

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

Charles Vaught,
Virginia Polytechnic Institute

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 costmetologists 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

"ready for viewing." While the bereaved are in the mortuary making the necessary arrangements, they may be offered coffee or tea as a gesture of hospitality. This ploy serves to distract the thoughts of the bereaved from what is happening "backstage". Usually, the time spent waiting for the appearance of the star takes place in the family home. Once the body is brought to the viewing room, however, the primary focus of the drama shifts to the mortuary, as the vigil by family and friends begins. This vigil usually continues until time for the formal ceremony, but the cast of characters will change, and the drama will be interrupted by visits home to rest or "freshen up".

Beverages available in the funeral home, are subordinate to the costume of the deceased, the props of the chapel and the viewing room, and the various other accoutrements of the mortuary. These beverages are limited to coffee or soft drinks which are often dispensed from machines located at some distance from the viewing rooms. The physical separation of such refreshment from the "frontstage" areas serves two purposes: First, it confines the attention of the mourners to "the script in hand" in the viewing room, thereby decreasing distraction from the central thrust of the play. Second, the physical distancing of the refreshments also provides a background prop which allows the actors in the drama to withdraw periodically to the background of the play, where they may gain respite from the prolonged tension of having to "be on". Beverages provided in the funeral home, serve instrumental functions, and are not integral properties of the funeral drama.

As the scene shifts from the formal setting of the funeral home, the dramatic aspects of the mourning scenario more nearly approximate the qualities of improvisational theater. The actors are expected to deal lucidly with unexpected occurrences using a rather general set of precepts from everyday life. The non-routine aspects of the death drama demands that the actors use ingenuity in bringing off a successful performance. Here, the actors themselves create the stage set-

tings and develop the mood befitting the central theme 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 so 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 ever 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 afterward... 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

felt almost normal, drank a cup of what tasted like very savoury coffee and ate a couple of sandwiches. Later on I felt dreadful about it when I told my husband that the sandwiches I had were delicious.

(Matse, Nevejan, Faber, 1971:73)

Blackmar (1963) explains this reaction by the secret sense of elation "which cries out inwardly, 'The grave has opened again, nearby, but not for me!'"

A traditional function of the death drama, which continues today, is the integration of the mourners. The drama presents the opportunity to "tell the story of the deceased" (in Glaser and Strauss' terms), and to trace the threads of relation among the survivors. In our highly mobile and rationalized society a death presents a rare occasion when significant portions of the family assemble. The family assemblage allows the expression of continuity, even in a society with a high degree of anonymity and superficiality. For a short time, there is a sort of pseudo *gemeinschaft*. This is not to say that the drama is without rivalries and factionalisms, but the overall sentiment will be the sentiment of "togetherness." This idea has been acknowledged by Campbell in asking the rhetorical question, "...why does not the fundamentalist minister say decisively, 'Here's a man who's going to burn in Hell. If ever we've had a beautiful case, this is it?'" (1969:220). Here, the drama is intended as an integrating device.

DRAMATIC IMPROVISATION IN THE HOME

But where will the integrating acts of the death drama be played? The funeral home is a formalized and rigid setting where some acts of the drama are out of place. The family home acts as a sort of theater-in-the round, where the more free-form elements of the drama can best be played out. Although the primary theme is established by the occasion, the actors themselves establish the mood, develop the roles to be played, and explore the subplots of the drama. In this setting the creation and use of stage properties becomes more problematic, because this act of the play is not as well rehearsed and managed as in the funeral home. Since

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.

REFERENCES

- Blackmar, M.K. 1963 Funeral feasting. *Ladies Home Journal*, June, 80.
- Bruder, Karl 1969 *The Theater Student Properties and Dressing the Stage*. New York, Rosens Press.
- Campbell, E. 1969 Death as a social practice. In *Perspectives on Death*, L.O. Mills, Ed. Nashville, Abingdon Press.
- Cavendish, R. 1970 *Man, Myth and Magic*. New York, Cavendish Corp.
- Charmaz, Kathy 1976 The coronor's strategies for announcing death. In *Toward a Sociology of Death and Dying*, ed. L. Lofland, Beverly Hills, California, Sage.
- Erasmus, Desiderius 1975 *Preparation to Death*. Amsterdam, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum.
- Freud, S. 1968 *Civilization, War and Death*. Ed. J. Rickman, London, Hogarth.
- Goffman, Erving 1959 *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, Anchor Books.
- Goody, J. 1975 Death and the interpretation of culture. In *Death in America*, Ed. D. Stannard, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Habenstein, R. & W. Lamers 1960 *Funeral Customs the World Over*, Milwaukee, Bulfinch Printers.

(Concluded on page 182)

Krishnan P. and Kayani 1974 "Estimates of age specific divorce rates for females in the United States." 1960-1969 Jour of Marriage and Family, 36, 72-75, Feb.

Kunzel, Renate 1974 "The connection between the family cycle and divorce rates: An analysis based on European data." Jour of Marriage and Family, 36, 379-388, May.

Lopata, Helena Znaniecki 1973 "Self-identity in marriage and widowhood." Sociol Qt, 14, 407-418, Summer.

Maddox, George L. and Douglass 1973 "Self assessment of health: A longitudinal study of elderly subjects." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 14, 88-93, March.

Palmore, Erdman and Luikart 1972 "Health and social factors related to life satisfaction." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 13, 68-80, March.

Reynolds, W. Jeff, Rushing and Miles 1974 "Validation of function status index." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 15, 271-288, Dec.

Scanzoni, John 1972 Sexual Bargaining Power in Politics in the American Marriage. Englewood Cliffs New Jersey Prentice-Hall.

Schoen, Robert and Nelson 1974 "Marriage, divorce, and mortality: A life table analysis." Demography, 11, 267-290, May.

Spicer, Jerry W. and Harpe 1975 "Kinship interaction after divorce." Jour of Marriage and Family, 37, 113-119, Feb.

Sweet, James A. 1972 "The living arrangements of separated, widowed, and divorced mothers." Demography, 9, 143-157, Feb.

Tousignant, Michel, Denis and Lachapelle 1974 "Some considerations on validity and use of the health opinion survey." Jour of Health and Social Behavior, 15, 241-252, Sept.

Townsend, Peter 1968 "Isolation, desolation and loneliness." Old People in Three Industrial Societies, Shanas, Townsend, Wedderburn, Friis, Milhoj, and Stehouwer, 258-287. New York Atherton Press.

US Dept of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1971. US Health Interview Survey, Washington DC US Govt Printing Office.

(Continued from page 168)

Vaught

Hodgson, J. & E. Richards 1975 Improvisation. London, Eyre Methuen.

Jung, C.J. 1958 Psyche and Symbol. Ed. V. de Laszlo, New York, Anchor.

Kelly, P.K. 1975 Death in Mexican folk culture. In Death in America, Ed. D. Stannard, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Matse, J., M. Nevejan, H. Faber 1971 Bereavement. Suffolk, GB, Chaucer Press.

Nisbet, R.A. 1969 Social Change and History. London, Oxford Press.

Puckle, B.S. 1968 Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development. Detroit, Singing Tree Press.

(Continued from page 173)

Olshan

Co.

Walzer, Michael 1965 The Revolution of the Saints. Cambridge Harvard University Press.

Weber, Max 1958 The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York Charles Scribner's Sons.

_____ 1968 Economy and Society. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (eds.). New York Bedminster Press.

(Continued from page 177)

Munson

REFERENCES

Handler, Ellen 1975 Residential treatment programs for juvenile delinquents. Social Work, 20, 217 May.

Munson, C.E. 1977 Consultation in an adolescent home using a role theory perspective. Offender Rehabilitation, 2, 65-75 Fall.

Pearlin, L.I., C. Schooler 1978 The structure of coping. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 19, 2-21 March.

Redl, Fritz, and David Wineman 1971 Children Who Hate, New York, Free Press

_____ 1952 Controls from Within: Techniques for the Treatment of the Aggressive Child. New York, Free Press.