WINING, DINING, AND THE DEAD: FOOD PROPS AND THE DEATH DRAMA

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To the very perfyte conclusyon of Christes lore, your lordship calleth me, mooste noble erle, and yet more noble in the study of godlynes, than in the ornamentes of fortune, in that ye provoke me to adde to my former bokes some lytle thynge, teachinge howe a man ought to prepare hym to deth. For this is of mans lyfe the last part (as it were) of the playe. Erasmus

The use of metaphor as a way toward understanding and simplifying abstract and complex concepts is probably as old as human society itself (Nisbet, 1969). Since long before the birth of Erasmus writers have likened life to a play, implying that people are only actors playing out their assigned roles. Erving Goffman (1959) introduced the notion of life as theater to sociology. He presents a model perspective for the study of social life with principles derived from theatrical performance. But there are several drawbacks to this model as applied to everyday life: 1) the stage has a make-believe quality which is apparent to the audience; 2) unlike the formal theater, life presents things that are presumably real and less-well-rehearsed; 3) the audience is a third party, essential to the theater, but not part of the real life situation. While one may not agree with these assessments of analogy between life and the formal theater, the metaphor has proved useful.

An additional theatrical metaphor which might be valuable for sociological analysis is that to be drawn from improvisational theater. Here the actors are given unscripted roles with a central theme. They must elaborate on the central theme as they develop the play. Improvisation, though only recently rediscovered, is rooted in narrative epics of early Greek and Roman comedies (Hodgson & Richards, 1974:2).

THE DEATH DRAMA One life occurrence which combines improvisation with certain aspects of formal theater is the death drama. The complete drama includes genuine mourning behavior, ritual grief attitudes which one adopts because of custom rather than a particular affective state (Campbell, 1969:223), and stylized funeral rites. Goody (1974:5) stresses the dramatic qualities of funeral performances, especially in non-literate societies where the funeral oration sums up the past history and the social relations of the individual who has died.

It is not difficult to distinguish the elements of formal theater from the less-well-directed and less-well-rehearsed aspects of the death drama. With the increased rationalization of the process of dying, the funeral home has come to be the setting where the funeral play is given. The funeral home may be equated with the traditional theater, having "backstage areas" (the embalming and preparation rooms), and "frontstage areas" (viewing rooms and the chapel). The stage dressings are designed to foster the proper atmosphere of dignity and respect, while the piped-in music transmits a sense of tranquil decorum. In addition the mortuary offers a skilled stage manager in the person of the funeral director.

To bring the performance off smoothly, the funeral director must ensure that the "star" is properly groomed and dressed, so as to present the right "face" to the world. He employs an array of embalmers and cosmetologists to prepare the star for the dramatic moment on center stage. As with most back stage regions, the behavior and language of functionaries who provide support for the performance may be dissonant with the image the funeral director presents to the audience. The stage manager must therefore handle the action "out front" so as to keep the audience and supporting players (the bereaved) at some distance, both psychically and physically, from the back stage region (Goffman, 1959:114).

The image of the deceased is preserved as "merely in a deep slumber," so as to dissuade premature visits to the mortuary. With the exception of a visit to the funeral home by representatives of the bereaved to plan for the funeral and "choose" a casket, visits are discouraged until the body is
Food may become an integral property of the drama. It is in this setting that food may become an integral property of the drama, taking on symbolic as well as instrumental attributes. To understand the functions of the death drama and the uses of food properties in modern America we must discuss the drama in times and cultures where the formal theater of the funeral ceremony and the improvisational theater of mourning are not so neatly separated.

FOOD AS A REFUTATION OF DEATH One of the earliest functions of the death drama was to indicate to the mourners that death is merely a stage in life. Freud (1968) argued that primitive man had an inconsistent attitude toward death. On the one hand, he took death seriously, as the termination of life; on the other hand, he denied death. Death came to be regarded as a transition point for the individual, who would continue life in another form. For primitive man, the dead were still very much with the living, and had to be treated accordingly.

The early death drama may have been played largely at the grave as a means of conciliation toward the one who had undergone transition. Food was an important property in this drama, with a feast being celebrated at the grave site and the deceased acting as host (Blackmar, 1963). The feast may have been held at the grave to maintain the separation of the quick and the dead. Puckle (1968:100) recounts a portion of the drama played by the Bodo of India, who carry the dead man's share of the feast to the grave, and repeat the formula "Take and eat; heretofore you have eaten and drunk with us, you can do so no more; you were one of us, you can no longer; we come no more to you -- come you not to us."

The Egyptians used food to refute death symbolically. At death, a portion of the individual's estate was set aside for the provision of the corpse. To ensure the departed's receipt of this bounty, a tube was connected to the mouth of the corpse, and he was force-fed through the tube (Puckle, 1968:101). The Chinese also held the belief that the departed must be nourished. In the Chinese scheme, the soul
possessed a duality, one of which remained in the grave to receive the food offerings of the living. Without regular offerings of food, the soul would become hungry, and would surely remind delinquent relatives of their duty. Thus, food was used to express a belief in life after death.

EXPIATION OF SIN With the advent of Christianity and the conception of eternal life in Heaven for the righteous, and a Hell for those who strayed from the straight and narrow way, the notion of an afterlife took on even more serious overtones. Not only would the deceased continue to exist after death, but he would endure either in very glorified or very tortured circumstances. The principle of intercession for the soul led the bereaved to ensure that many prayers would be offered for the soul, in the corpse's presence, until the burial.

This practice gave rise to the gathering-in of the relatives and friends of the deceased, who would feast and pray in the presence of the dead. Puckle notes that in the fourth century the charge was levelled against Christians that "ye appease the dead with wine and meals" (Puckle, 1968:108). The rich often set aside amounts of cash to buy food to be distributed to the poor, with an earnest request that they pray for the safe passage of the departed soul to Heaven.

A variation of this use of food in the death drama is the practice of "sin eating" which flourished in parts of Great Britain and Western Europe in the middle ages, with vestiges remaining in Eastern Europe today (Cavendish, 1970:2584). The sin eating rite was conducted particularly upon the death of an eminent member of the community. After he was dressed and "laid out" upon his bier, a meal was placed upon his chest, and the local sin eater was called. When the sin eater arrived, he was ushered into the death chamber by a witness, who made sure the meal was actually consumed and not pocketed. The sin eater would consume the meal and drink the wine, thereby ingesting the sins of the departed. The bereaved heard moaning and wailing from the death chamber as the sins left the body of the corpse and entered the body of the sin eater. When the sin eater emerged, the bereaved hustled him off and flung two or three silver coins after him. Cavendish notes that considering the stigma attached to sin eating, the reward was rather small (1970:2584).

In time, the meal became a symbolic piece of bread and glass of wine placed near the corpse, and the sin eating was performed publicly by a close male relative of the deceased. Puckle (1968:102) notes that as late as the time of the Stuarts in England it was common practice for the mourners to drink wine from a cup placed on the coffin, and thereby to "enter into a kind of communion with the dead." Today, in Rumania and certain other Eastern European countries, it is customary to pass a glass of wine across the open grave of the deceased, which the recipient then drinks (Habenstein, Lamers, 1960). In Mexico, food is often taken to the burial site and passed to those closely related to the bereaved (Kelly, 1975).

FOOD PROPERTIES IN THE MODERN DEATH DRAMA Food has been an integral part of the death drama throughout much of human history, sometimes as a principal element and sometimes performing secondary functions. Though we no longer attempt to expiate sin through the food property, the practice of giving the deceased monk's meals to the poor, or the contributions to charity in the name of an illustrious member of the community are not far removed from this practice. We also continue to use food as a means of indirectly symbolizing our refutation of death. The bereaved in the modern American family will be coaxed to eat, "because life must go on..." In the film script No Callers Please a young woman tells of the events immediately following the burial of her mother:

Immediately afterwards we all gathered in the nearby parlour for a cup of coffee. I discovered that that is the least you can arrange for people to do after ward... But you know, I found that quite a pleasant experience... I don't know any other way of describing it... It was then I moved into a sort of exhilaration, when I hadn't the least trace of regret. I
the drama in the family home is longer, including various subplots, the opportunity for changes of atmosphere is much greater (Hodgson, Richards, 1974:164). In this family theater-in-the-round, food will be a more integral property of the drama.

One function of a stage property is to initiate a particular line of action (Bruder, 1969:52). In furnishing the house of mourning with a plentiful supply of food the family and friends have ensured that there is a mechanism which allows for the suspension of expressions of grief. Charmaz (1976) reports a statement by a coroner in her study to the effect that "Grief lasts as long as it takes the flowers to wilt." (73) Although this is cynical, it recognizes that even the deeply affected must have respite from continual wailing and moaning during the death drama. An emotional outpouring of grief cannot be maintained for the entire run of the drama. Food serves as a focal point around which to act out some of the less emotionally charged scenes of the play. The widow may be encouraged to engage in "normal" activities, such as taking nourishment or playing hostess to friends and neighbors who enter the state to utter lines of sympathy and condolence.

Secondary actors play bit parts in the drama (grandchildren, distant kin, friends) whose roles call for them to demonstrate respect but not grief. In the formal theater of the funeral home, these bit players stay in back regions of the play, while the principle supporting actors occupy a distinct front region (the segregated sanctuary). In the theater-in-the-round of the home, however, all actors are onstage together. In this improvisational setting, provisions must be made for the various levels and types of mourning behavior, and changes in the atmosphere of deep grief.

Actions involving the food property may serve to create a change in atmosphere from deep mourning to subdued festivity. An extreme example of the festive use of the food property is the wake, where participants feast and drink to the honor of the departed in a much less solemn atmosphere than the formal funeral proceedings (Blackmar, 1963). This subdued festivity offers
relief from tension, and allows less serious parts of the funeral tale to be told.

A second function of the stage property is to reinforce the mood of the scene (Bruder, 1969:52). Orthodox Jews, who discourage lavish forms of funeral display, present sympathizers with hard-boiled eggs and salt. The egg symbolizes regeneration, and the salt symbolizes incorruptibility (Puckle, 1968:108). Thus, with a minimum of elaboration, the mourners display faith in the regenerative and ongoing force of life. In the modern American household the food properties are lavish and varied, but the mood which they help to establish is the same. The preparation of food is a creative effort which embodies the essence of regeneration. Dressing the stage with these food props reinforces one of the basic themes of the death drama: "We are gathered to honor one who has departed. However, we affirm that life goes on, and we therefore fortify ourselves for the struggle." The mood which food properties help to reinforce is one of continuation.

ESTABLISHING THE CHARACTER OF THE ACTORS For an acceptable performance, the actors in the drama must build a believable character. If the character is not commensurate with the role the actor is attempting to play, his performance will be unconvincing. Bit players who appear to express condolences to the family often flesh out the character of sympathizer by bringing offerings of food. Ideally, this food offering is the result of the creative efforts of the actor, and serves to comfort the bereaved. Even a casual perusal of the dining table in a house of mourning will indicate that the performative emphasis is more on creativity than upon function. Cakes, pies, and assorted confections will outnumber the offerings of less expressive but more functional dishes.

In developing their own characters, the bit players are also embellishing the character of the star and the principle supporting actors. The entire death drama is intended to portray the star as a social entity, possessing a degree of worth to the participants of the play. In their offerings of food and expressions of compassion, the sympathizers are doing much to indicate the status of the star and his entourage in the larger community. The bereaved, as principle supporting actors in the drama, also help to flesh out the character of the star by providing a luncheon or some other gathering for "near friends," either before or after burial services (Blackmar, 1963). This gesture provides another opportunity to relate the tale of the deceased.

EPILOG The funeral ceremony and burial ends the play for the star. His part is done; his exit made. Supporting actors, however, have an epilog. The process of returning dishes and utensils provides a final setting for friends to express sympathy, and for the bereft to express grief. The dialog will usually be spoken on a more intimate level, and will conclude by reaffirming life.

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