

The social convention of death in literature

[Life](#), [Death](#)



Our environment dictates how we live our lives and how we handle situations. Our environment also dictates how the people around us handle our death. Death is one important social convention of a society depicted in *The Call of the Wild*, *Garden Party*, *the Great Gatsby*, *Bone*, and *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. Death and the handling of death is a social convention portraying values and ways of living in two main ways: "respect" of the body and acceptable manners to die such as through violence, illness, caring, etc.

In *The Call of the Wild*, by Jack London, death is a game where survival is a tactic, kill or be killed (manner of death) and the body is a trophy ("respect" for the body). For example, "He Buck was ranging at the head of the pack, running the wild thing down, the living meat, to kill with his own teeth and wash his muzzle to the eyes in warm blood." (London 49). This game Buck played with the other dogs was a challenge of who will catch the snowshoe rabbit. It shows a twisted regard for life. Buck wanted to wash his nose in the rabbit's blood to smell the kill. In this game, the only respect for life is the trophy that the body will make in death. Another example of the game is "From then on, night and day, Buck never left his prey, never gave it a moment's rest, never permitted it to browse the leaves of trees Nor did he give the wounded bull opportunity to slake his burning thirst in the slender trickling stream they crossed." (London 95). Buck played with the bull's fear and he showed no mercy. He showed no respect, he gave the bull no honor and the bull finally died of exhaustion, falling over, only to become Buck's prize that also fed him. "For a day and a night he remained by the kill moose, eating and sleeping, turn and turn about. Then rested, refreshed and

strong," (London 96). Buck nourished himself off the bull and became stronger and more resilient. To eat Buck must hunt his food in the uncaring wild, it was his only choice for survival. The game that Buck played with life did not always give respect to the dying, though this seemed necessary to his survival, giving the deaths more acceptability as a source to nourish the winner of the game.

In a Garden Party by Katherine Mansfield, death is not a game but a learning experience about the division of classes ("respect" for the body) and an awakening (manner of death). For example, Mansfield writes, "Oh Laura! Jose began to be seriously annoyed. If you're going to stop a band playing every time someone has an accident you'll lead a very strenuous life You won't bring a drunken workman back to life by being sentimental," (Mansfield 45-46). This shows the social convention of lack of respect for a body if he is not of the same social standing, though he is their neighbor. The man was poor, a worker, therefore according to Jose, not important enough to postpone the party in respect of his death. In fact, Jose goes a step further in her open disrespect for the Mr. Scott, the dead man, by suggesting that he was drunk and that implying that all paupers are alcoholics. A further example, "Mother, a man has been killed,' began Laura. Not in the garden?" interrupted her mother. No, no!' Oh what a fright you gave me!' Mrs. Sheridan sighed with relief" (Mansfield 46). Mrs. Sheridan only concerned herself with the death, when she thought he died at her house and would inconvenience her. However since he did not, he was no concern of hers either, showing the absence of respect for the man who died because of his

class. An instance of awakening is " Well, there's a young chap living there the cottages below, name of Scott, a carter. His horse shied at a traction-engine, corner of Hawke Street this morning, and he was thrown out on the back of his head." (Mansfield 44). This shocks Laura. As an upper class child, she is sheltered from the harshness of life. Accidents came with hard physical work in those days because of the lack of safety measures. She, as a child, also was not permitted to go near the cottages. As said previously, she wanted to cancel the party in respect for the corpse, showing her lack of understanding of the social norms of her class. The indifference to the man's death teaches about class division and death, shown through Laura's shock.

In a similar manner related to social class, in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, death shows the snobbery of the society (" respect" for the body) and reflection on the worth of the man, indirectly through the manner of death. We see this in the passage, " When the butler brought back Wolfshiem's answer I began to have a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all." (Fitzgerald 173). Gatsby had thrown extravagant parties that all sorts of people claiming to be " friends" attended. Now at his death, they retreat behind the wall of social class, by either leaving the area for a " vacation" or saying associating themselves with Gatsby is not appropriate. One person even had the nerve to call and say he will try then start into " What I called up about was a pair of shoes I left there." (Fitzgerald 177). As if the shoes meant more than a man's life. Another example, Tom said to Nick, " That fellow Gatsby had it coming to him He ran over Myrtle Wilson, the garage mechanic's wife like

you'd run over a dog and never even stopped his car." (187). The simple fact is that Gatsby did not run over Myrtle, Daisy did. However, Gatsby took the blame to spare Daisy. Only a kind heart would put his head on the block for another man (or woman). In addition, Myrtle ran out in front of the car thinking she ran towards Tom, all the while shouting, " Beat me! Throw me down and beat me you, you dirty little coward!" (144). Myrtle before her death reveals Tom's true character, a little coward. He runs from Myrtle's death, knowing he is partly to blame, and sheds the entire burden upon another man. Also in all of his greatness of being rich, acting the part of a big man, he acts like a child upon Myrtle's and Gatsby's death, basically saying that neither was his fault and that they had it coming. Tom scorned the fact that Gatsby acted as a rich man, squandering his money on big parties, fancy cars, clothes, and servants to impress Daisy, as if he was part of his social standing. Gatsby in reality made his money through shady deals and for the most part was not wealthy. Furthermore, Daisy ran over Myrtle like an animal, and sped up after impact. Daisy lacked regard for life, as shown by the deaths. She sent nothing, no word or flower, to Gatsby's funeral, after Gatsby ends up dying for taking up the blame, by the hand of Wilson. In grief, Wilson shot Gatsby than himself, completing the circle to the eye of a normal bystander, the husband, lover, and wife. This illustrates how Gatsby never plays himself. In the instances shown, death was violent and caused by others. People could be concluded that taking another's life is not a sin or crime if that life was lower class or deserved' it. That reflects on the values and customs of the day, its social conventions.

Bone by Fae Myenne Ng, treats death much different from the prior examples. In Bone, the dead are paid respect ("respect" for the body) and the deaths are tragic (manner of death). For example, "It the Chinese cemetery was a messy looking place, with overflowing garbage cans and half singed funeral papers from Chinese burning rituals stuck in the bushes." (Ng 72). Though the area lacks care, the funeral papers and overflowing, garbage cans prove that people come to pay tribute to their departed family. The social conventions of the Chinese required visual rituals to honor the dead. Tradition dictates much of the actions. Another example is "We had some people over, close friends of Ona's, the sewing ladies, some old-timers; just an afternoon when everyone remembered Ona before the old year ended." (Ng 113) In honor of Ona, they held a small memorial service to honor her spirit, by remembering her. The manner of death is unique in Bone because it was at Ona's own hand, however her death still possesses a tragic nature. For the Leong family death is more tragic, such as when Ona died, "Whenever I closed my eyes, I thought I heard Ona scream." (123). Ona haunts Lei because of the tragedy of her death, by suicide. Her death ripped the family apart, adding to the tragedy. Respect is paid to the dead according to custom, with funeral papers, wishing them to a better place, and funerals. However, tragedy surrounds the death for the family. We do not really see how death conventionally occurs or what is an acceptable way to die in this book, however.

Finally, in Dulce Et Decorum Est by Wilfred Owens, the manner of death

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frightens other soldiers making the tragedy more real, as the body is treated as a number ("respect" for the body). The passage illustrates a violent frightening means to die, "He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning." (Owen, line 16). After being gassed, he gasps for air, a truly frightening experience, to watch a fellow soldier die withering in pain. Then "Behind the wagon we flung him in," (Owen, line 18). There is no respect for the body. The corpse flung like surplus into the wagon, with no care that it once possessed a human life. This book shows that a person's worth is questionable and that horrendous ways of dying are acceptable.

In summary, death is an event surrounded by custom of the day with society's view of the value of the individual life inherent in how the remains are treated and respected'. We see that survival and use of the body for nourishment by one animal for another is not that different from using a person as a lower class worker who provides for a higher class. At the end of life, in both of these instances, the body is somewhat tossed aside. We also see that custom and respect can be ingrained in society and dictate events following a death as well as how the body, or individual, is respected. Through looking at death and dying, we can decipher much about values, norms and conventions of a group of people as illustrated by the works cited.

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