

# DEATH, DYING, AND THE DEAD IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Fulton and Owen (1987) have observed that for members of the generation born after World War II, individuals who generally lack firsthand experience with death, the phenomenon of death and dying has become abstract and invisible. Americans, like members of many other societies, attach fearful meanings to death, dying, and the dead (Leming and Dickinson 2002). Moreover, it has frequently been suggested that the United States has become a “death-denying” culture. A number of scholars have documented the various ways in which Americans attempt to deny death (e.g., DeSpelder and Strickland 2002; Leming and Dickinson, 2002; Mannino 1997; Oaks and Ezell 1993; Umberson and Henderson 1992). For example, we have a societal taboo against frank discussions about death and dying. When we do refer to these topics, it is normative for us to use euphemisms, such as *passed away* or *expired*. Furthermore, in the United States death typically occurs in the segregated environments of hospitals and nursing homes, and we typically relegate the task of handling the dead to professionals, such as funeral directors.

Although the United States is a death-denying society, Americans may be said to have an obsessive fascination with death and death-related phenomena. As Bryant and Shoemaker (1977) observe, “Thanatological entertainment has been and remains a traditional pervasive cultural pattern both in the United States and elsewhere, and has become very much a prominent and integral part of contemporary popular culture” (p. 2). For instance, death, dying, and the dead “regularly appear in various informational and entertainment media” (Walter, Littlewood, and Pickering 1995:581). Accordingly, the mass media have become a primary source of information about death and dying for most Americans.

In this chapter, I explore the various manifestations of death, dying, and the dead in contemporary U.S. popular culture. This discussion is not intended as an exhaustive exposition of this topic; rather, I seek to address the more

prominent examples of this phenomenon. These include portrayals of death, dying, and the dead on television, in cinema, in music, and in products of the print media, as well as in recreational attractions, games, and jokes. Additionally, I explore the social import of the presence of these thanatological themes in popular culture.

## TELEVISION

Nearly every American household has at least one television set, and a large percentage have several. Death and dying are brought directly into homes via the medium of television. According to DeSpelder and Strickland (2002), in an average issue of *TV Guide*, approximately one-third of the listings “describe programs in which death and dying feature in some way” (p. 35). These topics appear in soap operas, crime dramas, mysteries, documentaries, and comedies. Many of the current top-rated shows, such as *ER* and *CSI*, prominently feature death and dying. The popular “reality” show *Survivor* deals with a type of symbolic death. In fact, death and dying are the most frequently appearing social topics even in religious television programming (Abelman 1987). Recently, the unique series *Six Feet Under*, the ongoing saga of a family that owns and operates a mortuary, has proven to be compelling for many viewers.

Many people have expressed tremendous concern about the amount of violent death featured on U.S. television. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, by the time the average American reaches age 16, he or she has seen 18,000 murders on television (Kearl 1995). It has been estimated that violent death “befalls five percent of all prime time characters each week” (Gerbner 1980:66). Violent death is not limited to prime-time programming, however. The cartoons that are featured on Saturday mornings contain an average of 20 to 25 violent acts per hour, and many of these acts result in the apparent deaths of

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characters (Wass 1995). However, unlike in reality, cartoon characters have their deaths “reversed with no serious consequences to their bodily functions” (Mannino 1997:29).

Death has also long been a mainstay of televised news programming, but with the advent of cable television and satellite broadcasting, death coverage has taken on a new dimension. The Gulf War of 1991 was a major news event, with live coverage of the battles as they occurred. An average of 2.3 million households tuned in daily to the O. J. Simpson trial, the so-called Trial of the Century (Durkin and Knox 2001). The funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, was seen on television “by 31 million people in Britain and two billion worldwide” (Merrin 1999:53). The tragic terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were a media event that transpired on live television:

Every major network, as well as many specialized cable networks (e.g., VH1 and MTV) featured live coverage of the events as they unfolded. According to Nielsen Media Research, 80 million Americans watched television news coverage on the evening of September 11th. . . . In the days following September 11th, there was around-the-clock coverage of the subsequent reaction to the attack, the rescue efforts, and the eventual military retaliation. (Durkin and Knox 2001:3-4)

### CINEMA

Thanatological themes have traditionally been, and continue to be, an extremely popular element of the cinematic enterprise. For instance, death and dying feature prominently in westerns and war movies. There have also been many successful film dramas about dying, including *Love Story*, *Dying Young*, *Stepmom*, *My Life*, and *Sweet November*. Death has even been the topic of comedies, such as *Weekend at Bernie's* and *Night Shift*. As Kearl (1995) notes, beginning in the 1970s, a popular motif “involved attacks on humanity by the natural order—frogs, bees, sharks, meteors, earthquakes, and tidal waves” (p. 27). A vast array of movies have featured “disastrous life-threatening phenomena such as diseases (e.g., AIDS, Ebola-like virus), massive accidents (e.g., airplane crashes, nuclear plant accidents) and natural disasters” (Bahk and Neuwirth 2000:64). Ghost movies (e.g., *Truly, Madly, Deeply* and *Ghost*) as well as thrillers such as *Flatliners* have used the near-death experience as a narrative focus (Walter et al. 1995).

Many movies have a decidedly morbid focus. Young people appear to be particularly fascinated by films that feature violent deaths (Leming and Dickinson 2002). Zombie films such as *Dawn of the Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead* not only feature the undead but have scenes containing gruesome acts of violence and murder. The notorious serial killer Jack the Ripper has been featured in a large number of films, including *Murder by Decree*, *A Study in Terror*, and *Man in the Attic* (Schecter and

Everitt 1997). A number of recent films have portrayed the activities of murderers, including *Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*, *American Gothic*, and *Natural Born Killers*. In the popular *Faces of Death* series, which appeared in video rental outlets in the mid-1980s, “actual death was displayed, with images of suicides, executions, and autopsies” (Kearl 1995:28).

One specific genre of horror film, the slasher movie, has become especially popular in recent years. According to Molitor and Sapolsky (1993):

The genre can be characterized as commercially released, feature length films containing suspense evoking scenes in which an antagonist, who is usually a male acting alone, attacks one or more victims. The accentuation in these films is extreme graphic violence. Scenes that dwell on the victim's fear and explicitly portray the attack and its aftermath are the central focus of slasher films. (P. 235)

Slasher movies feature plenty of sex and large teenage body counts (Strinati 2000). Examples include *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Slumber Party Massacre*, and *Motel Hell*. In 1981, 25 slasher movies were ranked among the 50 top-grossing films of that year (Strinati 2000). The impact of slasher films has extended far beyond the cinema; for example, the mayor of Los Angeles proclaimed September 13, 1991, Freddy Krueger Day, in honor of the killer featured in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film series (Lewis 1997).

### MUSIC

Historically, thanatological themes have been present in nearly all musical styles. For instance, folk songs about serial killers date back well into the 19th century (Schecter and Everitt 1997). Death-related themes are also present in many operas and classical musical pieces. These motifs have played a major role in the recording industry. Interestingly, one of the first recordings ever “produced for the Edison phonograph featured an actor reading the shocking confessions of H. H. Holmes, the notorious nineteenth-century “Torture Doctor” (Schecter and Everitt 1997:185). However, death became particularly prominent in the popular music of the so-called Baby Boom generation's teenage years (Kearl 1995). In the 1950s, a musical genre often referred to as “coffin songs”—songs featuring themes related to dying and grief (e.g., “Last Kiss”)—became popular with young Americans (DeSpelder and Strickland 2002). The eminence of death-related motifs continues to this day. At times, this can assume remarkable configurations. For example, the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, produced pop artist Elton John's hit single “Candle in the Wind '97” (Merrin 1999), which is a lyrically rearranged version of an earlier John song about the dead movie icon Marilyn Monroe. Moreover, a large number of musicians have died in tragic and untimely

fashion. Some examples include John Bonham, Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix, Buddy Holly, Janis Joplin, John Lennon, Bob Marley, Keith Moon, Jim Morrison, Elvis Presley, Bon Scott, and Ritchie Valens.

The music that is popular with today's young people frequently has a morbid element that emphasizes death's destructive and catastrophic nature (Fulton and Owen 1987). Examples include songs about homicide, suicide, and extremely violent acts (Wass et al. 1988; Wass, Miller, and Redditt 1991). Many members of our society consider such topics to be particularly unsavory and antisocial, and, accordingly, a number of groups have been particularly vocal in their criticism of this music. For instance, as Wass et al. (1991) note, "A number of professionals, their representative organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatricians and the National Education Association, various child advocacy groups, including the Parent's Music Resource Center, and others have suggested that such lyrics promote destructive and suicidal behavior in adolescents" (p. 200).

The themes of death and destruction play an especially prominent role in two of the most popular styles of contemporary music: heavy metal and rap. Many heavy metal bands have names associated with death, such as Megadeth, Anthrax, Slayer, and Grim Reaper. Examples of heavy metal song titles include "Suicide Solution," "Highway to Hell," and "Psycho Killer." The band Guns N' Roses even recorded a cover version of the song "Look at Your Game Girl," which was written by the infamous murderer Charles Manson (Schecter and Everitt 1997).

In rap music, the violent lyrics of artists such as Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, and Puff Daddy have generated a great deal of controversy. In fact, one of the most successful rap recording companies is named Death Row Records. Examples of rap song titles include "Murder Was the Case," "Sex, Money, and Murder," and "Natural Born Killers." The song that rapper Eminem performed at the Grammy Awards in 2001, "Stan," describes a murder-suicide. Rap music came under national scrutiny after performer Ice-T released the song "Cop Killer." The murders of rap artists Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. in recent years have also served to enhance the deadly image of this style of music.

## PRINT MEDIA

Dying, death, and the dead are principal themes in much of American literature (Bryant and Shoemaker 1977). Westerns, war novels, mysteries, and true-crime books are exceptionally popular with readers. Violent death is a ubiquitous theme in popular fiction (Fulton and Owen 1987). Books about hospitals and doctors are also fairly successful (Bryant and Shoemaker 1977). Death and dying are even featured in children's stories (DeSpelder and Strickland 2002; Umberson and Henderson 1992). Newsmagazines frequently publish stories that deal with

death and dying, often featuring these stories on their covers. Even comic books have featured the exploits of notorious serial killers (Schecter and Everitt 1997).

Reports of death and dying are common in daily newspapers. The deaths of ordinary people are usually reported only in brief obituaries, unless a person has died in some sensational fashion. Newspapers report the deaths of public figures such as politicians, celebrities, and musical artists in far greater detail (Walter et al. 1995). For instance, the *Seattle Times* ran a front-page feature on the death of rock star Kurt Cobain, complete with photos of the suicide scene (Martin and Koo 1997).

In general, newspapers tend to overemphasize catastrophic causes of death (Combs and Slovic 1979). As Walter et al. (1995) observe, those dramatic deaths that are "boldly headlined and portrayed in the news media are extraordinary deaths" (p. 594). The image of the burning World Trade Center towers was featured on the front pages of many newspapers on September 12, 2001.

Newspaper depictions of death and dying are not always so explicit, however. When Umberson and Henderson (1992) conducted a content analysis of stories about the Gulf War that appeared in the *New York Times*, they found a striking absence of explicit references to death. Instead, the stories frequently employed governmentally inspired euphemisms such as "collateral damage" when discussing death. Moreover, the stories repeatedly quoted State Department and military spokespersons who talked about efforts to keep casualties to a minimum.

One form of print media that scholars have traditionally overlooked is the supermarket tabloid. The weekly circulation of the six major tabloids (*Star*, *Sun*, *National Enquirer*, *National Examiner*, *Globe*, and *Weekly World News*) is about 10 million, with an estimated readership of about 50 million (Bird 1992). As Durkin and Bryant (1995) note, these publications are full of thanatological content. Articles about murders, accidents, celebrity health scares, and dead celebrities are common, as are stories about paranormal phenomena such as reincarnation, ghosts, and near-death experiences. Health advice regarding the prevention of life-threatening medical problems can be found in some tabloids. In fact, Durkin and Bryant report that the *National Enquirer* has "received an award from the American Cancer Society for medical stories that the paper provided" (p. 10).

## RECREATION

Aside from their presence in the media, dying, death, and the dead play an important role in the recreational activities of many Americans. As Bryant and Shoemaker (1977) note, many people show an "interest in, and morbid fascination with, facsimiles of the dead, the pseudo dead as it were" (p. 12). An example of this common fascination is the ever-popular wax museum. Also, the traveling museum exhibit of objects from King Tut's tomb was a

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nationwide sensation. In fact, actual dead bodies have sometimes been used for sideshow exhibits. According to Bryant (1989):

For many years carnival concessionaires have displayed various kinds of odd bodies and curious corpses . . . because the public was fascinated with such unusual exhibits. A particularly morbid type of display that was common to carnivals was the exhibition of deformed fetuses in jars of formaldehyde, euphemistically known in the trade as “pickled punks.” (P. 10)

In a somewhat similar vein, Bunny Gibbons, a sideshow exhibitor, displayed the “Death Car” of serial killer Ed Gein at county fairs throughout the Midwest (Schechter and Everitt 1997).

Some scholars have adopted the term *dark tourism* to refer to “the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley and Lennon 1996:198). For example, since 1994, one of the more popular tourist attractions in Los Angeles has been the Brentwood condominium where Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were murdered (Schechter and Everitt 1997). Battlefields such as Gettysburg have traditionally been successful tourist attractions, as has the site of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (Foley and Lennon 1996). During times of disaster, public safety officials often experience major problems in controlling curiosity seekers motivated by the chance to experience novel situations firsthand (Cunningham, Dotter, and Bankston 1986). Authorities have labeled this phenomenon *convergent behavior* (Bryant 1989).

Cemeteries and burial sites are also popular tourist attractions. For instance, the Forest Lawn cemetery near Hollywood is internationally known as the “cemetery of the stars” (Morgan 1968). Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia has millions of visitors annually (Bryant and Shoemaker 1977). As Frow (1998) reports, Graceland, the former home and burial site of music legend Elvis Presley, “is the object of both everyday pilgrimage and especially intense commemoration during the vigils of Tribute Week, culminating in the candle-lit procession around Presley’s grave on the anniversary of his death” (p. 199). Merrin (1999) notes that when a telephone hot line was first opened for members of the public to order tickets to visit the grave of Princess Diana, it was “reported that up to 10,000 calls a minute had been attempted at peak times” (p. 58).

Games, a popular form of recreation, frequently contain thanatological themes. War toys and board games featuring characters like Casper the Friendly Ghost are popular with children. Video games such as *Mortal Combat* and *Duke Nukem* feature vivid images of violent deaths (see Funk and Buchman 1996). Several million copies of the *Ouija Board*, which is touted as a means of communicating with the dead, have been sold (Bryant and Shoemaker 1977). As Schechter and Everitt (1997) report,

the thanatological themes in games can assume morbid dimensions:

Though it is unlikely to become the next *Trivial Pursuit*, a board game called *Serial Killer* set off a firestorm of outrage when it was put on the market a few years ago. . . . [It] consisted of a game board printed on a map of the United States, four serial killer game playing pieces, crime cards, outcome cards, and two dozen plastic victims (in the possibly ill-advised form of dead babies). (P. 31)

## JOKES

Humor is a mechanism that allows for the violation of taboos regarding the discussion of death-related topics (Mannino 1997). A vast array of jokes deal with death, dying, and the dead. Thorson (1985) identifies two major varieties of death humor. The first is humor associated with the body. This includes jokes about cannibalism, funerals, undertakers, burials, and necrophilia. The second type, humor associated with the personality, includes jokes about suicide, homicide, memories of the departed, grief, executions, deathbed scenes, last words, and the personification of death.

Some jokes about death, dying, and the dead involve what has frequently been referred to as *gallows humor*. This term originated “from the genre of jokes about the condemned man or helpless victim, and is often generated by the victims themselves” (Moran and Massam 1997:5). An excellent example is Freud’s classic anecdote about a man who joked on his way to the gallows. Currently, gallows humor is conceptualized as more of a philosophical posture than a specific repertoire of jokes (Van Wormer and Boes 1997). This type of humor is intentional (Thorson 1985) and tends to express “a cynical, morbid focus on death” (Sayre 2001:677).

An especially violent and cruel strain of death humor spread through American popular culture in the 1980s (Lewis 1997) and is still popular today. AIDS jokes are the classic example of this type of humor, in which the common tactic is to “specify an outgroup and make fun not only of death but also of dying people” (Thorson 1993:21). Moreover, many jokes are told about particular murderers and accused murderers (e.g., Jeffrey Dahmer and O. J. Simpson). Additionally, a variety of jokes circulate in relation to disasters such as the crash of *ValuJet Flight 592* in Florida and the destruction of the space shuttle *Challenger* (see Blume 1986). Americans have also created macabre humor surrounding the Ethiopian famine, the Gulf War, and the mass suicide of the Branch Davidians. Such jokes “invite us to be amused by images of bodily mutilation, vulnerability, and victimization” (Lewis 1997:253). Controversial by its very nature, this insensitive type of humor is particularly offensive to many people (Thorson 1993); their responses ensure a dialectic, which increases the humor’s entertainment value.

## THE POSTSELF

Many of the manifestations of death and the dead in U.S. popular culture deal with what has been termed the *postself*. This is especially true for deceased celebrities and other public figures. The postself is the reputation and influence that an individual has after his or her death. According to Shneidman (1995), this “relates to fame, reputation, impact, and holding on” (p. 455). The postself constitutes a form of symbolic immortality, whereby “the meaning of a person can continue after he or she has died” (Leming and Dickinson 2002:143). In essence, the deceased person continues to exist in the memories of the living (Shneidman 1995). On a cultural level, this functions symbolically to blur the bifurcation between the living and the dead (Durkin and Bryant 1995).

As Frow (1998) observes, the fame of dead celebrities sometimes assumes a pseudoreligious dimension in contemporary society: “A small handful of stars and public figures experience this adoration that raises them beyond the human plane . . . [such as] Elvis, Rudolph Valentino, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, James Dean, Kurt Cobain, Bruce Lee, Che Guevara, and Evita Peron” (p. 199). Perhaps the most prominent example of this phenomenon in recent years is Princess Diana, whose tragic and untimely death has resulted in what has been characterized as the “Diana grief industry” (Merrin 1999:51). The devoted can buy Diana dolls, books, plates, videos, stuffed animals, key chains, ashtrays, T-shirts, towels, mugs, spoons, stamps, posters, and more. Although this phenomenon has certainly been highly profitable for a vast array of entrepreneurs, some people find it particularly distasteful. For instance, British Prime Minister Tony Blair has condemned the sale of Princess Diana collectibles as the tacky exploitation of Diana’s memory (Merrin 1999).

## DISCUSSION

On the one hand, the contemporary United States is frequently described as a death-denying society. Numerous scholars have observed that recent generations of Americans lack the firsthand familiarity with death and dying that their ancestors had (e.g., Fulton and Owen 1987; DeSpelder and Strickland 2002; Leming and Dickinson 2002). Accordingly, many Americans express a great deal of death anxiety. On the other hand, many Americans also have an obsessive fascination with death, dying, and the dead (Oaks and Ezell 1993; Umberson and Henderson 1992). Nowhere is this paradox more apparent than in our popular culture. Television programming, movies, songs, the print media, games, jokes, and even recreational activities are fraught with thanatological content.

This seeming contradiction may be read at several levels, in that there are differential interpretations. The most obvious, albeit superficial, interpretation is that the United States is not as much of a death-denying society as many

writers contend. A second explanation for the paradox is that our society is, indeed, a death-denying one, but our insulation from death causes us to crave some degree of information and insight concerning death, and we feed that craving through popular-culture depictions of death and dying. This situation would be not unlike the Victorian period in Great Britain and the United States, during which sexual Puritanism was an ideological mainstay of the value system, but nevertheless there was a significant demand for clandestine, salacious accounts of sex and sexual activity, such as smuggled “dirty” books from Europe.

Another interpretation of the contradiction between the death-denying nature of U.S. society and the saturation of death themes in the American mass media is that the treatment of death as entertainment and humor is simply an extension of, or another configuration of, death denial. By rendering death into humor and entertainment, we effectively neutralize it; it becomes innocuous, and thus less threatening, through its conversion and ephemerality in the media. This is, perhaps, the more compelling explanation.

Death is a disruptive event, not only for the individual who dies but for the larger social enterprise as well. Consequently, all societies must construct mechanisms to deal with death’s problematic impacts (Blauner 1966). As Pine (1972) notes, the “beliefs and practices of the members of a society toward dying and death are largely dependent upon that society’s social organization” (p. 149). Popular culture serves as a type of collective vision by which meanings are socially constructed, which in turn “greatly influences our norms, beliefs, and subsequent actions” (Couch 2000:25). It appears that the thanatological themes in U.S. popular culture function as a mechanism that helps Americans to deal with death. As Bryant (1989) notes, death, dying, and the dead “are traumatic and anxiety producing topics, and can be better confronted if they are socially neutralized” (p. 9).

Such social neutralization can help to assuage the disruptive impact of death and dying for the individual. This can occur in three related ways. First, in the context of popular culture, death, dying, and the dead are frequently reconceptualized into forms that stimulate something other than primordial terror. These phenomena may be considered fascinating, entertaining, and even humorous, depending on the social context. Bryant (1989) observes that when death is camouflaged in such a manner, “individuals can more comfortably indulge their curiosity about, and fascination with, such concerns” (p. 9). For instance, a visit to Elvis Presley’s grave, to the site of the JFK assassination, to the spot where Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were murdered, or to the Forest Lawn cemetery near Hollywood might be considered part of a vacation. Moreover, many individuals find it thrilling to be frightened by horror and death at the movies (Leming and Dickinson 2002). Also, newspaper accounts of violent or accidental deaths may engender some voyeuristic, albeit convoluted, pleasure “or some macabre enjoyment in the misfortunes of others” (Walter et al.

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1995:586). Similarly, many of the outrageous stories that appear in supermarket tabloids such as the *Weekly World News* and the *Sun* “appear to have no purpose other than catering to accident watchers” (Bird 1992:54).

Second, appreciation of many of the types of thanatological themes found in our popular culture requires some detachment on the part of the individual. Like spectators at professional wrestling matches, viewers of horror movies are required to suspend disbelief (Weaver 1991). Children or adolescents playing violent video games must detach themselves from the depictions of primal carnage occurring before their eyes. The quintessential example of this phenomenon is thanatological humor. Humor functions as a type of defense mechanism, allowing people to cope with the fear and anxiety associated with death and dying (Moran and Massam 1997; Oaks and Ezell 1993; Sayre 2001; Thorson 1993). Enjoyment of this type of humor requires us to laugh at our own mortality (Thorson 1985). As Lewis (1997) notes, the appreciation of a so-called killing joke “calls for the adoption of a playful detachment from an act of violence or suffering” (p. 264).

Finally, some observers have argued that the tremendous amount of exposure to death, dying, and the dead that we receive through our popular culture may make us more accepting of these phenomena (Oaks and Ezell 1993). This saturated environment of thanatological concerns may function to inure individuals to death and dying, thus diluting or counteracting their anxiety about these phenomena (Bryant and Shoemaker 1977). Durkin and Bryant (1995) speculate that “the inordinate amount of attention afforded to thanatological themes in the tabloids may actually help to desensitize the reader” (p. 11). Similarly, Wass et al. (1991) suggest that the ubiquitous death-related themes in popular music might help adolescents confront their anxieties about these phenomena, given that death and dying are seldom discussed in the home or the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

The United States is commonly characterized as a death-denying society. Americans frequently attach fearful meanings to thanatological concerns, have taboos against frank discussions about death and dying, and relegate the task of handling the dead to professionals. Nonetheless, death, dying, and the dead occupy a prominent place in our popular culture. Thanatological themes appear frequently in television programming, cinema, the print media, jokes, and recreational activities. Dead celebrities also play an important role in our popular culture. These thanatological elements of popular culture function as a mechanism to help individuals deal with the disruptive social impacts of death and dying. They help us to redefine death as something other than a terror, and enjoyment of these themes requires some detachment on the part of the individual. It has also been argued that we may be more accepting of

death, dying, and the dead because of our frequent exposure to these phenomena through our popular culture.

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