As Controversial as a Divorce:

American Etiquette Writers, Mourning Dress, and the Debate over Divorce and Remarriage,

1918-50

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 A young, grief-stricken mother wrote to etiquette columnist "Mrs. Cornelius Beeckman" in 1934, seeking guidance with following the detailed rules of mourning dress. Her dilemma: she could not afford to buy new clothes, let alone clothes she would only wear for a limited period. Her mother-in-law expected her to conform to the then-standard practice of expressing her grief by wearing plain black outside and plain white inside for several months.[1] Perhaps the young woman's mother-in-law got her advice from competing etiquette writer Emily Post, who recommended that widows and mothers who lost their children wear plain black with crêpe trim for a year, then six months of plain black without the trim, followed by another six months of half-mourning, after which they could reintroduce bright colors to their wardrobes.[2] Beeckman responded in her column "Correct Manners," reassuring the young mother that her "heart is what is mourning, not your clothes," and that her judgmental in-laws were "ogres" with whom she should avoid interacting.[3] These two radically different pieces of advice demonstrate two competing approaches to solving the problem twentieth-century etiquette writers faced.

Each of them indirectly presented their opinion on the extent to which nineteenth-century social norms remained relevant in a changing social climate. The harsh tone of Beeckman's response seems especially out-of-character from a woman so proper that she signed her own writing with her husband's name to follow the expectation that a married woman present as part of her husband's household. It also shows that American etiquette writers still held strong opinions on the subject years after the First World War.

These writers were debating a practice that their predecessors had prescribed since the nineteenth century. Upon the death of a family member, American women would wear plain

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[1] Mrs. Cornelius Beeckman, "Correct Manners: Mourning," *Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), March 18, 1936.
[2] Emily Post, *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* [2nd edition] (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1929), 409-10.
[3] Beeckman, "Correct Manners: Mourning."

black clothes, trimmed in black crêpe, to visually signal that they were mourning a loss. After the first mourning period, they would gradually reintroduce different colors and elaborate trims into their wardrobe. By the early twentieth century, this process became a codified set of stages of mourning – each with their own prescribed duration.[4] Mourners could look to etiquette manuals for guidance with navigating the process, but each etiquette writer turned these social norms into a different set of rules.

Previous scholars of Western mourning dress overlook conflicts like the one between Post and Beeckman. They present an artificially condensed timeline of mourning dress as a nineteenth-century practice that rapidly fell out of favor after the First World War. Yet, etiquette writers continued arguing over the importance of mourning dress to American women's wardrobes into the 1940s.[5] Fashion writers writing for a younger, fashion-forward, audience presented mourning dress as a changing, even controversial, practice which individuals adapted to their own needs. However, they acknowledged that many American widows had adapted but not abandoned it, even in the late 1930s – a generation after the women widowed by the war.

Dress historians tend to compartmentalize the disappearance of mourning dress as a strictly fashion-related topic. As a result, they miss its symbolic importance for American women. By choosing whether to follow the traditional stages of mourning or not, twentieth-century widows could signal their stance on the idea of marriage as a state that a woman enters once and mourns for the rest of her life once it ends. Historians who miss this symbolic value therefore risk ignoring mourning dress's significance as part of a debate that extended well beyond the advice columns and blue books of etiquette writers into the middle of the century. If

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[4] Post, *Etiquette* [2nd edition], 401-03.
[5] Emily Post, *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* [6th edition] (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1940), 495.

one accepts the dominant narrative about mourning dress, Beeckman's opinion appears ordinary. However, if one looks instead at the discourse about mourning dress outside of fashion magazines, she seems boldly avant-garde in her dismissal of the practice.

Her more conservative contemporaries continued recommending mourning dress because they saw it as representative of an existing social order that they wished to maintain. During the second quarter of the twentieth century, divorce rates among American women increased.[6] This posed a challenge to the idea of women's marital status as a linear progression from single to married to widowed. By the 1950s, widowhood was no longer the only possible end to a marriage, nor a permanent state. This change in public opinion posed another challenge for etiquette writers defending the continued relevance of the already-controversial practice of mourning dress. American etiquette writers finally stopped prescribing long mourning periods in the late 1940s and early 1950s because they recognized that their readers saw it as increasingly incompatible with their own situations and views on marital status.

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[6] United States Public Health Service, National Center for Health Statistics Division of Vital Statistics, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics: 1867-1967,* by Alexander A. Plateris, DHEW Publication no. (HRA) 74-1902, https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/12831.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Earlier scholars of mourning dress presented World War I as the most significant contributing factor to its decline. As the last vestiges of the practice disappeared from American etiquette manuals in the early 1980s, British dress historian Lou Taylor published her foundational book *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History*.[7] Taylor examined mourning dress in a global context, pointing to World War I as the primary cause for its decline in the mid-twentieth century. To build this argument, she primarily used European fashion magazines and European witnesses as evidence.[8] She conditioned her argument as a drastic yet not complete change, giving examples of mourning dress from the American East Coast in the years immediately after World War I. However, due to its brevity, this concession seems relatively unimportant to her general argument.[9] Taylor's book therefore established two important precedents for subsequent scholars working on mourning dress in the twentieth century: World War I as the catalyst for the practice's decline and the compartmentalization of mourning dress as a primarily dress-historical subject.

Later historians expanded upon Taylor's primary argument that the upheaval of World War I caused significant changes in the practice of mourning dress that would contribute to its disappearance in the years immediately following the war. If every war widow wore mourning dress for years after the loss of their spouses, the number of widows visibly in mourning would emphasize the high death toll of the war and therefore lower civilian morale.[10] In addition to

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[7] Elizabeth Post, who succeeded Emily Post at the helm of the Emily Post Institute's etiquette-book series, last mentioned mourning dress in *Emily Post's Etiquette* [14th edition] (New York: Harper and Law, 1984).

[8] Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 266-69.

[9] Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 276.

[10] Maude Bass-Krueger, "Mourning Dress in the West, 1800 until Today: Codification, Gender, and Global Perspectives," in *The Routledge History of Fashion and Dress, 1800 to the Present*, ed. Véronique Pouillard and Vincent Dubé-Sénécal (London: Routledge, 2024): 397; Lucie Whitmore, "'A Matter of Individual Opinion and

worrying about wartime morale, women took over industrial tasks from the men who went to the front lines. Historical costume restoration specialist Sonia Bedikian argued that the loss of a significant portion of the male workforce irreversibly changed the social role of women. Female industrial workers exited the domestic sphere and entered a workforce with room for neither fashion nor formalities.[11] They prioritized their workplace safety over following etiquette writers' prescriptions to wear crêpe veils that would risk impeding their vision.[12] Most scholars agree upon these two effects and take them as underlying assumptions in their analyses of the role of World War I in the decline of mourning dress.

British dress historian Lucie Whitmore wrote the most self-aware of these later works. While she acknowledges these historiographical conventions, she does not challenge them. Instead, she merely complicates them by suggesting additional factors that fit alongside the death-toll argument within a World War I-centric narrative – with the heavy limitation of focusing specifically on British widows.[13] She devotes much of her study to expanding upon an idea that Sonia Bedikian mentioned briefly.[14] As many of the men killed in World War I were relatively young, their widows were of a similar age and still interested in following fashion despite their situation. They chose increasingly fashionable mourning clothes, to the point where mourning dress eventually became indistinguishable from fashionable black clothing. In Whitmore's discussion of these war widows and their role in changing the practice of mourning

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Feeling': The Changing Culture of Mourning Dress in the First World War," *Women's History Review* 27, no. 4 (2018): 580.

[11] Sonia A. Bedikian, "The Death of Mourning: From Victorian Crepe to the Little Black Dress," *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 57, no. 1 (2008): 44-46.

[12] Bass-Krueger, "Mourning Dress in the West," 398.

[13] Lucie Whitmore, "'A Matter of Individual Opinion and Feeling': The Changing Culture of Mourning Dress in the First World War," *Women's History Review* 27, no. 4 (2018): 579. Although she does not explicitly state this geographical constraint, there is a clear bias towards British primary sources and the experiences of British widows.

[14] Bedikian, "The Death of Mourning," 44.

dress, she takes care to acknowledge that mourning was fashion-adjacent before the war.[15] She correctly presents the involvement of fashion writers in the discourse over mourning dress as one phase of an established relationship between fashion and mourning. However, she – and most dress historians working on this subject – present World War I and its immediate aftermath as the end of distinct mourning dress, where fashion subsumed mourning etiquette as young war widows adapted their clothes to their situation.

This model makes sense at first glance. The 1920s have a legacy as a decade of cultural upheaval, where the long nineteenth century came to an end as people questioned the social structures that led to World War I. Previous historians expected that mourning dress, a practice codified during the nineteenth century, would disappear quickly in this new context. Their readers were also more likely to accept this model since it fit into their preconceived view of history. However, some American widows continued to wear mourning through the 1920s and 1930s. Historians who stop looking at mourning dress after 1920 risk missing the reasons why these later widows chose to follow this practice – or not. If one focuses on types of evidence or geographic areas beyond the existing gestalt within which previous scholarship works, one might find other factors that create a more complete picture of the decline of mourning dress, especially in the United States.

Dress historians produced most of the 21st-century scholarly work on the twentieth-century practice of mourning dress. They used fashion magazines and extant garments as primary evidence to discuss the changes in mourning etiquette that fashion writers of the 1920s and 1930s mentioned as a reflection of broader cultural changes. The problem with their

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[15] Whitmore, "A Matter of Individual Opinion and Feeling," 583.

arguments is a result of the constraints of their discipline, not their work: by only focusing on this one set of evidence and ignoring other material that the same American widows would have read, they risk conflating change and disappearance.

The World War I-centric model works for these authors because they take a Eurocentric, if not European-exclusive point of view. The American case has been comparatively understudied: dress historians have only examined American widows and the writers who instructed them on how to dress and behave within the context of a global narrative that looks to European events for explanation.[16] Some of these authors acknowledged limitations in the historiography of mourning dress. However, they neither considered this Eurocentrism to be a pressing limitation, nor considered the American case necessary to discuss on its own. Bedikian justified this Eurocentric focus by suggesting that fashionable American women followed Europe's lead.[17] The most recent study on mourning dress in the twentieth century, by Belgian art historian Maude Bass-Krueger, explores the development and decline of mourning dress in a global context, but also falls into this trap. Bass-Krueger uses evidence from *Vogue*, an American fashion magazine, to show a decline in mourning dress after the war. However, she uses European evidence to present the causes for this decline – a sleight of hand that generalizes the European experience.[18] The death toll of World War I would have been proportionally higher among the major European powers involved in the conflict. It is therefore not unlikely that the

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[16] Whitmore presents a brief historiography of twentieth-century mourning dress in the introduction to of "A Matter of Individual Opinion and Feeling." She mentions the limited scholarship on the subject on pp. 579-80: few historians looked closely at even the European case – the most-studied instance of mourning dress post-1914. Even the few existing works, Whitmore argues, all follow the World War I-centric model and provide little detail on the exact changes that occurred.

[17] Bedikian, "The Death of Mourning," 38.

[18] Bass-Krueger, "Mourning Dress in the West," 398-99.

war played a larger role in the decline of mourning dress among European widows.[19] Examining the American case more specifically might suggest other factors that better explain why American widows continued to wear mourning dress through the first half of the century.

Taylor set the precedent for this World War I-centric model, but she recognized that the shift in mourning customs after the war also reflected other social changes. She observed that more couples began to divorce during the mid-twentieth century, and previously married women became more likely to remarry. These increased divorce and remarriage rates undermined the linear perception of marital status which widows' years of mourning suggested.[20]. Bedikian also touched on a similar topic, implying that the young widows of fallen World War I soldiers were more likely to remarry, and return to visually presenting as a married woman, not a widow, in her discussion of the effects of the war on mourning dress.[21] However, both of these authors discuss these factors so briefly that they fell quickly in and out of the historiographical conversation, lost in a more extensive World War I-centric argument. Nevertheless, these short asides suggest a cause that deserves further examination.

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[19] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "World War I: Killed, Wounded, and Missing," last modified April 16, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I/Killed-wounded-and-missing.
[20] Taylor*, Mourning Dress*, 283-84.
[21] Bedikian, "The Death of Mourning," 48.

MOURNING DRESS AFTER THE WAR

Dress historians take the fact that black clothing became acceptable everyday non-mourning wear during the 1920s and 30s to indicate that mourning dress was becoming indistinct from, and merging with, fashionable black clothing.[22] This argument does not account for the fact that American widows who chose to wear mourning dress remained visibly distinguishable from women who wore black outside of mourning in the 1920s and 1930s. Fashion writers who wrote on mourning dress defined new rules beyond the durations and colors prescribed in etiquette books, in order to help their readers tell if someone wearing black was in mourning. In fact, writer Ivy Twynell argued to readers of American magazine *Vogue* that the increasing use of black for non-mourning clothes made it more important to follow the rules of mourning, lest others mistake their black clothes for a fashionable non-mourning outfit.[23] Another *Vogue* writer recognized that American widows as late as 1938 wore veils over fashionable black hats.[24] To further distinguish themselves from women who wore black as a fashion choice, those widows avoided accessorizing their hats and veils with jewelry or colored nail polish. They also continued to purchase other mourning-specific items, including special stationery for each stage of the mourning process.[25] Mid-twentieth-century fashion writers acknowledged the post-World War I change that later dress historians discuss, but they would not cease talking about mourning dress until around 1940. Some American widows gave up the practice even later. The causality of this gradual change was more nuanced than previous analyses suggest.

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[22] Bass-Krueger, "Mourning Dress in the West," 399.

[23] Ivy Twynell, "Contemporary Mourning: Dignified, but not Depressing," *Vogue*, January 15, 1932.

[24] "Sense and Sensibility in Modern Mourning," *Vogue*, March 1, 1938.

[25] "Sense and Sensibility in Modern Mourning."

Younger women who came of age in the late 1910s, and became widowed during or immediately after the war, might have been more open to abandoning a custom which was never a lifelong habit for them anyway. However, older widows, who expected to wear mourning for years when they became widowed. Emily Post mentioned a generational gap in mourning practices in her 1940 etiquette book.[26] Although more conservative in this regard than some competing etiquette writers, Post continued to update her advice between editions of her book to match the "modern frame of mind," suggesting that this observation was as much description as prescription.[27] *Vogue* published their own etiquette manual, which they advertised in their magazine.[28] These two *Vogue* products likely overlapped in target audience due to this cross-promotion. Millicent Fenwick, the author of the etiquette manual, gave advice for mourning etiquette to readers who wanted it.[29] This indicates that a portion of *Vogue's* fashion-forward readership continued to think about mourning dress. However, the fact that *Vogue*'s editors relegated it to a separate etiquette book suggests that the number of readers who wanted to learn more about the subject declined over the 1940s. This second significant change – mourning dress finally disappearing after decades of contention and adaptation – took place long enough after World War I to not be a direct effect of the war.

The First World War had a lesser impact on the number of widowed Americans than on the number of widowed Europeans. Census data shows that the proportion of widowed Americans remained consistent through the twentieth century; no censuses have abnormal data

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[26] Emily Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 498.
[27] "Emily Post is Dead Here at 86; Writer Was Arbiter of Etiquette," *New York Times*, September 27, 1960.
[28] "A Complete Guide to Taste and Good Manners," *Vogue*, March 1, 1953.
[29] Millicent Fenwick, *Vogue's Book of Etiquette: A Complete Guide to Traditional Forms and Modern Usage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948), 156.

compared to the surrounding points.[30] The extreme demographic shift previous historians looked to as a cause for the decline of mourning dress would not have affected American widows as greatly. This indicates the irrelevance of the effects of war to the American case.

Despite the relatively steady proportion of widows, Americans' marital statuses underwent a different demographic shift during this period. The divorce rate increased significantly from 1910 to 1920 and never returned to pre-1910 levels, causing a steady increase in the divorced population.[31] A greater number of American women then began to stop strictly considering marriage as something that had to end with a loss to grieve for the rest of their lives. This change also posed a problem for etiquette writers whose guidance on how to mourn the end of a marriage did not apply to women whose marriages did not end with a death to mourn.

Different writers presented their own solutions to this problem. This variety of opinions makes it difficult to present a timeline of the practice. An anonymous *Vogue* writer mentioned that mourning dress was a choice by 1927: even those who did choose to wear mourning did not have to follow the codified phases of mourning detailed in etiquette books and could choose from a selection of mourning clothes by leading fashion houses.[32] This writer explained that "undoubtedly, the War had a great deal to do with this change," which aligns with the World War I-centric narrative dress historians put forth.[33] Comparing their opinion to other *Vogue* writers suggests that this writer took a rather extreme opinion for the time. A whole decade later, another *Vogue* writer detailed the mourning stationery fashionable Americans used in different stages of

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[30] Valerie Schweizer, "Divorce: More than a Century of Change, 1900-2018," Family Profiles, National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University. 2020.
[31] Schweizer, "Divorce: More than a Century of Change, 1900-2018."
[32] "Fashion: The New Aspect of Mourning," *Vogue*, July 15, 1927, 1-2.
[33] "Fashion: The New Aspect of Mourning," 2.

mourning.[34] The difference in these two commentaries in the same magazine implies that the practice of mourning dress was in contention for many years and some writers continued to prescribe longer periods in more detail, even as others stopped completely.

In fact, etiquette writers acknowledged a difference in opinion well before the First World War. Florence Hartley admitted to readers of her *Ladies' Book of Etiquette* that "there is such a variety of opinion upon the subject of mourning, that it is extremely difficult to lay down any general rules" because every woman chose a duration of mourning that let them best heal from their loss.[35] All she could do, she explained, was provide her readers with guidelines on what American women generally defined each stage of mourning. Her claim that the details of mourning are up to the individual echoes Emily Post's observations that in 1929, most people still wore mourning to some degree upon the loss of a loved one but that "the tendency [is] towards sincerity" when choosing the depth and duration of mourning.[36] However, Hartley wrote her piece of advice in 1876, in the period Sonia Bedikian called "the pinnacle of mourning."[37] Historians who interpret the acknowledgements present in mid-twentieth-century etiquette manuals as a suggestion that these writers considered mourning dress a rapidly disappearing risk presenting an artificial sense of discontinuity. They might find more value in looking at the other changes that etiquette writers implied happened during the twentieth century.

Emily Post applied her finishing-school education and familiarity with the intricate social norms of the American upper class to the eleven editions of her "Blue Book" of etiquette, where she advised readers on every social situation she expected them to encounter.[38] She shortened the

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[34] "Sense and Sensibility in Modern Mourning," *Vogue*, March 1, 1938.
[35] Florence Hartley, *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* (Boston: J.S. Locke and Co., 1876), 33.
[36] Post, *Etiquette* [2nd edition], 406.
[37] Bedikian, "The Death of Mourning," 41.
[38] "Emily Post is Dead Here at 86; Writer Was Arbiter of Etiquette."

mourning period that she prescribed widows over the course of her 40-year-long career; in 1940, she mentioned an increase in young widows remarrying as a justification for shortening the mourning period that she prescribed.[39] However, she defended the continued social benefits of the practice of mourning dress, six years after Mrs. Beeckman brushed it off as something that only concerned judgmental ogres.[40] While working on this edition of her etiquette manual in 1939, she responded to a quick question from a *Tacoma Times* reader, who was unsure if she should mourn the death of her ex-husband a year after their divorce. In this novel situation, Post broke from her usual advice, telling the divorcée to not wear mourning at all.[41] Even Post, a staunch defender of the practice well after other writers saw it as obsolete, had to recognize that this divorcée's situation was incompatible with the social norms she would defend, a year later, as fundamental to society.

Etiquette writers had to acknowledge the changing times, even if they did so grudgingly. A year after she responded to the Tacoma divorcée, she criticized the "epidemic" of divorce "raging" through the United States.[42] Some of her contemporaries disagreed with her: two years after Post published the sixth edition of her "Blue Book," fellow etiquette writer Lillian Eichler-Watson promoted divorce as a better option than an unhappy marriage. Whereas Post described divorce as a new problem among American couples, Eichler-Watson saw it as "as old as marriage."[43] Even when faced with the same social changes, every etiquette writer took a different approach to advising their readers in navigating changing norms.

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[39] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 498.
[40] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 494.
[41] Emily Post, "Good Taste Today: Mourning After a Divorce," *Tacoma Times* (Tacoma, WA), January 21, 1939.
[42] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 788.
[43] Lillian Eichler [Eichler-Watson], *Today's Etiquette* (Garden City: Garden City Publishing Company, 1942), 141.

Writers outside the etiquette world joined this debate on the acceptability of divorce and remarriage. Even *Guys and Dolls* author Damon Runyon published a piece defending widows' right to remarry immediately after the death of a spouse. Responding to an open letter from a young widow nervous about remarrying, he reassured her that her husband would have wanted her to be happy and not feel like she owed him the rest of her life.[44] He cited Saint Paul to legitimize his argument by showing that it was not incongruous with Christian ideology; like Lilian Eichler-Watson's assertion that divorce was as old as marriage itself, this invited his readers to reflect on if the linear model of marital status was as natural as it seemed. The fact that a successful author like Runyon took the time to write on this issue indicates that the debate on how marriages should end was more significant than a simple question about the minutiae of etiquette.

These writers' varying advice would have been applicable to a growing number of women in the mid-twentieth century. Marriage rates in the US fluctuated during the first half of the century, while divorce rates increased steadily; the disparity between marriage and divorce rates would never return to its level at the beginning of the century.[45] Etiquette writers pointed out a change in mourning dress that coincided with this increase in divorces and remarriages.[46] They were not the only group of people to notice this change: fashion writers also discussed a change in mourning attire that was part of a broader shift away from codified rules that prescribed different garments for every occasion.

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[44] Damon Runyon, "Widows Urged to Marry Again – It's Not Disrespect," *Detroit Evening Times* (Detroit, MI), May 1, 1941.

[45] United States Public Health Service, National Center for Health Statistics Division of Vital Statistics, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics: 1867-1967*, by Alexander A. Plateris, DHEW Publication no. (HRA) 74-1902, https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/12831.

[46] Lillian Eichler-Watson, *The Standard Book of Etiquette*, (Garden City: Garden City Publishing Company, 1948), 266; Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 495.

Even the vocabulary that English-speaking writers used to describe mourning dress changed during this time: whereas they previously used the term "crape" to talk specifically about the black fabric used for mourning dress, they began to use the generic term "crêpe." "Black crêpe" surpassed "black crape" as the preferred English term in 1917.[47] The fact that these writers used the vocabulary of non-mourning fashion to discuss mourning dress suggests that they began to consider mourning dress a subset of fashionThe term "black crêpe" remained prevalent through the second quarter of the century – in fact, there were as many instances of the phrase "black crêpe" in 1938 as there were of "black crape" in 1889.[48] Both terms fell out of use after the 1950s, as etiquette writers came to a consensus that mourning dress was an outdated practice, which indicates that the phrase "black crêpe" probably referred to mourning dress, not fashionable black dress. This second shift, when even the fashion-adjacent turn "black crêpe" fell out of use, coincided with a second dramatic increase in the divorce rate of American women.[49] The fact that the shift towards the term "black crêpe" coincides roughly with the end of World War I does not necessarily indicate that mourning dress became subsumed by fashion due to an increasingly normalized population of young widows, as previous dress historians suggested. The distance between the abandonment of the two terms shows that the decline of mourning dress was a long process that did not end when fashion writers began using high-fashion terms to discuss it.

The phases of this alternative timeline of the history of mourning dress among American widows all coincide with stages in the history of divorce in the United States. Divorce rates

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[47] Google NGram data for "black crêpe" and "black crape," Google NGram Viewer, accessed April 2025. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=black+crape%2Cblack+cr%C3%AApe&year_start=1880&year_end=1980&corpus=en&smoothing=0&case_insensitive=false#

[48] Google NGram data for "black crêpe" and "black crape."

[49] Schweizer, "Divorce: More than a Century of Change, 1900-2018."

nearly doubled from 1910 to 1920.[50] The most notable part of this increase took place between 1918 and 1920.[51] This may have contributed to the change in mourning dress during that decade that historians traditionally linked to World War I. The divorce rate continued increasing steadily until the late 1940s: there were only six years between 1918 and 1946 where the number of divorces per capita was lower than the preceding year.[52] The alignment of these two statistics suggests a link between the intermediate phase where writers talked about mourning dress but acknowledged significant changes and an intermediate phase where divorce rates were changing from their low in the 1900s to the consistent higher rates in the second half of the century.

MOURNING DRESS GIVES WAY TO NEW IDEAS OF MARRIAGE, 1940S-50S

Emily Post continued prescribing long phases of mourning in detail, even decades after the 1927 *Vogue* article proclaimed that mourning dress disappeared with the war. She acknowledged that the details of mourning had changed over the twentieth century. In 1945, she introduced the section on mourning dress in her etiquette book by claiming "during the past decade no other changes in etiquette have been so great as in the conventions of mourning."[53] She also implicitly acknowledged a change in Americans' perceptions of marriage that aligned with an increasing unpopularity of mourning dress. Even in 1940, she conceded that "many persons today do not believe in going into mourning at all"; by 1945, this "many" had become "a greater and ever greater number." [54] She defended young widows' right to remarry after their

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[50] Schweizer, "Divorce: More than a Century of Change, 1900-2018."
[51] Plateris, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, 10.
[52] Plateris, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, 9.
[53] Emily Post, *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* [8th edition] (New York: Funk and Wagnalls 1945), 279.
[54] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 495; Post, Etiquette [8th edition], 280.

mourning period less explicitly in 1945 than in 1940 – perhaps she considered her audience more likely to agree with her by 1945, and therefore in need of less convincing.[55] However, she recommended the same mourning period for widows as she did five years earlier.[56] By insisting on that period, Post set limits on her support of changing ideas of marriage.[57] She accepted remarriage under certain circumstances because widows could still keep their second marriages within the framework of mourning etiquette. They would just have to go through the years and stages of mourning for their first spouse before remarrying. However, she discouraged remarriages that would conflict with the idea of a long period of visible mourning for the first spouse.

Post also commented on the increase in divorce among American couples during the mid-twentieth century. She detailed her views on divorce in her etiquette books: by 1940, she argued that divorce was a problem that had already ruined a generation.[58] This further indicates that she opposed a full breakdown in the linear idea of marriage and would only accept slight changes that could still fit into the framework of mourning etiquette.

The reasons Post provided for opposing divorce so strongly in her 1940 etiquette book created a counterexample to the argument she made for the continued practice of mourning dress in the same edition. She claimed that people who grew up in a culture where divorce was prevalent showed "a brittle hardness, [a] lack of consideration for any opinions but their own, and [an] indifference towards family obligations."[59] Mourning dress symbolized a certain level of family obligation as a means for people to pay respects to their deceased family members.

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[55] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 498; Post, Etiquette [8th edition], 282.
[56] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 498; Post, Etiquette [8th edition], 281-82.
[57] Post, *Etiquette* [8th edition], 282.
[58] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 788.
[59] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 788.

Post also argued that it forced people to consider the feelings of others by confronting them with a visual symbol of those feelings.[60] It also discouraged those who wore it from being self-centered because people would judge mourners who bent the rules of mourning in order to follow their fashion sense as uncaring or "perhaps ignorant of the effect of [their] inappropriate clothes or unconventional behavior."[61] She implied a contrast between individual opinion and social expectations with the phrase "unconventional behavior." This contrast, and her tacit support of convention over individual opinion, suggests that she saw divorce as promoting cultural values that directly opposed the values that made mourning dress necessary. She likely thought consciously of this incompatibility. After all, she had to directly admit it when she answered the Tacoma divorcée only a year earlier.

Post continued to denounce the "epidemic of divorce" in her etiquette manuals through the 1940s – as the number of divorcées continued to steadily increase.[62] She acknowledged that etiquette writers struggled to adapt their advice to a growing group of divorcées who ended their marriage for an increasingly varied range of reasons, especially in cases where "conventions and humanities are in conflict."[63] However, even as she recognized this change, she continued to see it as a negative which "must be rated with floods, duststorms, tornadoes, and other catastrophes."[64]

Other etiquette writers had changed their mind by the end of the 1940s. *Vogue's* etiquette book, geared towards fashion-forward women who read the magazine, provided readers with advice on mourning dress but acknowledged that the practice was becoming unpopular by the

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[60] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 495.
[61] Post, *Etiquette* [6th edition], 500.
[62] Schweizer, "Divorce: More than a Century of Change, 1900-2018."
[63] Emily Post*, Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* [9th edition] (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1950), 629.
[64] Post, *Etiquette* [9th edition], 629.

end of the 1940s.[65] Lillian Eichler-Watson presented both mourning dress and divorce as personal choices. By 1948, opinions on both divorce and widowhood differed too much between individuals for her to consider them within the domain of the etiquette writer.[66] She saw strict, detailed rules on mourning dress as at odds with the "sane and liberal" view Americans held about mourning dress.[67] Therefore, she only gave her readers the general suggestion of avoiding bright colors and social events as they heal from a loss. It seems that, by the end of the 1940s, the decades-long debate over the place of mourning dress in American culture was coming to an end, as etiquette writers slowly came to a consensus that an individual widow's mourning practice was her personal choice, and an increasing number of widows chose to wear lighter mourning for shorter periods – not to mention the increasing number of women who were no longer on their first marriage but for whom "widowed" was not their most relevant marital status.

This alternate timeline of mourning dress, where it survived World War I and became part of a debate about divorce and remarriage in the second quarter of the twentieth century pushes the practice's final decline to the mid-to-late 1940s. *Vogue* stopped advertising businesses specifically dedicated to mourning dress in 1943.[68] By 1950, even etiquette writers writing for a slightly older or less fashion-conscious audience generally acknowledged changes in mourning practices and in Americans' ideas of marriage. Even Emily Post began to cede; in 1950, she described a widow wearing a year of deep mourning followed by a year of second mourning as "now considered extreme." [69] She still expected young widows to wear a year of mourning before remarrying. However, she no longer expected them to wear any half-mourning

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[65] Fenwick, *Vogue's Book of Etiquette*, 156.
[66] Mourning as a personal choice: Eichler-Watson, *Standard Book of Etiquette*, 267; divorce as a personal choice: 249.
[67] Eichler-Watson, *Standard Book of Etiquette*, 267.
[68] "Vogue's Address Book of Shops, Services, and Restaurants," *Vogue*, March 1, 1943.
[69] Post, *Etiquette* [9th edition], 293.

afterwards.[70] The fact that even Post, who defended the practice into the 1940s, changed her mind demonstrates that even its strongest proponents knew that it was no longer relevant to their audience. Many writers stopped talking about mourning dress at all during the 1950s. The number of English-language books that mention "black crêpe" declined sharply after 1945; the number of writers who mentioned either "black crêpe" or "black crape" became negligible after the 1960s.[71] This chronology accounts for the continued back-and-forth as fashion and etiquette writers slowly changed, and only later stopped, their prescriptions on mourning dress.

Even after the rate of change in the number of Americans who sought divorces peaked around 1946, it remained higher through the 1950s and 1960s than it had been at any point prior to 1940.[72] The marriage rate also decreased sharply after the mid-1940s. Therefore, even as the divorce rates stopped increasing as quickly as id did before 1946, it continued to approach the marriage rate.[73] As these social changes proved permanent, etiquette writers eventually had to acknowledge them in order to maintain their relevance to a mid-twentieth century audience.

At the same time, women's rights activists campaigned for divorce reform. They laid the groundwork for the eventual legal acceptance of no-fault divorce in the late 1960s. The National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) began writing their first draft of a no-fault divorce bill in 1947 – just as Lillian Eichler-Watson wrote that it was no longer etiquette writers' job to condone or oppose a topic as personal as divorce, and that instead, they should focus on suggesting guidelines that would make an emotionally difficult process easier for their readers.[74]

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[70] Post, *Etiquette* [9th edition], 293.
[71] Google NGram data for "black crêpe" and "black crape."
[72] Plateris, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, 10.
[73] Plateris, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, 10.
[74] Laura Oren, "No-Fault Divorce Reform in the 1950s: The Lost History of the 'Greatest Project' of the National Association of Women Lawyers," *Law and History Review* 36, no. 4 (November 2018): 875; Eichler-Watson, 267.

The NAWL grew as an organization as an increasing number of women began practicing law professionally.[75] Emily Post also remarked on this increasing acceptance of career women, even connecting it directly to the growing number of Americans who saw mourning dress as incompatible with women's changing place in society.[76] Despite working in very different fields, lawyers drafting these proposed legal reforms were operating upon the same observations as the etiquette writers who gradually relaxed their prescriptions on mourning dress. These women saw a change in other women's behavior and realized that these changes were incompatible with the social and legal rules that they followed.[77] This change in rules was a gradual process in both family-law and etiquette books, as other lawyers and etiquette writers continued to hold onto idea that marriage should be a one-time event followed by a long widowhood.

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CONCLUSION

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The decline of mourning dress among American widows reflects a parallel breakdown of the traditional, linear model of marital status – a historical context relevant to the American case. Even people who agreed with Emily Post that divorce rates were too high might have known, or at least heard of, women around them who were part of an ever-increasing group of divorcées. Some of them might have realized, like Post, that the rules of mourning dress were not applicable to those women's situations.[78] This change in how individuals viewed marriage might have been more notable in the United States than in European countries. Post portrayed divorce as an

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[75] Oren, "No-Fault Divorce Reform in the 1950s," 863.
[76] Post, *Etiquette* [9th edition], 295.
[77] Oren, "No-Fault Divorce Reform in the 1950s," 863.
[78] Post, "Good Taste Today: Mourning After a Divorce."

American problem: an "epidemic raging in this country [the US]."[79] Of course, she might have been exaggerating or influenced by a confirmation bias from her own experiences as an American. Even so, historians would benefit from examining the influence of this social change on the eventual disappearance of mourning dress, especially in the United States, because the World War I-centric factors had a smaller impact there than in Europe.

This is not to say that this alternative explanation does not apply to international contexts, nor that it is incompatible with the historiography of the subject. In addition to her brief comment on the potential role divorce and remarriage played in the breakdown of the social structures on which the practice of mourning dress depended, Lou Taylor made another short aside that indirectly suggested the importance of divorce to the disappearance of mourning dress. She mentioned that widows in Southern Europe continued wearing mourning dress after the practice fell out of favor among Northern or Western European widows, or even their American counterparts.[80] Due to the brevity of this aside, and the lack of citations, it is unclear exactly which Southern European countries she meant. It is possible that she referred there to regions where the dominant culture was influenced by Catholicism: a religion that strongly discouraged divorce. Elizabeth Post, Emily's successor at the helm of the Emily Post Institute, made a similar comment about "Latin countries." That corroborates the idea that Taylor's short aside referred indirectly to the Catholic cultural sphere.[81] When taken together, these comments suggest that the acceptability of divorce in a culture is a useful control factor to understand why mourning dress persisted or not among widows in that culture. This would be especially relevant to understanding its decline in regions where the World War I death toll was less significant than it

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[79] Post, *Etiquette* [8th edition], 592.
[80] Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 283.
[81] Elizabeth Post, *Emily Post's Etiquette* [12th edition] (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), 321.

was among the major European participants in the war, or to populations of women less personally invested in following fashion than the young widows of World War I soldiers.

Previous scholars treated the decline in mourning dress as an inevitable continuation of the effects the First World War had on the practice; I wish to propose an alternate timeline that treats the change and disappearance of mourning dress in the United States as two separate events that reflect separate stages in the breakdown of the linear idea of marital status. This model better explains why the practice finally fell out of favor in the late 1940s and early 1950s – long after World War I. I do not intend to present my work as a comprehensive study of the decline of mourning dress, but simply as an investigation of the limits of the previous model. I also hope to provide an alternative explanation for its prescription and practice in a limited geographical area and a limited timeframe outside of the gestalt historians traditionally use in their studies of mourning dress.

The limited nature of the World War I-centric model invites readers to investigate what happens in other contexts beyond those limits. By expanding the scope of primary sources beyond strictly fashion-related publications, I also hope to put in question the other precedent that governs the historiography of mourning dress. Doing so re-inserts it into its broader historical context and de-compartmentalizes a subject that previous historians treated as a matter of dress history. Fashion and etiquette writers wrote for a target audience of women with the means to try and keep up appearances. However, they used their writing as a proxy through which they could insert themselves into a debate that concerned every American, regardless of gender or interest in fashion, who wished to start or end a marriage.

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