O death, where is they sting? O grave, where is they victory? Where, indeed. Many a badly stung survivor, faced with the aftermath of some relative’s funeral, has ruefully concluded that the victory has been won hands down by a funeral establishment—in disastrously unequal battle.

Much has been written of late about the affluent society in which we live, and much fun poked at some of the irrational “status symbols” set out like golden snares to trap the unwary consumer at every turn. Until recently, little has been said about the most irrational and weirdest of the lot, lying in ambush for all of us at the end of the road—the modern American funeral.

If the Dismal Traders (as an eighteenth-century English writer calls them) have traditionally been cast in a comic role in literature, a universally recognized symbol of humor from Shakespeare to Dickens to Evelyn Waugh, they have successfully turned the tables in recent years to perpetrate a huge, macabre and expensive practical joke on the American public. It is not consciously conceived of as a joke, of course; on the contrary, it is hedged with admirably contrived rationalizations.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, over the years the funeral men have constructed their own grotesque cloud-cuckoo-land where the trappings of Gracious Living are transformed, as in a nightmare, into the trappings of Gracious Dying. The same familiar Madison Avenue language, with its peculiar adjectival range designed to anesthetize sales resistance to all sorts of products, has seeped into the funeral industry in a new and bizarre guise. The emphasis is on the same desirable qualities that we have all been schooled to look for in our daily search for excellence: comfort, durability, beauty, craftsmanship. The attuned ear will recognize too the convincing quasi-scientific language, so reassuring even if unintelligible.

So that this too, too solid flesh might not melt, we are offered “solid copper—a quality casket which offers superb value to the client seeking long-lasting protection,” or “the Colonial Classic Beauty—18 gauge lead coated steel, seamless top, lap-jointed welded body construction.” Some are equipped with foam rubber, some with innerspring mattresses. Elgin offers “the revolutionary ‘Perfect-Posture’ bed.” Not every casket need have a silver lining, for one may choose between “more than 60 color matched shades, magnificent and unique masterpieces” by the Cheney casket-lining people. Shrouds no longer exist. Instead, you may patronize a grave-wear couturière who promises “handmade original fashions—styles from the best in life for the last memory—dresses, men’s suits, negligees, accessories.” For the final, perfect grooming: “Nature-Glo—the ultimate in cosmetic embalming.” And, where have we heard that phrase “peace of mind protection” before? No matter. In funeral advertising, it is applied to the Wilbert Burial Vault, with its %inch precast asphalt inner liner plus extra-thick, reinforced concrete—all this “guaranteed by Good Housekeeping.” Here again the Cadillac, status symbol par excellence, appears in all its gleaming glory, this time transformed into a pastel-colored funeral hearse.

You, the potential customer for all this luxury, are unlikely to read the lyrical descriptions quoted above, for they are culled from Mortuary Management and Casket and Sunnyside, two of the industry’s eleven trade magazines. For you there are ads in your daily newspaper, generally found on the obituary page, stressing dignity, refinement, high-caliber professional service and that intangible quality, sincerity. The trade advertisements are, however, instructive, because they furnish an important clue to the frame of mind into which the funeral industry has hypnotized itself.

A new mythology, essential to the twentieth-century American funeral rite, has grown up—or rather has been built up step by step—to justify the peculiar customs surrounding the disposal of our dead. And, just as the witch doctor must be convinced of his own infallibility in order to maintain a hold over his clientele, so the funeral industry has had to “sell itself” on its articles of faith in the course of passing them along to the public.

The first of these is the tenet that today’s funeral procedures are founded in “American tradition.” The story comes to mind of a sign on the freshly sown lawn of a brand-new Midwest college: “There is a tradition on this campus that students never walk on this strip of grass. This tradition goes into effect next Tuesday.” The most cursory look at American funerals of past times will establish the parallel. Simplicity to the point of starkness, the plain pine box, the laying out of the dead by friends and family who also bore the coffin to the grave—these were
the hallmarks of the traditional funeral until the end of the nineteenth century.

Secondly, there is the myth that the American public is only being given what it wants—an opportunity to keep up with the Joneses to the end. “In keeping with our high standard of living, there should be an equally high standard of dying,” says the past president of the Funeral Directors of San Francisco. “The cost of a funeral varies according to individual taste and the niceties of living the family has been accustomed to.” Actually, choice doesn’t enter the picture for the average individual, faced, generally for the first time, with the necessity of buying a product of which he is totally ignorant, at a moment when he is least in a position to quibble. In fact of point the cost of a funeral almost always varies, not “according to individual taste” but according to what the traffic will bear.

Thirdly, there is an assortment of myths based on half-digested psychiatric theories. The importance of the “memory picture” is stressed—meaning the last glimpse of the deceased in open casket, done up with the latest in embalming techniques and finished off with a dusting of makeup. A newer one, impressively authentic-sounding, is the need for “grief therapy,” which is beginning to go over big in mortuary circles. A historian of American funeral directing hints at the grief-therapist idea when speaking of the new role of the undertaker—“the dramaturgic role, in which the undertaker becomes a stage manager to create an appropriate atmosphere and to move the funeral party through a drama in which social relationships are stressed and an emotional catharsis or release is provided through ceremony.”

Lastly, a whole new terminology, as ornately shoddy as the satin rayon casket liner, has been invented by the funeral industry to replace the direct and serviceable vocabulary of former times. Undertaker has been supplanted by “funeral director” or “mortician.” (Even the classified section of the telephone directory gives recognition of this; in its pages you will find “ Undertakers — see Funeral Directors.”) Coffins are “caskets”; hearse are “coaches,” or “professional cars”; flowers are “floral tributes”; corpses generally are “loved ones,” but mortuary etiquette dictates that a specific corpse be referred to by name only—as, “Mr. Jones”; cremated ashes are “cremains.” Euphemisms such as “slumber room,” “reposing room,” and “calcination—the kindlier heat” abound in the funeral business.

If the undertaker is the stage manager of the fabulous production that is the modern American funeral, the stellar role is reserved for the occupant of the open casket. The decor, the stagehands, the supporting cast are all arranged for the most advantageous display of the deceased, without which the rest of the paraphernalia would lose its point—Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. It is to this end that a fantastic array of costly merchandise and services is pyramided to dazzle the mourners and facilitate the plunder of the next of kin.

Grief therapy, anyone? But it’s going to come high. According to the funeral industry’s own figures, the average undertaker’s bill in 1961 was $708 for casket and “services,” to which must be added the cost of a burial vault, flowers, clothing, clergy and musician’s honorarium, and cemetery charges. When these costs are added to the undertaker’s bill, the total average cost for an adult’s funeral is, as we shall see, closer to $1,450.

The question naturally arises, is this what most people want for themselves and their families? For several reasons, this has been a hard one to answer until recently. It is a subject seldom discussed. Those who have never had to arrange for a funeral frequently shy away from its implications, preferring to take comfort in the thought that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Those who have acquired personal and painful knowledge of the subject would often rather forget about it. Pioneering “Funeral Societies” or “Memorial Associations,” dedicated to the principle of dignified funerals at reasonable cost, have existed in a number of communities throughout the country, but their membership has been limited for the most part to the more sophisticated element in the population—university people, liberal intellectuals—and those who, like doctors and lawyers, come up against problems in arranging funerals for their clients.

Some indication of the pent-up resentment felt by vast numbers of people against the funeral interests was furnished by the astonishing response to an article by Roul Tunley, titled “Can You Afford to Die?” in The Saturday Evening Post of June 17, 1961. As though a dake had burst, letters poured in from every part of the country to the Post, to the funeral societies, to local newspapers. They came from clergymen, professional people, old-age pensioners, trade unionists. Three months after the article appeared, an estimated six thousand had taken pen in hand to comment on some phase of the high cost of dying. Many recounted their own bitter experiences at the hands of funeral directors; hundreds asked for advice on how to establish a consumer organization in communities where none exists; others sought information about pre-need plans. The membership of the funeral societies skyrocketed. The funeral industry, finding itself in the glare of public spotlight, has begun to engage in serious debate about its own future course—as well it might.

Is the funeral inflation bubble ripe for bursting? A few years ago, the United States public suddenly rebelled against the trend in the auto industry towards ever more showy cars, with their ostentatious and nonfunctional fins, and a demand was created for compact cars patterned after European models. The all-powerful auto industry, accustomed to telling the customer what sort of car he wanted, was suddenly forced to listen for a change. Overnight, the little cars became for millions a new kind of status symbol. Could it be that the same cycle is working itself out in the attitude towards the final return of dust to dust, that the American public is becoming sickened by ever more ornate and costly funerals, and that a status symbol of the future may indeed be the simplest kind of "funeral without fins"?
COMPREHENSION

1. According to the essay, what role does consumerism play in the funeral industry?
2. What image does the funeral industry want to advance?
3. What does Mitford mean by “a new mythology” in paragraph 7?

RHETORIC

1. To what end does Mitford use the Lord Essex quote at the beginning of her essay?
2. What is Mitford’s thesis? What is her tone? Cite evidence from the essay to support your view.
3. Mitford quotes Shakespeare in a few places. Locate one of these instances, and explain why it’s an effective device.
4. Which paragraphs rely on classification and division? What is the purpose of this rhetorical strategy?
5. Find some examples of what Mitford calls “Madison Avenue language,” and explain how they work to strengthen her thesis.
6. Assess Mitford’s use of illustrations and evidence. How effective do you find it?

WRITING

1. In an analytical essay, examine the attitudes of Americans toward death and burial. How do their attitudes make them more susceptible to the practices cited in Mitford’s essay?
2. In an essay, describe in detail how you would like your own funeral to be arranged and by whom. Be specific: Include instructions regarding guests, flowers, music, and the eulogy.

CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY

VIRGINIA WOOLF Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), novelist and essayist, was the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, a famous critic and writer on economics. An experimental novelist, Woolf attempted to portray consciousness through a poetic, symbolic, and concrete style. Her novels include Jacob’s Room (1922), Mrs. Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927), and The Waves (1931). She was also a perceptive reader and critic; her criticism appears in The Common Reader (1925) and The Second Common Reader (1933). In the following essay, which was delivered originally as a speech to The Women’s Service League in 1931, Woolf argues that women must overcome several “angels,” or phantoms, in order to succeed in professional careers.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Professions for Women

When your secretary invited me to come here, she told me that your Society is concerned with the employment of women and she suggested that I might tell you something about my own professional experiences. It is true I am a woman; it is true I am employed; but what professional experiences have I had? It is difficult to say. My profession is literature; and in that profession there are fewer experiences for women than in any other, with the exception of the stage—fewer, I mean, that are peculiar to women. For the road was cut many years ago—by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot—many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps. Thus, when I came to write, there were very few material obstacles in my way. Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse. For ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare—if one has a mind that way. Pianos and models, Paris, Vienna and Berlin, masters and mistresses, are not needed by a writer. The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions.

But to tell you my story—it is a simple one. You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right—from ten o’clock to one. Then it occurred to her to do what is simple and cheap enough after all—to slip a few of those pages into an envelope, fix a penny stamp in the corner, and drop the envelope into the red box at the corner. It was thus that I became a journalist; and my effort was rewarded on the first day of the following month—a very glorious day it was for me—by a letter from an editor containing a cheque for one pound ten shillings and sixpence. But to show you how little I deserve to be called a professional woman, how little I know of the struggles and difficulties of such lives, I have to admit that instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher’s bills, I went out and bought a cat—a beautiful cat, a Persian cat, which very soon involved me in bitter disputes with my neighbors.

What could be easier than to write articles and to buy Persian cats with the profits? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were