

The Spectrum of Women in Death

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Women are the dead. Women care for the dead. Women advocate for the dead. Throughout history, women's roles related to death have ranged from passive victims posed for men's entertainment, to caretakers of the dead, to advocates and activists fighting for the right of the dead to justice or just a decent burial. In some ways, the roles women have with regards to death through the centuries have been a reflection of women's roles in society. However, even during times when women were passive victims, there have been portrayals of women taking a more active role in advocating for the dying. The remainder of this paper will discuss three specific ways women's association with death has been portrayed: titillating object, caretaker, and activist.

Titillating Object

Women have been objectified and subordinated for centuries. However, in the late 1700s, men began to objectify not only beautiful living women, but also beautiful dead women. Clemente Susine ostensibly created the Anatomical Venus along with her sisters "the Slashed Beauty" and "The Dissected Graces" as teaching tools designed to allow people to gaze into the body of woman to see her heart, her lungs, and the fetus nestled within her womb. However, the Venuses, as they are collectively known, are not representative of plain women, but of beautiful women with golden hair and flawless skin. All of the Venuses are depicted supine and might be considered sexually desirable, if it wasn't for the slashed skin that allows for their easy dismemberment. Sadly, the Venuses were designed to not only be titillating, but also to teach sexist myths of the weaknesses of women and how their anatomy made them passive, childlike, and prone to hysteria (Ebenstein, 2012).

Artists of the 1800s were still objectifying dead women as numerous artists eroticized beautiful corpses by painting women who were dead, or at least passive.

Shakespeare's Ophelia was erotically painted by multiple artists. Millais' depicts Ophelia laying in a stream with her arms outstretched surrounded by greenery. Although Ophelia is fully clothed, her beauty calls to us and it one could imagine that she is awaiting a man's embrace. Steck's 1895 version of Ophelia is similarly romantic as she is depicted underwater with her hands clasped in front of her chest (Romanska, 2005, p. 36). In some ways, these images are reminiscent of a Sleeping Beauty awaiting the kiss of her prince to reanimate her. While these images of Ophelia were more romantic than seductive, other images of dead women were seemingly designed to titillate. Fuseli's depiction of a "Sleeping Women and the Furies" shows a passive woman, with her breasts on full display and Delacroix' "Odalisque Reclining on a Divan" depicts a fully nude woman reclining while a figure watches her (Romanska, 2005, p. 35). All of these images, whether seductive or romantic, depict a woman as a passive object for men to leer at and fantasize about.

Sadly, our society continues to use beautiful dead women to titillate as our movie and TV screens are filled with depictions of beautiful dead, mostly white, women, even though the true crime statistics tell a different story about victimization. In the real world, 47% of murder victims are Black men and only 11% are White women (Statista, 2020). However, in TV land, White women are much more likely to be fictionally murdered than any other demographic (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). Unfortunately, despite Black men representing more murder victims than White women, in the true crime genre the stories profiled are most often those of pretty white women and girls like Natalie Holloway, Lacey Peterson, and Jon-Bonet Ramsey. In death, the dead white girl is the perfect victim, the "highest sacrifice" and the "virgin martyr" (Bolin, 2018). There is even

a name for the trend of news and true crime shows to disproportionality cover the stories of missing white women and girls: “Missing White Woman Syndrome (MWWS)” (Datz, 2021). Unfortunately, while the impact of showcasing dead white women on fictionalized crime stories may be minimal, MWWS has real world consequences as the less coverage that a missing person story has, the less likely it is that the person will be found. And although Dillman speculated the reason for more female victims on TV crime shows was because men liked to portray women as disposable (Dillman, 2014), one lawyer has speculated that the root cause of MWWS is financial as coverage of missing white women brings more viewers and more profits (Miranda, 2021).

Caretaker

Throughout the centuries women have tended to the dead. In Ancient Greece women, under the direction of men, tended to the bodies of the dead. Within 24 hours of a person’s death, women of the deceased’s household washed the body, anointed it with oil, and dressed it in new robes. While they were tending to the body, they lamented the person’s death and sang dirges to honor the dead. They also led the lamentations during the procession to the burial ground (Hame, 2008). In Ancient Egypt, women known as the Hawks of Nephthys, were hired to lament the dead (Hill, 2010).

In the US, women continued to care for the dead into the 19th Century when the funeral industry, much like the medical industry before it, professionalized and men took over what had previously been women’s work. Up until the mid 1800s, “Shrouding Women” were responsible for washing, shrouding, and moving the newly deceased. They were also responsible for arranging the corpse into a pose of restful repose, which could include tying a rag around the head to keep the mouth closed and placing coins

on the eyes to keep them closed. These duties fell to women because these tasks of washing and clothing the bodies were similar to the tasks that women performed when caring for babies. Additionally, women were viewed as more intuitive and emotionally able to care for the dead. Women were not typically paid for these services as they were viewed as caretaking. Although women performed these duties for free for centuries, once men realized they could be commercialized, women were viewed as too weak or delicate to work with the dead (Runblad, 1995). It should be noted that Muslim and Jewish women have continued to be responsible for washing and clothing the bodies of dead females due to religious customs.

The face of the funeral industry is returning to the feminine as women reclaim their place as caretakers of the dead. The number of women in mortuary school has increased from 35% enrollment in 1995 (Cathles, Harrington, & Krynski, 2010) to almost 65% of graduates in 2017 (SHAFFREY, 2018). Women are also innovating and educating as they work to modernize the industry that they were mostly excluded from for over 100 years. Although Samantha Sieber did not invent alkaline hydrolysis, or water cremation, her family's company, Bio-Response Solutions, is the world's largest producer of the technology and she was the one that BBC News called to explain the technology after it was revealed that Archbishop Desmond Tutu had chosen water cremation to dispose of his remains (Oster, 2022).

Caitlin Doughty is a caretaker of the dead, but she is also the queen of the death positivity movement. She is a mortician who currently owns a funeral home in California and she is also an educator whose Webseries "Ask a Mortician" gets hundreds of thousands of hits each week. Her always educational and usually funny videos have

tackled such tough topics as how severely decomposed bodies are prepared for burial and why JFK's coffin remained closed. Although, some of her topics are macabre and maybe a little creepy, her series provides a lot of series educational content such as her video on how to have an ecological funeral and what rights you have when working with a funeral home (Doughty, 2022) ¹..

Activist

Women's bodies are intricately linked with life. Every person on this planet has entered the world through the body of a woman. Women feel the kicking of babies within their wombs and they feel the pain of childbirth. This intricate connection to life also connects us to death when those children we loved before they were born die before us. When those children we held within our bodies die through violence, women often become activists for their own dead loved ones or for the still living children of others.

One of the first activists for the dead was the fictional Antigone. Creon, the ruler of Thebes, chose to deny her brother Polyneices a burial and to leave him unmourned and his body to "be left for all to see, unburied. His body ripped to shreds by vultures and wild dogs" (Sophocles, 2020). Despite knowing that the penalty for disobedience could be death, Antigone chose to defy Creon and bury her brother (Sophocles, 2020). In defying Creon and acting as an activist, Antigone was acting in a manner uncharacteristic for a woman as even her sister Ismene reminded her that they were

¹ It should be noted that I debated whether Doughty was a caretaker or an activist. I could not justify putting her in the activist category as while she educates about death, I don't believe she actively works for the dead. In reality, she probably falls between caretaker and activist, but I did not want to create a separate category for advocates.

women and “weren’t meant to fight battles with men” because they were meant to be “ruled by whoever’s stronger” (Sophocles, 2020). Although Antigone is not strong enough to remove Polynieces body from the battlefield and physically bury it, she does sprinkle dust over the body and these actions are equated with an actual burial (Hame, 2008).

Fast forward a few centuries to Argentina in the 1970s when the country’s military dictatorship turned against its citizens and tortured, killed, and disappeared over 30,000 people who spoke out about the government’s activities or pointed out the social inequities within the country. It was against this backdrop that the mothers of the country began protesting to remember their children and to call for justice for those who had been disappeared (Blakemore, 2019). Las Madres were a powerful group who stepped out of the shadows of domestic life to fight for justice for their children. While these women were demonized, called crazy, and attacked, they never stopped fighting for justice and their courage gave others the strength to stand up to the government until the Junta was ended and they began to see justice for their children (PORTILLO, 1986).

While the Las Madres protested and marched for justice for their children, a group of mothers in Mexico has taken a more hands on approach to searching for the remains of their dead children and other family members. More than 70,000 people have disappeared in Mexico since the late 1970s and most are believed to be victims of the drug cartels. A group over 100 mothers formed in the small town of Los Mochis to actively search for the remains of their loved ones. After receiving tips, these mothers go out into the desert armed with shovels and dig for the bodies of their children.

Although finding a body is sad, these discoveries are met with joy as it means one more mother knows what happened to her child (Zatarain, 2020).

Mothers of dead children in the United States rarely, if ever, have to dig for their bodies, they all too often have to reach deep in their souls to find the courage to seek justice for their children. This is especially true for the mothers of dead Black children who often not only have to fight for justice for their children, but also have to fight racist perceptions of their children who may be viewed as thugs or criminals, even if they did nothing wrong. The killers of both Trayvon Martin, killed by a racist who believed he had no right to be where he was, and Michael Brown, killed by a police officer who took extreme action, were both judged not guilty and released into society. Both of their mothers cried and advocated for their sons' killers to face justice and they both continue to reach out to the mothers of other murdered young people (Lawson, 2018). Although there was no justice for Martin or Brown, their mothers' advocacy may have helped ensure justice for George Floyd, whose murderer was sentenced to more than 20 years in prison, despite being a police officer (AP, 2022).

Another type of maternal activism occurs when women who have lost their children, mostly sons, through war invoke their dead sons to protest the war. These women, including Cindy Sheehan, often face backlash from those who view their actions as less than patriotic and feminists who view them as accidental activists. Sheehan courageously spoke out against the Iraqi war after her son Casey was killed. She faced backlash from supporters of the war who labeled her a traitor (Franklin & Lyons, 2008) and by online trolls who called her fat, ugly, and a bad housekeeper (Stitt, 2010).

Conclusion

In many ways, the role women play in relation to death depends upon how much agency they are given or are willing to claim. Women who are objectified through art or other means have no agency. Their cold dead bodies are posed or drawn based on the whims of others. Women who become caretakers have varying amounts of agency as some can only act under the direction of others while others can act independently. However, women who become activists have overcome the inertia of their grief and have felt their bodies fill with red hot rage over the injustice theirs or others children have suffered. Maybe a day will come when all women will have agency, when we will no longer be objectified and when we will no longer caretake only under the direction of others. And maybe a day will come when our children are no longer killed unjustly.

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