21 Mourning Dress in the West, 1800 until Today

Codification, Gender, and Global Perspectives

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At the June 2020 funeral of George Floyd, a Black man whose murder by a white police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020 sparked a reckoning for racial justice in the United States and beyond, mourners inside and outside the funeral service at the Fountain of Praise church in Houston, Texas predominantly wore black, as has been typical in Western morning practices since the 1800s. Inside the church, where the final funeral services capped a three-state, five-day service, invited friends and dignitaries wore formal pants black suits, dresses, and skirts. Some inside the church donned black t-shirts bearing Floyd's infamous last words, "I can't breathe," along with black pants. Outside, the crowd was unified not in the formality of dress, but in the predominance of black clothing as well.[1] The codification of mourning practices has loosened dramatically in the West since the 1800s, and the rigidity of nineteenth-century mourning practice, with set fabrics and colors corresponding to the progressive stages of mourning, has ceded to the accepted informality of wearing typically dark daily wear on the day of the funeral only. But wearing black remains a predominant outward signifier of individual and social mourning. Yet, amid the crowd of black-clad mourners, George Floyd's family stood out: dressed in white—white dresses, hats, and shoes for the women, crisp white suits for the men—their garments were chosen to signal the celebration of George Floyd's life.[2] Their dress also served to highlight the rich histories of global mourning practices, the historic and cultural diversity of mourning colors and silhouettes, as well as the centrality of dress within the ritualized ceremony of bereavement.

It is impossible to provide an overview of the mourning practices for all cultures since 1800; indeed, even generalizing by large geographic areas or cultural regions would be beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet it is possible to recognize several tendencies that run through the practice of mourning dress in the West since 1800, three of which will be examined here. First, the increasingly rigid codification of mourning dress from 1800 until the turn of the century, followed by a simplification and then disappearance of regimented mourning dress in the twentieth century. Second, the complex negotiation of gender and sexuality that was made visible in the black mourning clothes worn by women, who, in many cultures, wore the most visually distinctive mourning garments. Third, a shift in mourning practices in non-Western cultures following exposure to Western mourning practices due to imperialism, colonization, or globalization.

This chapter builds on Lou Taylor's seminal work on mourning, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History*, first published in 1983.[3] A close reader of social history, Taylor chronicled the development of European and American mourning dress and etiquette from the Middle Ages to the 1980s, with the strongest focus on the period between 1600–1910. Taylor mainly concentrated on female dress, but also incorporated

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discussions of men and children's clothing, the mourning industry, mourning jewelry, and a discussion of color in mourning. The arc of Taylor's thesis is that etiquette rules for mourning dress became a coded, public sign of respectability for the upper and middle classes in Europe and North American through the nineteenth century. Aided by the commercial exploitation of mourning wear by manufacturers and advertisers, the commodification of mourning—and the social pressures and social stratification that came with increasingly complex mourning codes—reached a peak between 1880 and 1900.[4] A simplification of mourning practices was already in place at the turn of the century, only to be cemented during and following World War I. After World War II, mourning dress was no longer a specific branch of the ready-to-wear industry.[5] By the dawn of the twenty-first century, mourning dress was indistinguishable from daily wear.

Taylor's conclusions remain unchallenged by those who write on European and American mourning dress today, but historians have worked on deepening various aspects of her work. Some recent writing has addressed the changing culture of mourning fashion during war, particularly the First World War.[6] As the core of Taylor's researched focused on the United Kingdom, and France to a lesser extent, authors have also examined other national contexts, including Australia and the Netherlands, for instance.[7] Books and exhibitions on the color black have also addressed mourning through the lens of the most prevalent color in Western mourning practices.[8] The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art organized an exhibition on mourning dress in 2014, and exhibitions on the color black, including one at MoMu in Antwerp in 2010 and another at the Missouri History Museum in 2016, also prominently featured mourning ensembles.[9] Yet, perhaps because of the solidity and depth of Taylor's knowledge on mourning dress, there has been no real attempt to write the narratives of Western sartorial mourning practices anew, nor has there been any sustained attempt to address the narratives through a globalized lens. The latter is perhaps due to the great diversity in mourning practices across non-Western cultures and religions.

The research for this chapter draws not only from social history, but also from fashion studies, color studies, gender studies, Black studies, the history of emotions, death studies, war studies, and from material culture studies. Fashion scholars such Anne Buck and Anne Hollander have written historical overviews of mourning dress in the West that complement Taylor's work.[10] Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood's article on birth, marriage, and death in *The Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion* helped provide reference points for non-Western mourning dress, as did articles by Saet Byul Park, Marily DeLong, and Brenda Fermenías on the increasing prevalence of black mourning dress in contemporary Korea and Peru.[11] Michel Pastoureau's influential work on colors in visual culture, including his tome on the color black, proved fruitful for understanding the rich histories of black dyes and textiles and their connections to death and grief.[12]

Much of the excellent work on the material culture of mourning in the long nineteenth century addresses gendered aspects of ritualized grief such as Willemijn Ruberg's study of Dutch women,[13] Holly Kent's article on the politics of dress for Union women in the United states,[14] and Joy Damousi's work on motherhood and grief in Australia.[15] Historians working in war studies, and specifically those who work on World War I, have sought to investigate the reasons behind the dramatic simplification of mourning dress codes that preceded, but were then accelerated by the war.[16] My own work on mourning dress in France during the First World War has shown that mourning attire was fraught with anxiety from both genders who worried both about the rapid simplification of mourning wear (which some equated to

forgetting the dead) and about the visibility of black-clad widows (who were sexually ambiguous, neither virgins nor married).[17]

Scholars of Black American culture have written on one of the most visible aspects of contemporary mourning attire in the United States, notably R.I.P. shirts, which memorialize the dead through images and text printed on cotton t-shirts worn by family and friends in daily life. Here, the articles by Robin Brooks, Jenn Shreve, Kami Fletcher, and Candi Conn helped contextualize the history, politics, and contemporary manifestations of the memorial shirt.[18]

Although the history of emotions has yet to have its material turn, key overviews of the field provided relevant information about how manifestations of private and public grief have changed over time, particularly for young girls and women.[19] The cultural histories of death and mourning, which can perhaps be called Death Studies, was a particularly rich field for research on fashion, textiles, and materiality.[20] As Ruth Toulson and Zahra Newby write in the introduction to their edited volume on *The Materiality of Mourning*, the study of death has long neglected grief, and with it grief's rituals—which often revolve around objects.[21] Those who do discuss grief, they write, too often focus on literary of philosophical approaches rather than on the lived experience.[22] However, a rising awareness of the need to study emotional experience, and the effect that material culture has shown to have on the emotional experience of grief, has helped propel new research on the intersection between the bereft and the object. Both Toulson and Newby, as well as Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, in their work *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*,[23] differentiate between *dedicated* objects, which are those created for use in funeral contexts, such as mourning armbands or mourning dress that was specifically made for that purpose, and *emergent* memory objects, which are those which "may have had a long life in other context but take on new resonances after death as potent reminders of the deceased, such as clothing."[24]

Examples of mourning attire were examined in the online catalogues of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Victoria and Albert, and in the online database of the Berg Fashion Central. The nineteenth century and contemporary press in France, Europe, and North America—*La Mode Illustrée, Femina, La Femme de France, Vogue, The New York Times, Time Magazine, Vanity Fair,* and *The Guardian*, to name a few—was also searched for references and images about mourning and widows.

The Rise of Codified Mourning Dress in the West, 1800 to 1900

As mourning ceremonial and dress, originally a privilege of the royal courts of Europe in the Middle Ages, gradually spread outward to the rest of society, finally reaching the poorest levels of society by the early twentieth century, wealthy families doubled down on mourning etiquette to reinforce their own social standing.[25] By the 1850s, mourning etiquette in Western Europe followed a code—set by the upper classes—so rigid that women feared social ostracism if they did not adhere to an increasingly complex set of sartorial and social rules.[26] Such strictly codified mourning dress had several functions: as a non-verbal means of communication, it visually denoted class, gender identity, wealth, and social standing. Mourning dress also help mediate between inner emotions and the outside world. But it also put the burden of mourning and of maintaining a family's social respectability on the shoulders of the woman. As a Dutch fashion magazine, *De Gracieuse*, noted in 1895: "When, after a decease, the first feeling of grief has passed, every adornment will hurt a wounded heart and the mourner will resort to black

robes, which equal a silent request to spare her of the trivialities of life, and that builds a dividing wall around her, that is respected by every sensitive human being."[27]

While mourning dress helped the widow communicate her emotional state to the outside world, critics were also quick to associate non-adherence to mourning norms as indicative of an improper emotional state or a weak marriage. To avoid such criticism, European and North American fashion magazines, which saw a specular rise in readership in this period, helped advise all classes on the minutia of mourning etiquette. "Mourning being also subject to the caprices of fashion," the American fashion magazine *Godey's* reported in 1862, "we will now give a few hints as to the styles now in vogue."[28] These magazines not only set the standards which dominated the lives of respectable women but also informed women of the stores, shops, and purveyors of mourning dress. Yet, as Holly Kent notes in her discussion of mourning within the US fashion press during the Civil War, meticulous discussion of the specificities of mourning dress etiquette may have offered readers a sense of order amidst the turmoil of funeral preparations, but the magazines focused on mourning as a means of demonstrating feminine respectability rather than as an emotional part of the grieving process.[29]

Conversely, although women were expected to wear their grief on their garments, as it were, showing sadness through outward emotions was not always acceptable in polite, pre-war society. Writing about the nineteenth-century Netherlands, for instance, Willemijn Ruberg quotes etiquette books that recommend that women do not attend funerals, lest they lose control of their emotions and exhibit loud outbursts of grief. Ruberg theorizes that outward grief might "compromise the function of mourning dress, which was carefully tailored to indicate grief and to function as a wall between inner emotion and the public's gaze."[30] Peter Stearns has written about the differences in emotional socialization of children during this period, where girls (but not boys) were encouraged to learn the appropriate responses to grief by playing with dolls whose kits, by the 1870s and 1880s, sometimes included grief paraphernalia like black armbands.[31] While grief was acceptable for both genders to display in the nineteenth century—a contrast to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prohibitions against externalizing the feeling—intense sadness gradually fell out of vogue in the second half of the nineteenth century and happiness became a central concern.[32] The arc of the history of emotion—from valuing sadness to happiness in capitalist, liberal economics—corresponds with increasingly rigid codification and then the gradual loosening of sartorial mourning codes; research into the intersection of the history of emotions, particularly that of grief, and its material culture would be a fruitful avenue of inquiry.[33]

Throughout the nineteenth century, mourning dress was worn by all who could afford it; those who could not wore their best Sunday clothes. A painting by Cork artist Daniel MacDonald is a rare representation of the realities of a poor Irish family mourning during the Great Famine, a period of mass starvation and disease between 1845 and 1849, during which an estimated 1 million people died and another million fled the country. The mourners wear no recognizable sign of mourning, but a red worsted cape—likely the most expensive garment in the bereaved widow's wardrobe—draws attention to itself and to her. By the mid-nineteenth century, women from the working class could often afford mourning clothes, deciding between using the services of a cheap dressmaker, buying their mourning outfits from new specialized stores, department stores, or warehouses; buying second-hand mourning clothes; borrowing or loaning clothes from societies set up to inculcate the rituals of respectability to the poor; or

Figure 21.1 Francis Montague Holl, I am the Resurrection and the Life, 1872 © Leeds Art Gallery.

simply dyeing one's garments black.[34] An 1872 painting by Francis Montague Holl of a simple village funeral shows a trio of mourning women wearing black silk crepe cloaks and skirts, as dictated by social conventions; the young girl also wears a black mourning coat (Figure 21.1). The poorest were still excluded from formal mourning etiquette, but their lack of outward signs of bereavement did not diminish their profound belief in the appropriateness of a decent Christian church burial.[35]

At the other end of the social ladder, women applied frenetic energy to ensure that their mourning wardrobes were fashionable and appropriate—no small feat when the mourning process consisted of three distinct stages of mourning, and each stage required the appropriate set of garments for all the activities of a day, including interior gowns, walking dresses, carriage garments, and evening clothes. A passage from the 1890 *Gentlewoman's Book of Dress*, which advises that "if [a woman] lifts her skirts from the mud, she must show by her frilled black silk petticoat and plain black stockings her grief has penetrated to her innermost sanctuaries," shows how deeply Western society judged inner emotional grief by the standards of the outward appearance of mourning dress.[36]

By the draw of the nineteenth century, mourning regulations for widows prescribed that full mourning, the first stage, typically lasted for one year if one was mourning a close relative; the second stage would last a further nine months; ordinary mourning then followed for three more months; finally, half mourning (*demi-deuil*) stretched on for another six months, for a total of two and a half years.[37] Some widows never came out

of half mourning. Queen Victoria, widowed at the age of 42, was the most highly visible embodiment of this practice, although Patricia Jalland has argued that her behavior was more a sign of complicated, or chronic, grief, and was "neither widely admired nor highly respected. [38] In other words, as stringent as Victorian mourning regulations may have been, Queen Victoria's lifelong adherence to wearing mourning dress was not representative of typical Victorian practices. Mourning periods were generally lessened according to the distance one had from the deceased. There were regional variations in the length of mourning across Europe as well, with the French observing a less lengthy general mourning stage than the English, for instance. While absolute adherence to the guidelines guided the upper classes, individuals outside of the highest echelons adapted and interpreted the rules to suit their needs and circumstances.

The silhouette and subtle rules about fabric and accessories changed nearly every season in nineteenth-century Western Europe and North America, but the fundamental rules remained the same: only dull fabrics, metals, and stones were allowed in deep mourning (some suggested that no jewelry at all should be worn in full mourning); each subsequent mourning stage allowed for the introduction of more lustrous black fabric and trimmings, and even trimmings in white, gray, or mauve. Dull and then shiny accessories could be gradually reincorporated into the wardrobe. Children, young women, middle-aged women, and older women followed different sets of rules about which fabrics could be worn and during which periods. Mourning codes were also different for clothes worn inside the home (where the woman was also on display), to those worn outside. From the 1800s until the early- to mid-twentieth century, black crepe—a lusterless matte silk gauze that had been crimped with heated rollers, dyed black, and stiffened with starch, gum, or glue—was typically used to make mourning garments. As Anne Buck has noted, black crepe (also called crape when used for mourning), was consumed in such large quantities in Victorian England that manufacturers such as Courtauld amassed large fortunes, and their supply could not always meet demand.[39] The price of the fabric depended on the quality, with coarser, and less expensive varieties appearing in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Stores specialized in mourning clothes commodified their mourning products with an eye to widening their customer base, often boasting that their shelves featured products for every budget. Advertised in fashion periodicals, described with the same rhetoric as for fashionable dress, and mirroring exactly the fashionable silhouette, the design process and commercialization of mourning dress and mourning jewelry in the long nineteenth century operated firmly within the fashion system. Indeed, mourning dress was so indistinguishable from fashionable dress in its silhouette that, when faced with a black dress, cape, or mantle in a museum archive dating from the nineteenth century onward, it is often difficult for the researcher to ascertain that the garment was in fact used for mourning and not simply as fashionable wear. For nineteenth-century garments, matte black crepe and matte trim are often the distinguishing features of mourning dress, as seen for instance in this fashionable American mourning dress dated to 1907 cut from matte black English crepe, along with its accompanied veiled hat, black leather gloves, and black umbrella. But for garments dating from World War I and after, unless the owner specified that the garment was in fact worn for mourning, the garment is made from plain black crepe, or if the garment includes a veil or recognizable trimming, it becomes hard to differentiate a garment used specifically for mourning from the standard black garb of daily life.

Mourning Dress for Men and the Simplification of Female Mourning Attire, 1900–1920

While mourning attire for women became increasingly codified over the course of the nineteenth century, mourning dress for men lessened during the same period: mourning cloaks and trailing hat sweepers, typically of male mourning dress in the early 1800s were replaced by arm bands (and sometimes hat bands) worn over an ordinary black suit and black tie.[40] Originally used in military circles, armbands were adopted by male civilians during the nineteenth century;[41] the practice has continued today, notably at high-profile sports events. The length of mourning was also greatly reduced for men, with just six months of mourning before a widower could remarry, according to nineteenth-century Dutch etiquette.[42] In this British cabinet card from c. 1880, the female mourner is in full black mourning while her husband stands by her side in normal clothes, his status signaled by the mere presence of a black armband (Figure 21.2). Thus, from 1800 onward, the gender divides in mourning practices widened as male mourning dress reduced itself to the black armband, if that at all. Mourning dress from 1800 onward was worn almost exclusively by women.

The streamlining of mourning practice was already under way at the turn of the century, spurred by funeral reformers who opposed the ostentatiousness of Victorian mourning as well as by falling mortality rates and a gradual decline in Christian faith.[43] Anne Buck notes growing opposition to extravagant mourning beginning in the 1870s on economic grounds, citing evidence that the sale of black crepe (crape) in England began to decline in the 1890s among the upper classes.[44] She also notes a feminist element in the opposition, as women bore the weight of mourning: "In all cases the nearer the relative the more cumbrous becomes the dress of the female mourner; but the widow's dress positively amounts to a mild form of suttee [the Indian practice, banned in 1829, wherein the wife immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre] … It is in fact a survival of the outward expression of the inferiority of women for … the inferior always expresses grief for the superior."[45]

The First World War, with an estimated 40 million military and civilian casualties, signaled the first major change in Western mourning practices in the long nineteenth century as mourning dress codes for women were drastically simplified to accommodate wartime needs. The mass mourning imposed by the war greatly accelerated the changes already under way. The same exceptions and adaptations that middle-class women had enjoyed to best accommodate the mourning process to their lifestyle extended to the upper classes during the war. The sheer number of deaths—and the deep mourning that the previous century's strict mourning rituals would have required for the millions of bereaved widows, family, and friends—made lavish and restrictive displays of bereavement seem ostentatious and inappropriate. Simplifying mourning codes may also have been a question of morale: the sight of millions of women of all ages shrouded in black crape would have been too bleak.

"Mourning codes have never been as strictly disregarded as during this time of anguish when even the most pained women cannot always manifest by external signs, by the way in which she dresses or by the life that she leads, the pain that constricts her and her detachment from all things," wrote a journalist in the middle-class magazine French *La Mode Illustrée* in 1916.[46] The magazine advised readers that buying costly mourning fabrics would be seen as brazen given the war, and that they need not impoverish themselves for fashion's sake: black armbands or basic black crepe was perfectly

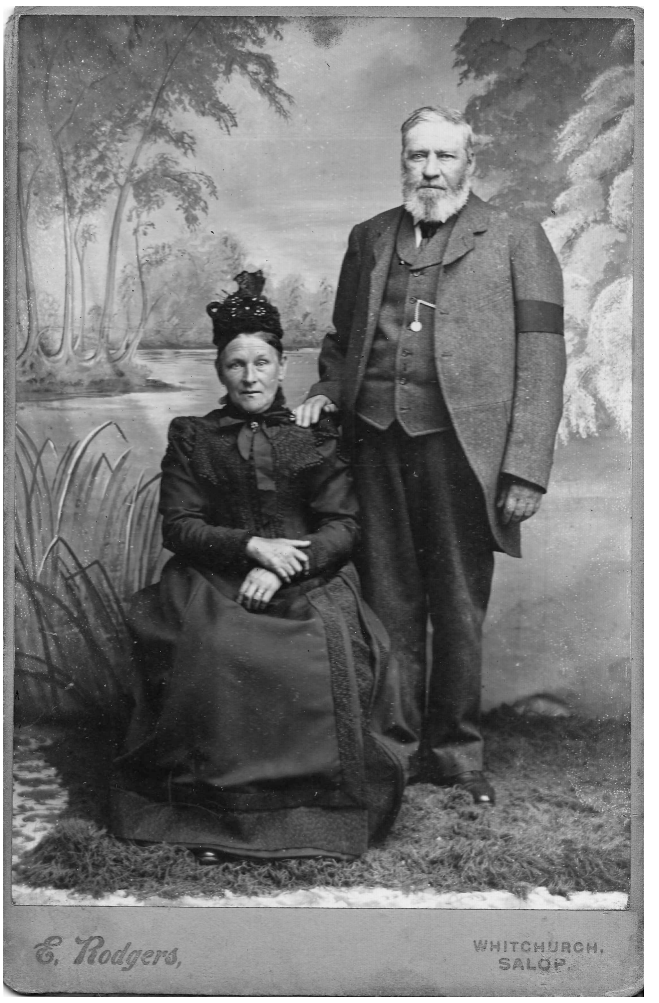

Figure 21.2 Cabinet card, c. 1880. British. Albumen. © Courtesy Ann Longmore-Etheridge Collection.

acceptable. Indeed, encouraging mourning women to return to work as a way to "make abstraction from their pain" and find "the only consolation that they might have in this world," the magazine clearly stated the central reason for the simplification of mourning dress during the war: women from all social classes were working—for pay or as charity—outside of the home for the benefit of the war, thereby precluding the wearing of bulky or vision-constraining garments or accessories and rendering moot the pre-war requirement of avoiding all social contact during the first mourning period. Mourning shawls, which prevented movement, were to be avoided, for example.[47]

For the wealthier readers of *Femina*, "proper mourning" required that women purchase mourning garb that was "correct but nevertheless in fashion."[48] While *Femina* assured its readers that touches of white could be worn even in the deepest mourning, *La Mode Ilustrée* declared that this was "incompatible with deep mourning"; on this issue, the

journalist wrote, the magazine "sided with our readers against fashion."[49] Wartime fashion magazines featured articles about correct mourning dress and practices, fashion plates showing the latest styles of mourning wear, patterns for mourning garments, and advertisements for specialized mourning stores alongside their typical fashion features—a juxtaposition that today reads as jarring. An article from *La Femme de France* titled "Frivolities: *fantaisies* for mourning" (*fantaisies* covers jewelry and accessories) mentioned "naturally elegant" widows who were "seduced by a thousand pretty things," played into the hand of male critics who accused fashionable mourners of desacralizing the dead.[50]

The Decline of Specific Mourning Attire in the Postwar Period

In the postwar period, the rigid practice of fashionable mourning continued its decline, although mourning dress was still reported on by the fashion press. By 1920, a widow from the aristocracy was supposed to mourn her husband for one year and six weeks—a full year less than in the Victorian era.[51] A series of illustrations by Bernard Boutet de Monvel in the October 1920 issue of the *Gazette du Bon Ton*, the French fashion magazine for the elite, showed the progression of bereavement from full black crape to white silk (Figure 21.3). Nearing the end of her mourning period, the woman begins to reapply powder to her face, then lipstick, finally posing jauntily with a cigarette in hand to signal a return to gay society.

An analysis of the coverage on mourning dress in American *Vogue* shows 338 records for "mourning" for 1890–1899; 1107 records for 1900–1909; 797 records for 1910–1919; 359 records for 1920–1929; 307 records for 1930–1939; followed by a dramatic decline, with only 59 records for 1940–1949. The decades following 1950 show little fluctuation, with around 20–3 records a decade until the present. In perhaps the last proper article dedicated to correct mourning attire, dated to March 1, 1938, the *Vogue* journalist writes that "so many women, especially in New York, wear smart, simple, dull black dresses, and hats with veils, that the transformation of their wardrobes into mourning is often very slight. […] [T]he general effect, though subdued, is very much the same as usual."[52] During World War II, almost all the references to mourning fall in the "address book" or advertisement section of the magazine. The 1942 issue of *Vogue* features not a single article or fashion shoot featuring mourning dress, nor, it appears, do any subsequent issues since.

In practice, royalty and the elite have held on to traditional mourning dress the longest. After the assignation of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Jaqueline Kennedy appeared in a black Givenchy suit, black gloves, and a long black veil, becoming, through her public appearance, an embodiment of the nation's grief.[53] At Prince Philip's funeral in 2021, the Queen and all Royal attendees wore deep black;[54] at his memorial service in March 2022, however, many of the attendees, the Queen included, wore dark green, which was the color of his official livery but also one of the accepted colors of half mourning, according to royal watchers. Other members of the royal family adhered to traditional protocol for half mourning as well, incorporating hints of white, purple, and blue into their ensembles.[55]

Contemporary Mourning Practices in Black American Communities: The R.I.P. Shirt

As stringent—and expensive—as the mourning dress practices were in the long nineteenth century, they had the benefit of externalizing and ritualizing grief. The loss of visible symbols of bereavement in contemporary Western societies has meant that the mourner's grief is private, rendered invisible from society at large. In the aftermath of World War I, as black garments lost their connotation to mourning, some women also

(a)

(b)

Figure 21.3 Bernard Boutet de Monvel. Deuil. *La Gazette du Bon Ton*, issue number 8, October 1920. Public domain: https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/gazettedubonton00c (p. 242).

adopted armbands (black or violet) or wore commemorative jewelry in order to show external signs of grief. Recently, a new public mourning trend has emerged in Black American culture that fulfills the same outward function as mourning clothing in the long nineteenth century: the R.I.P. (Rest in Peace) or memorial t-shirt, popularized in the 1990s and early 2000s and still worn today (Figure 21.4).

Figure 21.4 Lageisha, from the series "Studio X," 2007. © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Printed with the deceased person's face, name (often nickname), birth and death year, and mourning phrase (often a variation of "In Loving Memory"), memorial t-shirts function as perhaps the most visible tradition of public mourning wear in the contemporary United States.

The origin of the memorial shirt is unclear. Some scholars speculate that it may have originated in New Orleans funeral practices, or else further back, to West African and Caribbean traditions of wearing head scarves or handkerchiefs with the deceased person's likeness on them.[56] Various historians and journalists claim that the practice of wearing R.I.P. shirts grew popular in the 1990s on the West Coast as a way to remember slain gang members, but others link the shirts to Black East Coast or Southern culture.[57] The hashtag #memorialshirt or #memorialshirts on Instagram, as well as an internet search with the same keywords, reveals a commercial enterprise that spans from large print-on-demand companies who do business selling printed shirts more generally to local, typically Black-owned, businesses who specialize in memorial shirts, often with their own unique visual style. Shirts increase in price depending on the quality and quantity of the printed matter on the shirt, and the nature of the shirt itself (sweatshirts can also be used as a base).

The shirts are a tangible way for family members and friends to express their bereavement or condolences during the funeral and continue to wear the shirt after—an act of remembering in daily life akin to nineteenth-century mourning practices. Kami Fletcher, writing from her own experience of wearing an R.I.P. shirt for a family member's funeral, writes about the garment as "an intense act of memory-making underlaid with African American social and cultural values that can produce agency and activism helping Black people mark their dead in ways that ensure they are not forgotten marginalized, or perhaps most of all, misrepresented."[58] Walking memorials of sorts, R.I.P. shirts allow death to come into the everyday discourse of Black communities while also confronting larger society about its role in African American death.[59] In the wake of September 11, R.I.P. or memorial shirts were also adopted by white communities in order to mourn the death of loved ones. Today, searching for memorial shirts on the internet shows representative images of t-shirts bearing both Black and white faces. However, the tradition and practice of wearing such shirts is not only more prevalent within Black communities, but also carries a more potent political message.

Taken up by the Movement for Black Lives, the memorial t-shirt has transformed into what Robin Brooks calls a "protest" shirt: whereas R.I.P. t-shirts are worn by family and friends of the departed, protest memorial t-shirts, which typically feature the names of Black men and women who have been murdered by the police and whose stories have received national attention (pictures, birth and death dates, and catch-phrases are not featured on these shirts) are worn by those who seek justice for their deaths. "Not only do these shirts pay homage to lost lives," Brooks writes, "they also powerfully demand a transformation to systems of oppression for those alive in the US."[60]

The Gender Politics of the Color Black: "Merry" Widows and Sexualized Mourning

Running through the narrative of how distinct and ritualized mourning dress slowly disappeared over the course of the twentieth century is the intertwined history of the color black, with its complicated sexual undertones. As Michel Pastoureau writes in his monograph on the color, the very first verses of Genesis draw an opposition between

darkness, where no life was possible, and God's commandment for light, thus revealing a more than two-thousand-year-old history of associating black with death.[61] Pastoureau notes that from the beginning of the Roman Republic, black was present in various forms—objects, offerings, paintings—in Roman funeral rights. Magistrates, and the elite who copied them, began to wear black (or dark grey) beginning in the second century B.C., marking the beginning of a custom of mourning clothing in Europe.[62] Dense, dramatic, and sober, the values imbued within the color black make it a natural fit for the somber nature of mourning.

However, other colors were also associated with mourning, including white—the color of glory, purity, and resurrection—which was one of the most widespread mourning colors in Europe before 1800. Indeed, traditions of wearing white remained entrenched among peasants and farmers communities across Europe through the nineteenth century as well, as well as among royalty through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[63] The pristine white garments worn by the family members at George Floyd's funeral derive directly from this practice as well. One of the most ancient colors for mourning, white was—and still is—also used extensively outside of Europe, notably in many Eastern cultures, such as China, Korean, and Japan as well as in parts of Africa and in Hindu ceremonies. Anne Hollander has noted that the only generalization possible about the type of garments associated with mourning practices in Early Modern and Modern Europe is that mourning clothes were in some way different from ordinary dress and usually suggested humility. Cloaks, hoods, or veils were more frequently used to identify a person in mourning during this period than any ritualized color.[64]

By the fourteenth century, however, black had become recognized as symbolic of grief, although reds, browns, and greys could be used as well into the sixteenth century.[65] And from the eighteenth century onward, black was generally accepted among all social classes as the preeminent, and most appropriate, color for mourning in the West. However, black was not reserved *exclusively* for mourning, neither before the 1800s or following. Black was historically a highly labor intensive and difficult color to produce, meaning that it favored by the elite who used it to display their financial prowess in procuring (and maintaining) garments of the deepest black.[66] By the 1800s, the dye had become cheaper, rendering black textiles more democratically priced. Black subsequently became widely used among the working class: black garments hid dirt well and were considered a sign of middle-class respectability. In the nineteenth century, shopkeepers, *modistes*, and seamstresses were nearly always visually represented wearing black tailored suits. Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting *The Umbrellas* (1880–1886) shows such a black-clad hatmaker (the large hatbox on her wrist reveals her profession) wearing a tailored bodice trimmed with black velvet cuffs, a black shift with a high-ruffed neck, and a full black skirt. However, black was also dramatic and attractive—a feature that many fashion critics remarked on and that elegant ladies did not fail to notice. When fashionable women wore black outside of mourning, as in the famous portrait of Virginie Gautreau, "Madame X," painted in 1884 by John Singer Sargent, it was to signal a desire to play by a different set of rules in a fashionable world ruled by the bright colors of aniline dye and the multi-hued Orientalism of Paul Poiret. Indeed, a missive from one of the American Union's leading fashion periodical, *Peterson's Magazines*, advised readers during the civil war to stop wearing "black or dark-colored silks," as fashionable dress, the subtext being that they should now be reserved for mourning.[67]

A ubiquity of black dresses during the First World War accustomed millions of women to wearing some form of black garment—most likely cut in the latest fashion.

Public rhetoric sent mixed signals to female mourners: fashion magazines promoted the most *au courant* mourning through countless fashion illustrations and texts meant to guide readers through sartorial mourning rituals, but society was also quick to castigate women for being too conspicuous or fashionable in their mourning. Fashionable mourners ran the risk of being perceived as less grief-stricken than their peers, particularly if the widows were young and attractive. A journalist for *L'Écho de Paris* rebuked women for wearing tight black dresses, black silk stockings, and patent-leather shoes: "No, these are not our widows," the journalist lamented.[68] Fashion-conscious women were called "fake widows, "bad widows," "merry widows," or even worse, prostitutes.

Because women wore the most visible outward symbols of mourning, they were also the lightning rods for the most virulent public criticism. Paradoxically, mourning dress simultaneously informed the public of one's widowhood—and thus also of one's new "availability." Nations where young men were dying at unprecedented rates sought to increase marriage, and by extension, birthrates. As many more young women than in previous generations became young widows, society adapted to support quicker remarriage. *Femina's* June 1917 article "Can A War Widow Remarry?" was written to assure women that remarriage was acceptable but also confirmed wider societal unease around the practice.[69] Legally, article 228 of the French Civil Code mandated a period of widowhood of ten months, after which a woman was officially free to remarry, the journalist informed *Femina*'s readers. Yet the laws of morality were not always those of the law, the article maintained; the fictional young widow who was the subject of the article was "advised" to remarry not for love, but to ensure a better life for her children. A second marriage, *Femina* counseled, could reinforce, and honor, the memory of the deceased while also paving the way for a future with a "fundamentally good" man. "I encourage you to do it," the columnist argued, "Remarry! It's life, as they say … and life will always be right against death."[70]

In truth, young widows were the frequent target of misogynistic commentary. The trope of the fragile, economically vulnerable, and sexually experienced female mourner was prevalent in public discourse. "These women are young and wear austere black mourning crepe from heat to foot … and for a louis [coin]—wartime pricing—they let their veils drop: black is not always dressed," a journalist wrote at the start of the war in the popular French weekly *Le Cri de Paris*.[71] The fact that black-clad *modistes*, *midinettes*, and *couturières*—typically young, unmarried women of the working class—were also perceived of as facile mistresses (is the man behind Renoir's *modiste* lustful?), also added to the implicit sexuality of black garments.

In the postwar period, as the black dress evolved into a fashionable statement, the seductive undertones of the widow's dress became its main selling point for designers such as Gabrielle Chanel and others. But as black dresses became more fashionable, they also lost their sexual undertone, becoming, simply, "a standard garment for every elegant woman's wardrobe," as *Vogue* wrote about the seeming ubiquity of the black Chanel dress in fashionable society that season.[72] By the 1930s, even traditional mourning suppliers, such as the British firm Courtaulds began to market their mourning garments as suitable for elegant evening wear as well.[73] From this period on, as the black dress became the "little black dress"—that is, a garment suitable for daily wear, evening wear, and, only when required, mourning—the burden on women to act as the social bodies of mourning decreased. Today, aside from the moment of the funeral, when both men and women can choose to don sober garments, it is, in most cases, and outside the

practice of wearing memorial shirts, impossible to tell from outward appearance alone if someone is grieving in Western society.

Imperialism, Colonialism, and Globalization: Mourning Dress Outside of Western Europe and North America

While wearing black for mourning is the most prevalent feature of Western mourning practices, it is also common in other cultures and traditions. Black or dark blue is also the color of mourning throughout Southwest Asia, a practice that has become encoded in the language, according to Francis Steingass: "throwing garments into the Nile," with the double meaning of *nil* as denoting both indigo and the river, means "to put on mourning."[74] Black too is the color of mourning in Peru, worn for Catholic mourning rituals. White is a traditional mourning color in Western and Eastern cultures, such as China, Korea, and Japan as well as in Hindu ceremonies. However, many cultures have their own distinct mourning colors, such as red and black in Nigeria or Ghana.

In most cultures, although not all, the principal garment worn during the mourning ceremony is tailored in the silhouette of contemporary, fashionable dress; accessories such as veils, sashes, shawls, or armbands may be added to the garment to distinguish its function within the mourning process. In cultures where traditional dress still plays an important role in ceremonial rituals, such as in Korea, Japan, or in the First Nations, for instance, the mourner's garment is generally distinct from the silhouette of his or her daily wear.[75]

However, some countries have adopted the black garments of Western mourning dress in a modification of their own traditions. At the 2009 funeral of the former Korean President Roh, Moo-hyun, his widow, attended the funeral in a black hanbok, eschewing the traditional, Confucian white mourning garments and hewing to Western mourning norms. According to Saet Byul Park and Marilyn DeLong, who have written about the adoption of the color black in contemporary Korean mourning dress between 2002 and 2014, although black mourning dress was almost uniformly adopted by men in the twentieth century, most of the female Korean mourners sampled held on to the traditional white garments through the twenty-first century, with a shift happening after 2009.[76] Saet Byul Park and DeLong credit this shift to the increasing visibility of Christianity and Catholicism traditions within Korean society, which have in turn influenced Buddhist and Confucian practices.[77] Although their research does not address the social discourse around this shift, they conclude that wearing traditional mourning dress in black (rather than white) is an example of a hybrid dress form that shows contemporary Korean society in transition between tradition and innovation.[78]

In some cultures where black is only used for mourning, such as in Peru, local markets have adapted to making the traditionally bright-hued fabrics and garments in black to appeal to tourists, who view black as a wardrobe staple. As Blenda Femenías has noted in her examination of changing fashion practices in contemporary Peru, the color "'black' circulates between the realm of death and funerals, and the dominion of tourist fashion."[79] Femenías also notes that the use of black mourning clothing in Peru may be a legacy of Spanish colonial rule, as is common in many Latin American countries.[80] When traveling through Palestine in 2017, I engaged with a vendor in Hebron on the black *keffiyahs* in stock, which she also maintained were only sold to tourists and not to locals. There is so much sadness in the world, the vendor argued, why would a Palestinian buy something black when it is not needed? In Peru, unlike in Palestine, the color black also

holds sacred mourning qualities, which are excised for the tourist market. "As sales are altered by tourism," Femenías notes, "objects formerly intended for purposes of mourning and commemoration are now made and marked for secular, rather than sacred, contexts." Like the vendor I met in Hebron, a Peruvian vendor also inquired of Femenías, "Why do gringos dress so sad?"[81]

Conclusion

For well over a century, from 1800 until the 1920s, elaborate and highly codified black ensembles were seen as external signifiers of grief, sadness, or loss in Europe and North America. Social conventions dictated that women don the most visible mourning garments during this period, but black-clad women also served as lightning rods for social anxiety surrounding death: women were expected to keep their mourning attire and emotions in control, but even then could be castigated for dressing too fashionably or not fashionably enough; for externalizing their grief too vocally or not enough; for adhering too strictly to the sartorial codes or not enough; for being too visible in public or not enough. The simplification and then end of codified mourning dress following World War I may have come as a relief for many women, who were free to grieve without needing to think about the message their clothing sent to the world, but conversely, the lack of specific mourning dress also rendered personal grief invisible. The three stages of nineteenth-century mourning dress, each with its own specific dress code, may have helped women make sense of their loss within socially recognized stages.

The invisibility of grief in the contemporary Western world, where, beyond dark garments worn the day of the funeral, there are almost no outward sartorial indicators of grief beyond the funeral day itself, is experienced as complicating the grieving process by some mourners today. The wide variety of bodily practices—from singing to dancing to storytelling to making art to tattooing—described in the edited volume *Grief and the Expressive Arts: Practices for Creating Meaning* help make the point that "bring[ing] the pain to the surface," as Malinda Ann Hill has written about her own experience of getting a memorial tattoo following pregnancy loss, provides essential opportunities externalize grief and encourages public communication about love and loss.[82] The memorial, or R.I.P. shirts, worn in the Black American community play a similar role of rendering Black grief visible—an important political statement in the context of the Movement for Black Lives.

Some cultures have maintained their traditional mourning dress, although most have dispensed with lengthy periods of wearing these garments as incompatible with contemporary life. The ubiquity of black as the color of mourning—and that of fashion—in the European and North American tradition has gained other cultures due to legacies of imperialism, colonialism, or globalization. The hashtags #funeralfashion and #funeraldress on the social media platform TikTok show women from all around the globe donning black or black-patterned dresses (white or red dresses with black patterns seem to be popular in Ghana); indeed, some of the most popular accounts using these hashtags are those of Ghanaian seamstresses who promote their latest creations for fashionable and appropriate funeral wear.[83] These videos, which are nearly all focused on female mourning attire, and which often revolve around providing viewers inspiration for what to wear (or provide satiric commentary on overly lavish mourning attire), have essentially replaced the fashion magazines of yore as tools to help people navigate and make sense of gendered and culturally determined sartorial practices of mourning.

Notes

1 The international press reported extensively on George Floyd's funeral, with several news outfits publishing photographic slideshows of the services, including Roy, "A Family and City in Mourning"; Ho, "'He'll change the world.'"
2 The photographs by Roy for *Time* feature several photographs of Floyd's family members posing together in their white mourning wear. Roy, "A Family and City in Mourning."
3 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*.
4 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, XX; Lou Taylor also provides a succinct summary of her thesis in Taylor, "Mourning Dress," 518–20.
5 Taylor, "Mourning Dress," 519.
6 See Whitmore, "'A Matter of Individual Opinion and Feeling'"; Bass-Krueger, "Mourning."
7 Ruberg, "Outer Display and Inner Insincerity"; Damousi, "Private Loss, Public Mourning."
8 See Pastoureau, *Black*; *Black: Masters of Black* notably the essays by Lou Taylor, "Black in Mourning" and Bianca M. du Mortier, "The Plague and Other Tales of Mourning."
9 *Death Becomes Her: A Century of Mourning Attire*, The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 21 October 2014–1 February 2015; *Little Black Dress: From Mourning to Night*, Missouri History Museum, Saint Louis, April 2, 2016–September 5, 2016; *Black: Masters of Black in Fashion and Costume*, MoMu Antwerp, March–August 2010. The catalogue for the MoMu exhibition is cited above.
10 Buck, "The Trap Re-Baited", 32–7; Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 370–5.
11 Vogelsang-Eastwood, "Birth, Marriage, and Death"; Park and DeLong, "Black in Korean Traditional Mourning Dress"; Fermenías, "'Why Do Gringos Life Black?'."
12 Pastoureau, *Black*.
13 Ruberg, "Outer Displays and Inner Insincerity."
14 Kent, "Wearing Black, Wearing Bows."
15 Damousi, "Private Loss, Public Mourning."
16 Taylor wrote about this process in *Mourning Dress*; see also Whitmore, "A Matter of Individual Opinion and Feeling."
17 Bass-Krueger, "Mourning Dress."
18 Brooks, "R.I.P. Shirts,"; Shreve, "A Fitting Memorial"; Fletcher, "Long Live Chill #LLC"; Conn, *Virtual Afterlives*.
19 Matt, *A Cultural History of Emotions*; Boddice, *The History of Emotions*; Rosenwein and Cristiani, *What Is the History of Emotions*.
20 See, for instance: Howarth, *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*; Jupp and Gittings, *Death in England*; Graham, *Death, Materiality and Mediation*; Frank, *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, notably the essay by Ann Schofield on "The Fashion of Mourning."
21 Toulson and Newby, "Introduction: Emotions and Materiality in Theory and Method," in *The Materiality of Mourning*, 4–10. *The Materiality of Mourning* includes an essay by Emily Brayshaw on "Remember Roland Leighton: Uniforms as the Materials of Memory and Mourning in World War I."
22 Idem.
23 Hallam and Hockney, *Death, Memory and Material Culture,* 13.
24 Toulson and Newby, "Introduction," 11.
25 Taylor, *Mourning Dress,* 120–2.
26 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 122.
27 *De Gracieuse* 33, September 5, 1895, 1 cited in Ruberg, "Outer Display and Inner Insincerity," 248.
28 Kent, "Wearing Black, Wearing Bows," 561.
29 Kent, "Wearing Black, Wearing Bows," 562.
30 Ruberg, "Outer Display and Inner Insincerity," 543.
31 Stearns, "In Private," 143.
32 See Matt, "Introduction," 10–11.
33 Literature from the history of emotions is rich with information about private and public displays of grief and sadness in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, most of the key overviews neglect the material culture of emotional display. For instance, *Histoire des*

Émotions, edited by Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello features papers on almost every aspect of emotional history except for the objects which people use to express themselves.
34 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 126.
35 Taylor, "Black for Mourning," 133.
36 Cited in DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*, 53.
37 Taylor, "Black for Mourning," 130.
38 Jalland, "Victorian Death and its Decline."
39 Buck, "The Trap Re-Baited," 35.
40 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 134.
41 Howarth, "Fashion and Costume," 191.
42 Ruberg, "Outer Displays and Inner Insincerity," 251.
43 Jalland, "Victorian death and its Decline," 242–4.
44 Buck, "The Trap Re-Baited," 37.
45 *The Woman's World*, 1889, 418 cited in Buck, "The Trap Re-Baited," 37.
46 "Jamais le code du deuil ne fut moins strictement appliqué qu'en ces temps d'angoisses où les femmes les plus éprouvées ne peuvent pas toujours manifester par des témoignages extérieurs, par la manière dont elles s'habillent ou par la vie qu'elles mènent, la douleur qui les étreint et leur détachement de toutes choses." "A travers la mode: le deuil," *La Mode Illustrée,* October 29, 1916, 389. Translated by author.
47 Idem.
48 "Si le costume de deuil a le souci avant tout d'être correct il doit cependant être à la mode et la suivre dans ses grandes lignes." "Le deuil correct," *Femina*, March 1917, 41. Translated by author.
49 "À celles de nos lectrices qui considèrent cette part faite au blanc comme incompatible avec un deuil sévère (et sur ce point nous sommes d'accord avec elles contre la mode), nous conseillons de porter comme toilette de campagne simple et pratique, une jupe noire en toile […]."Thevenot, "À travers la mode," *La Mode Illustrée*, August 22, 1915, 2. Translated by author.
50 "C'est alors que la femme naturellement élégante se laisse séduire par les mille bibelots jolis produits de l'ingénieuse fabrication parisienne et qui, par leur grâce pimpante, ajoutent à sa beauté." "Frivolités: les fantaisies du deuil," *La Femme de France*, September 12, 1915, 6. Translated by author.
51 See the recommendation from Bernard Boutet de Monvel, written in the October issue of the *Gazette du Bon Ton,* referenced in Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 270.
52 "Sense and Sensibility in Modern Mourning," *Vogue*, March 1, 1938, 135.
53 Images of the funeral were published in all major news outfits. A selection of photographs of Jacqueline Kennedy in mourning can be seen in "The Winter of Her Despair," *Vanity Fair*, September 18, 2014.
54 "Big Moments from Prince Philip's Funeral," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2021.
55 Burack, "See All the Photos from Prince Philip's Memorial Service," *Town and Country*, March 29, 2022.
56 Brooks, "R.I.P. Shirts," 810.
57 Shreve, "A Fitting Memorial."
58 213.
59 Conn, *Virtual Afterlives;* Fletcher, "Long Live Chill #LLC," 216.
60 Brooks, "R.I.P. shirts," 822.
61 Pastoureau, *Black*.
62 Pastoureau, *Black*, 35.
63 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 249.
64 Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 373.
65 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 252.
66 Gessner, "Little Black Dress," 482.
67 Kent, "Wearing Black, Wearing Bows," 556.
68 "Non, ce ne sont pas là nos veuves." Frédéric Masson, "Le problème de demain," *L'Écho de Paris,* April 12, 1915, 1. Translated by author.
69 Maurice de Waleffe, "Une veuve de la guerre peut-elle se remarier?," Femina, June 1917, 15–16.
70 "Là, je vous le conseille. Remariez-vous! C'est la vie, comme on dit … et la vie aura toujours raison contre la mort." Translated by author. Idem.

71 "Ces dames sont jeunes et vêtues de la tête aux pieds d'un voile de crêpe noir austère […] pour un louis –prix de guerre—, elles laissent tomber leurs voiles: le noir n'est pas toujours habillé." "Eros en deuil," *Le Cri de Paris*, November 29, 1914, 10. Translated by author.
72 "The Début of the Winter Mode," *Vogue*, October 1, 1926, 69.
73 Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 273.
74 Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary* (London: Pincott, 1892), quoted in Vogelsang-Eastwood, "Birth, Marriage, and Death," 429.
75 There is no monograph or edited volume published on global sartorial mourning practices, so research was conducted by searching the internet, Google images, and stock photo sites for the mourning dress of a range of countries and cultures.
76 Park and DeLong, "What is the Meaning of Black?," 91.
77 Park and DeLong, "What is the Meaning of Black?," 92.
78 Park and DeLong, "What is the Meaning of Black?," 94.
79 Fermenías, "Why Do Gringos Like Black?," 93.
80 Femenías, "Why Do Gringos Like Black?," 97.
81 Femenías, "Why Do Gringos Like Black?," 108.
82 Malinda Ann Hill, "Memorial Tatooing—Making Grief Visible" in Niemeyer, *Grief and the Expressive Arts*, 53.
83 For instance, a Tiktok video by Ghanaian dressmaker @ola_ella on fashionable funeral outfits for 2022 boasts 53,000 views while that for @fashionhusofficial responding to a request to show "a tyle for my grandma funeral" has 70,600 views.

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