Mourning the Dead: A Study in Sentimental Ritual

One of the most significant expressions of sentimental culture was the cult of mourning. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the sentimentalization of death in America had gradually shifted the focus of popular attitudes away from the objective, physical fact of death toward the subjective response to death by those who mourned. By the mid-nineteenth century, death had come to preoccupy sentimentalists, who cherished it as the occasion for two of the deepest "right feelings" in human experience: bereavement, or direct mourning for the dead, and sympathy, or mournful condolence for the bereaved. Within the sentimental cult of mourning, bereavement and sympathy were regarded as visible signs of a mourner's Christian piety, social benevolence, and sincere sensibility. Mourning, the natural human response to the greatest human affliction, was held sacred by sentimentalists as the purest, the most transparent, and thus the most genteel of all sentiments. In mourning, a middle-class man or woman was believed to establish very clearly the legitimacy of his or her claims to genteel social status.

Because mourning offered middle-class men and women an opportunity to demonstrate true gentility, the social expression of mourning became very significant in sentimental culture. By conforming to the explicitly defined rules of mourning dress and etiquette, the bereaved and their sympathetic acquaintances enacted publicly a genteel performance of their deep sensibility. In other words, mourning was subject to the same civilizing process shaping other aspects of bourgeois conduct. But once again, middle-class efforts to embody private feelings in established cul-

tural forms aroused deep anxieties about the conflict between social form and sentimental content and gave rise to a sentimentalist attack on the hypocrisies of middle-class life. Sentimentalists feared that the struggle for bourgeois gentility was poisoning even mourning with calculated self-interest and transforming mourning ritual into a masquerade of affected sensibility. Any confidence man or woman, it was feared, could easily assume the proper mourning dress and etiquette, stage a deceptive performance of deep grief, and thus establish a false claim to genteel social status. But the sentimental critique of the hypocrisies of formal mourning did not halt the ritualization of bereavement. Just as the sentimental attack on fashion and etiquette ultimately provided for their acceptance by the American middle classes, the sentimental critique of mourning ritual merely increased the complexity of the sentimental typology of grief and made mourning ritual the most elaborate expression of a dominant middle-class culture by the mid-nineteenth century.

For seventeenth-century New England Puritans, death had been a grim and terrifying reality. The morphology of conversion that shaped their efforts to achieve sainthood offered no assurance of salvation; those who claimed to know definitively that they were of the elect merely revealed that they were probably damned. While the elect soul faced the prospect of eternal life, the damned soul confronted eternal death, and the iconography of Puritan death dwelt on the darker probability. The physical terrors of death had firm hold on the Puritan imagination, as evidenced by the death's head or winged skull that appeared on most seventeenth-century gravestones, as well as on funeral elegies, broadsides, and mourning rings. And the common epitaph "Prepare for death and follow me" ceaselessly reminded all who strayed past the graveyard of their own mortality.[1]

Throughout the course of the eighteenth century, however, this stark Puritan image of death was gradually modified and softened. The Great Awakening, the most significant theological revolution of the century, introduced the belief that men might anticipate their own salvation without fear of godless pride. Under this new doctrine of assurance, the death of a Christian came to be regarded as an occasion for great joy. By the mid-eighteenth century, death as described in poetry, sermons, journals, and sepulchral art was an object of longing and not of dread. Gradually the death's head that had dominated gravestone design until 1740 evolved into a smiling cherub's face, suggesting eternal spiritual life rather than eternal

physical death. Seventeenth-century epitaphs which had gloomily reminded readers of their own mortality and imminent judgment gave way to eighteenth-century epitaphs which cheerfully stressed the temporary nature of physical death: "Farewell my wife and children dear / I leave you for a while." By the nineteenth century, death had come to be viewed as a sweet deliverance from life, a promise of salvation for virtually all.[2]

In their sentimentalism, popular nineteenth-century effusions about the beauty and joy of death far surpassed all eighteenth-century discussions. But time had wrought greater changes than those of degree, for nineteenth-century views of death focused not on the event itself but on the mourning of those left behind. As Philippe Ariès has argued, the sentimentalization of death meant a shift from the medieval concern with "la mort de soi" to a romantic interest in "la mort de toi." This growing interest in "thy death" carried with it an intense concentration on "my grief." Tombstone design revealed most dramatically this crucial shift in the American view of death. Pre-nineteenth-century tombstones depicted the dead: the grim seventeenth-century representation was a skeleton; the more hopeful eighteenth-century design was an angel; and one eighteenth-century variant offered a medallion portrait of the deceased, with wings often added or suggested by an abstract design. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, these representations of the deceased were yielding in popularity to the classical urn-and-willow design. This design featured a central funeral urn over which hung the branches of a willow tree, with the willow's drooping posture and enormous need for watering suggesting mourning. During this same period, roughly from 1780 to 1840, school girls were turning out mourning pictures based on the same design, but with a significant addition: a woman who wept over the urn, the lines of her drooping figure conforming to those of the willow. By about 1835, mourning pictures were being mass-produced by lithographers such as Nathaniel Currier; these prints offered blank tombstones on which purchasers might inscribe the name, age, and date of death of their lost loved ones. By the 1840s, the mourning figure had become part of sepulchral art itself: life-sized statues, sometimes actual representations of living mourners, leaned and wept over stone-carved urns, crosses, and caskets. Later in the century mourners would cluster around open caskets for mourning photographs and sometimes pose alone, gazing sadly upon locket photographs of the deceased.

In the nineteenth century, the dead vied with those who mourned them for iconographic attention, and often lost the contest.[3]

The full emergence of the cult of mourning that distinguished nineteenth-century views of death occurred in the rural cemetery movement of the 1830s. Colonial graveyards, not surprisingly, were regarded as unpleasant places to be avoided by the living. By the late eighteenth century, even as the first urn-and-willow tombstones began to suggest the growing significance of mourning, burial grounds were deteriorating into weedy fields filled with fallen tombstones and the offensive odor of decay. Not until the early decades of the nineteenth century did critics begin to attack these messy places of death and to suggest that new rural cemeteries be established and carefully attended. One important concern of the rural cemetery movement was the health hazards created by the crowded old burial grounds, often located in the centers of rapidly growing cities. More important, however, reformers planned the rural cemeteries as beautifully landscaped gardens to encourage mourners to visit the graves of their lost loved ones—to encourage the living actively to mourn the dead. With the rural cemetery movement the transformation of Puritan death into Victorian death was complete. As one sentimentalist wrote,

> Formerly it was the practice to locate the "burying ground" in the most lone, desolate and barren spot that could be found; as if the very space the dead occupied was grudged them. Every thing about it was disagreeable and calculated to repel. What inscriptions and epitaphs on the gravestones! What emblems—ghastly skulls, cross-bones; and grim skeletons! all eminently fitted to fill the mind, and particularly the young mind, with dismal thoughts, and to make death and the grave subjects most unwelcome, and to be shunned as gloomy and terrifying intruders on the joys of life. But now all this is passing away.[4]

By 1831, when Mt. Auburn Cemetery was established on the outskirts of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the mourner had almost entirely upstaged the dearly departed for the lead role in the sentimental drama of death. What was the significance of this intense concern with mourning? The answer lies in the vast literature of mourning that became available to the middle-class reading public after 1830: death poetry, funeral sermons, consolatory essays and letters, and mourning manuals, which were anthologies of all these. Ann Douglas has recently categorized this literature as

"contemporary consolation literature."[5] But just as the popular American literature on personal health reflects less a national concern with health than a national obsession with sickness, nineteenth-century consolation literature reveals more about the impulse to mourn than about the quest for solace.[6] Because these manuals offered extensive instruction on how and why to mourn, they may be read as the advice books of bereavement and sympathy, and a close examination of their content reveals much about the meaning of mourning in sentimental America.

Mourning manuals, like sepulchral art, provide evidence of an extraordinary self-consciousness about the act of mourning. In a poem entitled "Dirge for a Young Girl," for example, the poet dwelt at length not on the dead girl but on those who mourned her, and verbally copied the weeping figures captured in stone by sepulchral sculptors: "Yes, they're ever bending o'er her, / Eyes that weep, / Forms that to the cold grave bore her, / Vigils keep."[7] In *Agnes and the Little Key: Or, Bereaved Parents Instructed and Comforted,* a popular mourning manual of the 1850s, the writer provided for his readers' edification an extensively detailed discussion of his and his wife's bereavement over their daughter Agnes, dead at age one. He recorded, for example, every minute emotional response to the central problem of the book, where they should keep the key to Agnes's coffin. With the intensity of a sentimental surgeon he dissected their every feeling: he carefully recorded their response to seeing the empty high chair for the first time; he probed the question whether he or his wife suffered more; he compared his feeling on the day of the burial to his feelings on seeing the grave for the first time after the burial. Finally, he suggested to his wife this method for organizing their thoughts and feelings:

> I should love to join with you, some evening, and put down in a little book our thoughts and feelings in connection with [the key]. We shall read it, hereafter, with great satisfaction. . . . I will name some use, or reflection, or purpose, suggested by the little thing; and, when we have discussed it, I will write it down here. Then it shall be your turn to propose a sentiment.[8]

For middle-class sentimentalists, mourning the dead was an intensely self-conscious experience, to be probed and examined in the Puritan tradition of spiritual self-examination.

One of the first tasks of popular mourning literature was to assure readers that mourning was not forbidden. For New England

Puritans intense bereavement had been viewed as a rebellion against the will of God: the good Puritan strived to use the occasion of death as a reminder of his own mortality and then to cease his mourning as soon as possible. In contrast, nineteenth-century Americans were encouraged to weep over the dead. Grief, they were assured, was a fitting response to death: "Ye weep, and it is well; / For tears befit earth's partings."[9] The natural workings of the human body in response to death gave evidence that mourning was not meant to be denied: "The smitten heart will bleed; the workings of nature must have vent. It is right. Tears were not made that they should never be shed: nor the passion of grief implanted only to be stifled."[10] Jesus himself, the manuals repeatedly pointed out, had wept at the grave of Lazarus, so "surely, he allows you to weep; surely, there is a 'needs be' that you feel a heaviness under such a trial."[11]

In fact, mourning was believed to be a peculiarly Christian response to death. "The religion of Christ," the mourning manuals reminded their readers, "is eminently the religion of the heart."[12] In weeping over the dead, the mourner was thus performing an act of Christian piety: "The heart of the true saint quivers at pain, and his eyes are filled with tears."[13] The death of a loved one was clearly part of God's plan to bring the mourners to pious sensibility, for, as one mourning manual exclaimed in 1836, "How naturally does affliction make us Christians!"[14] The working of affliction upon the immortal souls of mourners, as described in sentimental mourning literature, resembled the crude morphology of conversion that characterized nineteenth-century evangelical revivalism. In the first stage of the mourner's conversion, the death of a loved one induced in him a strong sense of his own spiritual insufficiency: "When the hand of God lies heavy upon us, we plainly discern our own insufficiency and weakness, and yet see nothing about or near us that can afford us any real relief."[15] Out of the mourner's grief came a deep sense of the vanity of earthly happiness: "Consider, pensive mourner, that which stole your heart from God, is gone. That which engrossed your time and thoughts, and left no room for Christ and eternal realities, is gone."[16] God visited death upon the spiritually careless to remind them that their day too would come: "[Death] compels us to feel most sensibly because there is uniformly something peculiarly affecting and solemn in mortality, and because we are necessitated to anticipate the period when we shall grapple with 'the last enemy.' "[17] The mourner thus came to realize

that men must not "have a dependence on ourselves," but must "come out of ourselves to be able to resign ourselves to God."[18] God had designed the affliction of death "to melt and soften our hearts to such degree as he finds necessary, in order to the good purposes of his grace."[19] Convicted of his insufficiency, deprived of his earthly happiness, reminded of his own mortality, his heart softened by affliction, the mourner finally fled "to *Him* who only can [afford us any real relief], who is rich in mercies and mighty to save; both able and willing to stretch himself out to all our wants, and to fill our emptiness."[20] God was the one "True Consoler" and Christianity the "religion of consolations."[21] Christian mourning, the sentimentalists assured their bereaved readers, was a vital religious experience, a kind of personal revivalism in which the death of a loved one convinced the mourner of his utter worthlessness and softened his hardened and reprobate heart. By weeping freely the mourner was believed to assist God in preparing his heart to receive divine grace.

In the sentimental cult of mourning, the story of Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus was frequently cited to illustrate the Christian piety of the mourning experience. This story also established the significance of mourning as a form of sentimental social bonding, for in weeping over his friend's grave, Jesus was said to have shed dignity on "the most sacred of our social feelings."[22] In mourning, the bereaved proved that they had not forgotten the dead: "Then forget not the dead, who are evermore nigh us, / Still floating sometimes to our dream-haunted bed."[23] Specifically, mourning over lost loved ones was believed to demonstrate the enduring strength of family ties. Within the sentimental view, death was not powerful enough to sever the bonds of domestic love. The departed loved one acted as a guardian angel who shed continued influence over the heart of the mourner:

> The memory of the sainted dead hovers, a blessed and purifying influence, over the hearts of men. At the grave of the good, so far from losing heart, the spiritually minded find new strength. They weep, but as they weep they look down into the sepulchre, and behold angels sitting, and the dead come nearer, and are united to them by a fellowship more intimate than that of blood.[24]

The bonds of love that stretched across the great divide of death were thus believed stronger than those ties that bound families together in life. Furthermore, the death of one family member

united the living family in greater love: "The chain of family love on earth becomes much more strong and enduring, when some of its precious links are in heaven."[25] Finally, mourning ensured that family love would be perfected in the domestic heaven pictured by sentimentalists: "I love to think," mused the father of Agnes, "that our separations, griefs, and our improvement under them, will make us love each other intensely when we meet again."[26]

This sacred social feeling of mourning was not limited, however, to the close-knit family circle. When affliction melted the ice around the hardened heart of a mourner, he felt a rush of benevolence toward all men: affliction "has a direct tendency to soften the character, and call forth and improve all the benevolent affections."[27] The flow of love toward a now departed friend was necessarily diverted into new channels of benevolence:

> When a river of love is suddenly checked in the heart by the death of a friend, it needs various channels to drain off the waters that otherwise must drown it in the suffocating agonies of repression . . . after the heart has given one great throb of pain, it may turn for relief to immediate acts of benevolence to human beings who may not know from what depths of pain such love is wrung, nor how the poor, crushed, bleeding heart seeks to still its own throbbings by blessing others.[28]

The death of a loved one, by reminding mourners of every unkindness they had committed against the departed, encouraged them to check their passions and to meet one another in kindness and peace, in a heightened awareness that "our social ties are golden links of uncertain tenure, and, one by one, they drop away."[29] When mourners learned from their affliction to practice kindness toward all, then "gentleness diffuses itself over society" and displaces "suspicion and distrust, those cankerworms that sap the life and purity of communities where they exist, while it restores and strengthens confidence between men."[30] When men and women learned this great lesson of mourning—to love one another—they helped establish on earth the social harmony they would one day enjoy in the sentimentalist heaven, where "universal love expels all selfish passions, prompts every heart to seek the general good, and diffuses serenity over the scene, and contentment among the myriads of the blessed."[31]

Mourning was regarded as the most sacred of social feelings because the heart softened by affliction turned with greater love not

only to the departed loved one, but to all living members of the family, and finally to all mankind. But although mourning was seen as a social feeling, it was not depicted in sentimental mourning literature as a social practice. The mother of little Agnes wept alone in a darkened room, with a Bible in her lap, despite the fact that her conscientiously grief-stricken husband sat in the next room; and the bereaved parent of "The Little Boy that Died" wrote, "I am all alone in my chamber now, / And the midnight hour is near."[32] In mourning pictures the bereaved invariably wept with face averted, or partly concealed by a hand, a handkerchief, or a drooping sleeve. "Why should we make a parade of grief, and blazon it as it were upon the housetops?" apologized one mourner before speaking of the death of his son.[33] Solitude was such a crucial element of sentimental mourning because "those who grieve unseen are sincere."[34] Solitary mourning was sincere mourning, and public displays of grief, in the sentimental view, were regarded with distaste.

True mourning, the sentimentalists believed, was not intended for the eyes of the unsympathetic: "[Tears] are not for the gaze / Of the cold, scornful eye; / No mocking look shall rest, / None know,—but purity."[35] And most eyes, it was assumed, were in fact shockingly unsympathetic. All the world outside the small circle of mourners was regarded as a "tearless crowd," a "thoughtless throng," who gave to "the hearse, the coffin, and the shroud, a passing glance" and then carelessly hurried on.[36] This conviction that mourning was too sacred to be witnessed by the cold and careless generated a sentimental hostility to death iconography. In sentimental literature, graves were often lonely, unmarked, and even hidden from the gaze of a heartless world: "For thickets heavy all around should screen it / From careless gazer that might wander near, / Nor even to him who by some chance had seen it, / Would I have ought to catch his eye, appear."[37] Not in erecting elaborate gravestones did the sentimental mourner memorialize the dead, but in faithfully grieving over their departure and thus carving their memory on the heart: "There is no stone raised there to tell / My sister's name and age, / For that dear name in every heart / Is carved on memory's page."[38] One story told of a young mountain girl whose entire family had died, leaving her lonely and mourning her loss. She did erect a stone over the grave of her brother, but could only write an epitaph in pencil, and a passing stranger commented on the faithfulness of her grief:

> Gracious heaven! said I within myself, what mausoleum could preserve the memory of the dead so faithfully as this tearful mountain-girl does that of her brother, coming night and morning as she does, to reengrave his memory upon her heart, by writing over again upon this poor chip of granite the heart-melting inscription, MY BROTHER'S GRAVE![39]

Public iconography was condemned and replaced by a sentimental reverence for the personal tokens or keepsakes left by the deceased: "In every home there is an enshrined memory, a sacred relic, a ring, a lock of shining hair, a broken plaything, a book, a picture, something sacredly kept and guarded, which speaks of death, which tells as plainly as words, of some one long since gone."[40] Rings, pictures, and locks of hair were cherished in the sentimental cult of mourning because they could be handled and wept over in domestic privacy.

The lonely woman weeping over an unmarked grave, the solitary man gazing sadly at a locket he wore over his heart—both gave sure evidence, within the sentimental conventions of mourning, that they sincerely grieved over their loss. In hiding their tears from careless passersby, in scorning to erect tombstones over their dead, in retreating to closed rooms and drenching their pillows with tears at midnight, these mourners proved their grief a matter of the heart. In the privacy of their grief, they practiced a heartfelt sensibility that demonstrated their alienation from "this blighted orb," this "living tomb" of earth, "Where all are strange, and none are kind; / Kind to the worn, the wearied soul."[41] One poetic mourner not only wept privately but hid his grief under the guise of happiness upon his return from his loved one's grave: "The vows are paid my spirit sought to pay; / The thoughtless throng must see me weep no more; / Back to the busy world I take my way, / To *seem* as happy as I was before."[42] To ensure the higher sincerity of his bereavement, this mourner deliberately practiced the hypocrisy of hiding his grief.

Sentimental mourning, as exhaustively described in the mourning literature, was an act of Christian piety, of deep social feeling, and of sincere sensibility. The true mourner was a Christian whose grief confirmed and strengthened his piety, a devoted family member and a benevolent member of all human society, and a person of true sensibility whose sincerity was evinced by the solitude of his

grief and by his alienation from a heartless and unfeeling world. "By the sadness of our countenances," many manuals informed their bereaved readers, "our hearts are made better."[43] Death assumed such importance in the sentimental culture of nineteenth-century America because mourning provided the greatest opportunity to experience deep and lasting sentiment.

In praising the uses of affliction, however, the sentimentalists did not depart from the genteel demand for propriety of emotional self-expression. Although middle-class men and women were encouraged to indulge "the luxury of grief"[44] as a mark of their sentimental sensibilities, they were instructed never to grieve excessively. The rationale given for this repeated warning was religious: the heathen and the Jew howled in impious anguish over their departed loved ones because they had no hope of resurrection, but the Christian "gives way to the feelings of nature, which prompt the bursting tear and sad regret; but at the same time, his sorrow is not without hope."[45] The Christian did not wail with despair over the death of a loved one. Mourning was to be instead an occasion for discipline in emotional self-expression, for genteel self-improvement: the proper mourner strived to cultivate "finer sensibilities" and a "high moral culture," "a better taste" and "a more Christian feeling."[46] Even in mourning for the dead—in fact, especially in mourning for the dead—the bourgeois quest for genteel propriety was not to be abandoned.

The view that proper mourning was a mark of respectability was well expressed by Rev. F. R. Anspach in *The Sepulchres of Our Departed,* published in 1854, in which the writer urged upon his readers the "propriety of caring for the dead." "The condition of a grave-yard," he wrote, "is, generally speaking, a very good index of the character of the community in which it is located." Anspach warned his readers to "have a care about your confidence, and interest, and reputation among a people where you witness an air of negligence and desolation overspreading the sacred enclosure where the departed repose." Those who properly mourned the dead maintained beautiful cemeteries, which stood as a testimony to their respectability. Those who failed to mourn their dead and let their graveyards fall into ruin could not be trusted to practice the lofty principles they professed; they were confidence men. "They may affect to love you, and profess a high esteem, as long as caprice and policy may dictate; but they will cast you off as they would a worthless garment, when their own selfish ends can no longer be

subserved by your presence."[47] Mourning the dead, like proper dress and polite social conduct, stamped the middle-class American with the mark of good character.

Mourning was also viewed as a means to form good character and thus to establish bourgeois respectability. In *Agnes and the Little Key,* Nehemiah Adams described at some length the transformation of an uncouth laborer into a genteel merchant through the powers of bereavement. In their newfound sympathy for other bereaved parents, Agnes's parents attended the funeral of another small child. Agnes's genteel father described this other father as follows:

> The father was a drover. He was a stout, coarse-looking man, with a very large head, which he leaned back against the ceiling where he sat, rolling it to and fro, with his mouth open, the tears running down with no effort to conceal them or wipe them away, and every now and then he would beat with his head against the wall.

Here, clearly, was a heathen mourner who mourned without hope, and an uncouth mourner who mourned without any of the physical or emotional self-control that stamped the man of gentility. Enter Agnes's parents. Having made sure that the grass was dry and "the ground was safe to kneel upon," they persuaded the lubberly drover and his meek Christian wife to pray at the gravesite. With this act they launched a long and patient effort to convince this impious heathen that his only hope to see his wife and child in heaven lay in religion. The drover's eventual conversion to Christianity and gentility deserves to be quoted at length:

> He became a consistent Christian, joined the church, took a seat in the choir, he having a splendid baritone voice; and sometimes, when I have listened, I could not be mistaken in the feeling that the subduing influence of affliction had raised him in the scale of being, and had opened susceptibilities in him which made him tenfold more of a man than he was before, besides enduing him, through grace, with that which made him a new creature, and had changed his prospects for eternity.
>
> Several months after that, he called, with his wife, at my house, very respectably dressed, being now the owner of a provision stall in a large market, and in profitable business. His countenance was changed. It was refined, urbane, full of feeling; he was gentle and affectionate; he was a happy man.[48]

Affliction had brought to this once coarse and lowly man not only a new heart and a new countenance but a new job and a new suit of clothes. In his mourning, he had been raised in the social scale and ushered into the ranks of the sentimental genteel.

Because of the social imperative to mourn, sentimental bereavement sought outward expression in the middle-class observance of the many social regulations governing mourning dress and mourning conduct. To mourn was to grieve inwardly over a lost loved one; but to be "in mourning" was to wear black, to assume a demeanor of bereavement, to limit one's social activities for the appropriate period following the death. The social forms of mourning were regarded by sentimentalists as simply the outward signs of inward grief: "Why is that mother robed in mourning? It is the outward token of a mourning which the heart alone can feel."[49] But the primary purpose of these social forms was to establish the mourner's claim to his or her due status as one of the sentimental genteel. And it was this social function of mourning forms that would arouse deep middle-class concerns about the hypocrisy of genteel bereavement.

"The chief use of mourning attire," an etiquette manual of 1852 explained, "is to express our grief and humiliation."[50] Mourning dress was to be "an appropriate emblem" of inward bereavement.[51] In the Western European mourning tradition, nineteenth-century Americans generally accepted the color black as "the best suited to the sombre tone of the spirits when one has met with a recent loss,"[52] and in this outward emblem of grief the proper mourner dressed from head to foot. Although styles of women's mourning varied as fashions changed, "close plain" or "full" or "deep" mourning dresses were usually made of black bombazine—a silk and wool mixture with a sooty, lustreless look—and trimmed with black crape or braid. In choosing mourning fabrics, consumers were cautioned to select "a dead, solid color" of black that gave no hint of blue or rust.[53] Collars, sleeves, cuffs, and bonnets were all made of crape—a silk treated to assume a dull, matte surface—and mourning bonnets were covered with a long, thick, black crape veil. For outerwear, black cloth cloaks, black Thibet cloth shawls, and black furs were worn. Black silk was considered inappropriate for deep mourning because of its shine, and gloves were of plain black cotton or of "shammy" leather, which had a dull, suedelike surface. Mourning handkerchiefs were of sheer cambric, unembroidered, with a broad plain hem or a black border that grew narrower throughout the

mourning period. Ornaments worn during mourning were to be few and plain. Mourning rings, brooches, lockets, pins, necklaces, and earrings of jet, set in gold, could be worn; but an oval brooch surrounded by rings of jets and pearls and containing a lock of hair from the deceased was often the sole ornament donned by the mourner. Finally, mourning fans, parasols, umbrellas, aprons, pincushions, and walking sticks were made of black and trimmed with crape. Throughout most of the period from 1830 to 1860, the genteel woman in deep mourning wore no white.[54]

The degree of mourning reflected in dress varied according to the mourner's relationship to the deceased, and the time that had elapsed since the death. Strictly speaking, a widow was expected to wear mourning for two years and to remain in deep mourning, as described above, for the entire first year. After the first year she assumed half mourning, also known as "second" or "lighter" mourning. "The first outward token of lighter mourning is laying aside the veil."[55] Gradually, the widow replaced the black crape sleeves and collars of deep mourning with white tarleton and French cambric; black crape trim gave way to black lace. The woman in second mourning often wore shiny black silk in place of sooty bombazine and varied her sombre wardrobe with some garments of gray, violet, and white. In general, full mourning was worn for parents, grandparents, spouses, and siblings, while half mourning could be assumed from the beginning for uncles and aunts, cousins, and intimate friends and acquaintances. A woman who had lost a parent or a child mourned for one year; for a grandparent, a brother or sister, or a friend leaving her an inheritance, she mourned for six months; for an aunt or uncle, nephew or niece, she mourned for three months and was allowed to wear white trim. Mourning children under the age of twelve wore white in summer and gray in winter; their suits were trimmed with black buttons, ruffles, belts, and bonnet ribbons.[56] In donning mourning apparel, men and women were warned to avoid the extremes of extravagance and of total neglect. "The custom is ancient—it is useful, to the bereaved, and to the community."[57]

The man or woman who donned proper mourning attire assumed with it a properly bereaved social demeanor. One purpose of wearing mourning, in fact, was "to remind us of our bereavement on those occasions, when we are liable to be gay and thoughtless."[58] In other words, mourning dress not only expressed grief, it enforced a social manner of grief that was to be maintained at all times

during the mourning period. Mourning attire also signaled to others the proper demeanor to be assumed in the mourner's presence: "It is also a caution to others, not to converse on light or mirthful topics in our presence; yet we should not speak of death to one who wears a weed."[59] In the genteel performance of mourning, the bereaved expressed grief in dress and manner, and social acquaintances of the bereaved responded with appropriate gravity.

Upon first assuming mourning, the bereaved man or woman was to assume an air of quietly controlled grief. "We should be calm, humble, and discharge every duty. Excessive grief will do no good—the event has occurred—the departed cannot be recalled."[60] Lest the mourner be guilty of grieving too violently—or, perhaps, too complacently—mourning dress assisted the proper bereavement by placing certain well-defined restrictions upon the mourner's social activity. In the dramaturgical context of nineteenth-century etiquette, the mourner's semiseclusion expanded the back regions in which the genteel performance could be relaxed. For the first month after the funeral, mourning women were not supposed to leave home except to attend church and arrange business matters; for the first six weeks, they were expected not to make visits or to dine away from home. For the entire deep mourning period, women were forbidden to attend weddings or festive parties.[61] A mourner who received a social invitation sent her regrets with a reference to her proper social seclusion: "When I tell you that my dear———is no more, you will at once sympathise with me, and feel the impossibility of anything like mixing in society. Believe me, amidst my own griefs, Your ever sincere friend, . . ."[62] And in an emblematic statement of the grief that incapacitated her for social activity, the mourner used black-edged stationery. In letters, as in face-to-face social intercourse, the properly sensible mourner used the mourning token as a reminder never to slip into any inappropriate sentiments or activities.

The mourning dress and mourning etiquette of the middle class pointed to an enormous concern for sustaining the proper demeanor of bereavement by assuming the proper forms for expressing genteel grief. Within sentimental mourning literature the feeling of grief itself was all that mattered, and the privacy of its expression was the test of its sincerity and depth. But in social practice middle-class attention shifted from the sentiment to its forms of expression, and the ideal of private feeling yielded to bourgeois demands for its public performance. The rules curtailing

the social activities of mourners did enforce upon them, to a degree, the solitude demanded by the sentimental ideal. But the rules of proper mourning attire directly violated the sentimental conventions of heartfelt, private grief. In donning proper mourning attire, the mourner wore her heart on her sleeve and expressed her grief not privately but publicly. The sentimental image of the handkerchief drenched with tears by night became a black-edged handkerchief carried by day; the poetic image of the private keepsake of the lost loved one became a lock of hair displayed under the glass front of a jeweled brooch backed in gold. Genteel mourning ultimately subordinated the sentiment of bereavement to the respectable performance of bereavement, but not without generating sentimental resistance. The problem was simply stated by the Reverend Orville Dewey: "The truth is, these trappings of grief seem to me indifferent and childish where there *is* real grief; and where there is not, they are a mockery."[63] Once again, the middle-class attempt to formalize sentiment in the interests of bourgeois gentility was arousing anxiety about the problem of hypocrisy in middle-class culture.

The best statement of the perceived conflict between private sentiment and its public expression was Timothy S. Arthur's short story, "Going Into Mourning," published in October 1841. The story opens with the funeral of Willie, youngest child of the respectable Condy family. A group of less respectable neighbors are cynically commenting on the haste with which the Condys have assumed proper mourning, and one says, "These bombazine dresses and long black veils are truly enough called mourning—they are an excellent counterfeit, and deceive half of the world." In supposing the Condys insensible of their loss, these local gossips prove mistaken, for the family's grief runs deep. But Mrs. Condy is very concerned about their mourning apparel and is anxious to replace the dresses she and her two oldest daughters have borrowed for the funeral with her own. Her husband tries to dissuade her, saying, "Sarah, black dresses, and an outside imposing show of mourning, cannot make us any the more sorry for the loss of our dear little one. . . . We know our grief to be real, and need no artificial incitement to keep it alive." But Mrs. Condy refuses to ignore the dictates of proper society and orders the family seamstress, Ellen Maynard, to make up three mourning dresses in time for church on Sunday. Ellen tries to refuse the job because her sister Margaret is dying of consumption. But the Condys insist, and the

poor seamstress leaves her sister to work day and night in the Condy home, where she herself falls ill. Finally, escorted by kind Mr. Condy, Ellen arrives at her own garret apartment late Saturday night to find Margaret near death. Mr. Condy sends for a physician and for his own family, who arrive in time to realize what they have done. As Mary Condy sits with the dying girl, she thinks of her dead brother and realizes that "since her thoughts had become interested in the getting and making up of her mourning dress, she had felt but little of the keen sorrow that had at first overwhelmed her, and that now came back upon her mind like a flood." She admits that she has desired less "to commemorate the death of her brother, in putting on mourning, than to appear before others to be deeply affected with grief," and in a sudden burst of repentance she resolves not to attend church the following day "for the too vain purpose of displaying her mourning apparel."[64]

In "Going Into Mourning," Arthur, one of the most popular writers of his generation, expressed the peculiarly Victorian concern that the social forms of bereavement were at war with the sincere sentiment of grief. Even though the Condys are not hypocrites of bereavement, they do allow their anxious concern for social approval to blunt their sincere feelings of grief. In fact, in their haste to fulfill genteel social expectations, the Condys fail to exercise the most important sentiment of middle-class gentility—disinterested benevolence. They work Ellen until she feels ill, and ensure the miserable loneliness, if not the premature death, of Ellen's sister Margaret. In repentance for their sins of selfishness, the Condy family pay Margaret's funeral expenses and invite Ellen to come live with them. As Ellen sits in her new home, working on mourning dresses for the younger children, Mrs. Condy extends to her one more offer of charity—a piece of bombazine for her own mourning. But Ellen quietly refuses it and thus completes the lesson in sentiment she is teaching the Condy women, who now respect her for shunning "all exterior manifestation of the real sorrow that they knew oppressed her spirits. And never did they array themselves in their sombre weeds, that the thought of Ellen's unobtrusive grief did not come up and chide them."[65]

"Going Into Mourning" presented clearly the critique of empty social forms that lay at the heart of sentimental anxieties about hypocrisy. But Arthur's short story did not entirely condemn the custom of wearing mourning attire. Significantly, the Condy family, after performing penance by absenting themselves from church on

the first Sunday of their bereavement, did not cast aside their mourning dresses. Even as they admired the unobtrusive grief of their seamstress, they themselves did not abandon the genteel social custom. A poor seamstress, Arthur thus suggested, might ignore social forms that middle-class people could not avoid and still maintain respectability. In retaining quiet respect for Ellen's purer, private grief, while obeying the dictates of genteel custom, the Condys struck the proper balance between pure sentiment and its outward social expression, the balance that represented the genteel mourning ideal.

Even *Godey's Lady's Book,* whose fashion columns regularly included advice on mourning attire, delivered periodic sentimental apologies for its contributions to the formalization of bereavement. Its critique focused, of course, on the fashion of assuming mourning apparel. Because the afflicted human heart "craves this outward type of loss," the writers at *Godey's* explained, they chose to "quarrel with the *fashion,* but not the *custom,* of mourning."[66] Fashionable mourning involved an extremely literal equation of inner sentiment with precise outward forms:

> We quarrel with the *fashion,* which judges of grief by the depth of a fold, that brings remark or censure upon a widow as to whether she wears her veil up or down . . . that modifies shades according to weeks or months, instead of softened feeling.[67]

Those who confused form with feeling, *Godey's* warned, lost sight of the true purpose of mourning attire: to signify bereavement, not to substitute for it. Those who dressed in mourning for the sake of personal vanity rather than as the outward expression of inner grief were guilty of hypocrisy:

> We quarrel with the *fashion* . . . that puts on black for a third cousin, because becoming, and lays it aside at Newport for a fancy ball; or counterfeits it by a mockery of white tarleton, with violet streamers, and marabout feathers tipped with the same shade; or goes glistening in bugles and jet to the gayest entertainments.[68]

The magazine's columns condemned excessive mourning jewelry, fabrics with checks and bars and stripes, bonnets decorated with streamers and bouquets, and dresses covered with bugles and artificial flowers of white and black crape. Such fashionable atrocities were not sincere emblems of bereavement but the mere "mock-

eries of grief" that made up what was contemptuously called "dressy" mourning. Whenever mourning became "a study of an ornament," *Godey's* warned, "it loses its significance."[69]

The best expression of the magazine's avowed contempt for the excesses of "fashionable tribulation" appeared in a satirical farce entitled "The House of Mourning," published in May 1844. The story is of a country squire and his lady on their first visit to a large, modern London mourning establishment. This "house of mourning" is divided into various departments for the different degrees of mourning, and each department is staffed by a salesperson who delivers his or her sales pitch while affecting the precise attire and demeanor of bereavement appropriate to that department. In the deep mourning department a solemn young man dressed in black greets the Lady Hamper lugubriously, "May I have the melancholy pleasure of serving you, madam?" He shows the rustic couple dresses with names such as the "Inconsolable," a watered silk—"watered, as you perceive, to match the sentiment"—and the "Luxury of Woe," made of expensive velvet. When Lady Hamper asks the solemn youth about half mourning, he tells her that they sell "Full, and half, and quarter, and half-quarter mourning, shaded off, if I may say so, like an India ink drawing, from a grief prononcé to the slightest nuance of regret." In the "intermediate sorrow department," a young man in gray, "who affects the pensive rather than the solemn," shows the lady a dress called "Settled Grief" and a warmly tinted black fabric called "a gleam of comfort." In the coiffure department, a saleswoman in deep mourning shows the couple a fancy cap called "the sympathizer" and a handkerchief called "The Larmoyante—with a fringe of artificial tears, you perceive, in mock pearl." Meanwhile, Squire Hamper delivers a constant series of asides concerning the hypocrisy of this fashionable mourning. When the solemn salesman excuses the flimsiness of a fabric by saying, "But mourning ought not to last for ever, sir," the squire replies, "No, it seldom does; especially the violent sorts." When the pensive salesman proclaims one fabric as "the happiest [i.e., the finest] pattern of the season," the Squire replies, "Yes, some people are very happy in it, no doubt." Finally, the Squire closes the farce with a flash of country simplicity and sincerity:

> Well, if it's all the same to you, ma'am, I'd rather die in the country, and be universally lamented, after the old fashion—for, as to London, what with the new French modes of mourn-

ing, and the "Try Warren" style of blacking the premises, it does seem to me that, before long, all sorrow will be sham Abram, and the House of Mourning a regular Farce![70]

Squire Hamper's attack on the hypocrisy of urban mourning customs was clearly not limited to the fashionable excesses of proper mourning attire. In a broader sense, the good Squire was condemning the commercialization of mourning. In the 1840s and 1850s, as formal mourning became widely accepted as a mark of middle-class gentility, *maisons de deuil* such as Besson and Son of Philadelphia began to spring up in the largest American cities, and mourning departments appeared in the new large department stores. These mourning establishments encouraged a wide range of distinctions in the degrees of bereavement expressed in proper mourning attire, and thus contributed to the extreme literalness of middle-class views concerning the relationship between inner sentiment and its outer social expression. By 1854, *Godey's Lady's Book* was announcing that because mourning attire had "become the subject of so much conventional formality and abuse," many people were refusing to assume it, "their sorrow being of the heart, and their mourning not meant for the eyes of the world."[71]

The genteel imperative of formal mourning was not, however, to die so easily, and it is clear from their continued advice on mourning fashions that *Godey's* did not expect all women to abandon the custom entirely. Instead *Godey's* advised their readers that in mourning, as in all dress, plainness and simplicity were recommended as the purest and most sincere form of emotional self-expression. In the 1850s, *Godey's* began to suggest ways in which mourning attire might express more accurately the precise sentiments of the mourner. For example, it became proper for mourning mothers to wear dresses in quiet colors, white dresses with dark ribbons, or black silk dresses with a white crape or straw bonnet. These modifications of stark traditional mourning were viewed as better expressions of "the sadness with which we see a child taken from us, yet from the cares and anxieties of life as well."[72] At the same time, mourners anxious to avoid the hypocrisy of fashionable mourning were encouraged to abandon the rigidly codified time periods for the various levels of mourning, since "this code of fashion, which many families follow in our more stylish city circles, would seem to indicate the day and hour when grief terminates, and the dead are forgotten."[73] The mourner who set aside her

formal mourning whenever her bereavement faded thus demonstrated the sincerity of the social expression of her grief.

In the sentimental ideal of mourning, bereavement was a sacred sentiment that was best and purest when most private. In the social practice of mourning, however, the bereavement of the heart sought outward, public expression in the highly and precisely symbolic trappings of mourning dress. True sentiment, ideally a matter of the private heart, was also the outward sign of middle-class gentility, and therefore open to the threat of hypocrisy. The act of death itself was admired by sentimentalists because the dying seldom dared to cling to the hypocrisies of earthly existence: "Seldom has any one sufficient strength of motive or of nerve to act a part when the stern realities of another world begin to press upon him. Hypocrisy dare not look the king of terrors in the face."[74] Mourning the dead was a different matter entirely, for any confidence man or woman aspiring to higher social status might assume the outward trappings of bereavement to lay claim to bourgeois gentility: "Man finds his account in dissembling, not only to the living whose good opinion he would propitiate, but also over the unconscious remains of the dead, that he may keep up a reputation for sensibility and friendship among the living."[75] But since sentiment was the stamp of gentility, the social forms of sentimental expression could not be cast aside: genteel Americans, like the Condy family, had to condemn the fashion of mourning without abandoning the custom of mourning. The sentimental typology of grief was repeatedly defended and apologetically shaped anew into "truer" expressions of bereavement. But it was not abandoned by middle-class men and women seeking to establish their respectability by demonstrating in outward social forms the deep sensibility of their private hearts.

Mid-nineteenth-century middle-class Americans were obsessed with mourning their dead because, in their sentimental scheme of social status, the capacity to experience deep grief demonstrated true gentility. For the same sentimental reasons, they were almost equally obsessed with the act of offering sympathy to those who mourned. The sentimental duty of consolation expanded the genteel opportunities presented by a single death far beyond the family and intimate friends of the deceased to all who knew or barely knew the mourners themselves. Little Agnes's father noted, for example, that men who had scarcely bowed to him before his daughter's death now noticed the mourning weed in his hat and the sorrow in

his face and saluted him respectfully on the street. The grateful man wrote, "It made me love my fellow-men more than ever; it made me resolve to be kind to people in trouble."[76] Sympathy, as well as bereavement, brought men and women closer together in the sentimental bonds of disinterested benevolence. The mourner was said to be unusually open to the influence of others: his mind was "sensitive and alive to whatever affects it; and is often powerfully touched by the slightest action or word." No office of friendship, therefore, demanded "greater discernment and delicacy of mind" than consolation.[77] And no office of friendship demanded "a more calm and tender piety. . . . 'Pure religion and undefiled' is to visit the widow and fatherless, the childless and bereaved 'in their affliction,' to stretch out a helping hand to our suffering brethren, 'to bear each other's burdens,' 'to weep with those who weep, to comfort those who mourn.' "[78] Sympathy, as well as bereavement, was cherished by Victorian Americans and cultivated as a mark of sensibility.

Within the cult of mourning, moreover, sympathy was believed to be quite rare, for bereavement wrapped the mourner in "a grief, the depth of which another / May never know."[79] "The stranger knows not of it. The acquaintance cannot intermeddle with it; and even in the confidence of tender friendship, it may not be wise often to intrude it."[80] Sentimental mourning literature held to a convention that only those who had been mourners themselves could truly sympathize with the bereaved. At the same time, however, none knew better than they the uselessness of merely formal sympathy:

> Young mother! what can feeble friendship say,
> To soothe the anguish of this mournful day?
> They, they alone, whose hearts like thine have bled,
> Know how the living sorrow for the dead;
> Each tutored voice, that seeks such grief to cheer,
> Strikes cold upon the weeping parent's ear;
> I've felt it all,—alas! too well I know
> How vain all earthly power to hush thy woe!
> GOD cheer thee, childless mother! 'tis not given
> For man to ward the blow that falls from heaven.[81]

The most deeply sympathetic friend could only address the mourner with a delicate apology: "How to offer you consolation in your present grief, I know not."[82] And even such painful but well-intentioned professions of sympathetic incompetence were believed

to be unusual, for all the world outside the family circle was seen as callously unconcerned about the mourner's grief: "Mid laughing crowds I stood alone, / Unutterably desolate."[83] Even the funeral attendants were labeled "a numerous unconcerned company, who are discoursing to one another about the news of the day, or the ordinary affairs of life."[84]

Why did sentimental mourning literature return again and again to this idea that even the well-intentioned could offer little or no consolation to the bereaved and that most of the world failed to share or even to notice the mourner's deep grief? By the nineteenth century, death in America was losing the communal significance it had had in the colonial period. Although seventeenth-century views of death had been grimly terrifying, the major shock of separation from the dead had been confronted and absorbed by the entire community. In the small colonial towns a tight network of mutual dependencies and primary relationships bound all men and women together, and the death of a single individual was viewed as an immediate loss to the entire community. In expression of their collective loss, members of the community helped lay out and attend the body before the burial, construct the coffin, bear the body to the burial site, and dig and cover the grave. The funeral was both a social function and a public event, to which all were summoned by the tolling of the meetinghouse bell. And in recognition of a bereavement that extended beyond the immediate family of the deceased, funeral attendants wore mourning rings, scarves, and gloves.[85]

As American society grew increasingly complex in the early nineteenth century, the death of a single individual gradually lost its communal significance. The nineteenth-century view of death had been sentimentalized, but the shock of separation now had to be borne almost entirely by the immediate family of the deceased. Death had become a private matter, and the older concern with the dead person's place in the community yielded to an interest in his or her place in the personal lives of family and friends. The most important sign of this shift was the early nineteenth-century professionalization of duties performed for the dead. Church sextons, who gradually had taken over the tasks of tolling the bell and digging the grave, now began to lay out and attend the body and direct the funeral procession; gradually, professional undertakers began to set up business. The funeral ceased to be a public function for the entire community and became a limited social occasion for

which personal invitations were issued; mourning dress and jewelry came to be worn only by the family and closest friends of the deceased. By the mid-nineteenth century, mourning had become a private anguish experienced with little community support, and popular mourning literature bewailed the callous indifference of the "tearless throng."[86]

Despite the strong sentimental insistence on the ultimate inconsolability of the mourner, genteel mourning ritual nonetheless demanded that acquaintances of the bereaved express sympathy in certain prescribed ways. The one mourning rule specified in nearly every etiquette manual was that social acquaintances of a mourning family pay a visit of condolence within a week after the death. Relatives and intimate friends of the family were to pay a personal visit; more distant acquaintances were simply to stop by the house and send in a card with the servant. Polite condolence was to be expressed in formal tokens of sympathy: "It is courteous to send up a mourning card; and for ladies to make their calls in black silk or plain-colored apparel. It denoted that they sympathize with the afflictions of the family; and such attentions are always pleasing."[87] Just as mourning attire assisted the mourner in maintaining the proper demeanor of bereavement, sympathetic attire helped the visitor paying a condolence call to "let your manners and conversation be in harmony with the character of your visit."[88] Men and women paying polite visits of condolence maintained a quiet gravity of manner and avoided both gaiety and unnecessary references to the deceased. After paying one formal visit, they avoided calling on the bereaved family until they received cards signaling the family's emergence from the mourning period.

The formal visit of condolence was the subject of much controversy within popular mourning literature. Once again, the sentimentalists who guided middle-class conduct raised the problem of the conflict between social forms and true sentiment, between politeness and sincerity. The mother of Agnes explained her distaste for the visit of condolence:

> Calls on a bereaved person are, for the most part, agonizing, unless there be great intimacy between the parties. . . . I am resolved that, unless I am on very intimate terms, or in a peculiar relation to a bereaved person, I will express my sympathy merely by some message, or little gift, or act of remembrance, and not by being one of twenty or thirty people to make

> the poor sufferer go over the bitter tale again and again, or to make her sit and endure a stiff, ceremonious visit.[89]

Condolence offered as a matter of proper form by mere social acquaintances, Agnes's mother thus complained, could only be stiff and ceremonious, never warm and natural. "Each tutored voice" of polite sympathy was a source of pain, not comfort, to the sensitive nerves of the poor mourner: "And if there is ever a time when cold and formal phrases of piety, dealt out as words of course, are intolerable, it must be when they are addressed to a mind, that is alive with all the sensitiveness of grief."[90] Furthermore, formal condolence only intruded on the mourner's desired privacy: "Sorrow naturally seeks for quietude and privacy. . . . The afflicted, when they consult their natural feelings, do not wish to be in a crowd."[91] Heedless of the mourners' needs, however, the polite mob overwhelmed them with company:

> Into an afflicted soul the crowd thinks it has a right to enter; it is like a conquered city. The new comers overturn everything; carry off, bring in, derange, arrange;—protestations are of no avail; besides, they are so feeble, (mere sighs of pain,) that they are scarcely heard. . . . It is a grievous spectacle these barbarous invasions,—well intended, most of them; but very unseasonable, and very afflictive.[92]

An even more serious problem than the hypocrisy of polite condolence was the hypocrisy of funeral attendance. Victorian etiquette forbade anyone to refuse an invitation to a funeral, and then went on to instruct attendants on the proper demeanor of bereavement. In the funeral procession, for example, attendants were to "walk with the head uncovered, silently, and with such a mien as the occasion naturally suggests."[93] In offering detailed advice on how to act bereaved, however, such works clearly suggested that genuine grief might not be counted upon to carry the attendant through the ceremony with the proper gravity. And one unusually cynical manual openly admitted the necessary hypocrisy of the attendant's air of grief: "Your dress is black, and during the time of waiting, you compose your visage into a 'tristful 'haviour,' and lean in silent solemnity upon the top of your cane, thinking about—last night's party. This is a necessary hypocrisy, and assists marvellously the sadness of the ceremony."[94] As long as the funeral attendant assumed the properly sorrowful demeanor, he fulfilled

social expectations of polite sympathy. In the funeral procession he might "walk with another, in seemly order, and converse in a low tone; first upon the property of the defunct, and next upon the politics of the day."[95] Consolation literature scornfully proclaimed that half "the mourners, so called" were "only nominally such," and attended the funeral "by custom rather than by their own feelings."[96] But etiquette manuals calmly accepted the inability of most funeral attendants to enact the genteel performance of mourning without specific instructions on the proper demeanor of bereavement.

Middle-class mourning ritual was caught, like dress and etiquette, in the vicious circle of sentimental form and feeling. In response to the relatively new isolation of the bereaved, polite middle-class society began to control the formal expression of condolence that replaced the emotional response of an earlier time. The new nineteenth-century focus on sympathy was itself of enormous significance: in colonial America, sympathy was not a major issue, for all who knew the deceased were themselves mourners; their own loss was not vicarious but direct. But by the mid-nineteenth century, only sympathy for those who mourned was demanded of those who had known the deceased; mere social acquaintances were not expected to grieve over one they scarcely knew or depended upon. And sympathy might be expressed simply through a polite visit of condolence, a mourning card, a black silk dress. But when the polite forms of condolence replaced communal bereavement, the Victorian spectre of hypocrisy reared its head and lent some credence to the sentimental lament that, beyond the circle of relatives and intimate friends of the deceased, none mourned, though many expressed polite sympathy.

How, then, were the aspiring genteel to express their sympathy? Within the conventions of sentimental mourning, the true mourner was inconsolable and any but the truest sympathizer was a cold and formal fraud who only intruded upon the mourner's privacy. But the genteel imperative of sympathy for the bereaved remained unaltered by all attacks on formal condolence; in fact, the difficulties of expressing sincere sympathy only made more precious any successful attempts to comfort the afflicted. After attacking the hypocrisies of formal condolence, therefore, mourning manuals went on to instruct their middle-class readers on how properly to offer sympathy. Although the "simplest expressions [of consolation], if only uttered in sincerity, will not fail of their intention; yet,

for the most acceptable performance of it, something more is needed than mere zeal, or good feeling."[97] That something more was a "respectful regard for the afflicted; a certain reverence of sorrow, forbidding the intrusion of what is doubtful, or might be the occasion of pain."[98] The acceptable performance of consolation demanded, in short, the exercise of genteel tact. The duties of consolation, Rev. Orville Dewey explained at some length, demanded great discretion and delicacy: true sympathy was never rash or intrusive, never too sure of its powers to assuage grief, never convinced that it fully shared the mourner's feelings. True sympathy was respectful: silent and gentle, not noisy and bustling; slow to command the mourner's religious submission to affliction, and reluctant to rebuke the rebellious mourner.[99] The tactful sympathizer carefully confessed an inability to express formally his or her sympathy, an ignorance of the depth of the mourner's sorrow, and an impotence to assuage that grief; but finally offered his or her own deep sympathy as a possible source of consolation to the bereaved:

> I cannot say what I would in words. Would to heaven, I had power to say any thing to assuage that grief, which with the highest principles and the noblest views, must be poignant indeed. The greatness of this trial no one can fully know, that has not tested it. But I know enough to awaken all my sympathy. It is a poor gift; but if it will yield you any consolation, you may draw largely from this source.[100]

The most important task of the man or woman offering sympathy was to recognize the mourner's own deep grief. The tact of condolence, like all Victorian tact, involved a formal acceptance of the genteel performance of another—in this case, the mourner's performance of bereavement. The formal visit of condolence, the acceptance of the funeral invitation, the demeanor of sympathy—these polite forms were an expression of respect not for the dead but for the mourners themselves. Significantly, only mourners were required to attend the body to the gravesite; social acquaintances were required only to visit the home of the deceased and attend the church service, in an expression of tactful sympathy for the mourner.[101] In fulfilling the polite forms of condolence, the genteel Victorian was simply stating "I know you grieve deeply" to those who mourned and thus honoring their claims to gentility. And in avoiding them socially for the mourning period, the polite Victo-

rian tactfully honored their genteel need for privacy. For the truly grief-stricken mourner, the high demands of gentility for physical and emotional self-control must have been difficult to meet for some time after the death of a loved one. And for the indifferent mourner, the demands of sentimental gentility for deep bereavement were equally difficult to fulfill. So the tactful acquaintance of the bereaved family honored their need for privacy by saying, "Though I should rejoice to meet you in the full enjoyment of your usual good spirits, yet I am aware that the grief which oppresses you, and which I regard as a credit to your feelings, must have its sway, and not till then can I hope for the pleasure of such a meeting." Having thus honored the mourner's grief as a credit to his or her feelings, this model letter-writer went on to lay his or her own claim to sentimental sincerity: "It is not, therefore, in the mere observance of a cold and formal custom, that I at present write, but in obedience to the dictates of the truest friendship. . . . Accept my condolence in your late bereavement, by the loss of ( ), and believe me to entertain the truest sympathy in your affliction." In the manner of proper Victorian correspondence, this letter thus disavowed all cold formalism and declared its own deeply sincere sympathy. And the polite response to such a letter was supposed to honor in turn the sincerity of this sympathy: "The perusal of your letter was indeed a solace to my grief, and convinced me that I have at least one friend who can sympathize in my afflictions."[102] Because the shadow of insincerity lay upon all attempts to offer condolence, the polite mourner expressly recognized the sincerity of all proper expressions of sympathy. The ritual was now completed: sentimental gentility had been claimed and mutually honored by both participants; the genteel performances of bereavement and of sympathy had been successfully enacted.

For the middle classes of mid-nineteenth-century America, mourning the dead was the most powerful sentiment of all and the most resistant to public expression through empty social forms. "There should be nothing in mourning but what is natural and spontaneous," wrote George Hervey, and "Besides, what is more absurd than weeping by rule, and wearing mourning according to a fashion."[103] Even as they articulated this sentimental view of mourning, however, the arbiters of middle-class conduct were erecting an elaborate framework of social forms that codified and regulated proper mourning dress and mourning etiquette as public expressions of bereavement and sympathy. In the many conventions of

mourning, the most powerfully right feeling of sentimentalism was formalized in the most precisely detailed middle-class ritual. Once again, American sentimentalists confronted the problem of hypocrisy in middle-class culture. These fears of hypocrisy were rooted in the nagging awareness that mourning the dead was not solely a matter of indulging private grief but was a means of establishing a public claim to bourgeois gentility. In mourning the dead, middle-class social aspirants were enacting a genteel performance of bereavement and sympathy. Within the bourgeois equation of sentiment and social standing, sincerity was seen as the mark of authentic bourgeois gentility; but the pervasive middle-class desire to rise on the social scale was believed to taint all mourning sentiment with the hypocrisy of self-interest. Just as "the weeping of an heir, is laughter under a mask,"[104] the weeping of the would-be genteel was feared to be merely the public performance of skilled confidence men and women, anxious to rise in middle-class society. Throughout the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, American sentimentalists continued to express deep anxieties about the conflict between private, sincere sentiment and public, hypocritical social forms in the cult of mourning. But gradually, as mourning ritual grew more elaborate, middle-class anxieties about cultural hypocrisy began to wane. By the 1850s, the Victorian cult of mourning was becoming an important ritualistic expression of bourgeois pride and self-confidence. After mid-century, the American middle classes learned to embrace the art of social performance as a mark of cultural dominance in the age of consolidation.