How Jackie Mourned

With poise and elegance, Jacqueline Kennedy helped America grieve. She also showed us the reality of death.

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Caroline Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, and John F. Kennedy Jr. exit the Capitol after the state funeral for John F. Kennedy on Nov. 25, 1963.

Photo by Abbie Rowe/White House Photographs/NARA via Wikimedia Commons

Fifty years ago, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy found herself thrust into a role she had never planned for—she became the nation’s first mourner-in-chief. Over a short time in 1963, Jackie went from being the nation’s chic, stylish first lady, a title she despised (“it sounds like a saddle horse”) to an icon of American grief in a time of national trauma. When Jackie became a widow in that hideously public manner on Nov. 22, 1963, it was less than four months after her second son, Patrick Bouvier Kennedy, had died following his premature birth. His death was said to have brought the president and his wife together: When Jackie (who’d had an emergency cesarean section) finally left the hospital, she and Kennedy were uncharacteristically holding hands. In the aftermath, Kennedy invited Jackie to come along to a Dallas campaign stop—something she rarely did. On the day they arrived, Kennedy was shot in the motorcade, and Jackie, in her pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat, climbed over the back of the car, reaching for a piece of his skull.

Kennedy’s death was our first major televised national tragedy, and Jackie’s public self-presentation in those days gave us a model for how we mourn publicly now—but also, in some respects, seems radically strange today. Tragedies are cathartic, Aristotle wrote, explaining the importance of crisis onstage. What Jackie intuitively understood was that Kennedy’s death could be a kind of catharsis for a nation divided by ideological strife. Her contradictory combination of strength and vulnerability allowed Americans to identify with her and find solace. The first day that mail was delivered to the White House after Kennedy’s death, [the historian Ellen Fitzpatrick has noted](http://www.ellenfitzpatrick.net/), Jackie received some 45,000 condolence letters. By January of 1964, when she gave a broadcast thanking Americans for their sympathy, she had received nearly 800,000 telegrams, letters, and cards.

Shortly after Kennedy’s death, Jackie told *Life*, “Most people think having the world share in your grief lessens your burden. It magnifies it. ... When this is over, I am going to crawl into the deepest retirement there is.” But in those first days, Jackie explicitly set the stage for how Kennedy’s death was received. She was instinctively attuned to the power of visuals. As Wayne Koestenbaum writes, in [*Jackie Under My Skin*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EX0GW6Y/?tag=slatmaga-20), “She did not want to be looked at, but she was in a position where she would be looked at. She was very good at being looked at.” In the hours after JFK’s death, many people suggested to Jackie that she wash her face and legs and change out of her[now-iconic suit](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/fashion/jacqueline-kennedys-smart-pink-suit-preserved-in-memory-and-kept-out-of-view.html), all of which were coated with dried, darkened blood. She refused. “Everybody kept saying to me to put a cold towel around my head and wipe the blood off,” she said, according to James Swanson’s [*End of Days: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0062083481/?tag=slatmaga-20). “I want them to see what they’ve done.” Blood still covered her when the public first saw her hours after Kennedy’s death, as she exited Air Force One with Bobby Kennedy, in that same pink Chanel suit. It’s a genuinely strange and gruesome thing to have insisted on—a bodily reality we don’t often see in our sanitized coverage of American deaths these days. At the time, the blood on Jackie’s clothes was one of the few ways that Americans could “see” what had happened. The network cameras hadn’t been on when Kennedy was shot, and the amateur footage caught by Abraham Zapruder wasn’t initially released.

In many of these now seminal moments, Jackie’s public mourning was a strange mix of the gorily real and the carefully staged. Kennedy’s funeral was a form of effective, profoundly moving stagecraft; Jackie modeled it explicitly on Lincoln’s funeral. Kennedy’s body, like Lincoln’s, lay in state in the East Room. She had ribbons of black crepe silk draped over the chandeliers exactly as they’d been draped for Lincoln. The same catafalque and caisson were used to carry the body to the cemetery. A riderless horse was, once again, part of the procession. The image of the lace-veiled widow holding two young children by hand, watching the casket pass, was a kind of visual metonym for the brutalized country: Such a young family shouldn’t have lost a father, and an American president, the leader of the free world, should never have been so painfully vulnerable to attack. The images were almost unbearably poignant—John-John saluting, Caroline twisting around, looking at what appears to be a funeral program while holding her mother’s hand. And yet Jackie’s surface composure somehow invited the public *into* her mourning, as a more distraught, wailing, hysterical self-presentation might not have. During the funeral mass, Jackie maintained—as the authors of [*Dear Mrs. Kennedy*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1250041732/?tag=slatmaga-20) relate—a “calm demeanor of silent dignity, breaking down only once ... shortly before taking communion.” One letter received at the White House read, “The whole world is mourning and emotional girls like myself have been screaming and crying hysterically thru all of it—but you—the one who has suffered the most—have managed to remain composed. Please don’t let anything change that.”

Mourning a president’s death is not much like mourning an individual’s death; even for Jackie, the public spectacle must have inflected and shaped the private grief. What, exactly, her private experience was we will never know, just as we cannot know what she was thinking when she slipped her wedding ring off and laid it with her husband’s body. But we do know that she was a woman who intuitively and brilliantly understood the collective, social nature of her mourning and how television would intensify its impact. As a saying from China’s lower Yangtze Valley, where professional mourning was once common, put it, “We use the occasions of other people’s funerals to release personal sorrows.” Jackie managed at once to be a mirror for the nation’s shock and a kind of rock.

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She was not averse to putting to use grief’s clarity of purpose: Seven days after Kennedy’s death found her writing diplomatically to Khrushchev on one of her last nights in the White House, to urge him to continue working on the peace that had so mattered to JFK. Likewise, she invited Theodore White of *Life* to Hyannisport, Mass., for an exclusive interview, where she stressed, more than anything, Kennedy’s love for [*Camelot*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B004GRMD3A/?tag=slatmaga-20), the musical about King Arthur’s court, based on T. H. White’s [*The Once and Future King*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0441627404/?tag=slatmaga-20). She told White that the lines JFK had loved most were: “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot/ for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.” Much has been made, as a result, of Jackie’s canny shaping of the JFK legacy. But reports of that interview also make her sound jumbled, agitated, full of surprisingly grim details of what it was like to be sitting beside Kennedy as he was shot, pieces of his brain spilling on her lap (“It was flesh-coloured, not white”). It’s difficult to imagine such details being offered up today in an equivalent scenario. One wonders if there was a kind of naïveté in Jackie’s disclosures that we have moved beyond—the shrewder we’ve become about media, the more we sanitize the difficult bits.

Indeed, after 50 years of televised tragedy and public grief, from the Vietnam War to Reagan’s funeral to 9/11, we’re savvier about the stagecraft and live footage, to the point that we distrust these occasions and images even as we participate in viewing them. Cable news, having perhaps grown out of moments like the Kennedy assassination, milks every last emotional moment, ratchets the viewer up to an emotional high, replays images gratuitously. Yet at the same time, today’s media (with the public’s approval) sanitizes the brute physical reality of tragedy in precisely the way that Jackie refused to. This is the crucial difference, it seems to me, between the model she gave us and the public mourning we practice today. After 9/11, most newspapers stopped publishing photos of the bodies leaping off the World Trade Center, as if it were somehow indelicate or too disturbing to do so. During its live coverage that morning, CNN, upon realizing what was happening, first ceased showing any nonblurry footage of the jumpers and then stopped showing any footage at all. And, as Tom Junod [reports in *Esquire*](http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN), in their 9/11 documentary, the filmmakers Jules and Gedeon Naudet edited out the sounds of many bodies falling that morning. Back in 1991, the first Bush administration banned coverage of returning dead service members; in 2009 the Obama administration lifted that ban. But to a large extent the practice of not publishing photos of dead or gravely wounded American service members in battle continues today, due both to military restrictions and to consideration for families.

To me, the singular aspect of Jackie’s mourning remains her insistence on the real blood-and-matter of it—the fact of the president’s body on her body, wholly unsanitized, and not at all polite. And in this Jackie played a crucial role not just in the ceremonial staging of how we would remember JFK, but in emphasizing the importance of actually witnessing death in its most incomprehensible reality: the person being turned to corpse, the physical material of it. This is a piece we may have let go of. Unlike Jackie—known for her impeccable manners and social graces—we seem to think it uncouth to deal with the corpse and its mess.

After you have read the article, answer the following questions on a SEPARATE piece of paper which you will submit. (20 points)

1. What is the MAIN IDEA of this piece? (The author’s claim?)
2. How did Jacqueline Kennedy influence perspectives on public grieving?
3. How is Jacqueline Kennedy different from Miss Emily Grierson in their grieving?
4. Use Jacqueline Kennedy as an example to address the unit question: “Given the amount of artifice, illusion, and weakness with our own perceptions, how is it possible to know the world around us accurately?” Think about how she cut through artifice and illusion and her own perceptions to demonstrate an accurate view of the world.