

## LIFE TRAILING DEATH: DOCUMENTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBITUARY WRITING

*Stuti Beri*

**Abstract:**

*Obituary is the most accepted and recognized form of writing pertaining to death, and an equally acknowledged piece of creative writing among innumerable readers these days. For some, it might be a mundane death notice, or else a group of words commemorating somebody's death. But the domain of obituary writing has become highly encompassing and far reaching in its scope. To get the true zest of this genre we need to venture into the recesses of yestertime, and this research would deal with the historical development of obituary form, by concentrating on the involuting factors involved in its growth. There were many major and minor events which occurred over centuries and worked together to build this genre; how it developed as a form of art, by gradual effort on the part of various newspaper editors and obituary writers. Hugh Montgomery Massingberd, John Grigg, and James Fergusson are three eminent names who played an integral role in the development and establishment of obituary as a unique form of art in 1986. Pioneering in Britain obituary gradually established itself as a form of writing across other British Colonies as well. Many recognized newspapers and obituary writers have published their own anthologies of highly exceptional and innovative obituaries. Moreover, the mushrooming readership obituaries are witnessing presently accentuate that they have emerged as an exceptional form of Literature, something more than a historical documentation about the deaths, associated with a certain section or class of society. This paper would probe into the intricacies of various convulsions this form of writing has gone through before its present existence, the form which is assessable to us today.*

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Obituary is one of the most recognized and valued part of western journalistic writings. There are numerous views associated with obituary form, giving it different meanings and definitions across nations and cultures. For some it might be an informative piece of writing, for others it can be a brief character sketch of the deceased accompanied by funeral information, yet others might consider it a piece of literary, historical or social document. Obituary is written for the public and can be conceptualized by them in different ways. Diverse cultures can have varied notions too; say obituary as an address or letter to the dead, or obituary writing as a ritualistic act and so on. Elaine Showalter in her article "Way To Go: On why obituaries are a business in US and an art in UK" published in the *Guardian*, remarks about the different treatment and perception of obituary art both in American and British newspapers: "American newspapers treat obituaries of public figures as occasions to record historical facts, British newspapers in the past 15 years have increasingly used the obituary as an interpretation of the life and career of the deceased, often written in the first person by someone who knew him or her" (Showalter).

How far can we concretely define this genre depends on many factors. Etymologically obituary has come from the word 'Obire' (go forward or go to meet), where 'ob' means towards and 'ire' means to go. In old Latin the word was 'Obitus' (departure, a going to meet, encounter), which in Medieval Latin came to be known as 'Obituarius' (a record of death of a person) thus leading to the English term 'Obituary' (register of death), to be widely accepted and used since the seventeenth century (Online Etymology Dictionary). Being a 'register of the death' obituary is a well acknowledged historical and social document among

scholars, especially from the time it became more descriptive in nature and intense in its language. It mirrors the society, its perceptions, practices, and ideologies through a brief biographical sketch of each life, lived during a frame of time. Every historical incident has had some effect on the psyche and morals of mankind, of which obituary art became an instant reflection, capturing the mood of the hour.

This phenomenon of recording death can be as old as times of early Roman Empire (around 59 BCE), where the *Acta Diurna* a kind of daily newsletter was distributed to the public. It contained important information and incidents of the day including some death announcements too (much cannot be said about its length and style). This practice came to a halt with the fall of Roman Empire. But seeing the literary history of Roman times, one cannot deny the presence of biographical writings as far back as 5th century BCE. Unfortunately not much literature is recovered from those times, but the major portions of what has been retained are funeral elegies. Thus one can note how some or the other forms of necrological writings have always existed through centuries. For some centuries before Middle Ages biographical writings gave way to hagiography, i.e., recording the lives of saints. “The demand of the church and the spiritual needs of men, in a twilight world of superstition and violence, transform biography into hagiography. There followed a thousand years of saints' life: the art of biography forced to serve ends other than its own” (Kendall).

With the passage of time, different kinds of literary writings commemorating death emerged. Changes occurred in form and style making them more refined and rhetorical in nature. Up till the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century forms such as epitaphs, eulogies, elegies, threnodies, panegyrics and so on were in vogue. “Yet each had practioners in its day. Samuel Johnson's misfortune has been that his throwaway remarks live on, not his considered works. “In his lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath” is still quoted; his masterly essay upon epitaphs is forgotten” (Haley 206).

One can even find a complete epitaphic tradition which was followed among the poets. “The epitaph is central to William Wordsworth's poetry and poetics. Many of his poems were inspired by epitaphs or use epitaphic motifs and his treatment of genre in his essays upon epitaphs is one of his major works of poetic theory” (Scodel 384). In his essays he argues that epitaphs show that humans have a tendency to eternalize the memory of one who has died. Like epitaphs or elegies other necrological writings more often than not, were associated with some kind of literary tradition or genre. Hence modern obituary is not a spur of moment origination, rather it had its seeds sown far back in past.

John Aubrey was a promising 17<sup>th</sup> century writer, whose addition to genre of biography made him a great inspiration for future obituarists and biographers. He was a man who lived through the reign of King Charles II and witnessed his beheading, he saw coming of Cromwell's Commonwealth rule, and then England of Restoration period. He was an antiquarian, a historian and a biographer, who had an observant eye towards his surroundings, and recorded information about the lives of eminent men, of his own as well as his preceding generation. Aubrey is best known for his *Brief Lives*, which was edited and published much later after his death, by scholar Andrew Clark in 1898. It's a collection of short and informal biographies, an outcome of his observations and gossips which he used to record as notes on scrapes of papers. These seemingly biographical writings include eminent 17th-century personages, like Sir Walter Raleigh, Francis Bacon, John Milton, William Shakespeare and many more. Men from various quarters of professional world such as writers, scientists, mathematician, sailors, theologians, astrologers, lawyers, and philosophers became a part of his collection. “These biographies continue to speak to us because Aubrey, rather than deliver airy eulogies, did the fieldwork: He racked up the small, telling details of his subjects' lives” (Garner). His brief biographies were written with an objective approach, accompanied by unique anecdotes. It was 'Brief Lives' which would become inspiration for two major agents of change experimenting with obituary genre. Aubrey's biographer and editor Anthony Powell described Brief lives as, “that extraordinary jumble of biography from which later historians have plundered so much of their picturesque detail” (Massingberd vi). Ruth Scurr who later wrote “John Aubrey, My Own Life” (2015),

says,

“he knew he was inventing the modern genre of biography”, and his obsession with what he took to be the truth makes him a very modern figure... He was sometimes criticised for being “too minute” (trivial), but Aubrey's answer was that “a hundred years hence that minuteness will be grateful.” He was a man who trusted in posterity and thus posterity rewards him (qtd. in McCrum).

John Aubrey later became a much known personality because of Patrick Garland's one-man stage play *Brief Lives*, based on character of Aubrey portrayed by actor Roy Dotrice. This play opened in London in 1967, and was an instant success with Roy giving greatest number of solo performances for some 40 years.

There were numerous life records available to initiate the idea of obituary writing, but its growth was a gradual process. Beginning with the idea of a simple death notice, obituary form was first experienced by its readers in the seventeenth century. In restoration England Roger L'Estrange who was the official journalist and national censor, came up with his news books, *The Intelligencer* and *The News* in 1663. He established obituary form but his subjects were dead royalists who were faithful to king Charles II, when in exile during Cromwell's regime in England. Then came the age of enlightenment or the eighteenth century, when reason and scientific development took over every aspect of life, and all art forms went through a critical examination. The classical literature that came during this time was a byproduct of prevalent rationalism, which gave new form, structure, and ideology to all literary writings. Literature depicting the material world enclosing life came into being; prominent changes occurred with regard to form rather than the imaginative aspect of writing, and obituary art was no exception to it. With the coming of *The Daily Journal* (1721-37), obituaries were openly published and widely read in London coffee houses. Obituaries in this journal were rich in biographical sketch accompanied by an objective tone, which made it more realistic in nature, something beyond the obsession of describing death or the evangelical way of recording it (Stark 268-269). An important example of this is the record of death of the Duke of Marlborough in *The Daily Journal*, 18 June 1722:

On Saturday morning about four died John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, at the Lodge near Windsor, aged 72. He was born at Ash in the County of Devon. He came first to Court by Favour of the Duke of York, and inclining to a Martial Life he went to Tangier, and in 1673 to France with the Duke of Monmouth...

In 1704 he routed the French and Bavarian Forces at Schellenbergh, and afterwards defeated them at Hockstet, was made Prince of the Empire, and on his return had the Manor of Woodstock settled on him and his heirs (qtd. in Stark 269).

After the emergence of this new form in *The Daily Journal*, a major milestone happened in the journey of obituary art when Edward Cave founded *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1731, which established its position as the precursor of modern obituary. Obituaries in this magazine presented a vivid picture of Georgian England, offering insight into diverse professions, arts, and ideologies prevalent among people. These obituaries also presented the dark and gloomy side of the enlightenment era, through the causes of deaths pertaining to many widespread deceases, thus shedding light on the life expectancy in those times. *Gentleman's Magazine* did not make a mark by its obituary being a sociological document, but rather by the way it recorded life of the deceased. Obituary writing went through a complete transformation in the hands of John Nichol, who became the magazine's co-editor in 1778. By August 1780 he started a section entitled “Obituary of Considerable Persons” which was changed to “Obituaries of Considerable Persons with Biographical Anecdotes” the following April (Stark 18 19). These obituaries were very interesting and unique:

What makes them markedly different from those which until then had appeared in the press was that they included, where Nichols found appropriate, hostile elements of character

assessment. Obituaries were no longer the exclusive preserve of lives that, in an editor's opinion, had adorned society; instead, column space was found for those who have undermined it. This conferred upon art itself a richer, more complete definition (Stark 20).

Idea of obituary writing changed in its style, and subsequently in its definition from one century to another. At one time it was nothing more than a list of deceased people; the next phase came when obituaries focused on the time, reason or circumstances of death. Slowly there came a change in the way obituary writers wrote; although slight traces of former elegiac and evangelical form of writing was still there, obsession with the idea of death was no more to be found. Obituary was meant to record the life lived, even though it was still reserved to a certain section of society.

*The Daily Register* appeared in 1785, which published only death notices. Later it was renamed as *The Times* in 1835, also during this time it started featuring obituaries which focused on subject's public life. Obituaries in this newspaper followed a pattern and a certain kind of hierarchical order in naming the deceased:

But for a considerable period *The Times* obituaries took a highly conventional and formulaic form. 'The Obituary' listed deaths in order of precedence, as part of an annual record of 'Death's Doings'. Thus the list for 1869 started with the names of those in the House of Lords, followed with those of baronets, then those in the worlds of art, literature and science, the legal world, the professional army and the House of Commons and ended with the medical world, with a coda containing 'foreign royalty and dignitaries'. Concurrently, detailed obituaries of an individual, modern type appeared as occasional separate entries (see Prof. Jukes, 3 August 1869). Their appearance did not become a regular feature until 1879, when 515 individual deaths were noted in this form throughout the year, sometimes taking the shape of a specialised obit column (Fowler 6).

The *Times* obituary pages were filled with the subjects of aristocratic classes, slowly it became a pioneer in publishing obituaries for a long time, without much competition from other publishing sources. Other newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* made an effort at refining their obituaries, and enhancing their obituary column, but all their efforts came to a standstill with the advent of World War I and World War II. Any interest shown by newspapers towards publishing full length obituaries during pre-war times was completely shattered. Out of many reasons for this set back in obituary writing, major ones were censorship on print and paper rationing, even more so during World War II. Newspapers became less bulky and shorter in size; also they required much space to print war news. *The Times* was the only newspaper which carried on its monopoly and interest in publishing obituaries.

The post-world war II period was still facing the aftermaths of war which can be seen through the slow pace of obituary revival. One can note that, continue exposure of common public to vast number of death occurrences during war, probably required some time for both press and public to recover and show some enthusiastic interest towards such death related writing. Although a large amount of literary pouring of this period were confessional in nature, describing the ways in which war affected the lives of masses, obituary art did not find much scope for its expansion. In major newspapers apart from *The Times*, condition of obituary page became far more deplorable than what it was in pre-war times. "In the post-war years, with newsprint rationing still in force until 1958, the *Guardian* returned to its format of the 1930s: concise, quietly reverential life summaries in an occasional half-column on the general news pages. Opportunities for engaging story-telling were sadly overlooked". Quite similar was the case with another important newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*: "The post-World War II *Daily Telegraph* also treated the obituary art with disdain. The pattern that emerged in the 1950s, to be replicated for more than 30 years, was that of a daily main obituary of seven or eight short paragraphs (about four to six column inches), followed by a collection of one-paragraph death reports" (Stark 272).

This dormant stage in the development of obituary art got over when a sudden wind of change

swiped over its dull and colourless domain. From 1980s the obituary art flourished completely never to look back again. One major initiating factor was appointment of new editors by newspapers like the *Independent*, and *The Daily Telegraph* who had futuristic and innovative approaches towards the development of newspapers which affected the obituary pages as well. Apart from this in 1986 Fleet Street's journalistic aura was completely disrupted, a place where head offices of all major newspapers were situated. "Rupert Murdoch led a steady exodus from the Neighborhood by relocation *The Times* of London and his other newspapers in 1986 in the course of a bruising war with the then powerful print unions"(Morris). Newspaper like *The Times* shifted its office from Gray's Inn road (Fleet Street) to Wapping in East London and *The Daily Telegraph* moved to farther east to the Dockland. This is also known as. This initiative by *The Times* led to the removal of restrictions laid down by print unions and allowed the newspapers to enhance further in their form, style, length, and scope. Thus, more column space was allotted to practice of obituary writing which allowed obituarists to work creatively with this form.

In 1986, eminent personalities like James Fergusson and Hugh Massingberd took hold of obituaries desk in two important newspapers *Independent* and *The Daily Telegraph*. This threatened to some extent the monopoly of *The Times* over the practice of obituary. James Fergusson is known till date to change the format of obituary page, along with innovative photographic presentation of deceased. But it was Hugh Massingberd who changed the complete idea and technique of Modern obituary, and influenced the perception, and the development of obituary in Britain and its American and Australian colonies.

Massingberd is considered as the father figure in shaping of the obituary genre. In his hands obituary no more remained a collection of words giving brief account of an individual's life, which can satisfy the collective conscious of public and demand of bereaved family members. The source of influence for his art was none other than John Aubrey. This can be an interesting point to note, that it wasn't Aubrey's writings primarily which had a profound effect on him, rather it was the theatrical representation of his character which led to the momentous illumination of Massingberd's inner creativity, and obituary writing gave him the platform to project his creative instincts. He has himself written in the introduction of his first edited book, which is a collection of daily telegraph obituaries:

A few years earlier I had been inspired by a passage in brief lives, Roy Dotrice's one-man show about the gossipy old 17<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian John Aubrey. Picking up a work of reference, he read out an ineffably dull biographical entry about a barrister: recorder of this, bencher of that, and so on. He then snapped shut the volume with a "Tchah" or it may have been a "Pshaw", and pronounced: "He got more by his *prick* than by his practice (Massingberd v, vi).

For him every individual became a unique specimen of human life with his or her own peculiar character. Humor came as a handy tool to him in carving the life of his each subject. Seeing Massingberd's own persona and outlook towards society one can sense in him, an all-encompassing personality; a man who can see the world in its vivid details and can accept its realities with an urge to describe them in words. Massingberd's obituary of the *Independent* published on his death described him as:

different people contained within one frame. Walking encyclopedia, genealogist, player of cricket, expert on theatre, musicals, film and television, gourmand, champion of country houses and estates. He was immensely well read, had a prodigious memory, was at home on the race-courses of Britain, and loved London clubs, particularly the Travellers. The list of his interests is daunting. All this might have made him the kind of man, who in a phrase he employed in obituaries "relished the cadences of the English language". But Hugh was never a bore (Independent 27 Dec 2007).

When Massingberd was editor of Burke Peerage he, "produced Burke's *Irish Family Records* (1976) and three indispensable volumes of royal genealogy, Burke's *Guide to the Royal Family* (1973), as well as volumes on European and Middle Eastern royal genealogy and Burke's *Presidential Families of the*

*United States of America* (1975), not to mention an indispensable index to families in the Burke imprint". But these volumes contained an overlaid flavor of "history" and "social anecdote" which became the basis of numerous obituaries he wrote and edited as chief obituary editor of *The Daily Telegraph* (Independent 27 Dec. 2007). Every obituary he wrote is a brief story in itself infused with literary elements, a bit humorous and inclined to picturize the life lived, rather than just commemorating a person after his death. An example can be seen in this obituary of Sir Atholl Oakeley Bt., published on, January 8 1987:

Although only 5ft 9in tall, Oakeley was broad in the beam. He started wrestling seriously after being beaten up by a gang of louts and built up his body by drinking 11 pints of milk a day for three years. This regimen had been recommended by the giant wrestler Hackenschmidt, who later told Oakeley that the quantity of milk prescribed had been a misprint.

Giants always had a particular fascination for Oakeley. He liked to recall how he had bent a man of 9ft with a half-nelson which it took several other wrestlers sitting on his opponent to untangle.

He received his distinctive cauliflower ear in a bout in Chicago when, as he recalled, Bill Bartuch "got me in a scissors grip between his knees (Massingberd 10).

The modernistic trends mushrooming in post war literature did not leave obituary genre untouched. Modern literature became more individualistic in nature, where depiction of individual life, psyche, and ideology became prime urge of writers. Experimentation with the new forms of writings, styles, and treatment of themes, dismantled old and traditional forms of writings. This period also saw inflation in biographical writings as compared to past centuries. Thus the originality found in modern literature can be seen, pervading obituary art too. Each newspaper and editor was attempting to evolve the existing form of obituary into something more literary and artistic in construct. Sense of realism and individualism entered obituary writing, making it more reflective and humanitarian at core.

One cannot say that the obituary pages of *The Daily Telegraph*, *Independent* or for that matter even *The Times*, have started explicitly including common public as their subjects, but still an attempt was made to broaden its range, for inclusion of daily life eccentrics in its obituaries. Sir William Haley who was the editor of *The Times* from 1952 to 1966 writes in his article Rest in Prose: The Art Of The Obituary about selecting the subject for the obituaries pages:

The value an editor places on public men and women while they are alive is an indication of the character of his paper. The treatment the paper gives them when they die confirms it.

One decision at the outset was crucial. Since a reviewer of Obituaries from the Times 1961-70 has revealed that on becoming editor I ruled that neither titles, nor rank, nor heredity, nor mere wealth should any longer be qualifications for an obituary notice in The Times, but only achievement, there is now no reason not to refer to it. The achievement could be in any activity, in any walk of life, in any country. ... Bishops, boxers, businessmen, poets, scientists, rebels, all qualify under it. It could embrace Pope John and Carson McCullers, President Eisenhower and Gypsy Rose Lee (207).

Often facts regarding publication of lesser number of female obituaries in comparison to males are presented by many historians and researchers. Analyzing women obituaries mainly depict, how different occupations were practiced by women, and how their involvement with public and economic sector gradually increased, in turn increasing their recognition in obituary columns.

Obituary form and its development were not only exclusive to the newspapers of Britain but also found its way into British colonies of America and Australia as well. In early eighteenth century when obituary writing was spreading its wings in British newspaper, similar strain can be felt in American colonial newspapers as well. Initial newspaper obituaries of America too were evangelical in nature. Following hagiographic tradition, they were pious and religious in tone and style; traces of which can be

seen in some obituaries up till the nineteenth century.

First writing recording death was published by John Campbell, the postmaster of Boston who launched *Boston News-Letter* on 24 April 1704; its first edition contained a death notice. Then in 1729 Benjamin Franklin while still in his early twenties started a newspaper which he later named *Pennsylvania Gazette*. In his newspaper he “delivered to American readers an obituary style relieved of piety and naïve eulogy.” In 1775 another colonial newspaper *The Virginia Gazette* adopted obituary form which reflected republican sentiment. The beginning of the nineteenth century saw obituary pages filled with valorous representation of people who fought in the revolutionary war. War time was as unstable for development of obituary in America as it was in Britain. Obituary development at the *Constitution* in Atlanta and *The Los Angeles Times* was of an inconsistent nature. *Washington Post* although being an important national newspaper hardly paid any heed to publication or refinement of its obituaries; not until 1980s. During this period, the *New York Times* was an exceptional newspaper like The Times in Britain, which invested time and paper in publishing obituaries. With the approach of nineteenth century, obituary established itself as an important feature of American newspaper. Many editors accepted the importance of including obituary pages in their newspaper from both economic and artistic point of view (Stark 26-32).

Also there were few trends of obituary writing which erupted in between for a very short period such as around 1880, intimate details of circumstances and causes of death started appearing in obituaries: “During this time, obituaries focused on the graphic and often morbid details of the person's demise. *The New York Times* piece on the death of Theodore Roosevelt, for example, leads with an elaborate description of the blood clot that “detached itself from a vein and entered the lungs”” (Funeral Consumer Information Society). Then during the turn of nineteenth the century, for a brief period there was an inclination towards use of verse to pay homage to the deceased:

A tribute to Guy Swain, who fell to his death while trying to chase a raccoon from a tree at night, was published in *The Delaware Gazette* (Ohio) on March 17, 1917. It begins:

A precious one is gone,  
A voice we loved is still,  
A place is vacant in our home  
Which never can be filled.  
O Guy, it seemed so bad,

The way you had to go ... (Funeral Consumer Information Society).

A prominent innovation in American obituary writing happened in the *New York Times* newspaper with the appointment of 'Alden Whitman' as its chief obituary writer in 1964. He started a new approach towards obituary writing by interviewing his subjects before their death. The firsthand information he gathered about his subjects, intensified the biographical element and subjectivity of his obituaries. He travelled around the world to interview his subjects, who were great men and women from different walks of life such as, T.S. Eliot, Pablo Picasso, Charlie Chaplin, Helen Keller and many more. Hundreds of advanced obituaries he wrote about the personalities he admired initiated the form of personalized obituaries, thus giving an entirely new meaning to the obituary writer as “the recording angel” (Fowler 7). Whitman edited and published two books which are collection of his writings, “*The Obituary Book*” (1971) and “*Come to Judgment*” (1980). Whitman too enlivened the modernist traits in obituary genre, through the way he dealt with his writings. Though the technique he used was a complete contrast to the ways of his British counterparts. In introduction to his book “*Come to Judgment*” Whitman has tried to define characteristic traits of an exceptional obituary: “A lively expression of personality and character as well as a conscientious exposition of the main facts of a person's life. A good obit has all the characteristics of a well-focused snapshot, the fuller the length the better. If the snapshot is clear, the viewer gets a quick fix on the subject, his attainments, his shortcomings and his times.” (qtd in *New York Times* Sept 5 1990)

America witnessed a new revolution in obituary writing much before Messingberd and others

started dealing with this form in 1986. This can be the reason why, many American obituary writers and editors across newspapers, lay stress on the fact that America developed its own form and style of obituary without any influence from British style. In 1982 another obituary writer Jim Nicholson was appointed in the 'Daily News'. His obituaries paid tribute to every common men or women, who had done his or her job, even though a meager one, faithfully, and was an important, loved and respected individual of society. Nicholson gave his views on writing obituary of a 'common man' in an interview with CBS News, he said,

We were the people paper; still is the people's paper. And it just seemed natural to do real-house people, mechanics, plumbers, teachers, cops - nothing startling... Sometimes, when you get really small picture and granular, you get the big picture. What would make him mad? What kind of cigarettes did he smoke? Did he keep his shoes neat in the closet? (qtd. in Terranova)

Since America is such a vast nation, apparently the traits of obituary column in different newspapers were different on regional basis. Even the use of words or euphemisms had their regional taste. "Down south and in the Midwest, the deceased has usually "gone home" or "went to eternal rest with the Lord." In the Northeast, obituaries tend to be blunt - people tend to simply "die" or "depart." And out west, where cremation is more common, it's typical to see obituaries mentioning being "scattered into the wind" or "returned to nature" (Terranova).

Practice of obituary form in Australian colonial newspapers mirrored what was practiced in Britain. Here the case was different from that of America. Even the first piece of obituary writing published in second edition of the *Sidney Gazette*, official newspaper of New South Wales, was picked up from a London newspaper. This obituary was published on 12th March 1803, but the subject must have probably died in 1802. Such was the effect of British Journalism on Australian Colonies that its initial newspapers picked up pieces of news items from London newspapers, and included them in their papers without any acknowledgement. George Howe who printed and edited the *Gazette* came to Australia because he was sentenced to transportation of life for committing a robbery. He reached Sydney in 1800 and published Australia's first authentic obituary in *Sidney Gazette's* 56<sup>th</sup> edition, on 25th March 1804. The revival of British obituary influenced a similar revival in Australia too; though it took some years for the wind of change to reach Australian shores. Some editors in Australian newspapers came from Britain, who were well aware of the British obituary form and public interest in reading them. This can be a major reason for sudden increase in publication of obituary pages in many newspapers. The commencer was Alan Onkley who came from London to edit Melbourne's *Herald Sun* in July 1993, and added obituary page to this newspaper. Reason being, his having worked with *The Daily Telegraph* in his home country, whose obituary art he idealized. Within five months of this in another national daily *The Australian* came a page titled 'Time and Tide' to honour the memory of individuals who lead considerably productive or successful lives and have contributed to the welfare of society. This paper adopted a pattern of arranging obituaries on its page which got fixed for Australian papers ever since; "a mix of hard-nosed, professional appraisal and soft farewell laced with eulogy". Hence, the twentieth century saw complete dawn of obituary genre in Australia (Stark 270-271, 277, 278).

The development of obituary genre was not exclusive to Britain itself; rather it had practitioners in other European countries as well. For example on the other side of English Channel, France too practiced different forms of necrological writings. French elegies had their own unique style and were written and appreciated for a longer time by its readers, in comparison to those written in British literary tradition. Thus coming to obituary writing, French newspapers weren't alien to this form. In twentieth century *Le Monde* gave a completely new treatment to its obituaries.

In France, *Le Monde* broke new ground by extending highly critical obituaries even to former Prime Ministers - such as Chaban-Delmas - whilst at the same time, their language changed, even sometimes permitting those disruptions of grammatical



rules that are typical of avant-garde styles (Fowler 7).

Tracing the evolution of obituary genre both in style and perspective, across Europe, and other countries and continents, would require a colossal frame. Yet this is an undeniable fact that obituary writing blossomed as a rare form of art in the twentieth century, to be practiced and polished consistently in future.

Diverging from the idea of stylistic development of obituary writing, other noticeable distinctions can be seen between the obituary practices of different places. First difference is, whether to consider obituary as a news report or as an art form. As described about the American obituary: "Like the modern newspaper itself, the obit section strives to be timely and topical. The obits in the *New York Times* are written as news stories. The understanding is that the recently dead are part of a passing show and that, like the front-page headlines themselves, they will be replaced tomorrow by new objects of interest" (Kurupnick). Elaine Showalter also laid stress on the artistic dimension of British obituary in contrast to the American one;

While American newspapers treat obituaries of public figures as occasions to record historical facts, British newspapers in the past 15 years have increasingly used the obituary as an interpretation of the life and career of the deceased, often written in the first person by someone who knew him or her. ....American obituary writing has definitely been influenced by the psychologically probing, literary and literate British style, but it remains primarily a news item rather than an aspect of belles lettres. Lapses of days or even weeks between a death and an obituary are routine in the UK, while in the US, timeliness is all-important. American newspapers describe the causes of death, while British newspapers omit the medical details (Showalter).

One can trace some structural differences in newspaper obituaries of two nations. In British newspapers a short summary of life events is mostly written towards the end of the obituaries, so that initial paragraphs can be used in creative construction. American newspapers on the other hand prefer to place the summary in the opening paragraph. Another distinction can be; while the American newspapers give explicit information about the surviving family members, the British newspapers mention the partner and children by number and sex (Stark 278). These differences on the basis of journalistic treatment of obituary art, both structurally and ideologically, do not stand on the ground by itself, rather somewhere it reflects public temperament too. Public parameters about life, Art, Identity, Success and Time also govern the forms of writings emerging in a societal setup.

Moving further with the preceding thought of obituary being a part of public domain, one can say that popularity which the obituary genre has gained over time cannot be just credited to the hard work, and creative impulse of obituary writers and editors. Readers too have played a major role in this; for an obituary writer to come up with exceptionally catchy piece of writing to justify a 'life lived', has a great deal to do with impressive readership and public acceptance of this form. "But the world, it seems, is full of secret obituary readers who are gradually coming out of their closets. Mention at any dinner party that you are an obituary writer and someone always admits to turning to the obituary page first. And they are, er, dying for more" (Bullamore 232). A great deal of interest has awoken in people these days, to read and write obituaries which some might regard as a perverse activity. Yet it has its practitioners, who sometimes won't discuss their craze for obituary openly. Moreover as in case of paid death notices which are composed by the relatives of the deceased, in case of obituaries too relatives have a major role to perform by giving in the first hand insight about the life of deceased to an Obituarist. This practice specially increased since 1980s when 'common man' obituary became popular. Sometimes, "when it comes to the unpaid news obit, the relatives of the deceased are also often involved in "selling" - persuading the news staff that their dead son or mother deserves to be written up because of his or her contribution to the community" (Krupnick 93). It is the very factor of growing public appeal, and dedication towards obituary

art which has made it thrive on internet too.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century saw an uprising in form of mass mourning on social media. Groups can be formed on social networking sites and memorial pages. This has enticed common public to write lengthy obituaries of their loved ones, highly charged with sentiments and emotions, to publish online. On these obituaries other people can offer condolences, comments and create support group. Many people started publishing their self-written obituaries on sites and blogs before their deaths. Although there are certain websites, online magazines, and blogs which are flourishing in obituary art even more than printed papers, papers still have their captured readership. Online sources being less costly, and catering to the requirement of wider audience, act as a magnetic force to attract a commoner, thus leading to further democratization of obituary.

Newspapers have always been a faithful assistance in fertilizing the obituary genre with its immense number of innovations. What has today become a widespread phenomenon had its germination in twentieth century. It was then exclusively under the editorship of Hugh Massingberd that perception related to 'recording death' changed and the language became more literary. Although transformation in public ideology pertaining to the idea of death, from era to era, became a triggering force behind the makeover of obituary art, one cannot deny that it's the inherent literalism which made obituary an appealing and interesting read.

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