DEATH AS THE GUEST OF HONOUR:  
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF FUNERAL RITES  
IN SOUTHERN SWEDEN, 1880–1949

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Introduction

I take who I want, high or low, rich or poor, old or young.1

This saying is an old Swedish proverb that has often been used to give comfort in times of loss and sorrow. Today’s increasing interest in ‘grave tourism’ is yet another example of the continuity of the fascination concerning death. In Europe people can find the last resting place of well-known personalities such as Karl Marx, Jim Morrison, and Ingmar Bergman.2 The comforting purpose of this morbid way of travelling is perhaps the equality of death—even very successful people die, which makes death less frightening. The two examples above represent different periods of time but the common message is that they reflect the notion of death as an equal complaint. In this study a part of the funeral rite, the funeral dinner, will be analyzed with regard to the concepts of secularization, gendered constructions, and class. The conventional opinion that we are equal in the eyes of death hides from view the fact that the framing and contents death faces depend on whom he or she pays a visit.3

At the same time, the grain of truth in the seemingly timeless messages above makes it possible to interpret the cultural acts of different social groups during the first half of the twentieth century in rites in relation to death. The first section furnishes the reader with a short survey of Swedish society in the period under investigation, roughly the 1880s up to 1949. Above all, it discusses the theoretical and methodological considerations that underpin the interpretation of the empirical materials drawn from a collection of stories and interviews about death-related rites. In the next

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1 Bringéus, Livets högtider, 222.
3 A first version of this article was discussed at the conference Making Sense of Death and Dying, Mansfield College, Oxford, July 2007.
sections, seemingly trivial issues such as the menu, religious practices, and mundane activities such as playing cards and alcohol consumption, as they appear in the stories of the participants themselves, will be analysed in order to expose their ritualised nature.

1. Methodological Considerations

This article is primarily a demonstration of how methodological and theoretical approaches to the material at hand can be helpful to elucidate the inequalities and particularities of the human experiences of death. In this study the theoretical concepts are linked together in order to analyze the interfaces of class formation, gendering, and secularisation. The purpose of the composed theoretical framework is to be able to interpret the ritualised behaviour of everyday life. The class and gender analysis of the funeral dinner is used to exemplify that the analysis of identity constructions constitutes a necessary passage point to understanding death rites in the past. To create a historical peephole, one that enables the study of different people’s ways of constructing funeral dinners, a collection of memories is used. This collection resulted from a questionnaire called Death and Funeral created and collected in 1949 by the Swedish ethnologist Nils-Arvid Bringéus.4 The collection contains the respondents’ own writings as well as interviews made by Bringéus’s assistants. All of the informants were aware that their stories would be filed in a public archive and that their statements could be used in future research. On the other hand, the agenda of this study differs in relation to the information they were given by Bringéus in 1949. Out of consideration to the respondents and their relatives the names used in this article are fictitious.

The collection of memories can then be viewed as a mixture of interviews and diary notes, or if preferred, as a kind of death-related memoirs. In this perspective the criticism of the collection as a historical source is inspired by the discussions made by researchers in the field of oral history.5 Oral history specialists argue that it is important to view

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4 Bringéus, Död och begravning (questionnaire), Folklivsarkivet, Lund, 1949 (hence LUF). The quotations from this article are translated by the author. The majority of these rites have been or will be analyzed in the future dissertation “As Life Shreds Light on Death,” which will consist of death notices, necrologies, funeral reviews, and a collection of memories.

5 See Perks and Thomson, The Oral History Reader.