as in this example: "Mourning worn for a child is the same as that worn for a parent. . . . Mourning worn for a friend who leaves you an

¹¹ Mrs. John Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887), p. 193. I am thankful to Clair Hughes for referring to this manual in her *Henry James and the Art of Dress* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 18.

¹² John H. Young, *Our Deportment; or the Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society* (Detroit: F. B. Dickerson, 1880), p. 331.

inheritance is the same as that worn for a grandparent” (Duffey, *Ladies' and Gentleman's Etiquette*, p. 297). “Mourning” here is a general noun for the various permitted garments. In another notable example, “the horse of a deceased mounted officer” is to be “fully equipped and draped in mourning,” which I take to mean mourning fabric—producing an equine mourning costume (Duffey, *Ladies' and Gentleman's Etiquette*, p. 220).

When mourning becomes associated with clothing, it retains the outward, visible implications of the broader range of rituals. The depth of the mourning, in the examples above, is directly linked to the lack of light present on the widow's person. Deep mourning plumbs no emotional depths; it rather requires carefully moderated sartorial choices. Similarly, if a horse can be in mourning as well as someone bereaved of a friend who has left an inheritance, then the mourning works as social signal rather than emotional expression.

Yet what did the dress signal, apart from the fact that death had visited? The transition from deep to half mourning marked impending social availability, but it also seems to have suggested decreasing levels of emotional pain. Hence, one etiquette writer complains that treating the dress as purely conventional—with no personal significance—elides its potential therapeutic use. Americans are using the conventions poorly, she explains, because “ladies have been known to go into deepest mourning for their own relatives or those of their husbands, or for people, perhaps, whom they have never seen, and have remained as gloomy monuments of bereavement for seven or ten years, constantly in black; then, on losing a child or a relative dearly loved, they have no extremity of dress left to express the real grief which fills their lives—no deeper black to go into” (Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages*, p. 192). If a woman has dressed extremely without feeling extreme grief, then she cannot subsequently express her extreme grief, which, Mrs. Sherwood implies, is part of the ritual's design. Such women seem to disrupt the sign system: one might see a woman in deepest black who has only lost a distant relative, and who therefore may not be grieving at all.

But from another perspective, such women do not disrupt the sign system so much as expose how one could hide within

its conventionality. As Cathy Gutierrez explains, “mourning rituals had no way of dictating a person’s actual emotional stance toward the dead”; “The production of memory instigated by mourning was a public function; activity and appearance were both severely circumscribed, creating a visual guarantee that the memory of the deceased was being honored.”¹³ The dress meant that the memory of the deceased was being honored—not necessarily that its wearer was engaged in remembrance or even felt remorse for the loss. Precisely because the dress indicates the fact of memory, rather than expressing the valences of its content, mourning could be donned without exposing one’s inner life. In fact, the opacity of the black dress could guard one’s inner life, maintaining its inaccessibility.

In sum, by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a mourning dress was a sign that death had visited, not necessarily an indication that its wearer felt the loss deeply, or that the wearer felt anything in particular. Moreover, the iconic mourning dress was often referred to simply as “mourning.” Thus, while being “in mourning” might mean that one is within the mourning period, and therefore observing several associated rituals, it could also mean that one had simply put on a very black dress that day. The grief one did or did not feel remained a separate matter: one’s mourning was what came within daily contact with one’s skin. That mourning refers to such external contact is, as I will demonstrate, key to James’s terminology as well as his interpretation of mourning’s particularity.



Although *mourning* may be differently inflected in James’s writing, it consistently evokes the visible rituals of the etiquette manuals. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *mourning* is used to modify a set of clothing and suggest restraint from amusements. Following the death of Mr. Touchett, Isabel Archer is “thankful for the quiet months which her mourning robes and her aunt’s fresh widowhood compelled them to spend

¹³ Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), p. 17.

together.”¹⁴ But in texts closer to the turn of the twentieth century, James tends to drop “robes,” so that *mourning* stands on its own, adjective and noun at once. For instance, in *The Wings of the Dove*, James introduces Milly Theale as a “slim, constantly pale, delicately haggard, anomalously, agreeably angular young person, of not more than two-and-twenty summers, in spite of her marks, whose hair was somehow exceptionally red even for the real thing, which it innocently confessed to being, and whose clothes were remarkably black even for robes of mourning, which was the meaning they expressed” (*The Wings of the Dove*, pp. 76–77). So far so good: Milly is one of those extravagant American mourners who wear the very blackest garments they can find (her wealth allows her to invest in the same). But when James continues, “It was New York mourning, it was New York hair, it was a New York history” (p. 77), the term becomes unclear: does “New York mourning” refer to her entire mourning practice, or does it repeat, more economically, the earlier mention of remarkably black robes? Clair Hughes argues convincingly for the latter, framing Milly’s mourning robes as characteristic of New York rather than London, where she was about to make her appearance. The robes mark Milly as overburdened and unfashionable, Hughes explains, since certain American mourners were donning copious veils and garments just around the time that British mourners were lightening themselves.¹⁵

In a host of James’s short fiction from around the same period, *mourning* also appears alone, to signify the costume. In these cases, James tends to write that a character is “in mourning,” in the sense of inside her mourning dress. In a key scene in *The Turn of the Screw*, for instance, the governess describes Miss Jessel as a “a figure of . . . unmistakable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful” (*The Turn of the Screw*, pp. 670–71). When her interlocutor, Mrs. Grose, asks, as if to clarify, “The person was in black, you say?” the governess answers: “In mourning—rather poor, almost shabby” (p. 672).

¹⁴ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady: An Authoritative Text, Henry James and the Novel, Reviews and Criticism*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995), p. 182. Isabel’s clothing is also mentioned: she appears “pale and grave—an effect not mitigated by her deeper mourning” (p. 182).

¹⁵ See Hughes, *Henry James and the Art of Dress*, p. 69.

The series of statements provides a progressively clearer image of Miss Jessel: at first she is a woman in black, then the governess specifies that it is the black of mourning. Because the governess's specifying line stands alone, it would be possible to read "in mourning" as introducing other information, about Miss Jessel's general observance of the rituals or even about her emotional state. But it is more consistent to read "in mourning" as the governess's affirmative answer to Mrs. Grose's question: yes, she wore black mourning clothes, and they were not in good shape.

A similar relay occurs in a less well known story from the same era, "The Friends of the Friends." Asked by his fiancée how an unnamed woman was dressed, a man replies: "In mourning, my own dear. No great depths of crape, but simple and scrupulous black. She had in her bonnet three small black feathers."¹⁶ "In mourning" signifies the general choice of garment, and the simplicity of the dress and the bonnet ornament function as additional details. To add another example: in "The Private Life," the narrator confesses to being "rather afraid" of Lady Mellifont, "with her stiff silences and the extreme blackness of almost everything that made up her person."¹⁷ He continues, explaining that the blackness of her person is not metaphorical but literal: "She was in perpetual mourning, and wore numberless ornaments of jet and onyx, a thousand clicking chains and bugles and beads" ("The Private Life," p. 61). To be in "perpetual mourning" refers to Lady Mellifont's costume as constant, outstripping the usual monthly or annual markers for when mourning was worn and when it could be laid aside. Similar to that in "The Friends of the Friends," the detail of Lady Mellifont's mourning is followed by the description of her particular approach to the custom—her excessive ornaments that are likely in line with the excessive robes of Milly Theale's "New York mourning."

In each of these cases, "mourning" is part of a description focused on the character's appearance, and therefore it may be interpreted as primarily conveying sartorial information. Certain

¹⁶ Henry James, "The Way It Came," in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1892-1898*, p. 627. The title was changed to "The Friends of the Friends" for the New York Edition.

¹⁷ Henry James, "The Private Life," in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1892-1898*, p. 61.

conclusions about the characters may be drawn from their described outfits; for instance, that Milly is wealthy but unfashionable, Miss Jessel is poor, the woman in “The Friends of the Friends” is understated, and Lady Mellifont is excessive. Yet such points might have been communicated through details about any outfit, and so it would seem that the mourning costumes must speak to some other narrative event, or to a specific quality or characteristic. But in fact, the *mourning* of James’s black-clad characters regularly appears incidental to the narratives of which they are a part. Is Miss Jessel in mourning for Peter Quint or for her lost pregnancy, and was she in mourning while alive or only in the governess’s vision? The question is unanswerable but also not particularly urgent: the detail of her dress does not serve to confirm or deny or fill out her identity. The woman in “The Friends of the Friends” wears black for her husband, but the fact of his death similarly does not propel the plot. As for Lady Mellifont, James never explains whom she is mourning. Even Milly Theale dons her black dress for four hundred pages without having a thought for her dead family. Broadly, we learn that each of these women observe a social ritual, that they have some respect for the rules of etiquette—but the dresses do not tell us much else.

The dresses are also suggestive, without being communicative, with regard to the grief or pain that their wearers might be feeling. Milly’s grief is either too private for our access or too irrelevant from the novel’s concerns—or it is nonexistent. Miss Jessel is “dreadful,” but her dread may or may not be related to the loss she has borne. In “The Friends of the Friends,” the woman in mourning may be a ghost and mourns for a husband from whom she separated after he physically abused her—so her feelings toward the dead are presumably complex, but they are unnarrated. Lady Mellifont’s disposition is “a little saturnine” (“The Private Life,” p. 61), but, as with Miss Jessel, it is not clear whether the disposition or the dress was originary. In each of these cases, the texts suggest that whatever emotions underlie the dresses, they are none of our business. The mourning cloaks these women rather than developing their characters.

The lack of information delivered by James’s “mourning” is what I want to highlight. It suggests that James invokes

mourning not only to represent convention but also to entertain the implications of a norm that granted obscurity. In other words, the dresses circulate as details that announce their wearers' emotional inscrutability. James seems to have been taken with the very possibility that peeved Mrs. Sherwood: that a woman could drape herself in black without letting her grief be evident—indeed, without providing any personal information at all. In this sense, his use of *mourning* registers the position that Isabel, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, famously takes against Madame Merle's insistence that one's garments are expressive. Isabel objects, "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which . . . I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 175). Madame Merle receives Isabel's argument as naive, a protest against the social conventions of fashion: "Should you prefer to go without them?" she asks (p. 175). But Isabel's limit and barrier may also be interpreted as what prohibits her interlocutor (and her reader) from knowing her by her clothes. The point is that no clothing is transparent: its presence interrupts expression rather than facilitating it. This premise of clothing's opacity resonates with James's women "in mourning." Spread throughout several texts, their images insist on what they do not disclose. And what they do not disclose, what remains absent from their stories, is the emotional experience of loss—is grief.¹⁸

In two other stories, "The Altar of the Dead" and "Maud-Evelyn," James also develops the implications of *mourning* conceived as dress, yet his focus is elsewhere: less on the opacity of *mourning* and more on the fact that it occupies space outside one's person. These texts do not elide the emotions associated with bereavement; they feature characters responding to death.

¹⁸ This paragraph clarifies how my approach differs from that in Clair Hughes's valuable study, *Henry James and the Art of Dress*, which is concerned with what specific elements of dress convey or signify; Hughes works from Madame Merle's position that clothes are expressive. See also Leo Bersani's argument that James, in his later writing, hews increasingly to Isabel's preference for obscurity, at the expense of his novel's realist legibility (see Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986], pp. 82–84).

Yet here, too, James does not emphasize grief. Rather than detailing the sadness of loss, he depicts his characters as imagining—or making—continued relations with their dead. He figures projects of attachment to the dead: mourning conceived as an outward practice that, like a closely fitting garment, facilitates touching. Wearing black becomes, then, a means for rethinking how one behaves not toward the living (as in the etiquette manuals) but toward the dead.



To appreciate James's emphasis on attachment to the dead, it is instructive to glance at Freud's contrasting insistence on detachment. When Freud compares melancholia to mourning, it is because the former shares a list of symptoms with the initial phases of the latter: "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity."¹⁹ According to Freud, the work of mourning serves to process the fact of loss in a way that keeps one's grief from becoming pathological: "bit by bit. . . . Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and detachment of the libido from it is accomplished. . . . When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" ("Mourning and Melancholia," p. 245). As the mind detaches from libidinal investments that can no longer be reciprocated, the mourner is able to turn again to the outside world, to generate, unlike the melancholic, new love. In Freud's paradigm, the essential work of mourning *is* detachment.

In "The Altar of the Dead" and "Maud-Evelyn," however, mourning is marked neither by a lack of interest in the outside world nor by a process that would reintroduce one to it.²⁰

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV, ed. and trans. James Strachey, et al. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 244.

²⁰ For another route to a similar point, see Matthew Jordan's comparison of James's story "The Altar of the Dead" with François Truffaut's 1978 film *The Green Room*, based largely on the tale. Jordan demonstrates that Truffaut's protagonist is imagined in so thoroughly a Freudian manner that James's, by contrast, is revealed as drawn from

Instead, its characters seek to bring the outside world closer to their dead, who, far from being lost—and thus far from demanding a grueling acknowledgment of the same—remain in their environs. In other words, the living remain attached to the dead, and the work of mourning consists in fostering further attachments that the dead might have—attachments to other living beings. These relating dead are not exactly ghosts, since they do not haunt, and neither are they treated as reappearing remnants of the living.²¹ Rather, it is as if, in Freud's language, "the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object" simply stick around, keeping the mourner company instead of causing the mourner pain.

For George Stransom of "The Altar of the Dead," the opacity of the mourning dress has been exchanged for insight into how he thinks of the dead. Yet his thoughts are peculiar: what we might identify as memories of the dead appear as *visits* from the dead. James introduces Stransom's altar project by explaining, "He had formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead: it had come to him tolerably early in life that there was something one had to do for them. They were there in their simplified, intensified essence, their conscious absence and expressive patience, as personally there as if they had only been stricken dumb."²² It is reasonable to interpret Stransom's habit as remembering the dead or thinking about them. But James represents Stransom's relation to them as if they constituted separate beings from him, not imagined or private fantasies: "they were there . . . personally there." Stransom proposes to make an altar in response to their presence:

a different model. See Matthew E. Jordan, "Mourning, Nostalgia, and Melancholia: Unlocking the Secrets of Truffaut's *The Green Room*," in *Henry James Goes to the Movies*, ed. Susan M. Griffin (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2002), pp. 76–98.

²¹ Schor observes that the difference between living and dead "is obscured within the Victorian cult of death and mourning, whose lyrics and narratives lay emphasis on all manner of interpenetration," including "intuitions of the beyond, . . . [and] visitations by the dead" (*Bearing the Dead*, p. 234). James's cultural milieu and literary oeuvre certainly contain indications of both. Yet the texts that I am highlighting here are not quite spiritualist in impulse, because they imagine extensions, more than returns, of the dead one's life.

²² Henry James, "The Altar of the Dead," in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1892–1898*, p. 451. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

“They had no organised service, no reserved place, no honour, no shelter, no safety. Even ungenerous people provided for the living, but even those who were called most generous did nothing for the others” (“The Altar of the Dead,” p. 451). These dead others require a kind of social care, in Stransom’s view, care that he construes not as an act of individual meditation but as “some material act, some outward worship” (p. 457). Meeting this criterion, the altar becomes not only a place for him to think but, as he experiences it, a place outside of himself where the dead can dwell.

Indeed, James’s language suggests that the very purpose of the altar is to externalize what would otherwise have been Stransom’s internal experience. In visiting the altar, James explains, Stransom “found the years of his life there, and the ties, the affections, the struggles, the submissions, the conquests, if there had been such, a record of that adventurous journey in which the beginnings and the endings of human relations are the lettered mile-stones” (“The Altar of the Dead,” p. 459). In “finding” his past outside of himself, manifested in a group of candles arranged in a church niche, Stransom meets his memories, so to speak, on public ground. Moreover, the altar allows Stransom to maintain his memories in a very literal manner: by paying for the space and for its candles. In this sense, Stransom’s altar is like a mourning dress: it is a marker of death that he has purchased and that he physically touches, over and over again. Yet rather than such an experience bringing home to him the fact of loss, contact with the altar serves to extend the loved one’s presence. In other words, the altar facilitates a process of rejecting absence, not becoming accustomed to it. As long as the candles are there, the memories can stick around, and, in Stransom’s case, both are maintained, and none are let go until his own death at the story’s close. If Stransom mourns, then he mourns by remembering, by prolonging his attachments; if he does not grieve, it is because he has kept what he might seem to have lost.²³

²³ “The Altar of the Dead” also depicts a relationship between Stransom and a woman (who appears “in mourning unrelieved” [“The Altar of the Dead,” p. 457]) who mourns at his altar. Christopher Stuart has argued accordingly that the story tracks Stransom’s discovery of “how to put the dead and the living in a more productive, life-

This mode of mourning by externalizing one's thoughts, in order to prolong attachments, finds its fullest expression in a brief scene wherein Stransom sees, or imagines he sees, a dead friend, Kate Creston. Having run into Creston's husband, who has—too soon, Stransom thinks—begun a new romance, Stransom vows that “*he* could spend an evening with Kate Creston, if the man to whom she had given everything couldn't” (“The Altar of the Dead,” p. 454). James then narrates what appear to be memories: “He had known her twenty years. . . . her house had been the very easiest in all the world and her friendship the very firmest” (p. 454), so that it seems as if “spend[ing] an evening” with the woman will be equivalent to thinking about her. But James's prose moves to the more literal interpretation, and it is as if the memory of Kate has slipped out of Stransom's mind to occupy his living room. “While [Stransom] smoked, after dinner,” James writes, “he had a book in his lap, but he had no eyes for his page: his eyes, in the swarming void of things, seemed to have caught Kate Creston's, and it was into their sad silences he looked. It was to him her sentient spirit had turned, knowing that it was of her he would think” (p. 455). That Stransom's eyes “seemed to have caught Kate Creston's” might mean that he could imagine her face, but Stransom instead experiences her as present, outside of himself, as a separate “sentient spirit.” Thinking of her, he reasons, has made her appear, which suggests that his ostensibly personal act of remembering is unconfined by his own subjectivity. Remembering produces, here, a change in Stransom's external conditions, and even a reversal of the motivating loss. Thus reflecting on his attachment allows him to remain, for another night at least, attached.²⁴

giving relation” through “communion in grief” (Stuart, “‘A Restorative Reaction’: Henry James's ‘The Altar of the Dead’ and Mourning in the Modern City,” *Henry James Review*, 33 [2012], 128). I am arguing that the story resists both the assumption that Stransom's bereavement amounts to grief and a moral preference of life over death.

²⁴ James's version of continued life might resemble the more common Victorian investment in immortality, but James appears uninvested in religious redemption. In the former context, Bradford notes that wearing mourning objects containing the deceased's hair “symbolically foreshadowed a glorious (re)union of mourner and deceased in a shared, immortal afterlife” (*Communities of Death*, p. 27). While Kate Creston's “sentient spirit” might technically reside in the afterlife, she also visits

One might argue that Kate Creston's visit is not corroborated by any other witness, and therefore may be a scene of Stransom's fantasy rather than a materialization of his memory. Yet some years later, James returns to, and extends, the latter possibility. "Maud-Evelyn" is a slightly absurd story, yet it develops the earlier conception of mourning as a process of externalizing thoughts of the dead in order to remain attached to them. At the core of "Maud-Evelyn" is a couple, the Dedricks, whose daughter, Maud-Evelyn, died as a little girl but remains a quite constant part of their lives. "They live for her memory," explains another character ("Maud-Evelyn," p. 188). We might interpret "her memory" as her parents' collective memories of her, such that they spend much time in reflective reverie. But as with Kate Creston, James instead develops "her memory" as something that has become externalized. Maud-Evelyn's parents act as if she continues to accompany them, physically, despite her death. The story turns on the possibility that Maud-Evelyn may thereby form a new attachment, to someone with no firsthand memory of her.

James presents this magical premise through a skeptical narrator, yet, in the context established by "The Altar of the Dead," Maud-Evelyn's ongoing existence appears as a legitimate mode of mourning. The Dedricks' constant thought of Maud-Evelyn produces a separate entity, an external presence, that in turn finds a place within their new friend Marmaduke's mental life. Marmaduke's friend Lavinia reports, "He thinks he knew her," elaborating that Marmaduke has "anecdotes—memories of his own. I mean things she said to him and that they did together—places they went to. His mind is full of them" ("Maud-Evelyn," pp. 193–94). The more Marmaduke gets to know the Dedricks, the more he is exposed to their memory, to the extent that he not only begins to share it but also to imagine an independent relation to it. Thus not only do the Dedricks refuse to detach themselves from Maud-Evelyn, but they also live in order to facilitate further attachments for her. To mourn her turns out to involve arranging her marriage

Stransom in his living room, and so he does not need to anticipate any glorious reunion. See also Stuart, "A Restorative Reaction," p. 128.

to Marmaduke—and it is only after this event that all three devotees consider her finally dead. The latter event is primarily marked by Marmaduke's appearance in full "deep mourning," including "his black suit, his black gloves, his high hatband" (p. 201). Marmaduke is following the etiquette manual, choosing deep mourning because his dearest relation, his wife, has died. That Marmaduke mourns so elaborately is a detail less disruptive of than continuous with the prolonged attachment of the Dedricks to her daughter: both help her to circulate. As an external marker of loss, Marmaduke's outfit serves as an analogue to Maud-Evelyn's parents' memory, a visible presence for his friends to observe. Further, when Marmaduke dies, his friend Lavinia inherits the house containing the couple's wedding gifts.²⁵ Even though she never believed in Maud-Evelyn's ongoing existence, the inheritance attaches her to others' memories of the girl. In this sense, the memory produced by the parents may be endlessly transferred and reattached in the living world.

In "The Altar of the Dead" and "Maud-Evelyn," then, memories of the dead take up space beyond the characters' minds and bodies. This premise appears fantastical, yet it also recalls the prescribed function of the mourning dress. The dress, in Gutierrez's words, served as "a visual guarantee that the memory of the deceased was being honored." James seems to have taken this premise literally, imagining how such memory could be part of the public, social world without a constant performance of disclosure. In the mentions of characters "in mourning" I tracked above, James emphasizes how the black dress obscured the wearer's state of mind. In "The Altar of the Dead" and "Maud-Evelyn," he provides a more complicated vision: memory is central to each story, but only as it figures the continued existence of something ostensibly lost. The content of any memories of the life now ended, including past experiences, remains unspecified. Instead, memory works to produce the dead for whomever one encounters in the present, and for the future. Taking these two visions of mourning

²⁵ Lavinia is also one of those characters who appears "in her ugly new mourning" but exhibits no emotional experience related to the death that, we are told, was her mother's ("Maud-Evelyn," p. 193).

together, James invites us to see the black dress as enabling its wearer's community not with the living but with the dead. The dress speaks to the social conventions of life only so that the mourner may mentally slip away, may bring her emotional investment to the waiting dead.



Only months before James composed "The Altar of the Dead," he was himself involved with the physical markers of a dead woman, in a very different way from Stransom or Marmaduke. As Lyndall Gordon narrates in her biography of James, after the death, likely suicide, of his good friend Constance Fenimore Woolson, James took

a load of [her] dresses . . . to the deepest part of the Venetian lagoon. A strange scene followed: he began to drown the dresses, one by one. There were a good many, well-made, tasteful, and all dark, suggesting a lady of quiet habits and some reserve. The gondolier's pole would have been useful for pushing them under the still water. But the dresses refused to drown. One by one they rose to the surface, their busts and sleeves swelling like black balloons.²⁶

Because the scene appears in her biography, Gordon considers what it says about James's relation with Fenimore, noting that "his attempt to drown her clothes" seems to indicate his deep involvement with her life, if not a feeling of responsibility for her death (*A Private Life of Henry James*, p. 1). But the analysis I have presented suggests that we might interpret the scene differently. In light of James's fiction, the persistently ballooning clothes register as empty—not vacant because the wearer is dead, but hollow because the tangle of emotions that motivated death are not to be found among the fabric. Each bobbing dress insists on the ultimate obscurity of Fenimore's final moments. At the same time, James's desire to drown the dresses might be read as the opposite of his character's impulse to build the altar: an effort to break contact with the dead, to

²⁶ Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), p. 1.

refuse the act of mourning. James will not discover what the dresses enclosed, what is perhaps only air after all; he insists on a final ending of the friendship.

This sense of finality stands in stark opposition to the plots of "The Altar of the Dead" and "Maud-Evelyn," resonating far more strongly with James's more famous depictions of grief. His grieving characters face loss as irredeemable, as irreversible, and they experience the sorrow and pain that attends such resignation. In "The Beast in the Jungle," John Marcher confronts his loss of the opportunity to love May Bartram with acute discomfort: "He gazed, he drew breath, in pain; he turned in his dismay" ("The Beast in the Jungle," p. 541). Similarly, in *The Wings of the Dove*, Merton Densher experiences his realization that he will never know how Milly Theale thought of him as "a favourite pang," an "ache in his soul" (*The Wings of the Dove*, pp. 398, 399). In *The Ambassadors* (1903), Lambert Strether also has "an ache sharp enough to make the spirit . . . wince with the thought of an opportunity lost," that of his son and, by extension, fatherhood.²⁷ What stands out in these representations is that the feeling of pain is linked to a lost opportunity more tightly than to a lost loved one. These men are sorrowful not because May or Milly or the son is dead—not because those persons are missed—but because they signify an experience that is no longer available. In this sense, grief is distinguished by a reflection on oneself, and pain is felt in response to one's own limitations, one's perceived inability to continue to gain from a personal relation. Mourning characters, it seems, acknowledge no such inability, acknowledge no end to their personal relations, whereas grieving characters are helpless to repair their losses. And because the loss affects the grieving characters individually, the experience of grieving remains a solitary, inward one, with no affiliation to social practice.

James's fine distinction, between mourning as an outward, continued attachment and grieving as an inward experience of loss, illuminates the monumental paradigmatic shift that Freud propagated with his "Mourning and Melancholia," published

²⁷ Henry James, *The Ambassadors: An Authoritative Text, the Author on the Novel, Criticism*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994), p. 61.

in 1917, the year just after James's death. Freud was born just twelve years after James, yet he provides no acknowledgment of the black dress or the trimmed handkerchief, let alone the public rituals they metonymize.²⁸ Instead, Freud registers mourning as a synonym for grief. "Profound mourning," he writes, is "the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved" and involves "loss of interest in the outside world" ("Mourning and Melancholia," p. 244). James's mourning characters—as well as the entire social apparatus of the mourning ritual—are characterized precisely by the reverse: by an interest, an investment, in the outside world. But Freud insists that the mourner turns away from others, turns resolutely toward the self, and his translators helped to mark this turn as one that could be called *mourning*, that need not be distinguished as grief. When Freud turns to make the comparison of his title, James Strachey renders his translation: "Let us now apply to melancholia what we have learnt about mourning" ("Mourning and Melancholia," p. 245). Another version, translated by Joan Riviere, reads, "Now let us apply to melancholia what we have learnt about grief."²⁹ While Strachey admits in a footnote, "The German 'Trauer,' like the English 'mourning,' can mean both the affect of grief and its outward manifestation," his choice to use *mourning* throughout has been dominant.³⁰ The ritualistic connotations of *mourning* as

²⁸ When Freud's father died in 1896, bereavement in Vienna still entailed social performance. Yet Freud elected—against, it seems, the wishes of his family—for a "quiet and simple" funeral for his father (Estelle Roith, *The Riddle of Freud: Jewish Influences on His Theory of Female Sexuality* [London: Tavistock Publications, 1987], p. 68). Roith notes that it is unknown whether the Freud family observed the Jewish ritual of *shiva*, in which the bereaved remain in the house of mourning for seven days, receiving condolence calls and performing memorial prayers. The fact that Freud had his hair cut immediately prior to his father's funeral, an act that would have been prohibited by Jewish law, suggests that he was not likely to have observed related rituals (see *The Riddle of Freud*, pp. 69–70).

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," trans. Joan Riviere, in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Touchstone, 1963), p. 166.

³⁰ James Strachey, editorial note, in "Mourning and Melancholia," ed. Strachey, p. 243. It is worth noting that some practitioners refer to Freud's distinction between grief and melancholia, rather than mourning and melancholia, to make the two terms more comparable. See, for example, Samuel A. Guttman, "A Note on Mourning Depressions," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 2 (1954), 479; and, more recently, Kate Mary Bennett and Laura K. Soulsby, "Wellbeing in Bereavement and

separate from grief have been virtually eclipsed, collapsed, and forgotten. Instead, the word has been appropriated to mean a difficult, sorrowful experience of private regret.

What has been lost in the collapse of two terms once distinguished? One answer was in evidence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2015 exhibit of mourning clothes, "Death Becomes Her." Its display of dresses and accessories from the nineteenth century ended in the year of James's death: 1916. In fact, while observance declined after World War I, neither mourning rituals nor mourning dress expired neatly; in France, Lou Taylor reports, "widows could be seen in the streets in black clothes" as late as the 1930s.³¹ Yet the exhibit evoked what the historical point also implies: at a certain point, mourning dresses ceased to be seen on the streets. Encounters in one's daily life with women dressed in swaths of dark fabric were gradually ceasing as James's life neared its end.

James's short stories, especially those in which characters appear "in mourning" as if randomly so, with no elaboration as to any experience of bereavement, suggest the ubiquity, as well as the ordinariness, that such encounters once had. Death is, in these stories, in circulation, part of the texture of the social environment, almost in demographic terms: not necessarily as loss, not necessarily as emotional despair, but as a marked shift in population. As James uses it, *mourning* registers this fact, the presence of death. Yet "The Altar of the Dead" and "Maud-Evelyn" register, too, the presence of the dead, felt by the mourner not as painful separation but as continued relation. In this sense, the eventual end of mourning dresses is an end to an era in which the dead could be out in public. James remarks on this shift in the preface to "The Altar of the Dead" that he wrote for the 1909 New York Edition. Despite his seeming resistance to mourning Fenimore, he seems to have experienced the

Widowhood," *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 20 (2012), 323. Other practitioners explicitly translate Freud's *mourning* as "grief" and his *melancholia* as "depression"; see J. William Worden, "Theoretical Perspectives on Loss and Grief," in *Death, Dying, and Bereavement: Contemporary Perspectives, Institutions, and Practices*, ed. Judith M. Stillion and Thomas Attig (New York: Springer, 2015), p. 91.

³¹ Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 276; see pp. 266–76.

decline in mourning as a painful loss. He recalls two situations in which his wish to speak of the dead was met by baffled refusal: in one, he recognizes a man and notes, “We used sometimes to meet, in the old days, at the dear So-and-So’s, you may recall.” James writes that “the awful gentleman” was “shocked at the allusion. ‘Why, they’re Dead, sir,’ he replies, and James is left to say to himself: “it’s precisely why I like so to speak of them!” In the second instance, an editor refuses a proposal of an article about a woman because, he writes, “and because *only*, so far as I can make out—she’s dead.”³² That the person is dead means for James’s interlocutors that she is no longer to be recalled or discussed—to be admitted among the living. James writes “The Altar of the Dead” as “a restorative reaction” (“Preface,” p. 1249), he says, which I interpret as a way to grieve the loss of mourning, of the rituals that could keep the dead in close contact.³³

Despite James’s restorative effort, today *mourning* hardly circulates as a separate process from grief. Yet the distinction between the two terms may be worth reviving. It was on my mind the day after the 2016 elections, as I walked through a campus that was unusually populated with black sweaters. It was conceivable that each individual dressed in black to express an internal state of grief—to signal that one was navigating the pain of detachment to a political ideal. Yet taken as a mass, the black sweaters also suggested the continuing presence of that ideal: a refusal to detach, an insistence on remaining attached. The ideal, in this sense, was made to stay, to circulate, to be out in public. The black sweaters converted the ideal into an altar, or into a young woman, that would remain available for continued relation. It might even be the case that one who had not known this lost ideal, like Marmaduke, could get to know it in the future, could get to love it. There was certainly grief that

³² Henry James, Preface to *The Altar of the Dead* . . . (New York Edition, Vol. XVII, 1909), in *Henry James: Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 1247–48.

³³ To interpret the remark more personally, the tale may have meant to restore for his character what James’s drowning of Fenimore’s dresses refused for himself. See Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James*, pp. 291–97.

day. But there was also something else, a refusal to let go, that James might help us to call *mourning*.

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ABSTRACT

Shari Goldberg, "Henry James's Black Dresses: Mourning without Grief" (pp. 515-538)

While scholars have carefully discerned how nineteenth-century modes of mourning differ from Sigmund Freud's later model, the distinction between mourning and grief, in texts of the period and beyond, tends to be collapsed. This essay argues that Henry James disentangles the two terms by insisting on mourning's association with ritualistic, social behavior, most iconically the wearing of a black dress. In James's writing, to be "in mourning" generally means to be physically within such a dress, without reference to one's emotional state. His use of the phrase, particularly in "The Altar of the Dead" (1895) and "Maud-Evelyn" (1900), thus offers ways of thinking through responses to death apart from grief. One is that the black dress can obscure, rather than advertise, the wearer's feelings. Another is that such garments may facilitate ongoing relationships with persons now dead. Such processes of mourning without grief are nearly impossible to recognize after the advent of psychoanalysis, yet this essay concludes by finding evidence of their circulation in today's political resistance.

Keywords: Henry James; mourning; grief; psychology; clothing