



LITERATURE ACTIVITY

A Grieving Nation

The Death of a President is William Manchester's account of the events of five fateful days in November 1963. In this bestseller, he details the impact of President Kennedy's assassination and funeral on millions of people in the United States and around the world who watched the events and mourned along with the President's family.

As you read, picture yourself as one of millions of Americans who "remained glued to television" for five days watching accounts of the assassination and funeral ceremonies.

Jacqueline Kennedy had appeared on the North Portico, a child in either hand. The President's son and daughter did not have to come out this way. They could have been driven out the south grounds and up Constitution, and before her departure for Texas their mother would have insisted upon that; at Andrews Field three days earlier she had forbidden John to leave the helicopter because photographers were present. But today and tomorrow were to be a season apart in her life. The shock of that brief scene was immense. In that one instant she revealed to the great audience the full measure of its loss. Old Guard infantrymen in dress blues and snowy gloves flanked the fatherless First Family, straining at attention. Caroline, her eyes hazy in reflection, gently rested her black headband against her mother's slim waist. John squirmed, wriggled free, and clenched his tiny fist behind his back in a crimping gesture which brought a stab of pain to those who remembered his father's restless right hand. Few saw it, however, for nearly every eye was upon the widow. Transfigured beneath the North Portico's hanging lantern she awaited the procession, her swollen eyes fixed on the caisson and the six matched horses. Her expression of ineffable tragedy was, in that flicker of a moment, indelibly etched upon the national conscience; in a survey of New England college students conducted later that week the investigators found that "attention to Mrs. Kennedy's actions and deportment bordered on the obsessive."

This was her first exposure to it. It was also the first sunlight she had seen since Dallas, but she did not blink. Steadfast and still, she awaited the signal to move, her lashes heavy and her lovely mouth drawn down in a classic curve of grief.

Immediately behind her, vigilant as always, stood Robert Kennedy. The cameras were frozen on the motionless widow, and omitting those who were reading newspaper accounts or talking to friends, nearly everyone in the United States was watching Mrs. Kennedy. By its own account, a minimum of 95 percent of the adult population was peering at television or listening to radio accounts. To the Americans must be added all of Europe and those parts of Asia which were periodically reached by relay satellite. Even Russia had announced that the Soviet Union would televise the funeral, including the Mass in St. Matthew's. By Sunday noon the U.S.A. and most of the civilized world had become a kind of closed-circuit hookup. Nothing existed except this one blinding spotlight.

*"An entire nation was trapped
in grief."*

Not only had commercials been canceled; such routine reports as weather, newscasts, and sports were unmentioned. The National Football League was playing its full schedule, but the country was unaware of it. The communication industry's coverage was unprecedented. . . . The United States had become the victim of voluntary hypnosis. There seemed to be no way for Americans to avoid concentration on the center of the national stage. . . .

It wasn't necessary to stand on Pennsylvania Avenue and see the Stars and Stripes flutter over the coffin for a man to weep before his children. . . . It was happening to heads of families in every part of the country, ranging from a third of the anti-Kennedy Southerners to nearly two-thirds of

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the pro-Kennedy Northerners, with the national average well over 50 percent.

Therefore flight was impossible. Every hatch was battened down, every roadblock impassable. An entire nation was trapped in grief. "What has happened," a network commentator said a half-hour after the Oswald shooting, "has been too much, too ugly, and too fast." The velocity of transmission, moving at the speed of light; the surfeit of horror; and the sense of shared sorrow bound the American people together more closely than any other nation since the beginning of man. . . . The average American, whatever his race, religious convictions, or politics, was gaping, anesthetized by what after two full days he still felt could not be happening. . . .

Drums are muffled by loosening the tension on each drumhead, thus deadening the resonance. The two bass and sixteen snare drummers had completed this task before falling in outside the White House, and had been holding their sticks with practiced ease when Mrs. Kennedy shepherded her children into the limousine outside the portico. Accompanying them were Attorney General Kennedy, the new President and Mrs. Johnson on the jump seats, and, somewhere in the back seat, a small and astonishingly mobile pair of white gloves. The gloves belonged to John F. Kennedy, Jr. . . .

Down the long drive they moved beneath the naked trees, and the fifty colorful state flags, ranged on either side, dipped in homage to the simple caisson. . . .

"Oh Lyndon," Mrs. Kennedy said suddenly, breaking for the first and last time her vow never again to call him by his first name, "what an awful way for you to come in."

. . . [T]he entire area from Justice to the Treasury had become black with straining people. The mob was the quietest ever to break a police line, and the break was so quick and effortless that none of the riders up ahead suspected anything unusual. The spectacle was, in fact, spectacular; climbing the equestrian statue opposite the National Archives, three of the routed policemen attempted to estimate the size of the multitude. Their best guess was that John Kennedy was being followed by a hundred thousand "Other Mourners." . . .

Now Lyndon Johnson stepped forward for the ritualistic wreath-placing by the President of the United States. His floral tribute was huge, brilliantly green with red and white carnation, mounted on a stand held from behind by a lanky Army sergeant 1st class. As Johnson faced it and glided forward, the soldier retreated, matching his steps with the President's. The odd two-man waltz ended; the sergeant swiftly departed. Johnson paused in momentary prayer and returned to his place. Except for the muted sobbing of the sergeant—two colonels were leading him to an anteroom—the great rotunda was silent. The plans had ended here. The fourteen-minute ceremony was over, and suddenly Mrs. Kennedy who had felt faint and was swaying slightly, realized everyone was waiting for her to leave first.

She wasn't quite ready. Facing Robert Kennedy she asked softly, "Can I say good-bye?" He nodded once, and she took Caroline by the hand. . . . Eyes closed, they leaned over to brush their lips against the flag. Caroline's small gloved hand crept underneath, to be nearer, and in that single instant an entire nation was brought to its knees.

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Questions to Think About

1. How does this excerpt indicate the enormous effect the death of President Kennedy had on Americans? What event in your lifetime has affected so many people? Describe it.
2. **Drawing Conclusions** *The Death of a President* was over 700 pages long, and yet it was a bestseller for many months. Why do you think this was so?