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Grief and Genre in American Literature,
1790-1870. By Desirée Henderson

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Desirée Henderson, *Grief and Genre in American Literature, 1790-1870* (Farnham, Surrey, England and Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate, 2011, \$99.95. Pp. 189; ISBN 978 1 4094 2086 6.)

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In her illuminating study, *Grief and Genre in American Literature, 1790-1870*, Desirée Henderson shows how the human struggle to communicate the experience of loss has given birth to a wide array of cultural practices and helped to define an essential term of cultural analysis: *genre*. Genre here does not refer to a category of texts defined by set formal qualities but rather to “a flexible framework that draws together a host of disparate texts, practices, and spaces . . .” (3). This flexibility of genre is essential to the book’s overarching claim that grief and genre are not inherently opposed, but that mourning practices (written, oral, spatial, bodily) actually enable a wealth of expression. “[I]t is the generic nature of mourning,” writes Henderson, “that gives rise to the extensive body of literature that seeks to represent, respond to, and express the acute experience of grief” (3).

Notwithstanding the book’s broad definition of genre (inspired by Bakhtin, Todorov, and Jameson) and its careful attention to non-literary mourning practices (from Puritan funeral sermons to interments of Civil War dead), *Grief and Genre* is first and foremost a work of painstaking literary analysis. Each of the five chapters moves from a cultural history of a non-literary mourning genre to close readings of canonical works, at once “challeng[ing] the distinction between literary and occasional genres” (16) and offering insights applicable in the American literature classroom.

The book opens by closely examining genres of funerary oratory in order to better understand the cultural and political work of foundational works of American literature. Henderson argues in chapter one that the first American novels, *The Power of Sympathy*, *Charlotte Temple*, and *The Coquette*, provide the opportunity to mourn “[actual] women who did not meet an idealized image of female perfection” (21)—an opportunity not afforded by the funeral sermon of the late eighteenth century. Chapter two reads “Eulogy on King Philip” by William Apess (Pequot) in light of the eulogy’s role as “a central arbiter of national identity and memory” (54) following George Washington’s death. By adapting generic form and tropes to celebrate a non-white hero Apess reminded his audience of nation’s violent history and challenged the myth of the doomed Indian.

Having brought funerary speech to bear on early American literature, Henderson turns more directly to the spaces of mourning. Chapter three considers the (non)place of the slave cemetery in the autobiographical narratives of Frederick Douglass, arguing that he problematically omits depictions of slave interment despite intimate knowledge of slave mourning practices in order to emphasize slavery’s inhumanity. Next Henderson moves from a comparison of Abraham Lincoln’s burial site in Springfield, Illinois, and national cemeteries of the Civil War era to a brilliant reading of Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”: the poem depicts Lincoln’s body moving across the nation as an alternative to both the collective anonymity of the national cemetery and the hierarchical implications of presidential memorials.

The final chapter situates Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *Gates Ajar* and selected poems by Emily Dickinson alongside nineteenth-century conduct literature of mourning. What interests Henderson the most is mourning conduct literature’s creation of a “textual persona” that “employ[s] dramatic, fictional, and poetic forms to demonstrate a mastery over the discursive realm and, thus, over the experience of loss” (129). Henderson finds that Phelps depicts the authoritative Aunt Winifred as correcting or corraling Mary’s grief while, in contrast, Dickinson writes poems in the imperative mood that instruct the reader

in the proper expression of grief but simultaneously undermine their own authority by redirecting the reader to her or his unique grief. Here Henderson insists that mourning conduct literature is not a genre but rather a genre-disrupting “tradition” marked by formal eclecticism and a blurring of the distinction between author and reader (128). In the interest of sustaining an emphasis on genre as a site for struggle and innovation, that is, she withholds the label of genre for a set of texts that are explicitly and insistently disciplinary. But one must ask why the corrective nature of conduct mourning literature should prevent its being called a genre any more than the nation-building function of the eulogy should inhibit its categorization as such. Moreover, Henderson’s readings of Dickinson’s poems show how mourning conduct literature’s attempt to dictate reader behavior gives rise to identifiable formal qualities (generic eclecticism being one) that, like attributes of other genres, provide the raw material for rebellious compositions.

Despite this tension in the final chapter, *Grief and Genre in American Literature* offers indispensable insights for teachers and scholars of nineteenth-century American culture and literature—especially those concerned with mourning, sentimentality, performativity, and public spheres theory. Ultimately, Henderson’s compelling volume drives home a lived truth: generic convention, rather than converting the unique into the commonplace, makes possible the communication of subjective experience and the continual evolution of human expression.