

***THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING:
DEATH AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR***
A BOOK REVIEW

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Abstract

Spanning across four long years, the American Civil War decimated the United States' population. With the loss of more than 620,000 lives, there was no escaping grief or carnage. In her 2008 book *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust explores the war that changed America's relationship with death. Brimming with empathy, she recounts the grit of life during wartime through the lens of the dying and the mourning. This book review seeks to critically analyze Faust's contribution to our perception of the war, as her research goes further than just reporting casualties. Her intimate accounts of wartime reality are deeply humanizing, and it further helps shape the collective memory for this tragedy.

Keywords: death culture, mourning, Drew Gilpin Faust, American Civil War, United States military history

Resumen

Durante cuatro años, la guerra civil estadounidense destruyó la población del país. Con más de 620,000 bajas, era imposible escapar de la violencia y el duelo. En su libro *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, publicado en el 2008, Drew Gilpin Faust expone cómo la guerra civil en los Estados Unidos cambió las actitudes individuales y colectivas hacia la muerte. De una manera muy empática, Faust narra las historias de supervivencia, luto y muerte de los militares involucrados, pero también de civiles, de ambos bandos. El objetivo de esta reseña es analizar críticamente el impacto de la guerra civil sobre la psique de sus

constituyentes y sus repercusiones, que aún impactan nuestra percepción de la guerra y de la muerte.

Palabras claves: muerte y cultura, luto, Drew Gilpin Faust, Guerra Civil Estadounidense, historia militar de Estados Unidos

In the contemporary world, death is a taboo. While it is a natural and unavoidable part of life, most people are horrified and terrified by the idea of death as well as its implications. In 1981, French historian Philippe Aries accused Western Europe and the United States of rendering death “invisible” in his book *The Hour of Our Death* (176). The Western world, he claimed, medicalized modern dying and saw mourning processes as indecent. During the span of the American Civil War, lasting from 1861 to 1865, the country lived through the collective experience in which loss became commonplace (xiii). In *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), historian Drew Gilpin Faust narrates the harsh reality of those living in the war-torn America--a “veritable republic of suffering,” as Frederick Law Olmsted described it (xiii).

The idea of the Good Death in contrast to what can be called the Bad Death is central to Faust’s book. She defines the Good Death as “the foundation for the process of mourning carried on by the survivors who used the last words and moments of the dead soldier as the basis for broader evaluation of his entire life.” (163) This concept is intrinsically linked to Christian ideas of dying, but later became a tradition separate from its religious foundation. The Good Death is highly formulaic and performative; it followed the *ars moriendi* tradition as dictated by Victorian ideals. This tradition provided the rules for how a person should die; the moribund should be surrounded by the comfort of family around their deathbed, and the family would observe the person’s state upon dying to gauge the chance of reunion in an afterlife (10). The dying person’s last words would be recorded, as they often held valuable life lessons, criticisms, and were considered the utmost Truth because it was believed that a dying person had no reason to lie. *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* also exemplifies the de-evolution of the Good Death, following the individual in combat’s pursuit of the Good Death despite the odds, and the civilian’s desire to provide the Good Death to those passed. Because the family unit was not present during death in battle, soldiers would often die clutching photographs, ambrotypes or other representations of beloved family members. In terms of fulfilling the Good Death for the soldier’s family members, fellow soldiers, doctors, and nurses took it upon themselves to record the dying’s last moments to forward to the family because there was no reliable system for reporting casualties

during the war. Sometimes, the soldier would write letters to their family narrating the circumstances of their death as they lay dying, other times they had even prepared letters that preceded the soldier's death and could be sent years after they were written. Furthermore, *memento mori* were essential to the mourning process; locks of hair, uniform buttons, pocket watches, and other trinkets were removed from the fallen soldiers' bodies and sent to their families as a way to bring solace to the grieving. This was especially helpful to those who were unable to bury their loved ones; John Palmer carried the bullet that killed his son with him until he died, while Henry Bowditch wore a pocket watch fob that contained a button from his dead son's uniform (266).

The United States' Civil War changed the perception of death in that it revolutionized the idea of who should die and how. This change brought upon widespread Bad Deaths, which were primarily sudden deaths that did not allow time for the due *ars moriendi* rituals to be enacted. The Bad Death is furthermore seen among those who were reluctant to die--opposing God's will--, blasphemers, the unbaptized, and sinners. Acting as "edifying examples" (27) of the Bad Death were those executed for military crimes such as desertion or rape. Soldiers executed by firing squads often sat or stood upon their coffins in front of assemblies of troops, their public humiliation serving as a "distinct disciplinary purpose" (31). The Bad Death was also seen postmortem, since giving all of the dead soldiers a proper Christian burial was impossible. Soldiers were often left on the battlefield unidentified to fall victims to decomposition or defilement at the hands of the enemy, or in the best-case scenario, were thrown into unmarked or mass graves, sometimes in enemy territory. Burial rites, if available, were often held far from home, and the scarcity and high cost of coffins made it so, the fallen were buried directly into the ground or just wrapped in a shroud or blanket. Fellow soldiers and concerned civilians all tried their hardest to give the dying the Best Death possible, even if it was not exactly a Good Death, to those fighting on their side.

Faust's book also emphasizes what has been called the "work of death" by many of those who experienced the war (xiv). This work is two-fold; it comprises the infliction of death through actions and agents, and the impact on its participants. At its core, the infliction of death lies in the killing aspect of the war, while the impact portion of the war lies on the rites of dying, mourning, and reconstruction after this tragedy. Through her writing, Faust is somehow able to separate the work of death from its political and economic context and focuses instead on the individual's approach to these tasks. While history is often taught through a broad lens, focusing on collectives like the government and social groups, Faust's focus on the individual's hands-on experience with mass death rewrites the war. Her descriptions

of the work of death are deeply personal, bringing to the forefront that which the average history book glosses over. Faust's focus on the grit of the work of war is immensely valuable because she dares to talk about that which is considered taboo, even gratuitous. She gives the intimate details of what it was like for a soldier to prepare himself to die on the battlefield, the subjection of the soldier to the objectification of the enemy in order to enact his duties and kill despite his reluctance to do so because of his Christian faith, and refers to letters in which he describes his wounds. The book includes descriptions of the gruesome labor of burying and relocating bodies, often mangled and unidentifiable due to their advanced stage of decomposition, but it is never disrespectful. It focuses on the psychological aspect of this civil war, describing the plights of grieving civilians, including that of children frantically trying to find their fathers, as well as the soldier's moral conundrum at engaging in warfare.

In addition to her mindful approach to death and dying, Faust also attempts to rescue the unsung heroes of the Civil War. It is through her work that the stories of the vanquished are resurrected. She brings the work done by African Americans during the war to the forefront. In a country where they were not considered legitimate citizens by the federal government, African Americans served in the war as a way to achieve spiritual as well as political redemption (48). They were overwhelmingly the targets of violence and cruelty at the hands of Confederates and fellow white soldiers alike. At the battle of Poison Springs, Arkansas, the first Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry lost 117 men and half as many wounded, and only white soldiers in an engagement near Monroe, Louisiana, were taken as prisoners while all black soldiers in the regiment were killed (45). Furthermore, Secretary of War James Seddon declared in 1863 that "negroes captured will not be regarded as prisoners of war" (46). The story of Andre Cailloux is especially fascinating; he was a free, property-owning literate artisan who served as secretary of one of New Orleans' Afro-Creole mutual benefit societies (49), and in 1862 he helped recruit a company for the Union army (50). Cailloux was killed as he led his troops at Port Hudson on May 27, 1863, and despite his courage, Confederates saw him as a man who deserved "not only death, but dishonor for his presumption in taking up arms against a superior race" (50). Confederate troops did not allow the Union to remove the bodies of deceased black men until their surrender on July 8, and after 41 days of exposure to natural elements, Cailloux's body was only identifiable because of a ring he wore (50). Black men in the military were also essential to the work of death; they were often assigned the gruesome task of burying and relocating cadavers. Despite their efforts to provide the Good Death for others, it is evident that they were hardly given a chance for the Good Death themselves.

Simultaneously, even though Jewish people made up only about three tenths of a percent of Civil War armies (8), Faust targets the community's efforts to help enact the Good Death despite the differences between Jewish and Christian views on death and the afterlife. This is seen by how Jewish chaplain of a Pennsylvania regiment Michael Allen held "non-denominational Sunday services for his men, preaching on a variety of topics including proper preparation for death" (8). Also, Rebecca Gratz of Philadelphia was recorded as telling her brother and sister-in-law that they and their son "shall be united in another world" (8).

Similarly, just how women have been historically essential in the work of death as those tasked with preparing the body for the funeral, they also played an enormous role during the Civil War. The absence of mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters during a soldier's last moments was commonplace. Oftentimes, female nurses replaced female family members for delirious dying soldiers; Clara Barton described how a dying young man mistook her for his sister Mary. Unwilling to tell the young man the truth, Barton kissed his forehead as he lay dying as a way to provide him with a Good Death (12). Women, who mostly outlived the men in their lives, were tasked with the grieving process: "Civil War fatalities belonged ultimately to the survivors; it was they who had to undertake the work not just of burial but of consolation and mourning" (143). The mourning process was also a way to honor and remember the dead, a type of physical manifestation of the person's legacy performed by another, famously seen on former first lady Mary Todd Lincoln, who wore mourning garb for the rest of her life following her husband's assassination in 1865 (148). Post-Civil War, women also banded together to form memorial associations to bury unclaimed and unwanted bodies, like the corpses of Confederate and black soldiers (244-245). Among these, the Ladies Memorial Association of Richmond, the Ladies Memorial Association for the Confederate Dead of Oakwood, and the Ladies Memorial Association of Appomattox all made private donations and held fundraising activities such as bazaars where war memorabilia was sold in order to fund the purchase of grave markers, land plots to bury their dead, and for cemetery maintenance (239-247).

Spanning across 51 pages in miniature print, Faust meticulously credits her book's sources. These consist significantly of primary sources, like soldiers' diary entries, journals, and wills, letters, sermons, and newspaper articles. Perhaps bearing the most impact, Faust also includes photographs of the United States Civil War. Portraits of renowned historical icons like nurse Clara Barton and Admiral Henry Clay Taylor staring straight into the camera juxtapose those images of human and animal corpses strewn about battlefields. Faust also highlights the impact this war had on artists and intellectuals of the time; she includes paintings, illustrations,

prints, advertisements, songs, and poems that give multiplicity of experiences endured by people during the Civil War. In addition to these primary sources, Faust's research is further substantiated by secondary sources. These include encyclopedias, history books, books on spirituality, religiosity, and death, research papers, and biographies as well as other of her own works on the American Civil War and death, just to name a few.

As a historian, Faust relays her information in an objective manner. Even though she centers on the emotional responses, spirituality and psychology of the war, she examines it through a pragmatic lens. In a way, she approaches this civil war in terms of cause and effect, the cause being the war itself and the effect being the multiplicity of responses to the war. On one hand, Faust depicts the physical, practical side of the war such as accounts of the deaths of an estimated 620,000 people (xi) and the management of bodies, and, on the other, she shows the internal; emotional side of the war, such as the ensuing periods of mourning, the moral and ethical dilemmas of killing the individual faces within war. She is able to narrate the facts, dates, and statistics of the war as well as the subjective experiences of the individual in an objective manner without being detached or insensitive. Perhaps Faust's book is her attempt at performing the "work of death" as an outsider, as someone who did not experience the war firsthand and was not affected directly by its carnage, by commemorating forgotten stories of Unionists, Confederates, and civilians at their most vulnerable state when experiencing a phenomenon that reminded them of their own mortality and proved to be the epitome of mass loss.

The information provided by Faust is relevant to the book's conclusions. The fact that almost everything about the Civil War was unprecedented from its death toll to its guerilla warfare in turn led to changes in the work of death at a government level, especially in terms of corpse identification and disposal, and medical advancements such as embalming. These changes are proof of society's overreaching pursuit to provide the Good Death in future times of conflict. The author's rigorous research about individual people's stories regarding death in the war in both its physical and spiritual aspects resurrects those forgotten with time. Throughout the book, readers encounter civilians' and soldiers' attempts to provide the Good Death for others despite the odds.

This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War is divided into eight parts, each dealing with a particular task that had to be performed as a result of the war. The chapter sequence—"Dying", "Killing", "Burying", "Naming", "Realizing", "Believing and Doubting", "Accounting", and "Numbering"—is reminiscent of the Kubler-Ross model of the stages of grief. Just like healing from

grief and trauma is not linear, the themes from the chapters sometimes flow into one another as the different aspects of the work of death are not all separate from one another. In the same way that grief changes people, these mass deaths changed the nation. As the book progresses, each chapter theme becomes more influential in changing society. While “Dying”, “Killing”, “Realizing”, and “Believing and Doubting”, deal directly with the changes experienced by the individual, “Accounting”, “Numbering”, and “Naming” were most influential in systematic changes at a government and social level.

The effects of the United States of America’s Civil War were overreaching. It has been the country’s bloodiest war up to date and it effectively revolutionized the average person’s relationship with death, redefining what was considered the Good Death, mourning processes, and ideas on who should die. Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* is immensely valuable as a historical secondary source in that she dares to write a book on that which is considered taboo. Death is a universal experience and it should not be overlooked, and Faust paints a portrait of a society in which all of its constituents were in some way affected by the deaths of the war. Curiosity surrounding what happens after death, especially what is done to the body, is to be expected and should not be considered morbid. Her attempts to talk about the practical side of death and its aftermath, like transportation, burial, funeral and embalming rites, and bodily decomposition are realities thousands of people were affected by and continue to experience today as it is an essential part of life. Through her writing she is able to immerse the reader into the suffering and carnage soldiers and civilians alike experienced during this war. Furthermore, she portrays the deaths in a way that they become more than a statistic; when she can, she tells the person’s accompanying story of who they were in life and this in turn humanizes them. Faust’s book serves as a way to satiate people’s “morbid curiosity”, but more than that, it acts as a way to preserve a snapshot of a nation during a time of inconceivable suffering.

References

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