



11-6-2018

# The Perfect Vessel of Grief: Women and Mourning Photography

Savannah Labbe  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Labbe, Savannah, "The Perfect Vessel of Grief: Women and Mourning Photography" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 334.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/334>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/334>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# The Perfect Vessel of Grief: Women and Mourning Photography

## **Abstract**

After her father died, the girl in the photo above went through a highly ritualized and formalized process of Victorian mourning. This process radically changed with the invention of photography in 1839. Now one could record the grieving process, which is what the photograph above accomplished. The photograph is a typical mourning portrait, depicting the mourner (the little girl in this case), with the photo of her deceased loved one in her hands. Like so many other photographs, this one recorded the grieving process, allowing loved ones to keep a piece of that person even after their death. 19th-century photographs also were often used to capture images of loved ones while they were dying. Photography was particularly apt for this kind of work as it was seen as a vessel of truth, intimately connecting the past and the present. 19th-century Americans realized that photographs told stories like few other objects could, and they used this storytelling ability to convey their emotions surrounding mourning. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Mourning, Photography, Women

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

### The Perfect Vessel of Grief: Women and Mourning Photography

By Savannah Labbe '19



*Unidentified girl in mourning holding a picture of her father.*  
(photo via [Library of Congress](#))

After her father died, the girl in the photo above went through a highly ritualized and formalized process of Victorian mourning. This process radically changed with the invention of photography in 1839. Now one could record the grieving process, which is what the photograph above accomplished. The photograph is a typical mourning portrait, depicting the mourner (the little girl in this case), with the photo of her

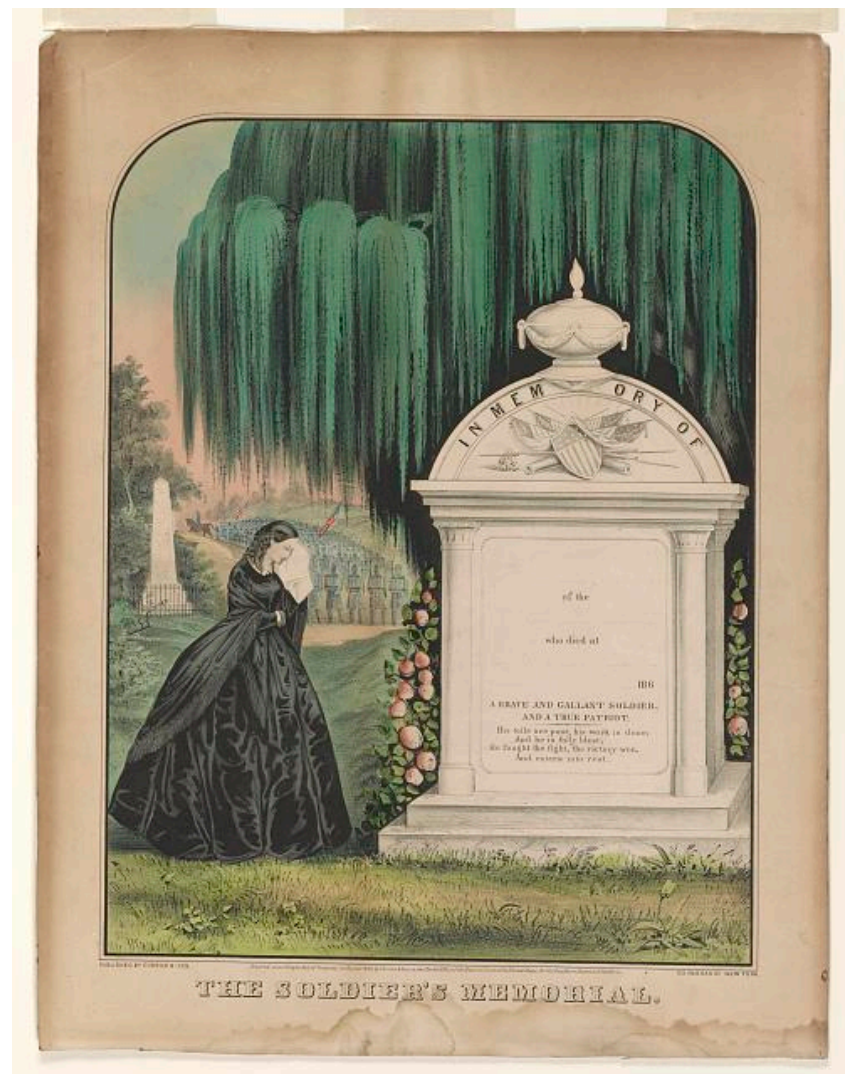
deceased loved one in her hands. Like so many other photographs, this one recorded the grieving process, allowing loved ones to keep a piece of that person even after their death. 19th-century photographs also were often used to capture images of loved ones while they were dying. Photography was particularly apt for this kind of work as it was seen as a vessel of truth, intimately connecting the past and the present. 19th-century Americans realized that photographs told stories like few other objects could, and they used this storytelling ability to convey their emotions surrounding mourning.

Queen Victoria, after whom the Victorian era was named, went into deep mourning following the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861. Although mourning was already an important part of people's lives before Albert's death, it became even more so due to Queen Victoria's highly public and drawn out mourning process, which was aided by the invention of the photograph. Mourning was such an important process because death was a constant feature of life in the 19th century. Disease, an overall lack of understanding of how to treat illnesses, and poor sanitary conditions shortened the average lifespan to about fifty years old. Due to the constant reality of death, funeral and mourning practices became an important aspect of everyday life. When someone was expected to die, their house would be draped in black crepe to let everyone know the family was expecting a death. The family would often prepare for death by taking portraits of the dying person. These portraits would later be sent out as part of memorial cards, informing one of the funeral and providing them with a keepsake to remember the dead by. In addition, the family would often take photographs with their deceased loved ones, especially infants, to further commemorate their life and passing.

After the death, women especially became vessels of grief. Women were thought to be more emotional and sensitive, so it was particularly their job to express their emotions over the loss of a loved one. They wore black, as well as jewelry specially made for mourning which would include a picture of the deceased on it. It was also common to include a lock of the deceased's hair in the mourning jewelry. The child in the picture above is already preparing for her role as a mourner, which would only become more circumscribed as she aged. She is dressed in all black, is wearing mourning ribbons, and holds a picture of her father, who died in the Civil War. Although she is young, she is already learning how one dresses, acts, and behaves while grieving, as well as performing a central part of the mourning process.

An integral part of mourning processes like the little girl's was the mourning portrait. These portraits did not begin with the invention of photography. In fact, many portrait companies were created to produce lithographs of the mourning process, such as the company that would come to be known as Currier and Ives. These lithographs usually depicted women in full mourning next to a tomb, which was oftentimes topped with an urn. There also was usually a weeping willow and a church in the background. These images typically showed women in exaggerated poses of sorrow, draped over the tomb next to them. Women were in these poses because mourning was very public; one had to show they were deeply aggrieved by the loss of their loved one. If women did not show their emotion, it was thought that they were cold and uncaring about the death of their

loved ones. Since it was women's jobs to mourn and be emotional, not doing so would have been considered a social faux pas. However, a woman could not be too emotional either, as that would have been unseemly for an era which also called for personal restraint in public. Not only did they have to "perform" their grief, but they also had to record it. They would hang these lithographs, and later, photographs, on the walls next to a portrait of their loved one, forever immortalizing their loved one's death and their own grief at the dead's passing. The photograph of the little girl is a continuation of the lithography process in a new medium. Now all at once, the girl has a picture of her father and of herself mourning her father.



**A typical mourning print done by Currier and Ives.**  
(image via [Library of Congress](#))

Photographs radically changed the mourning process because people saw photographs as somehow more truthful and organic than other artistic depictions, such as paintings. While it is true that the process of taking a photograph was staged, the photographer still could only capture material realities. One could not just add things into photos that



were not actually there, at least not in the 19th century. In addition, by staging the photos in a certain way, people felt like they were able to convey a deeper truth and reality, unlike they could in paintings. Victorian Era Americans also believed that by looking at a photograph of someone you could see into their soul and see what they were feeling at the moment the photo was captured. A photo could therefore authenticate a moment in history, which was why photography became so important to the mourning industry, so much so that people built businesses out of traveling and taking mourning photographs. Mourning photographs served as proof of the mourner's deep sorrow, more so than a lithograph ever could. The girl in the photograph has a haunting expression on her face and she looks much older than she actually is. The photo served to capture her emotion and the fact that she was forced to grow up by losing a parent long before any child should. Her father will always be with her though, and will never be forgotten, as is evident by the way she clasps his photograph to her.

The photograph was also important in mourning practices because it could capture the visual attributes of the deceased, either in the process of dying, or just before. On the brink of death, people were supposed to be resolute and accepting of their fate and if their face showed this in the photograph, family members would know that their loved one was going to heaven. The photograph, therefore, became a vessel for memory and a way to remember a loved one. Before the invention of photography, people only had an article of clothing or a toy to remember the deceased by. Photography now allowed loved ones to have a memento of the loved one's appearance, which played a role in both the public and private mourning process. The girl in the photo could always remember specific details about her father's appearance or demeanor, as she had a photograph of him. In addition, her father's death no doubt served as a political statement and evidence that he fought and died in the name of the Union's just cause. Such mourning photographs of Civil War dead thus played a significant role in perpetuating key, familiar tenets of 19th-century sentimentalism—that death, and familial grief for a loved one served a higher, patriotic purpose in which those who were left behind should take comfort. Therefore, not only did this specific image allow the little girl to remember her father's death; she could also remember how she herself felt after his death, as she also had a picture of the mourning process. The photo was a way of transporting her into the past to ensure that she would never forget her father, the higher purpose for which he died, or his guiding influence.

Mourning photography fulfilled similar needs for many other families of the deceased, especially during the deadly years of the Civil War. In this way, the technology of photography was able to radically and rapidly change the mourning tradition. People quickly noticed and took advantage of the capacity for photography to capture landmark moments in history by capturing "truth," be it all natural or staged for even greater or "more truthful" effect. In addition to providing a window into 19th-century mourning practices, this photograph also serves as a testament to how technological innovations throughout history have helped to better connect past and present, and affect sweeping cultural changes.

---

Sources:

Bedikian, Sonia A. "The Death of Mourning: From Victorian Crepe to the Little Black Dress." *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying* 57, no. 1 (May 2008): 35–52. Accessed October 1, 2018.

Grootkerk, Paul. "American Victorian Prints of Mourning." *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 11 no. 4 (1989):276-283. Accessed October 1, 2018.

McConnell, Kent A. "Photography, Physiognomy, and Revealed Truth in the Antebellum South." *Southern Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 32–53.

["The Custom of Mourning During The Victorian Era."](#) *Nps.Gov*. Last modified 2018. Accessed October 1, 2018.