

English



**ASSIGN
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Curtain” by Jessica Mitford is a path breaking essay on a very common yet
unusual topic. Common because, it is a normal process to embalm the body
after death in United States, but Jessica’s essay is unusual because, she
scathingly attacks this process of embalming the body and more especially
without the consent of the family members, is a thought provoking topic
indeed.

“ Behind The Formaldehyde Curtain” is an essay that was first published in
the year 1967, in the ‘ American Way of Death’. The essay has two poignant
points to be considered:

- a) The legitimate perspective of embalming as regards to law.
- b) The general perspective of death in the eyes of common American mass.

Motives behind Writing the Essay

The main purpose for writing this essay is to bring into focus that the
procedure of embalming the body is not legitimate and in most of the cases,
the consent of grieving relatives are even not asked before the body is
indulged into embalming either. There is a systematized industry and motif
working behind the embalming of bodies and Jessica wanted to bring these
points before the common mass, just to make it stronger that the procedure
considered inevitable is not at all mandatory. An expert on death and dying,
Jessica Mitford is completely against embalming dead bodies after death and
puts forward many valid points in support of her contention.

Her motive of writing this essay is explicit from the very beginning of the
literary piece. She has placed a strong objection regarding the secrecy
maintained during embalming. Another major purpose of writing this essay

was to make it clear that the process of embalming is barbaric and it is evident that her real goal in writing this essay was to reach the common mass so that common people should understand, how barbaric the practices are and the mystery that actually lies behind the closed doors of the funeral parlors.

She clearly claims that the ritual of embalming in North American funeral tradition is grotesque. Yet, people seem to remain ignorant about it. By highlighting these points, she wanted to create a common awareness against these rituals and tried to correct them.

She brings out evidences to make her contentions more concrete. She wanted to show that a planned industry works behind these traditions which try to make burial a pleasurable thing. This ritual, according to Jessica, only prevails in North America and does not occupy any place in the tradition of other areas apart from it. She writes with specific examples. She brings forth the example of the ritual of open - casket ceremony only common in North America. She ends her essay with the following line that completely complements her intentions behind writing the essay: “ He has done everything in his power to make the funeral a real pleasure for everybody concerned. Consequently well over 90 per cent of all American funerals feature the open casket-a custom unknown in other parts of the world” (Mitford, 1978).

Comic Elements

The essay apparently may seem humorous but the theme underlying it is complex. The essay was purposefully written to educate the mass of America and make them aware about those empty rituals of embalming and the gimmick which is associated with these rituals that are solely created by the

funeral industry.

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