

Peaceful Ironies: The History and Aesthetics of Postmortem Photography in
Quebec and Ontario (19th and 20th Centuries)

Troy Cluff

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*An excellent technique for understanding a society's ways of living [is] to observe its ways of dying.*¹

By the 1860s, after the technology of photography had developed and spread internationally, some Canadians began having deceased family members professionally photographed for commemorative purposes. This ritual was common in Europe and the United States, and experts today usually refer to it as postmortem photography or postmortem photographic portraiture. In this paper, I will explore the origins and the development of postmortem photography as a commemorative practice in Canada.

Today, in Western societies the subject of death carries with it a certain social stigma: in open discussion, both the event of death and the process of dying are taboo.² Instead, except when it is used in popular culture for dramatic purposes, acceptable venues for death and dying are seldom found outside of clinical or academic study. The average person becomes uncomfortable and embarrassed when death is openly discussed or displayed, so for the most part, it is dealt with quietly and with reservation in personal life.³ When people see postmortem photographic portraits for the first time, they often view the ritual as a deviation from modern, normative responses to death. In fact, historians have found that many people who have seen postmortem portraits in their ancestral collections have misunderstood the practice, inciting them to destroy or hide the photographs instead of donating them to public archives.⁴ The discomfort

¹ Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), x, 1.

² Philippe Aries, "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies," *American Quarterly* 26, no. 5 (1974): 553. "Death has become a taboo, an unnameable thing...and, as formerly with sex, it must not be mentioned in public."; Herbert C. Northcott and Donna M. Wilson, *Dying and Death in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2008), 118.

³ Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 1. "Life is commemorated through photographs. Why not death? A logical question, perhaps, but one that makes many twentieth-century Americans uncomfortable."

⁴ Nicola Brown, "Empty Hands and Precious Pictures: Post-mortem Portrait Photographs of Children," *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2009): 13. "[It] is entirely likely that changes in social attitudes to and rituals of death have meant that many treasured photographs have been thrown away and destroyed by later descendants."

which these photographs provoke suggests that postmortem photography was only openly practiced in Canada for a limited time—even if it is still practiced by some Canadians today.

Postmortem photography in Canada emerged at the same time as the nineteenth-century cemetery reform movement, which, to a large extent, helped transform the aesthetics and culture of death. This movement was inspired by Romanticism; spearheaded by bourgeois citizens; and entailed the creation of “ruralized” cemeteries in Victorian Canada’s rapidly expanding cities—an attempt to dignify the funeral process by making burials more aesthetically pleasing and more respectable.⁵ Historians have viewed this as part of a national “beautification movement,” which aptly emphasizes the aesthetic component of the changes made to traditional burial practices.⁶ Early postmortem photographs were an extension of this larger cultural transformation: they emerged at the same time and were infused with several of the same Romantic attributes as the new cemeteries being established in Canada’s major cities. Therefore, the emergence of postmortem photography should be seen as a dimension of a broader imperative to beautify death in Victorian Canada.

The photographs themselves were meant to comfort grieving family members by depicting their deceased loved ones at peace. Among other things, this facilitated the process of coping with death by allowing people to perceive it as a natural and beautiful phenomenon. In particular, when it first emerged, postmortem photography helped people negotiate the high prevalence of death associated with urban life at the time—especially the death of infants and children.

⁵ Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3. Strange actually wrote about the cemetery reform movement in Britain, but the reform movement in Canada was catalyzed by the same factors.

⁶ Roger Hall and Bruce Bowden, “Beautifying the Boneyard: The Changing Image of the Cemetery in Nineteenth-Century Ontario,” *Material Culture Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 14. “From the growing cities, however, emerged the *beautification movement*, which at its core and from both private and public inspiration, encouraged the formation of non-denominational, well-planned and strictly kept-up cemeteries” (italics added).

Over the course of the twentieth century, as infant mortality rates decreased and sensibilities toward death shifted due to advances in public health policy and the onset of the Great War, postmortem photographs began to depict adults more frequently than children, until the ritual declined as a socially accepted commemorative practice. Then, in the past decade, at least one not-for-profit company began to promote the practice of postmortem photography in North America once again. They have re-termed the ritual “remembrance photography” and still operate today, providing the service exclusively to parents grieving a stillborn child.⁷



Figure 1. Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep (2005-Present), *Unknown Infant* (ca. 2005-Present). Digital Photograph. <https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org>, Denver, CO.



Figure 2. Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep (2005-Present), *Maddux Achilles Haggard* (2005). Digital Photograph. <https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org>, Denver, CO.

While parents who have commissioned remembrance photographs perceive their pictures as “sacred” objects, it will be interesting to see how (or if) this service will affect the overall stigma towards death in contemporary North America.⁸ For the time being, it is too early to determine

⁷ Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep website, accessed April 9, 2014, <https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org>. Since 2005, the company has involved over 11,000 volunteers and has reached forty countries worldwide, including Canada. Currently, it operates out of Colorado and has a staff of a dozen photographers, who travel around both the US and Canada to give seminars instructing potential “remembrance” photographers on how to take appropriate postmortem pictures of stillborn children.

⁸ Marissa Miller, “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep,” *Miska: Beauty for Ashes Blog*, May 30, 2011, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://miskamiller.blogspot.ca/2011/05/now-i-lay-me-down-to-sleep.html>. “...the photos [Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep] took are among the few things (after my husband and children) that I would grab as I ran out the

whether remembrance photographs like those in Figures 1 and 2 have instigated any significant changes. As a result, in this essay, I have opted to concentrate more on nineteenth and early twentieth-century postmortem photographs instead of these more recent examples.

When it first emerged in Canada, postmortem photography was largely a bourgeois ritual, practiced in urban areas. Although it was not practiced exclusively by the elite, the majority of subjects in the earliest Canadian postmortem photographs were from bourgeois families living in industrializing cities. Furthermore, the Romantic characteristics of the photographs corresponded to a conscious bourgeois agenda of the time to educate the lower classes on respectable culture through beautifying public burial spaces.⁹ Of course, it is certainly possible that postmortem photography originated in larger cities alongside the cemetery reform movement by coincidence—that a new technology had simply appeared in cities which also happened to be establishing these new cemeteries. The similarities and chronological proximity between postmortem photography and the cemetery reform movement, however, suggest otherwise. Especially considering how the earliest postmortem photographs clearly reflect a similar aim to beautify death, it is only logical to credit the pre-existing cemetery reform movement as a principal incentive for postmortem photography to come to fruition in the first place.

Thus, this paper will explore the circumstances in which postmortem photography emerged and developed, focusing particularly on the following two aspects of the ritual: its social context, including who practiced it and why; and most predominantly, the aesthetic content of the images, and how it spoke to the transforming culture of death in Canada, both in the early Victorian period and again in the early twentieth century. Postmortem photography

door if our house ever caught fire. They are SACRED to us, and the work that NILMDTS is doing across the globe is phenomenal.”

⁹ Brian Young, *Respectable Burial: Montreal's Mount Royal Cemetery* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), li, 41, 51. Many high-standing citizens (like Peter McGill) “saw the cemetery as a coherent instructional site where the poor and modest would draw moral lessons from their betters.”

originated in the nation's largest cities as a bourgeois phenomenon, inspired by Romanticism. But when the price of photography and funerals in general became less financially crippling and more feasible for the working-class to take up, postmortem photography started to democratize as a commemorative practice and its aesthetics began to change. Finally, as the subject of death became a taboo in the early twentieth century, postmortem photography declined as a normal funeral tradition and was no longer openly practiced in most of Canada. Even remembrance photography, a rite which only recently appeared, is a service exclusively reserved for the exceptional circumstance of a stillbirth, and is therefore only practiced by a small minority.

While there is room for a comprehensive study of postmortem photography in all of Canada, I elected instead to focus on the custom as it was practiced in Quebec and Ontario, the two largest provinces when postmortem photography emerged. Using these two provinces for comparative purposes should have been useful for their proximity and their historic cultural differences, revealing whether the aesthetics of postmortem photographs depended on the ethnic, linguistic, or religious group to which those who commissioned them belonged. For instance, did French Catholics endorse a different aesthetic than English Protestants in their respective postmortem photographs? Given the differences between Catholic and Protestant cemeteries and the broader differences between these two divisions of Christianity in general, one would expect that the postmortem photographs commissioned by French Catholics and English Protestants might be different.¹⁰

As it happens, these cultural differences proved not to be very helpful to the study of Canadian postmortem photography, because nothing in the intrinsic visual aesthetics of a postmortem photograph allows it to be identified as distinctly Ontarian, Québécois, or even

¹⁰ Meredith Watkins, "The Cemetery and Cultural Memory: Montreal Region, 1860 to 1900," (MA thesis, Department of Geography, McGill University, 1999), ii, 3, 9, 16, 82-5.

Canadian. Although I did not analyze any postmortem images from other nations, I suspect that this is likely true of postmortem photographs in general.

In addition to finding few noteworthy differences in the aesthetics of postmortem photographs from different provinces, finding source material in either province at all was frequently problematic.¹¹ Overall, it proved difficult to locate collections of these pictures for several reasons. Alan Noon has explained that the scarcity of photographs in general is owed primarily to the fact that most commercial photographers from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries did not see the value in preserving their work for posterity. They were more immediately concerned with selling their service and earning a profit than they were with preserving the legacy of their businesses. Thus, as the shortage of quality, scratch-free glass in Canada created a strong demand for used glass-plate negatives, re-using or selling the negative of a photograph that had already been printed and sold was more of a priority than storing it away in their shops.¹² Consequently, most photography studio negatives do not survive, and so not every city has a representative archival collection of nineteenth or early twentieth-century photographs. This was most unexpectedly true in Toronto, where I was surprised to find no postmortem images at all in the archives I visited in person.¹³

In conjunction with the data in Tables 3 to 6, the seemingly arbitrary list of archives in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate how caches of postmortem photographs are randomly situated across either province, which added to the difficulty of collecting source material.¹⁴ For instance, I expected to find similar numbers of postmortem photographs in Toronto and Hamilton as I had

¹¹ There were a few exceptions where an archive contained a large number of postmortem photographs, particularly in Quebec. See: Table 3 in the Appendix for the precise number of photographs I found in each of the archives I consulted.

¹² Alan Noon, *East of Adelaide: Photographs of Commercial, Industrial and Working-Class Urban Ontario, 1905-1930* (London: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1989): 10-11.

¹³ Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix disclose which archives I consulted in either province.

¹⁴ All of these tables can be viewed in the Appendix.

found in Montreal, but this failed to take place. This is why cities like Kingston, London and St. Hyacinthe are listed alongside metropolises like Toronto and Montreal; these smaller cities frequently held larger caches of postmortem photographs.

Even within respectable photographic collections, postmortem images are often difficult to locate because a standardized methodology for cataloguing them has not yet been adopted in Canada. Although experts on the subject regularly use the term “postmortem photographs,” it is rarely used at all in Canadian archives. While searching image databases in the ten different cities I consulted for this project, the term “postmortem photograph” only produced results in Montreal. Search hits yielding postmortem images depended more on whatever arbitrary, non-standardized terms the archivist had attached to a postmortem photograph’s meta information when they first catalogued it. These search terms could range anywhere from “casket” to the more abstract “unidentified child”. Also, it is difficult to recognize sometimes that the person in a portrait photograph is actually dead, so postmortem photographs can be mistaken as regular portrait photographs. As a result, the photograph might not show up as a hit in a search using death-related terminology as a filtering parameter. These mistaken photos can only be discovered by closely examining every portrait photograph in a collection, which is a difficult and time-consuming process in larger archives. As the numbers in Table 3 demonstrate, postmortem photographs only make up a very small portion of all portrait photographs, so this was rarely fruitful and usually impractical.

Having success finding postmortem photographs often depended on the familiar knowledge of senior archivists, who typically possess extensive experience handling and cataloguing the content of their archives. Asking them if they had ever seen any of these images or if they knew other specialists or collections that would better serve the project was by far the

best way to procure the images, which was obviously far from systematic and unreliable at best. Nevertheless, I still managed to locate over 300 postmortem photographs in total, the majority of which I found in Quebec—though in most cases, I found that the overall numbers of postmortem photographs that turned up in an archive’s database could be misleading.¹⁵ Many of these pictures were actually just multiple photographs of the same scene, in which case I would count only one photograph. Also, in the Notman collection at the McCord Museum in Montreal, many of the images classified as postmortem photographs were actually completely unrelated to commemorative photography—there were some pictures of painted posthumous portraits, hand-made drawings, and even pictures of dead animals. After excluding these, copies of pictures, and images not specifically related to commemorative photography, the proportion of photographs I located to ones I actually consulted was dramatically reduced in some places, which is also demonstrated in Table 3.

As for my collection methods, I simply opted to collect as many of these photographs as I possibly could within my temporal and financial limitations. Considering how I simply went to places with caches of postmortem photographs that I could afford to visit, it is important to distinguish how I amassed a *collection* of postmortem photographs, not a sample. The tables in the Appendix should not be mistakenly interpreted as an accurate statistical portrayal of the proportion of postmortem photographs commissioned within a given area. They are not representative of who practiced postmortem photography or how popular it was; they merely give a more accessible visual of the number of photographs from certain timeframes that I was able to acquire or consult in different Canadian cities. They help give an idea of how postmortem photography emerged as a commemorative tradition in Canada’s major cities of the time, and also how it started to be practiced less often and in less populated areas around the onset of the

¹⁵ See: Table 3 in the Appendix for a complete listing of how many photographs I found in each city.

Great War.

Although postmortem photography is not a popular topic by any means, a few monographs have been published on the subject. Much of this discourse has failed to adequately cover the ritual as it was practiced in Canada, focusing more exclusively on postmortem photography in Britain and the United States.¹⁶ With that being said, in *Photography and Death*, the most recent, comprehensive and important publication on postmortem photography to date, Audrey Linkman frames postmortem photography within an international scope that includes Canada—though still only superficially.¹⁷

Linkman makes a series of arguments about the origins and motivations for postmortem photography, beginning by describing the influence that nineteenth-century Christianity had on the ritual. She points out that when it first emerged, the majority of Europeans and Americans were practicing Christians who believed the body was a precious and beautiful temple that was quite worthy of being “memorialized by the camera.”¹⁸ Certainly, Christian values had a significant impact on Western ideas of death. But the majority of the earliest postmortem photographs in Canada did not reflect any religious elements or affiliations at all, whether the bereaved family was Catholic or Protestant—unless the image was of a priest or a nun.¹⁹ There were other cultural developments in the nineteenth century that influenced the emergence of

¹⁶ Stanley Burns, Audrey Linkman, and Jay Ruby are the leading experts on postmortem photography, and have each authored monographic works on the subject. Ruby and Burns focus on the ritual as it was practiced in the United States, and Linkman has mostly been concerned with the ritual’s British context—though her most recent publication has an international focus. In particular, see: Stanley Burns and Elizabeth A. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography: American and European Traditions* (New York: Burns Archive Press, 2002); Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Linkman, *Photography and Death*, 9. “This study includes references to countries such as Australia, Canada, the USA and New Zealand, all of which were Westernized through settlement and broadly mirrored developments in the mother country.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹ Figures 3, 4, 6, 13, 16 and 17 are all examples of early postmortem photographs that do not exhibit any Christian affiliations. There *is* a crucifix in Figure 12 and a bust of the Virgin Mary in Figure 15, which are both early postmortem photographs—however, the subject in Figure 12 is a priest and, again, although religious paraphernalia sometimes did appear in early pictures like that in Figure 15, it did not happen very often.

commemorative photography far more directly than Christianity: for instance, the movement to beautify the aesthetics of death, which stimulated the creation of new, public burial spaces in Canada, shared far more specific similarities with postmortem photographs than Christianity did. Even if Christianity had played a significant role in provoking this beautification movement in the first place, its influence was reflected far less explicitly in the photographs themselves than the ideology of the Romantic.

Linkman also explains that in some cases, a sense of duty toward a dying family member motivated the commissioning of postmortem photographs, especially when family members could not be present for their final moments and expiration. The presence of relatives often brought peace and reassurance to the dying, and caring for them was an important and honorable rite—particularly for women. When a family member was absent for these final moments, postmortem photography could compensate for feelings of guilt and deprivation for having missed their opportunity and duty to offer comfort to the deceased. In cases like these, Linkman says the postmortem photograph served as a “proxy form of admission to the theatre of death[,] provid[ing] some measure of consolation” to those who could not be present for it.²⁰

Linkman also makes an important observation about a particular element in the aesthetic of early commemorative photographs that I have incorporated into my own work. In a section entitled “Death as Sleep,” she explains how many postmortem photographs Romanticized their portrayals of the deceased, in order to downplay as much as possible that they were actually pictures of expired corpses.²¹ This was most often accomplished by positioning the subjects to appear as though they were sleeping, not dead, which is illustrated in Figures 3 to 6. Although

²⁰ Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death*, 16.

²¹ “...photographers generally eschewed realism in post-mortem portraits commissioned by the bereaved family. *Influenced by the ideas of the Romantic movement*, they opted instead to portray death as sleep.” *Ibid.*, 12-3 (italics added).

this particular aesthetic began to change around the onset of the Great War—which I will explore in depth afterward—Linkman’s point about Romanticizing the images was actually at the foundation of postmortem photography in Canada. The lack of Christian paraphernalia, the obvious Romantic aesthetics and the markings of elevated social status in the majority of Canada’s earliest postmortem photographs suggest that, more than anything else, postmortem photography emerged here as a bourgeois tradition inspired by nineteenth-century Romanticism.



Figure 3. W. G. Adair Studio (unknown), *Unknown Infant* (ca. 1910). Scanned cabinet photograph. Dundalk, ON. Gregory Sullivan, “*Post Mortem Photography*,” Art Galleries: A Collection of Pictures That Deal With Death Blog.



Figure 4. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *Mrs. Walker's Dead Baby* (1868). Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.

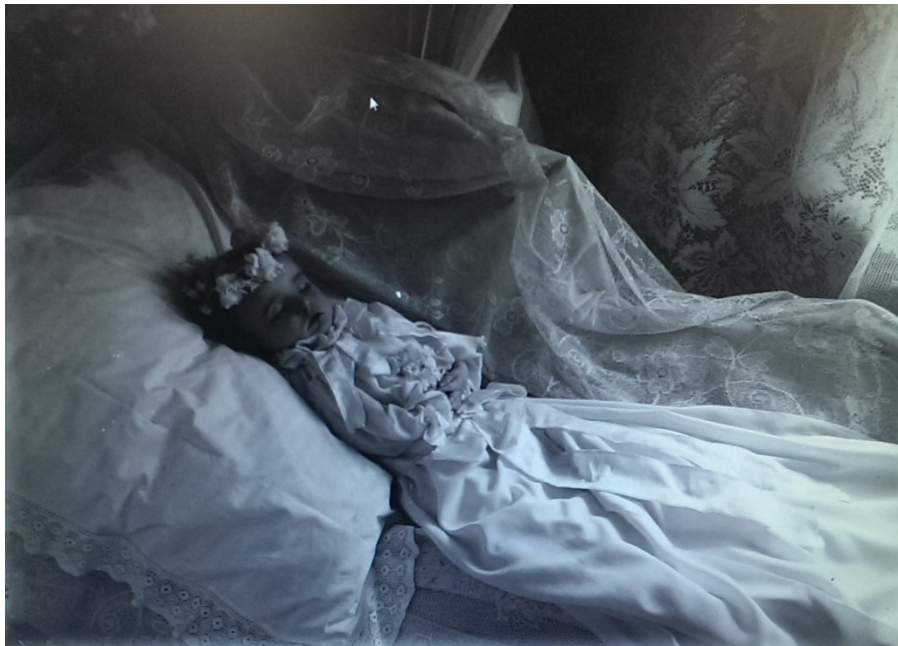


Figure 5. Studio B.J. Hébert, (1905-1915), *Unknown Infant* (1905-1915). Photograph of a scanned glass-plate negative. Archives Centre d'histoire de Saint-Hyacinthe, St. Hyacinthe, QC.



Figure 6. James William Powell Studio (1873-1906), *F. L. Clark child dead* (ca. 1873-1906). Photograph of a glass-plate negative. Powell Studio Fonds, Identified Males A-Z series, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, ON.

Rather than fading into obscurity, Audrey Linkman and Jay Ruby both suggest that postmortem photography actually continued as a commemorative practice over the course of the twentieth century. Ruby argues that many people in the twentieth century publicly abhorred postmortem photography, yet privately practiced it.²² He gleans evidence from an advice column that appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in February of 1991, which attracted a large number of respondents. In it, Ann Landers describes an earlier column where she agreed with a reader that postmortem photography was “weird” and “appalling,” only to have over one thousand people object and defend the ritual as a beneficial and therapeutic custom, even if they also found it odd in the beginning.²³ Ruby views the large number of respondents antagonized by Landers’ belittlement of the practice as proof that it continued to be practiced throughout the

²² Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 52.

²³ *Ibid.*, 167-8.

twentieth century. In fact, both he and Linkman believe that after postmortem photography went on the decline by the middle of the century, it actually began to pick up again by the late 1970s.²⁴

The dates of the photographs that I located in Canada support that the custom continued here, too. In fact, postmortem photographs were taken in every decade of the twentieth century up to the 1990s.²⁵ However, while people may have continued to practice postmortem photography here in a general sense, it definitely declined after the First World War, and there is no evidence that this trend reversed by the end of the century.²⁶ Furthermore, suggesting that postmortem photography “continued” is an oversimplification. I will argue that postmortem photography developed in twentieth-century Canada to a point where it could not accurately be classified simply as a continuation of the same ritual that had emerged in the 1860s. Certainly, mid-twentieth-century postmortem photographs were still pictures of dead people that attempted to commemorate them in a positive, endearing way. However, postmortem photography was no longer an exclusively bourgeois practice by this time, it no longer featured children as predominantly as it did in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and it did not endorse the same Romantic aesthetic as it did in the beginning. The overwhelming bundles of flowers and the caskets which dominate later images like those in Figures 7 through 9, in conjunction with the often cheap-looking backdrops, made it quite obvious that the subjects in these photographs were dead, not asleep, and that they were more frequently members of the popular classes.

²⁴ Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death*, 80-6; Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 7, 166-7.

²⁵ A complete list of the dates of the photographs consulted for this study is presented in Tables 4 to 6 in the Appendix.

²⁶ Tables 4 to 6 clearly indicate how the number of postmortem photographs in major cities drastically decreased after the onset of the Great War. Postmortem portraits taken after the 1920s were also more often from smaller towns or outlying rural areas, but even those were commissioned far less frequently than the ones that were taken prior to the war.



Figure 7. Hines Studio (1906-1929), *Cadaver on Cooling Bed* (1910-1928). Scanned glass-plate negative. Hines Collection, University of Western Ontario Libraries: Archives and Research Collections Center, London, ON.



Figure 8. Hines Studio (1906-1929), *Casket in Parlor* (1910-1928). Scanned glass-plate negative. Hines Collection, University of Western Ontario Libraries: Archives and Research Collections Center, London, ON.



Figure 9. Hines Studio (1906-1929), *Woman in Casket* (ca. 1910-1928). Scanned glass-plate negative. Hines Collection, University of Western Ontario Libraries: Archives and Research Collections Center, London, ON.



Figure 10. Anonymous, *Mother of Conrad Poirier* (1947). Scanned B & W photograph. Fonds Conrad Poirier, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ) Vieux-Montréal, QC.



Figure 11. Anonymous, *Joseph Larivière dans son cercueil (1930)*. Photograph of a printed B & W photograph. Archives Centre d’histoire de Saint-Hyacinthe, St. Hyacinthe, QC.

The images in Figures 10 and 11 further support how most postmortem photographs taken after the Great War and nearer to the middle of the century made no attempt to conceal the fact that the subjects in the photographs were dead. Thus, while postmortem photographs may have still been commissioned in Canada even after death became a taboo subject in the twentieth century, the people, venues, and reasons associated with the pictures had all changed, completely transforming their aesthetic. Arguing that postmortem photography continued over the twentieth century oversimplifies the history of the ritual by failing to adequately portray the significant ways in which postmortem photographs evolved.

Jay Ruby also rejects explicit analyses of the aesthetics of the photographs in order to focus more exclusively on the socio-cultural information that can be gleaned from them. He cautions against “[treating] the photographs as pure image,” which is misleading advice, because the aesthetics of postmortem photographs are not merely decorative aspects which complement the work; they actually have a significant impact on the experience of observing the pictures.

Still, Ruby warns that “the study of images alone, as objects whose meaning is intrinsic to them, is a mistaken method if you are interested in the ways in which people assign meaning to pictures.”²⁷

While studies of postmortem photographs certainly should not be exclusively confined to the realm of aesthetics, ignoring their aesthetics in order to consider these socio-cultural details is completely unnecessary. There are multiple aspects of postmortem photographs (and aesthetic objects in general) that can be analyzed for historical information, without any need for preferential treatment or consideration. In his seminal work on the history of Romantic criticism, M. H. Abrams has outlined four basic features of aesthetic objects which have typically been analyzed over time: the artist (in our case, the photographer); the audience (the bereaved); the universe (the background and context of the image); and the subject (the deceased).²⁸ Most studies of postmortem photographs focus on details relating to the family of the deceased, which would fall under the *audience* category in Abrams’ classification. While part of my research also concentrates on the families of the deceased to ascertain the social motivations for postmortem photography, I am mostly concerned with the aesthetics of the photographs and the sensibilities which influenced them over time, which is what Abrams would refer to as the *universe* of the object being critiqued. Contrary to Ruby’s belief, an analysis which treats both the universe (the aesthetic) and the audience (the socio-cultural context) of postmortem photographs is both useful and entirely feasible.

In Canada, the depth of the research on the nation’s postmortem photographs is relatively

²⁷ Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 5.

²⁸ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 6.

shallow.²⁹ The single comprehensive study of postmortem photography in Canada focuses on what Abrams would classify as the audience—the bereaved family members who commissioned the photographs. In her 2005 MA thesis, Kathryn Beattie adopts a principally psychological approach to the ritual and contends that a postmortem photograph reflects the simultaneous acceptance and denial of a child’s death by grieving Victorian parents.³⁰ But since Beattie presumes that the grief of losing a *child* at a young age motivated families to commission the photographs in the first place, it is relevant to point out that not all postmortem photographs in Canada were of infants or children. While the majority of early postmortem photographs certainly *were*, there were still some people who commissioned pictures of adults even in the earliest stages of the ritual, as clearly demonstrated in Figures 12 through 16. In fact, shortly after the turn of the century, the focus of postmortem photographs shifted and adults began to appear in the images more and more frequently, until the majority of postmortem pictures finally *were* of adults—which Kathryn Beattie’s perspective fails to address.

²⁹ Several studies refer to postmortem photography in Canada, but only very briefly. For examples, see: Brian Young, *Respectable Burial*, 44-6; Meredith Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 15; Katharine J. Borcoman, “William Notman’s Portraits of Children,” (MA thesis, Department of Art History, Concordia University, 1991), 25-6.

³⁰ Kathryn Beattie, “Aspects of Acceptance and Denial in Painted Posthumous Portraits and Post-mortem Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Children,” (MA thesis, Department of Art History, Concordia University, 2005), 2, 78. For instance: “The Victorians accepted and celebrated death while simultaneously denying it.”



Figure 12. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *Prêtre au crucifix sur son lit de mort (1866)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.



Figure 13. James William Powell Studio (1873-1906), *Dead man (ca. 1873-1906)*. Photograph of a glass-plate negative. Powell Studio Fonds, Identified Males A-Z series, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, ON.



Figure 14. Studio B.J. Hébert, (1905-1915), *Unknown Woman* (ca. 1905-1915). Photograph of a scanned glass-plate negative. Archives Centre d'histoire de Saint-Hyacinthe, St. Hyacinthe, QC.



Figure 15. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *The late Mr. Masson (1887)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.

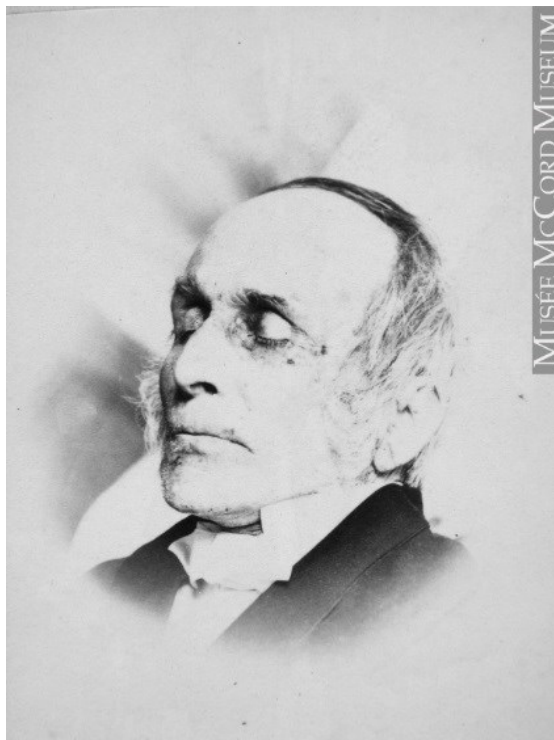


Figure 16. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *The Late Mr. Harvey (1864)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.

As for the aesthetic portion of her study, Beattie compares the aesthetics of postmortem photographs with another commemorative ritual which preceded it. She effectively proves how commissioning *paintings* of postmortem portraits was already an established commemorative tradition in Canada for families who could afford it.³¹ Using Phoebe Lloyd's terminology, she calls these paintings "painted posthumous portraits," and emphasizes how their existence catalyzed the emergence of postmortem photographs.

However, the precedence that painted posthumous portraits enjoyed in Canada did not necessarily guarantee that postmortem photography would inevitably come to exist as a commemorative practice in its wake. Of course, the similarities between these two rituals and the established precedence of painted posthumous portraiture would indicate that posthumous

³¹ Kathryn Beattie, "Aspects of Acceptance and Denial", 3-9.

paintings likely *did* contribute to the emergence of postmortem photography: those who had been actively practicing the former tradition had *a priori* incentive to also practice the latter, once the technology had been invented. Yet, on its own merit, this correlation does not eliminate the possibility that there were other reasons for postmortem photography to emerge. By the same principles of precedence and shared similarities, an additional incentive to practice postmortem photography can be traced to the movement to reform the aesthetics of death in nineteenth-century Canada, which manifested in the establishment of new, ruralized cemeteries, as I have already stated. I will explain this connection in much further detail, but first it will be necessary to refine the definitions of a few terms, concepts, and classifications I have been using to avoid vagueness and ambiguity.

So far, I have classified Canadian postmortem photographs under three separate categories, distinguishable from one another through their chronology and their aesthetics. While each picture is obviously original, parts of the abstract aesthetics of different photographs were similar during certain time periods, regardless of where they were taken. The earliest group, which I refer to as “early postmortem photographs,” is comprised of images which were taken in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—more specifically, from the introduction of photography in Canada around the 1860s to around the time of the Great War. The second category, which I have been referring to as “mid-century” or “late” postmortem photographs, is made up of pictures taken around or after the First World War, until the end of the twentieth century. Finally, the third group is comprised of the recent remembrance photographs of stillborn children, which are too immediate for the scope of this essay.

Obviously, it would have been preferable if there were more specific dates demarcating these three categories of Canadian postmortem photographs. However, there were no set

guidelines for taking the pictures, and as a result, though the aesthetics of postmortem photographs from different Canadian cities changed *around* the same time, they did not change with exact simultaneity, making it impossible to categorize them with a more satisfying level of precision.

Up to this point, I have used the terms “Romantic,” and “sensibilities” perhaps too liberally—they denote fairly complex and elusive ideas that need to be further clarified. The polysemy of the Romantic is so profound that any descriptions of it which claim to be definitive are already simplistic by nature: ideas of the Romantic often carry different connotations depending on the context in which they are being used.³² The result is that the word “Romantic” is exceptionally brittle at the heart of a conceptual framework if it is not further defined. Fortunately, Romanticism is a well-researched topic, so it was relatively easy to draw out some of the conflicts or tensions characteristic of this ideology that helped inspire both early postmortem photography and the rural cemeteries of nineteenth-century Canada. Each of the following four attributes collectively establish the contours of a Romantic aesthetic; they are not mutually exclusive or incongruous together, and they do not constitute a comprehensive list of what makes anything Romantic. Rather, they are simply some Romantic tensions that were common to early postmortem photographs and cemetery reform in Canada, helping to demonstrate how the two were part of a larger movement to beautify the culture of death.

MUTABILITY AND PERMANENCE

One of these Romantic characteristics was the tension or conflict between mutability and

³² Romanticism “is too large, too complex, and above all, too elastic to be captured in some scholarly butterfly-net, pinned down and dissected at convenience, to be classified once and for all.” Lilian R. Furst, *The Countours of European Romanticism* (London: MacMillan Press, 1979), xii; Morse Peckham, *Romanticism and Behavior* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 3-5.

permanence.³³ Representations like a painting or a photograph can provide an escape from mutability, where people can be immortalized in a prelapsarian state of innocence like the child in Figure 17. Although it is a representation of a person in the form of a material object that is void of impulse or emotion, representation allows people to be remembered in their youth by human audiences even hundreds of years hence.



Figure 17. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *A.E. Gagnon's Dead Child (1882)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.

In representation, beauty is not required to fade, whereas in life, people must grow old and perish. This capacity for representation to render mutable things beautifully immutable in the

³³ An excellent example of this tension can be found in the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” by John Keats, a member of the Romantic canon. The poem is a short and exquisite meditation on art, where a speaker looking at an urn from Greek antiquity describes the decorative human figures painted onto it *ekphrastically*, and ponders upon their permanent, immutable nature as they are represented on the urn. John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*, eds. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 905-6.

imaginative realm was a key sensibility of the Romantic period. Beautiful, Romanticized representation helped alleviate some of the anxiety caused by death. In Figure 17, a sense of the child's youthful innocence is enshrined in the photograph and could be revisited again and again, which would have provided comfort and solace to the bereaved family. Though human life has been and always will be subject to mutability, there are ways it can be endearingly preserved for posterity. A Romantic representation like the photograph in Figure 17 could manipulate the sensibilities of its viewers in a positive way.

SENSIBILITY AND REASON

In fact, human sensibility often fascinated the Romantics—particularly its capacity to countermand and even subjugate rationality on occasion. Romantic poets often explored and manipulated the sensual comprehensibility of their audiences by using specific vocabulary, imagery, rhymes and cadences that would elicit specific feelings or emotions. Their poems were not meant to be dissected line by line and understood on a rational basis or for their logical organization. One film on the life of John Keats, the Romantic poet, explains this contrast between sensibility and rationality particularly well through an analogy to the act of diving into a lake on a hot summer day. In the moment, a person does not sit and think on why they are swimming—they make no attempt to “figure the lake out.” Rather, they simply luxuriate in the sensation of the water running over their body as it cools them down.³⁴ While rationales might also exist for going swimming on a hot summer day, the utter glee which the experience instills cannot be wholly understood or explained on a rational basis; it is simply meant to be experienced. Similarly, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the comfort which rural cemeteries and postmortem photographs like Figure 17 brought to grieving family members and

³⁴ Jane Campion, Abbie Cornish, Ben Whishaw, Paul Schneider, Kerry Fox, and Thomas Sangster, *Bright Star*, directed by Jane Campion (London/Sydney: BBC Film Company/ New South Wales Film & Television, 2009).

friends might not be fully comprehensible on a rational basis. Rather, they encapsulated a Romantic aesthetic that beautified the dead, which was meant to appeal to the sensibilities of the bereaved and elicit feelings of comfort and peace over the despair and anxiety which typically accompany death—especially the death of a child.

BEAUTY AND CONTINUITY AMIDST DECAY AND RUIN

The Romantics also had a sustained interest in the concept of fragmentation, which is at least partially attributable to the experience of high mortality rates in their generation.³⁵ Romantic poets often used poetry as an outlet for lamenting the loss of a fragmented life, and many of their poems themselves were published as unfinished fragments.³⁶ While notions of the fragmented took root well before the onset of the Romantic period, its conventional use in Romantic works has led the concept to be naturally associated with Romanticism and the establishment of a “cult of ruin”.³⁷ For the Romantics, the ironic contrast created by symbols of beauty and continuity that appeared amidst decay and ruin—like flowers blooming in a graveyard, for instance—was actually a source of comfort, if only a fleeting one.³⁸ Early postmortem photographs captured this irony, as illustrated in Figure 17. The dead child looks pristine and is posed as though peacefully asleep, though family members who observed the picture obviously would have been aware that he was actually dead. In other words, the photograph beautifies the child, yet it is still a portrayal of a fragmented life, epitomizing this Romantic interest in beauty amidst ruin. Like Romantic

³⁵ In fact, the biographical narratives of the Romantic canon constitute an overall culture of failure and loss. For instance, the life of Keats, whose poetic brilliance is often compared to that of Shakespeare, was cut short when he died of tuberculosis in his mid-twenties, a tragedy which has often been lamented by poets and writers.

³⁶ See, for instance: Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Adonais,” edited by William Michael Rossetti, 1891. Accessed August 18, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10119/10119-h/10119-h.htm>. This elegiac poem was written on the event of Keats’ premature death.

³⁷ Elizabeth Wanning Harries, “‘Unfinish’d Sentences’: The Romantic Fragment,” in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. Michael Ferber (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 360-2.

³⁸ For instance, describing the Italian cemetery in which John Keats was laid to rest, Percy Shelley said that it was “an open space among the ruins [of the fortified circuit of ancient Rome], covered in winter with violets and daisies,” which “might make one in love with death to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.” See: Elizabeth Wanning Harries, “Unfinish’d Sentences”, 360-2.

poetry, photography was sometimes used in the Victorian period as an outlet to lament against the frequency of youthful deaths and the loss of potential associated with such an unfortunate circumstance.

SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

What is also interesting about photography is how odd it is from a philosophical perspective: photographs are tangible *things* that can bridge the subjective and the objective. That is, a photograph transmutes the subjective perspective of a person looking through a camera lens into an objective medium, creating a static, visual object out of an otherwise transitive experience. When we observe photographs of things or scenes that we already subjectively witnessed or experienced in real-time, it can instigate moments of existential consciousness, which can be fairly disturbing when they remind us of our own mortality. Graveyards and postmortem photographs are excellent examples of this particular phenomenon, because they both compel us to think about death, as well as our existence. We typically try to avoid thinking about such things, because contemplations of this kind often cause anxiety. The difference with early postmortem photographs and rural cemeteries is that their aesthetics were specifically designed to counteract the anxiety caused by these momentary preoccupations with death. As Figure 17 illustrated, a commemorative photograph that beautifies death with a Romantic aesthetic is far less troubling than a photograph of a homicide victim is, for instance, because the latter uncomfortably draws attention to an unnatural death, raising thoughts and illogical fears about how our own deaths will take place. Those who observed early postmortem photographs or visited rural cemeteries in the nineteenth century, on the other hand, would have been more apt to focus on the naturalness of dying, instead of being overwhelmed by the anxiety that often accompanies thoughts about death.

A final concept that I will explore involves social or public dispositions toward death, which often shift according to changing cultural values. It is well-documented, for instance, that attitudes toward death underwent a general transformation in the beginning of the nineteenth century and again in the early stages of the twentieth. The former shift was inspired by the Romantic period, which had ushered in a whole new set of sensibilities. Among these was an inclination to emphasize the natural beauty of death.³⁹ Prior to that, representations of death in the early eighteenth century were typically rooted in the idea of *memento mori* and emphasized ruin and decay, which served to remind audiences of their limited time and the need to live life accordingly. In the Romantic period, however, death began to be portrayed within sublime, picturesque contexts and with a much greater sentimental sensibility, so that its existence as a natural phenomenon was emphasized instead of using it to remind people of the temporal limitations of their mortality.⁴⁰ This emphasis on the naturalness of death is showcased rather clearly in early postmortem photographs, including those in Figures 3 to 6 and the image in Figure 17.

By the end of the Great War, attitudes toward death had shifted again. Although perceptions of dying were not uniformly negative, the horrors of the war made it difficult to continue emphasizing the natural and Romantic qualities of death.⁴¹ The unprecedented number of broken bodies in the fields of Europe had a significant impact on the aesthetic and public perception of death, as Figure 18 illustrates.

³⁹ Philippe Ariès, “The Reversal of Death,” 550. “It was in the Romantic era that men discovered the special beauty that death imposes on a human face...”

⁴⁰ Meredith Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 12-3.

⁴¹ Jonathan Vance has shown how the Canadian memory of the war was quite complex and often paradoxical. While the horrors of the war were very real and impossible to forget, many still perceived it as a just fight; the deaths of so many Canadians were seen to serve an important and worthy purpose; and many veterans attempted to downplay the terrible bitterness of the war and view it in an optimistic light, instead. Thus, perceptions of the war were not uniformly negative—but it certainly still shifted Canadian opinion away from the popular Romantic perspective, which emphasized the *beauty* and *naturalness* of death. Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 15-34, 40, 196.



Figure 18. Frederick H. Varley (1881-1969), *For What?* (1917-1919). Oil on canvas, 147.4 x 180.6 cm. Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, ON.

In fact, several experts on death and dying contend that death became a taboo after the Great War, which commits to a Freudian belief in the significance of *eros/thanatos* on social behavior.⁴² The general idea is that death (*thanatos*) was a normative issue in Victorian culture, whereas sex (*eros*) was taboo. Then, over the course of the twentieth century, they traded places

⁴² For instance, see: Sally Cline, *Lifting the Taboo: Women, Death, and Dying* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), 2. "Sex and death have always been significant subjects but the openness with which they have been discussed has changed over the centuries. In the West, Victorians discussed death, but for them sex was taboo."; Nicola Brown, "Empty Hands and Precious Pictures", 9; Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 7. "From the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1970s, death became a forbidden subject among the 'Americanized' middle class."; Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death*, 69-78, esp.75. "However, by the second half of the twentieth century in the advanced West, the taboo against death...had serious consequences for attitudes towards post-mortem photographs." Philippe Aries, "The Reversal of Death," 553. "Death has become a taboo, an unnameable thing...and, as formerly with sex, it must not be mentioned in public."; Herbert C. Northcott and Donna M. Wilson, *Dying and Death in Canada*, 118.

as acceptable and forbidden subjects in open discussion. The appeal of this type of Freudian analysis is understandable. A common assumption about these photographs is that the earliest ones clearly illustrates a Victorian fixation with death, while their decline in the twentieth century corroborates how sex was replaced by death as a taboo or even “pathological” subject by the middle of the century.⁴³ Thus, sensibilities and attitudes toward death had a significant impact on the aesthetics, frequency, and acceptability of postmortem photographs.

EARLY POSTMORTEM PHOTOGRAPHS, 1860 – CA. 1914

Commemorative postmortem photographs are posed pictures, arranged in specific ways for a desired effect. They are quite differentiable from the graphic and often grotesque nature of other forms of postmortem photographs, such as the pictures of dead bodies taken at crime scenes by police services for evidentiary purposes. The obvious differences between commemorative and other types of postmortem photographs confirm how commemorative photographers desired a particular, identifiable aesthetic in their final product. Interestingly, in Canada, there are noticeable patterns associated with these desired aesthetics: although they developed over time, the aesthetic objectives of postmortem pictures taken by different photographers in the same time periods are very similar, regardless of where they were taken.

While the parallels between the aesthetics of each of the pairings of photographs in Figures 19 through 25 are relatively obvious, every individual photograph is unique, and sometimes it can be difficult to detect the similarities between different postmortem pictures. The easiest way to pick out these similarities between photographs is by comparing a few of their abstract aesthetic components, including details such as: where the picture was taken; how the deceased subject in the photograph is posed; what clothing adorns them; and background detail, including: the backdrop or setting; props; flowers; religious paraphernalia; and whether the

⁴³ Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 7; Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death*, 69.

subject is laid out in a casket, a bed, a couch, or on a cooling table. In Figures 19 and 20, which were both taken around the 1860s, the aesthetic similarities are very apparent: each woman is dressed in mourning garb and is cradling a deceased child. There are no visible props or religious paraphernalia, and most of the background setting is omitted save for a partial view of a chair and bannister in Figure 20. The focus of each picture is clearly on the woman and child, and it is easily imaginable that both of the children are sleeping, not dead. The pictures convey a very similar aesthetic, though they were commissioned in relatively distant cities with significant cultural differences.



Figure 19. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *Lady and Capt. Crowie's dead baby* (1868). Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.



Figure 20. Anonymous, *Ross, Augusta Elizabeth (ca. 1850-60)*. Scanned carte-de-visite. Mills Family Album, Hamilton Public Library's Local History and Archives Department, Hamilton, ON.

Figures 21 and 22 both include the families of the deceased—dressed in mourning garb—making it difficult to imagine that the central figure of each photograph is only sleeping: why would all of the family pose for a picture while one of them slept at the center of the image?



Figure 21. William James Topley (1845-1930), *Master Balcomb dead (1901)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, ON.



Figure 22. Studio B. J. Hébert (1905-1915), *Mrs. Alphonse Raymond with family (1899)*. Photograph of a glass-plate negative. Archives Centre d'histoire de Saint-Hyacinthe, St. Hyacinthe, QC.

With that being said, Figures 21 and 22 were commissioned around the turn of the century, and although many of the postmortem images at this time still portrayed a Romantic aesthetic, where it could still be imagined that the deceased was asleep, these particular photographs highlight how the aesthetic of postmortem pictures had begun to change since their emergence in the 1860s, as well as how the aesthetics of pictures from two different cities in the same timeframe were often similar.

By the 1900s and early 1910s, many commemorative photographers were taking pictures that were dramatically different from earlier postmortem photographs. Figures 8 to 11, 23 and 24 each depict the ways in which the aesthetics had changed, particularly concerning how the fact of death was far more pronounced than in earlier images.



Figure 23. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *The late Mr. McDougall (1910)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.



Figure 24. Studio B. J. Hébert (1905-1915), *Unknown Child and Flowers (1905-1915)*. Photograph of a scanned glass-plate negative. Archives Centre d'histoire de Saint-Hyacinthe, St. Hyacinthe, QC.

Bodies in postmortem photographs by this time were often already situated in their coffins and completely surrounded or even covered by flowers. Although the overabundance of mourning flowers helped create a different type of beautified aesthetic, combined with the presence of a casket, they still diminished the likelihood and possibility for people to imagine that the subjects in the photographs were merely sleeping.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the content of postmortem photographs was typically less elaborate than these images from around the 1910s, as Figures 10, 11 and 25 illustrate. Although there were probably still flowers around the funeral parlor, in these later pictures, they typically no longer surround or cover the body and casket of the deceased, nor do they completely dominate the image.⁴⁴ Figures 10 and 11 illustrate particularly well how this rendered an aesthetic that was far more basic than that of early twentieth-century postmortem photographs, and made it even more obvious that the subjects in the photographs were dead.



Figure 25. Anonymous, *Sisters of Charity* (1945). Scanned glass-plate negative. Fonds Les Soeurs de la Charité de Québec, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ) Québec, QC.

⁴⁴ They still appeared in some photographs, as Figure 25 illustrates. However, they were no longer as pronounced as they were in earlier pictures, such as those in Figures 8, 9, and 24.

Figures 19 through 25 together give a general idea of how the aesthetic objectives of postmortem photographs transformed over time. Postmortem portraits after the Great War were more frequently set in funeral parlors, whereas early postmortem portraits were set either in the homes of the deceased or in the photography studio, and they were typically taken in such close proximity to the body that background detail was obscured or omitted altogether.

Figures 26 to 31 reveal how the earliest postmortem photographs were typically minimalist and simplistic, and emphasize how they were arranged to make it appear as though the deceased subjects were actually sleeping. This Romanticized aesthetic was most often established through the inclusion of pillows, blankets, a bed or couch, simple clothing or sleeping attire, in conjunction with how the body and limbs were arranged.

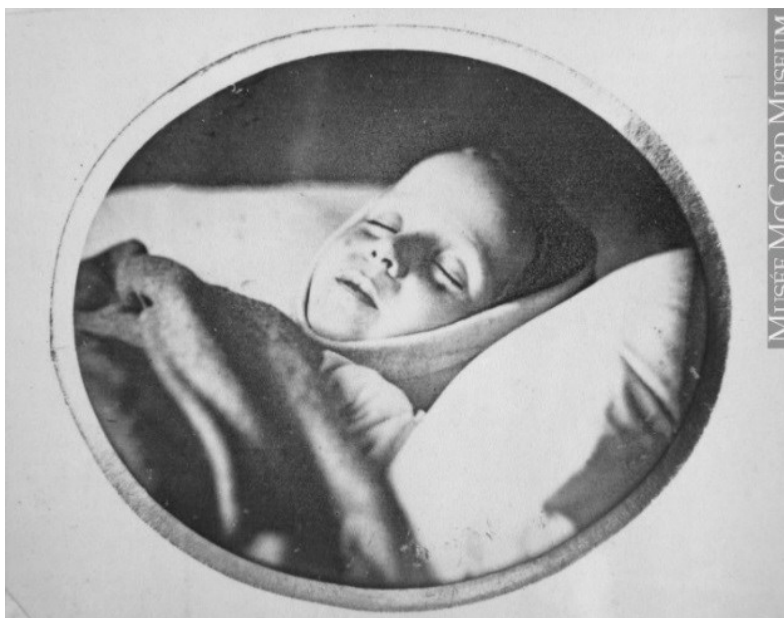


Figure 26. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *Sarah Christiana Bain, dead child (1863).* Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.



Figure 27. William James Topley (1845-1930), *Duff Master (child) (dead) (1874)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Topley Studio Fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, ON.



Figure 28. James William Powell Studio (1873-1906), *Dead baby (ca. 1873-1906)*. Photograph of a glass-plate negative. Powell Studio Fonds, Identified Males A-Z series, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, ON.



Figure 29. William James Topley (1845-1930), *Whelan baby (dead) (1874)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Topley Studio Fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, ON.



Figure 30. James William Powell Studio (1873-1906), *F. L. Clark child dead (ca. 1873-1906)*. Photograph of a glass-plate negative. Powell Studio Fonds, Identified Males A-Z series, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, ON.



Figure 31. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *Miss Porteous in bed* (1863). Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.

As photographs, early postmortem pictures were necessarily mimetic. However, they were also representations that portrayed an expressive, Romantic aesthetic, where one could more easily imagine that the subject in the photograph was not dead. Though the pictures in Figures 26 through 31 are but a few examples, my research has corroborated that this particular aesthetic aim was characteristic of most early postmortem photographs in Quebec and Ontario. The fact that it appeared in early postmortem images from cities as varied as Hamilton, Kingston, Ottawa, and Montreal emphasizes how this Romantic aesthetic objective was consistent in postmortem images throughout most of early Canada.

EARLY POSTMORTEM PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE RURAL CEMETERY

Perhaps the most interesting aspect about the aesthetic of these early postmortem photographs, though, is how it paralleled the movement to beautify nineteenth-century cemeteries, which was also inspired by the Romantic period. Generally speaking, nineteenth-century cemetery reform involved the aesthetic transformation of traditional urban graveyards. These changing aesthetics were a response to the problems that had accompanied the unprecedented growth of industrial cities. One of the consequences of rapid urbanization was the overcrowding of urban cemeteries: city graveyards quickly became mere dumping pits for bodies, which caused legitimate concern over sanitation and respectability—burying the dead in this fashion was neither sanitary nor respectable. Of course, there were other factors which contributed to the sanitation problems associated with nineteenth-century urbanization (including issues like inadequate sewage disposal and overcrowded housing), but cemeteries were one of the most pressing concerns.⁴⁵ Also, complaints from the wealthy class about the lack of respectability in urban burials started to arise, specifically over “the social inequities” of existing urban cemeteries. Contemporaries

⁴⁵ Meredith Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 8-9. “Although the cemetery was not the only source of unhealthiness in the city, it was continually criticized as the main one.”

started believing that the purpose of the graveyard needed to shift from simply being a practical way to dispose of corpses to something that more adequately commemorated the dead, while instructing the masses on “proper” culture at the same time.⁴⁶

The response to these health and social concerns about overcrowded graveyards was a widespread movement to reform cemeteries in Canada’s most rapidly developing cities. Although the movement first emerged in the cities of Europe and the United States, it gained traction in Canada by the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ City officials in rapidly developing areas started to plan for the creation of new cemeteries at their city’s limits. Historians have termed these cemeteries *rural*—not only because they were built at the outskirts of town, but also because they strove to emulate a pastoral setting. Their design was founded on a “sublime, pastoral and picturesque landscape,” they contained “irregular scatterings of gravestones among the trees and over the slopes,” and they were modeled on the concept of the open English garden.⁴⁸ Brian Young and Meredith Watkins have both argued that Victorian, high-culture concerns over respectable burials and the Romantic idealization of the natural, pastoral death inspired both the Mount Royal and the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges cemeteries in Montreal.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Mount Pleasant, Necropolis, Hamilton, Beechwood, and Cataraqui cemeteries in London, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, and Kingston, respectively, were also results

⁴⁶ Meredith Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 1-2, 6-8; Brian Young, *Respectable Burial*, li, 41, 51.

⁴⁷ Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 8; Young, *Respectable Burials*, 21-29, esp. 30. Cataraqui Cemetery in Kingston was established in 1850, and the first lots in Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal had been surveyed and laid out by 1852.

⁴⁸ Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 10; Young, *Respectable Burials*, 16, 106.

⁴⁹ Young, *Respectable Burials*, 1. “Inspired by their own estates and gardens, their libraries and travels, and by multiple examples across the Protestant world, the trustees constructed an institution that would impress by its classical architecture, its *romanticized* nature, and its strict codes of behavior.” (italics added); Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 7. “Ideas shared among philosophers and designers created a new frame of mind associated with Romanticism, and the cemetery became an important vehicle through which people were able to construct identities and convey the meaning of their lives to others.”

of this new Romantic sensibility in nineteenth-century Canada.⁵⁰ Gerald L. Pocius has also shown how the establishment of rural cemeteries in early Newfoundland, which would later join Canada as a province, was also inspired by notions of respectability and the Romantic ideology.⁵¹ Even as cities grew to a point where they re-encompassed these rural cemeteries, the use of the “rural” adjective has continued over time, and thus rural cemeteries now often ironically exist within some of Canada’s most populated cities.

Of course, these new rural cemeteries were much different than the burial grounds that were actually located in rural villages, which are referred to as *country* cemeteries instead.⁵² Meredith Watkins suggests that the inspiration for new, rural cemeteries in major cities originally came from country cemeteries, even if indirectly. After the onset of the Romantic period in the late eighteenth century, the natural, pastoral setting of the country cemetery helped inspired artists to change the way they represented death in their art and poetry. Thus, the prevalence of picturesque scenes and exquisite descriptions of death in Romantic representation was actually at least partially inspired in the first place by the pastoral cemeteries of Europe.⁵³ Country cemeteries, then, contributed to this new Romantic sensibility toward death, and officials in urban areas eventually incorporated these Romantic qualities into new, rural cemeteries in order to ameliorate health issues and social concerns about existing urban graveyards.

This Romantic sensibility, which emphasized the “naturalness” of death, also manifested in early postmortem photographs, which highlighted how death looked much like a natural state

⁵⁰ Roger Hall and Bruce Bowden, “Beautifying the Boneyard: The Changing Image of the Cemetery in Nineteenth-Century Ontario,” *Material Culture Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 14. “Romanticism, combined with an appreciation of the naturalness of death and a renewed spiritual emphasis upon its implications, created new attitudes towards the subject.”; “From the beginning, they were celebrated for their beauty, both contrived and natural. They reinforced, indeed celebrated, the bourgeois fabric of nineteenth-century life, providing an opportunity for discreet pride and restrained boastfulness in achievement to be paraded by successful Victorians.”

⁵¹ Gerald L. Pocius, “The Transformation of the Traditional Newfoundland Cemetery: Institutionalizing the Secular Dead,” *Material Culture Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 27-8.

⁵² Meredith Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory,” 10-11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12-3.

of sleep. Moreover, the Romantic tension between mutability and permanence was also intrinsic to the design of the rural cemetery. The beauty of the pastoral landscape was largely indebted to the natural majesty of the cycle of seasons, a quintessential symbol for the mutability of life. The changing of the seasons starkly contrasted with the setting of the cemetery, which typically symbolized the finality and permanence of death. This tension was not lost on the Romantics. Archibald Lampman's poem about Ottawa's rural cemetery, called "In Beechwood Cemetery" and inscribed at the cemetery's entrance, captures it with poetic justice:

Here the dead sleep—the quiet dead. No sound
Disturbs them ever, and no storm dismays.
Winter mid snow caresses the tired ground,
And the wind roars about the woodland ways.
Springtime and summer and red autumn pass,
With leaf and bloom and pipe of wind and bird,
And the old earth puts forth her tender grass,
By them unfelt, unheeded and unheard.
Our centuries to them are but as strokes
In the dim gamut of some far-off chime.
Unaltered rest their perfect being cloaks—
A thing too vast to hear or feel or see—
Children of Silence and Eternity,
They know no season but the end of time.⁵⁴

Here, Lampman juxtaposes the beauty of the changing seasons with the static timelessness of death, exacerbating that tension between the permanence of death and the beautiful, continuous motion of life. The last line of the poem stresses how the permanent state of death and the mutability of life are unknowable to each other and perhaps irreconcilable, yet they naturally coexist in the same space of the rural cemetery—a space which is beautiful. This is true of postmortem photographs, too, which also conveyed the permanence of death and reminded observers about the mutability of life within the same space, in a beautiful way. Postmortem

⁵⁴ Archibald Lampman, "In Beechwood Cemetery," in *The Poems of Archibald Lampman*, ed. Duncan Campbell Scott (Toronto: George N. Morang, 1900), 288-9.

photographers and the architects of rural cemeteries alike therefore drew from this Romantic ideal, and crafted some beautiful aesthetics that echoed this particular conflict between the inevitability of mutability and the possibilities for beautiful permanency through Romantic representation.

Romantic poets also often highlighted the tension between sensibility and rationality that had emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment, especially to illustrate how passion often supplants reason in human behavior. Similarly, the experience of the rural cemetery itself instigated a form of emotional catharsis that was not particularly comprehensible through rationalization alone. For the Romantics, reason had only a regulatory function in relation to sensibility, imagination, judgment, and intuition.⁵⁵ One needs only to set foot in a rural cemetery to understand the difference between actually experiencing its Romanticism and having it explained; walking amidst the gravestones scattered across the rural cemetery's sublime landscape captivates the senses and creates a peaceful irony.



Figure 32. Beechwood Cemetery Company (unknown), *The Botanical Cremation Gardens* (unknown). Digital Photograph. <http://www.ottawagraphy.ca/organizations/beechwood-cemetery-foundation>, Ottawa, ON.

⁵⁵ Morse Peckham, *The Birth of Romanticism, 1790-1815* (Greenwood: Penkevill Publishing Company, 1986), 3.



Figure 33. Notman Studio (1856-1935), *Entrance to Mount Royal Cemetery, Montreal, QC, About 1870 (1870)*. Scanned glass-plate negative. Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal, QC.

The resulting aesthetic of death in such a Romantic space is rarely morbid; it is conveyed with a sort of melancholic, ineffable beauty. In the rural cemetery, nature transmutes the stark reality of death into something peaceful and profound. This phenomenon is not something which can benefit from being described, it is an experience that must be experienced to render it fully comprehensible. In this way, the rural cemetery really brought the Romantic tension between sensibility and reason to the fore. Early postmortem photographs also brought it to light: observers were able to reason that the subjects in the photographs were dead, but could still be led to imagine that they were merely resting. The Romantic aesthetics of early postmortem photographs and rural cemeteries may not have been wholly rational and are rather difficult to explain, but actually taking them in would have granted observers an experiential understanding of their purposes.

Another tension shared by postmortem photographs and rural cemeteries alike was the way they both called attention to human mortality in a positive light. As I mentioned, photography often bridges subjective and objective experience, because it transmutes a

subjective, instantaneous experience into a static object: whatever appears before the lens of a camera as a picture is taken is exactly what appears in the resulting photograph. This instantaneous experience can then be observed afterward, including by those who were present for the original moment. Postmortem photographs specifically confronted their viewers with death, reminding them of their mortality and the mutability of life. Similarly, when standing looking at grave markers amidst the beautiful and mundane qualities of a natural landscape, the innate fear of death, whether conscious or unconscious, is projected through the objective and natural setting of the rural cemetery. Thus, the cemetery is an environment in the objective world that also confronts an observer with his or her own mortality. Objective experience in the case of both the postmortem photograph and the rural cemetery penetrates the solipsism of subjectivity in a useful way, because we often cope with the psychological anxiety generated by the awareness of our own mortality by choosing to continuously deny it. As Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has said, “it is inconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth”.⁵⁶ What made early postmortem photographs and rural cemeteries particularly similar is the fact that they both stimulated an awareness of death, yet at the same time, they both attempted to make it seem as natural as possible by beautifying the setting in which it was portrayed, which would have lessened the anxiety that inevitably accompanies contemplations of death.

Finally, rural cemeteries and postmortem photographs both exemplified the concept of fragmentation, which the Romantics embraced. Although the aesthetics of early postmortem photographs and rural cemeteries were meant to instill a sense of peace by highlighting the naturalness of death, they obviously did not erase the fact or context of death altogether. In many of Canada’s burgeoning cities in the nineteenth century, infant mortality rates were incredibly

⁵⁶ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 16.

high. Thus, nineteenth and early twentieth-century postmortem photographs and rural cemeteries alike were often intrinsically symbols of fragmented life, because the majority of deaths which they represented or accommodated were those of infants and children.⁵⁷ The predominance of young people being commemorated through both the cemetery and the postmortem photograph suggests that these Romanticized sites and objects became natural symbols of lament for fragmented lives.

Early postmortem photographs and rural cemeteries in nineteenth-century Canada counterbalanced the ineffably difficult experience of death; in both cases, their aesthetic properties were meant to give solace to the bereaved. Although Kathryn Beattie has effectively argued how the existence of painted posthumous portraiture influenced the emergence of postmortem photography in Canada, the movement to beautify graveyards was also taking hold immediately before postmortem photography appeared, and the two shared several of the same Romantic imperatives. Therefore, it stands to reason that postmortem photography originated in Canada as a component of the broader movement to beautify the culture of death, which, as Brian Young, Meredith Watkins, Gerald L. Pocius, Roger Hall and Bruce Bowden has each demonstrated, is also what inspired the creation of new, rural cemeteries in Canada.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF POSTMORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY

In addition to these Romantic inspirations, there were also social imperatives behind postmortem photography and the establishment of rural cemeteries. As in Europe and the United States, the rural cemetery movement in Canada was predominantly a Protestant, bourgeois project that intended to educate the public on respectability, religion, “proper” culture and moral

⁵⁷ Herbert C. Northcott and Donna M. Wilson, *Dying and Death in Canada*, 30; Brian Young, *Respectable Burials*, 45. “High infant mortality continued throughout the Victorian period and into the First World War...only after 1916 did Protestant infant mortality, as reflected in cemetery figures, decline significantly.”

responsibility.⁵⁸ Brian Young has argued that Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal exhibited social democratization, particularly because far more members of “modest” classes were buried in the cemetery than wealthy people; citizens who could not afford a grave at all were still accommodated in the cemetery; and some prominent individuals, including Peter McGill, were buried adjacent to members of the working class.⁵⁹ At the same time, however, Young also points out how the cemetery was still governed and paid for by a board of trustees, which was made up almost entirely of Protestant elites; all of the highest and best plots in the cemetery were paid for by Montreal’s wealthiest patrons; and finally, those of lesser means were afforded fewer privileges than those who paid.⁶⁰ Rural cemeteries may have been a democratizing, pedagogical endeavor, but at their genesis, they were still a bourgeois-controlled effort which, for all intents and purposes, presumed and reinforced pre-existing notions of the Victorian social hierarchy.

This argument that postmortem photography emerged as a bourgeois tradition in Canada might seem to imply that *all* early postmortem portraits were of wealthier citizens, which certainly was not the case, as Figures 34 and 35 demonstrate. The early dates, lower quality, cheap backdrops and props of these pictures indicate how early postmortem photographs were sometimes commissioned by working-class families—they were just far less common than those commissioned by the elite.

⁵⁸ See: note 9.

⁵⁹ Brian Young, *Respectable Burials*, 47, 51. “it is quite misleading to overemphasize Protestants of prominence and wealth. The cemetery remained a burial ground ‘common to all Protestants’. By far the majority of the dead who came through the cemetery gates can be described as ‘modest’—workers, tradesmen, shopkeepers, clerks, and their families.”

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 24, 41, 47-59, 105. “This Victorian high culture, the interest in family memory, and the capital to invest in a lot and its development ensured that key sections of the cemetery would exhibit a coherent and attractive harmony of landscape, lot architecture, and monuments. Many important Montrealers were buried in section A, originally the highest point of the cemetery.”



Figure 34. Girard Studio (unknown), *Unknown Infant* (ca. 1880). Scanned carte-de-visite. Montreal, QC. Gregory Sullivan, “Post Mortem Photography,” *Art Galleries: A Collection of Pictures That Deal With Death Blog*.



Figure 35. Côté Studio (unknown), *Unknown Infant* (ca. 1880). Scanned carte-de-visite. Montreal, QC. Gregory Sullivan, “Post Mortem Photography,” *Art Galleries: A Collection of Pictures That Deal With Death Blog*.

The temporal gap between when the elite and the popular classes started practicing commemorative postmortem photography with comparable regularity had more to do with the costs of death than anything else. Bettina Bradbury’s seminal work on working-class family wealth in nineteenth-century Montreal demonstrates that working-class families there were likely unable to afford postmortem photography in the nineteenth century.⁶¹ Even if the prices were within a skilled laborer’s wage range, for example, members of the working-class still did not have any surplus wealth. Thus, a child taking ill would have forced families to allocate their finances for available medical treatment. If a child suddenly died, the funeral costs would have further precluded working-class families from commissioning a photographer. In Montreal, getting the deceased up the mountain to Mount Royal Cemetery alone would have been an expensive and consuming task for working-class families. It can reasonably be assumed that the circumstances for the working class in nineteenth-century Montreal were common in other major

⁶¹ Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: UTP, 2007), 22-49, 80-118.

Canadian cities; although infant mortality rates in Montreal were among the highest in Canada, they were also high in other industrializing areas.⁶²

After totaling the costs of medical treatment and funeral necessities such as a burial plot and casket, there would have been little financial room for members of the working class to afford postmortem photography—especially while photography was still a novel technology. At the same time, it has been proven that many working-class families often overspent on funeral culture. To the dismay of celebrated social commentators like Charles Dickens, working-class families often overstretched their limited means for funerals, usually in an attempt to meet impossible standards of respectability set out by the wealthy class.⁶³ Considering how postmortem photography emerged as a bourgeois practice that contributed to the respectability of a funeral, postmortem photographs were sometimes commissioned by the popular classes in similar attempts to heighten the respectability of their burials—but in the source material collected for this study, this proved exceedingly rare.

Postmortem photography emerged as an extension of a larger bourgeois imperative to transform the culture of death into something that better showcased beauty and respectability. The establishment of new rural cemeteries predated postmortem photography in Canada, and they incorporated many of the same Romantic attributes that postmortem photographs would also incorporate shortly thereafter. In addition to reinforcing notions of upper class respectability, the establishment of rural cemeteries was also part of a bourgeois imperative to educate the public on moral values. The Romantic aesthetics and upper-class exclusivity of early postmortem photographs demonstrate how the ritual emerged as an extension of a bourgeois movement to beautify death and render it more respectable.

⁶² See: note 57.

⁶³ Julie Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, 1-4; Brian Young, *Respectable Burials*, 47-59.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

Shortly after the turn of the century and before the Great War, however, many of the aesthetic parameters of postmortem photographs had begun to transform, and they were being commissioned more frequently by other classes. By the 1930s, nearly all of the postmortem photographs I found were set in funeral parlors, whereas postmortem photographs taken prior to 1900 and 1910 were typically set in the home of the deceased or right in the photography studio. The funeral parlor wallpaper and cheaper artificial backdrops in many of Canada's twentieth-century postmortem photographs indicate how the ritual had spread more broadly to the popular classes by the First World War.⁶⁴ Also, commemorative photographers slowly began taking postmortem photographs at greater distances from the bodies, capturing the broader details of the funeral setting; caskets began to appear more frequently in the pictures than they had in the nineteenth century, until they appeared in nearly all commemorative photographs; the deceased were often covered or surrounded by flowers and other props; and finally, religious paraphernalia began to appear more frequently than in earlier images.⁶⁵

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, postmortem photography had faded as a socially accepted commemorative practice in most of Canada. Even though samples of postmortem photographs from every decade to the late 1980s can be found in different areas of Canada, Tables 4 through 6 illustrate clearly how the ritual declined over time, particularly after the Great War. Much like the differences between representations of death before and after the Romantic period, this decline in the practice of postmortem photography can be attributed to shifting sensibilities toward death. For the most part, postmortem photography today elicits mixed sentiments of intrigue, misunderstanding, or embarrassment for those who first encounter

⁶⁴ Figures 5, 7-9, and 24, for instance, showcase cheaper backdrops and how the ritual had been taken up by other classes more frequently by the early 1910s.

⁶⁵ Each of these different aesthetic aspects were showcased in Figures 7 through 11, 14, 22, 23, 24, and 25.

the material, confirming how there is still a stigma associated with death. Upon initially becoming aware of the custom, the average person is hardly inclined to believe that postmortem photography is still practiced in Canada, if for no other reason than it seems like such a deviation from modern, “normal” responses to death.⁶⁶

Thanatological experts and bereavement specialists typically agree that there was a shift in Western attitudes toward death in the twentieth century, which ultimately affected whether postmortem photography could be considered a normal cultural practice.⁶⁷ In her seminal work in the late 1960s on death and dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross argued that this attitudinal shift stemmed from the depersonalization of death in the twentieth century, and offered several reasons for how this came to pass.⁶⁸ One of the reasons, which fits well with the way the aesthetics of postmortem photographs changed around the First World War, was that its unfathomable destructive possibilities undid social and private understandings of death.⁶⁹ Although she does not mention the Great War specifically, the unprecedented magnitude of its destructive toll can certainly be viewed as an important catalyst for the depersonalization of death. The substantial number of casualties so far away from home and under such unnatural circumstances literally stripped away all of the natural and beautiful things which the Romantics had accentuated in their understanding and representations of death. The Second World War only compounded this form of depersonalization, considering it introduced some of the most destructive events in human history.⁷⁰

Kübler-Ross also looked to the advances made in healthcare after the turn of the

⁶⁶ This reaction has also been echoed in professional scholarship. Nicola Brown, for instance, has written that the images “would today be viewed as ghoulish and morbid.”: Nicola Brown, “Empty Hands and Precious Pictures”, 8, 19.

⁶⁷ See: note 42.

⁶⁸ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-7.

twentieth century as an additional catalyst for the depersonalization of death and dying. More recently, Herbert Northcott and Donna Wilson have provided further support for this view, arguing that innovative public health policies in Canada decreased the high mortality rates of the Victorian era and increased life expectancy. These policies were geared toward improving sanitation, hygiene, food safety, and immunizing against common diseases in order to ameliorate the variety of health problems that had been plaguing Canadian society. Among the relevant measures improved were proper sewage management, pasteurization, the sanitization of drinking water, promotional campaigns for cleanliness in the home and community, and the legislation of safe food, drugs, and health products.⁷¹ Though far from perfect, these changes to public health policies in the early twentieth century had a profound impact on the culture of death. For instance, fatal illnesses had become more chronic in nature than they were acute, and nursing homes and hospitals looking after patients afflicted with such illnesses had spread everywhere in Canada, transforming what people had come to expect with dying.⁷² Deaths started taking place more frequently at nursing homes and hospitals instead of in the comfort and familiarity of family homes. As the century unfolded, people afflicted with chronic illnesses became more and more isolated, and prolonging the length of time spent caring for the dying could be difficult for families who were not accustomed to the experience. By mid-century, sick people were often being kept in the dark about the truth or extent of their own illnesses, essentially making them less central to the process of their own deaths. This change in the culture of death reflected the same kind of depersonalization that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identifies as the cause for shifting attitudes toward death. Therefore, changes to public health policy, though generally a great improvement from the experiences of the Victorian era, led to the transformation of the culture

⁷¹ Herbert C. Northcott and Donna M. Wilson, *Dying and Death in Canada*, 32.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 32, 34-5. "Almost every town and city across Canada had a hospital by the 1920s".

of death in Canada, which ultimately contributed to the rejection of postmortem photography as a socially acceptable funeral rite and significantly affected how frequently it was practiced.

Whether it was the destruction of the wars or the improvements to public health that contributed more to the shifting culture of death, these factors certainly impacted the public disposition enough that the subject eventually became a taboo altogether. Over time, the Romance of nineteenth and early twentieth-century postmortem photographs lost its charm in most of Canada. Although postmortem photographs were still being taken after both World Wars, they appeared less and less frequently in urban areas, and they also no longer espoused the same aesthetic endorsed by earlier postmortem photographs. Commemorative pictures taken after the 1920s more frequently beautified the *event* of death, rather than the person who had passed away. Even remembrance photography, the more recent manifestation of the custom, is only practiced by a marginal number of the population and can hardly be classified as a normative or socially accepted commemorative practice, either.

Therefore, the ways in which the aesthetics of postmortem photographs transformed by the First World War indicate that these changes likely corresponded to the shifting attitudes that were inspired by the depersonalization of death, which was caused mostly from progressive health policies and the unprecedented destruction seen in the modernized twentieth century. By the 1920s, the aesthetics of postmortem photographs were different from their predecessors. It is difficult to determine whether the novelty of Romanticism had simply eroded, or if perspectives on death had finally reached a point where postmortem photography could no longer be considered a socially acceptable form of commemoration. Whatever the case may be, even though some people continued to practice postmortem photography in Canada after the Great War, it was aesthetically different from when it first emerged, and it was not a mainstream

practice by any means. In Canada, it has faded over time as a commemorative ritual, and it is very rarely practiced in a modern setting.

As historical sources, postmortem photographs are rather straightforward. They are pictures of dead people represented through specific aesthetics, which, historically, have aimed either to beautify the individual or the fact of their passing. Today, the photographs are often viewed as a very peculiar class of portrait photographs. Little contemporaneous information exists that explains the specific reasons for the origins or practice of postmortem photography with any finality. Analyzing the aesthetics and social context of these photographs, then, may be the only reasonable means to understand their social and cultural significance.

Looking at the earliest Canadian postmortem photographs, their purpose is immediately clear: they were not simply artistic or decorative. The aesthetic of the earliest postmortem photographs paralleled the aesthetic of the broader movement to reform urban cemeteries, which sought to create a beautified culture of death and had already been set into motion before photography came to Canada. The character of this new aesthetic was Romantic in nature. Indeed, rural cemeteries and early postmortem photographs shared several of the same Romantic focal points, especially their emphasis on portraying conflict or tension between: mutability and permanence; sensibility and reason; beauty and ruin; and subjectivity and objectivity. I provided abstract explanations for each of these Romantic characteristics, and then turned to describe the way they manifested in both early postmortem photographs and in the cemetery reform movement, comparing the two to reveal their similarities. Like Kathryn Beattie, I have interpreted facts of similarity and precedence as indicators of correlation. In this case, the similarities and chronological proximity of postmortem photography and the beautification movement indicate that the two were not coincidental. In fact, considering their shared purpose

and timing, it is highly likely that a relationship existed between the two. Considering the precedence and scale of the cemetery reform movement in Canada, postmortem photography should be considered as an extension of this larger movement to beautify death, because it undoubtedly functioned in the same capacity and therefore contributed to the same objective.

In addition, I looked at the social incentives for the emergence of postmortem photography, which also closely related with the cemetery reform movement. Graveyards in Canada's largest cities had become little more than public boneyards by the middle of the nineteenth century. Upper-class citizens sought to reform these urban burial grounds in order to ameliorate the health problems that they believed overcrowded cemeteries posed to society, as well as to incorporate the new, Romantic sensibilities that had been woven into the social consciousness after the Romantic period had come to pass. As Brian Young skillfully demonstrated, new rural cemeteries became sites for bourgeois-controlled instruction on Victorian standards, including things like "proper" moral values and various concepts of high-culture. However, postmortem photography would have been an expensive ritual for working-class citizens to practice. While Julie-Marie Strange and Charles Dickens have shown that price did not always deter members of lower classes from financially ruining themselves on avoiding pauper burials and augmenting the respectability of their funerals, it is rather clear in existing postmortem photographs that a wide majority of the subjects in the earliest pictures were from bourgeois families. Thus, when postmortem photography emerged in Canada, it was largely a bourgeois tradition, as well as a part of a broader movement to create a new, Romanticized culture of death.

Over time, postmortem photography evolved as both mortality rates and prices fell, and it started to be practiced more often by the lower classes after the turn of the century. It was around

this time that the culture of death was once again transformed by shifting sensibilities, which was initiated partially by the First World War and advances in health policies in the early-twentieth century. Each of these helped significantly change the way death and dying took place, as well as how it came to be understood. Dying became confined to the nursing home and hospital, where it was a depersonalized, isolating, clinical process. While postmortem photography originated as part of a new, Romantic and bourgeois culture of death, as a result of these shifting attitudes in the twentieth century, it faded into obsolescence as a normative, open tradition in Canada.

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Appendix

Table 1. Archives Visited in Ontario

| | HAMILTON | KINGSTON | LONDON | OTTAWA | TORONTO |
|------------------------|--|-----------------------------|---|--|---|
| NAME OF ARCHIVE | Hamilton Public Library Archives; McMaster University Library Archives | Queen's University Archives | University of Western Ontario Library Archives* | National Archives of Canada; J. Topley Ottawa Studio Fonds | University of Toronto Library Archives; City of Toronto Archives Database; York University Library Archives |

* Denotes archives that demanded payment for the use of their content.

Table 2. Archives Visited in Quebec

| | MONTREAL | QUEBEC CITY | ST. HYACINTHE | L'OUTAOUAIS | ROUYN-NORANDA |
|------------------------|---|--------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| NAME OF ARCHIVE | Notman Collection at McCord Museum; BAnQ Montreal | BAnQ Quebec City | Centre d'Histoire de Saint-Hyacinthe* | BAnQ l'Outaouais* | BAnQ Rouyn-Noranda |

* Denotes archives that demanded payment for the use of their content.

Table 3. Total Photographs Located and Consulted

| | PHOTOS LOCATED | PHOTOS CONSULTED | | PHOTOS LOCATED | PHOTOS CONSULTED |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| QUEBEC | 264 | 100 | ONTARIO | 42 | 42 |
| MONTREAL | 97 | 60 | HAMILTON | 1 | 1 |
| QUEBEC CITY | 1 | 1 | KINGSTON | 13 | 13 |
| ST. HYACINTHE | 51 | 31 | LONDON | 15 | 15 |
| L'OUTAOUAIS | 8 | 8 | OTTAWA | 12 | 12 |
| ROUYN-NORANDA | 107 | - | TORONTO | 1 | 1 |

Table 4. Photographs *Located* in Quebec, by Date

| DATES | MONTREAL | QUEBEC CITY | ST. HYACINTHE | L'OUTAOUAIS | ROUYN-NORANDA |
|---------|----------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1860-79 | 49 | - | - | 1 | - |
| 1880-99 | 41 | - | 1 | - | - |
| 1900-19 | 7 | - | 42* | 1 | - |
| 1920-39 | - | - | 6 | 4 | - |
| 1940-59 | - | 1 | 2 | - | - |
| 1960-79 | - | - | - | 2 | 6 |
| 1980-99 | - | - | - | - | 101** |

* Some of these photographs were labeled with a range of possible dates, from 1905-1915.

** These photographs were likely not entirely from the 1980s, but they are classified under this umbrella date in the BAnQ database.

Table 5. Photographs *Consulted* in Quebec, by Date

| DATES | MONTREAL | QUEBEC CITY | ST. HYACINTHE | L'OUTAOUAIS | ROUYN-NORANDA |
|---------|----------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1860-79 | 39 | - | - | 1 | - |
| 1880-99 | 17 | - | 1 | - | - |
| 1900-19 | 4 | - | 22* | 1 | - |
| 1920-39 | - | - | 6 | 4 | - |
| 1940-59 | - | 1 | 2 | - | - |
| 1960-79 | - | - | - | 2 | - |
| 1980-99 | - | - | - | - | - |

* These photographs were labeled with a range of possible dates, from 1905-1915.

Table 6. Photographs *Located and Consulted* in Ontario, by Date

| DATES | HAMILTON | KINGSTON | LONDON | OTTAWA | TORONTO |
|---------|----------|----------|--------|--------|---------|
| 1860-79 | 1 | 12* | - | 6 | - |
| 1880-99 | - | * | - | 4 | 1 |
| 1900-19 | - | * | 15** | 1 | - |
| 1920-39 | - | - | ** | 1 | - |
| 1940-59 | - | 1 | - | - | - |
| 1960-79 | - | - | - | - | - |
| 1980-99 | - | - | - | - | - |

* These photographs were labeled with a range of possible dates, from 1873-1906.

** These photographs were also labelled with a range of possible dates, from 1910-1928.