

Fashions in Funerals

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The jungles of New Guinea are a long way from Nashville, Tennessee, but Shana Alexander compares the funeral customs of the two places to show that two different cultures are perhaps not so far apart at all. The piece was included in Alexander's collection of essays, Talking Woman (1976).

- 1 A man in the remote jungles of New Guinea not long ago murdered another man with an ax. Tribal justice ensued. First the murderer was shot and killed with an arrow, and then seven other members of the tribe cut him up and ate him.
- 2 When word of the feast reached civilization, the authorities concluded that on this occasion justice had literally been served, and perhaps a bit too swiftly, so they hauled the seven cannibals into court, where a wise Australian judge dismissed all the charges, and acquitted the seven men. "The funerary customs of the people of Papua and New Guinea," he explained, "have been, and in many cases remain, bizarre in the extreme."
- 3 What, I wonder, would the judge have to say about the new, high-rise mausoleum now under construction in Nashville, Tennessee? When completed, this model of modern funerary design will be twenty stories high, fully air-conditioned, and capable of holding 65,000 bodies. A second slightly less deluxe tower on an adjoining site will have facilities to entomb 63,500 more. Nashville's enterprising mortician entrepreneur points out that his high-rise mortuary will be self-contained on only 14 acres, whereas it would require 129 acres to contain all these caskets in the, uh, conventional manner.
- 4 Well, not exactly caskets. In the new-style funeral, you will be laid out—after embalming, of course—on something called a "repose," described as a "bedlike structure," complete with white sheets, pillow, and blanket. When the ceremonies are ended, bed, pillow, sheet, and blanket are all whisked away; a fiberglass lid snaps down over what remains; and—zap—it's into the wall, stacked seven-high, with a neat bronze marker attached to the face of the crypt.
- 5 The forward-looking undertaker who thought all this up is al-

ready respected, in the trade, for bringing to Nashville the one-stop funeral.

But the most important advantage of the high-rise mausoleum is that by putting everything-but-everything under one roof you cut clown on the high cost of dying. Maybe so, maybe so. But I can't help thinking it would be even cheaper to die in New Guinea, where the funerary customs are certainly no less bizarre, and a lot more practical.

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Thesis and Organization

1. Which paragraphs emphasize New Guinea? Which emphasize Nashville? What sentence summarizes the point the author wishes to make about New Guinea?
2. What sentence serves as a **transition** between New Guinea and Nashville? What sentence summarizes the point the author wishes to make about Nashville?
3. What paragraph covers both New Guinea and Nashville? What sentence presents that paragraph's major assertion? Explain how that sentence is or is not the thesis of the essay.
4. What is Alexander's attitude toward "the new-style funeral"? Is she attempting to persuade the reader to adopt that attitude or is she simply informing the reader about the latest fashion in funerals and making a comment about it? What evidence can you find in the essay to support your view? Has she convinced you of anything? Why or why not?

Technique and Style

1. How would you characterize the author's tone? Is it earnest, lighthearted, sarcastic, ironic, tongue-in-cheek, what? What examples can you find to support your answer? Is the tone effective? Why or why not?
2. Where in the essay does the author use narration? Description? How do those modes support the author's use of comparison and contrast?
3. Why might Alexander have chosen to begin the essay in the third person with an objective point of view? Where and why does she introduce first person? Second person? How does her choice of point of view relate to her thesis?
4. How would you characterize the author's level of diction? Is it colloquial? Conversational? Formal? Fancy? What examples support your view? What relationship do you find between Alexander's tone and her level of diction?

POINTERS FOR USING COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

Exploring the Topic

- 1. What are the similarities?** What characteristics do your two subjects share? Are the two so similar that you have little to distinguish them? If so, try another subject; if not, pare down your list of similarities to the most important ones.
- 2. What are the differences?** In what ways are your two subjects different? Are they so different that they have little in common? If so, make sure you can handle a humorous tone or try another subject; if not, pare down your list of differences to the most important ones.
- 3. Should you emphasize similarities or differences?** Which pattern of organization best fits your material? Block? Point-by-Point? A combination of the two?
- 4. What examples will work best?** If your reader isn't familiar with your topic, what examples might be familiar? What examples will make clear what may be unfamiliar?
- 5. What other modes are appropriate?** What modes can you draw upon to help support your comparison and the organization of the essay? Do you need to define? Where can you use description? Narration? Example? Do any of your comparisons involve cause and effect?
- 6. What is your point? Your purpose?** Do you want to entertain, inform, persuade? Given your point as a tentative thesis, should you spell it out in the essay or imply it? If you are writing to inform, what information do you want to present? If you are writing to persuade, what do you want your reader to do?
- 7. What persona do you want to create?** Is it best for you to be a part of the comparison and contrast or to be an observer? Do you have a strongly held conviction about your subject? Do you want it to show? Does your persona fit your audience, purpose, and material?

Drafting the Paper

- 1. Know your reader.** Use your first paragraph to set out your major terms and your general focus, and to prepare the reader for the pattern of organization and tone that will follow. Reexamine your list of similarities and differences to see which ones may well be unfamiliar to your reader. Jot down an illustration or brief description by each characteristic that the reader may not be familiar with. If your reader is part of the group you are examining, tread carefully, and if your teacher may have a bias about your topic, try to figure out what that bias is so you can

counter it. Reread your paper from the perspective of the reader who is biased so that you can check your diction as well as your choice of examples and assertions.

2. **Know your purpose.** If you are writing to persuade, keep in mind the reader's possible bias or neutral view and see how you can use your persona as well as logical and emotional appeals to get the reader on your side. Informative papers run the risk of telling the reader something that person already knows, so use description, detail, example, and diction to present your information in a new light. If your paper's main purpose is to entertain, these techniques become all the more crucial. Try adding alliteration, allusions, paradox, and puns to the other techniques you draw upon.
3. **Use other modes to support your comparison.** Description and example are probably the most obvious modes to use, but also consider narration, cause and effect, definition, and analogy. Perhaps a short narrative would add interest to your paper, or perhaps cause and effect enters into your comparisons. Definition may be vital to your thesis, and analogy may help clarify or expand a point.
4. **Check your pattern of organization.** If you are using block comparison, make sure you have introduced your two subjects and that your conclusion brings them back together. In the body of the paper, make sure that what you cover for one, you also cover for the other. In point-by-point comparison, check to see that your points are clearly set out. You may want to use both types of organization, though one will probably predominate.
5. **Make a point.** Perhaps you want to use your comparison to make a comment on the way we live, perhaps to clarify two items that people easily confuse, perhaps to argue that one thing is better than the other. Whatever your point, check it to make sure it is an assertion, not a mere fact. Whether your purpose is to inform or to persuade, take a stand and make sure that your thesis clearly implies or states it.