

Lauren Wise

Capstone

Bob M. Bednar

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## **The Multiple Languages of Loss:**

### **A Comparative Analysis of Memorialization Mediums**

#### *Preface*

In this paper, I will be discussing memorials in terms of the maintenance and upkeep needed to keep them alive. When speaking about memorials in terms of high/low maintenance, I am not speaking of the mourners but of the dedication it takes to start, preserve and maintain the physicality of said memorials. What I propose is that this is an extension of symbolic grief that is put into the materiality of the memorials. What this does not mean, is that there are “high maintenance/low maintenance mourners'”, but high maintenance/low maintenance memorials. What I use this term with, is to demonstrate how much commitment/revisiting/maintaining is needed in terms of keeping these memorial forms, a working and active memorial site.

It is also crucial to acknowledge both deaths being discussed involve young girls tied to a traumatic death. This context is important in terms of analyzing grief because it creates an environment for more accentuated actions than one might not see with a natural passing. By using these cases, it allows us to see grief in a heightened manner that might otherwise go unnoticed in a natural scenario.

Throughout the remainder of this analysis, I will be going through my research object, explaining and discussing important aspects that might not be noticed at first glance.

Specifically, this will be in relation to the maintenance levels as well as the placement/displacement of the memorials. Through this, I intend to explore research questions which go as follows:

- How do these different mediums of memorials/gravesites contribute to symbolic expressions of grief through the placement/displacement of the physical site?
- How do these methods reflect the priorities of those grieving/creating/maintaining the Memorial sites?
- How do the dynamics of grief change when comparing high-commitment memorials, like the street shrine of Alanna Gallagher, with lower-commitment forms such as digital expressions on social media?

### *Grief Tied to Temporary Shrines*

Allana's passing, rooted in trauma and violence, prompted a large crowd response from those involved in the community. First, comes an initial response. After she was found, only a day or so later, we began to see small stuffed animals in the spot in which she was found. Unlike other common roadside shrines, this was not in a spot where she was killed such as that as a roadside shrine from a car crash. Even more, this is not where she lived. This placement of the roadside shrine is only where she was tragically found. Placement wise, this is one of the least personal places to grieve on top of being one of the most traumatic places in relation to the body to express this grief. With this being said, this puts the gravesite in a displaced state. The only relation to this spot geographically is the spot in which she was found.

This shrine is also categorized as a high maintenance medium of grief. In its nature it needs tending to, additional objects being added in remembrance, as well as a knowing host (considering the shrine was not located where Allana lived), and visitors/mourners.

As we look at Figure 1, we see the beginning stages of the roadside shrine. Pictured is the shrine within the first few days after Alanna was found. We see two neighborhood kids looking down at the group of stuffed animals as one might see mirrored in a picture of mourners looking down in a grave. Stuffed animals, commonly associated with “playtime” were the go-to for most of the gifts left at the shrine,



Figure 1

which carries a sense of dramatic irony, considering she was kidnapped while she was playing outside. Now as we move into Figure 2, we see visitors as the shrine begins to grow. We see an even larger appearance of teddy bears, flowers, and balloons. When looking at this shrine, it



Figure 2

almost mimics that of a baby show in terms of objects. An ironic contrast between the stark similarities we see between the birth and death of a young life.

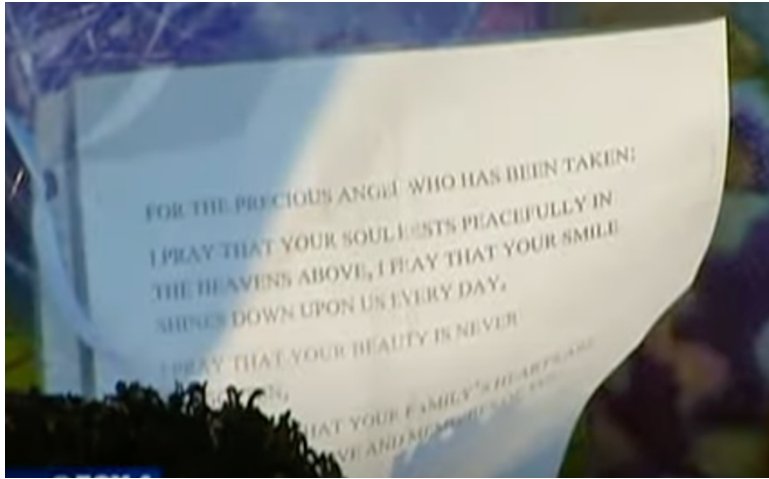


Figure 3

However, we then move to Figure 3, picturing a note left at this memorial. The note, although not all legible, is written to Alanna herself. This letter in particular is a great example of the extension of grief being put into a communal memorial such as this one. The note

is typed, and put in a laminated sleeve assumingly, so it can be preserved. The note reads:

“For the precious angel who has been taken I pray that your soul rests peacefully in the heavens above. I pray that your smile shines down upon us every day. I pray for your beauty...”

- Unknown

Within this note specifically, we see a shift from giving objects to Alanna, to speaking directly to Alanna. The author of the note prays for her soul's peace, as well as her beauty, and her likeness to be remembered with “your smile shines down”. However, knowing that Allana was 6 years old at her time of death, and her parents were not affiliated with the Christian faith, this message begins to get a bit strange. It is with this, that I question why grieving is presented in this likeness of someone who clearly was not associated with the Gallagher family. I believe that the note itself is a representation through this medium of collective grief.

As we see this shrine grow, we see a stark growth in the number of objects found, balloons, even more teddy bears, flowers, and candles all of which seem to be placed knowingly

to not stand up to the test of time within this temporary memorial, specifically outside. The only thing within this memorial found with intention to be preserved was the note pictured above. It is with this note that the materiality of the shrine is negated. Almost mirroring the message that it sends out. Just as the notes contents don't align with the shortly lived lifestyle of Allana, neither does the materiality of the object in comparison to the memorial with a life that is created to eventually be taken down. There is intention with this note for it to be preserved in a place where preservation is not an option.

Another aspect with the street memorial is that it needed to be discarded or moved after the support grew so large that it became a disturbance within the road and needed to be disbanded. Commonly, we think of grief as something that doesn't necessarily have a time frame. However, this specific memorial was bound to the restraints of time. Yet, it possibly never would have been moved or disbanded if not gaining as much traction as it did.

This kind of memorial creates a space in which you are bombarded with grief, being forced to return to that memory, even if you say you're just passing on your way to work. It is a visual that was presented to people in that neighborhood daily for weeks. Although this medium is temporary, since the commitment level is high, as well as the displacement, it creates a higher concentration of grief that is difficult to escape.



Figure 4

### *Grief Tied to Permanent Memorials*

As we look at Allana's long standing memorial as seen in Figure 4, we see what presents itself as a

sort of gazebo-like structure. As we know, this reading center is placed outside of her elementary school classroom. In comparison to that of the roadside shrine, this one was thoroughly planned, yet by the time it was erected, the communal grief had seemed to settle. Although the placement of this was more typical than that of the roadside shrine, it still stood awkwardly within three confining walls of the outside of the elementary school. To members of the community and those who went to school there, it seemed pretty obvious that it was not an original part of the school's plans.

The planning and construction of this memorial spanned several years, resulting in a structure that many current students had no direct connection to. Nevertheless, unlike temporary memorials, this structure was intended to remain permanent, signifying a deliberate effort to establish a lasting tribute. Its placement within the school's landscape, while not originally part of the architectural blueprint, represents an intersection between intentional placement and displacement within the environment in which it stands.

In terms of commitment levels, there was a dedicated team involved in planning and bringing this structure to life. However, once unveiled, the memorial required minimal effort to maintain. Upkeep primarily involves tending to the surrounding flowers. As long as the flowers are alive and there are occasional visitors, this memorial works as a living memorial. This places the memorial at middle ground between high and low maintenance.

What's particularly interesting about this memorial is its incorporation of living elements, and intention for interaction. However, standing as it does today, with a time gap between children who likely had no interactions with the Gallagher family, is it still a working memorial if there are no memories of the users to base their memorialization off of? In this case, the

priorities lie in having a memorial which can bring some sort of space for children to learn and feel safe.

Now as we look to the middle of the plot of flowers in Figure 5, we see the emblem “Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened”. Picked for the reading center



Figure 5

seemingly as an appropriate quote from Dr. Seuss. This quote affirms that the reading space intends to be constructive, despite its ties to tragedy. The circle itself however, mimics that of a grave, words engraved in a stone in the ground with intention for people to view. This gives us seemingly the same sort of image of people looking to the ground just as they would with a traditional gravesite. Seemingly, although these memorials have different intentions, in some way shape or form there is still a resemblance to a grave despite there not being a resting place used for a body.

What’s interesting to note with this however, is that the flowers planted in the ground add a bridge between life and death, mirroring the tending that would be needed with a young child like Allana. Also differing from the roadside shrine, it creates a long-standing interactive space meant to cultivate an educational spot for children. Although, considering Allana was 6 years old, it is an interesting note similar to that of the letter in figure C, that if this had intentions to

please Allana past the grave, would it be an effective memorial considering she most likely did not know how to read.

### *Greif Tied to Virtual Memorialization*

Now in the case of Kaitlynn, she died in times of covid, so unlike that of Allana, one of the only ways griefs could be expressed was through social media presence. Her account is public, letting anyone gain access as long as they could find her username, if they did not already follow her. Unlike the shrines of Alanna, this works as an active timeline, showing her own curated moments from before her death. Every piece of photographic media pictured is something that she chose to be remembered by. In terms of being remembered in this case, it seems to be the most accurate representation considering that these were hand-picked by her. Instagram reaches out to the relatives of the deceased to confirm whether they would like to keep their account up. In this case, the account is still up and available for viewing. We can

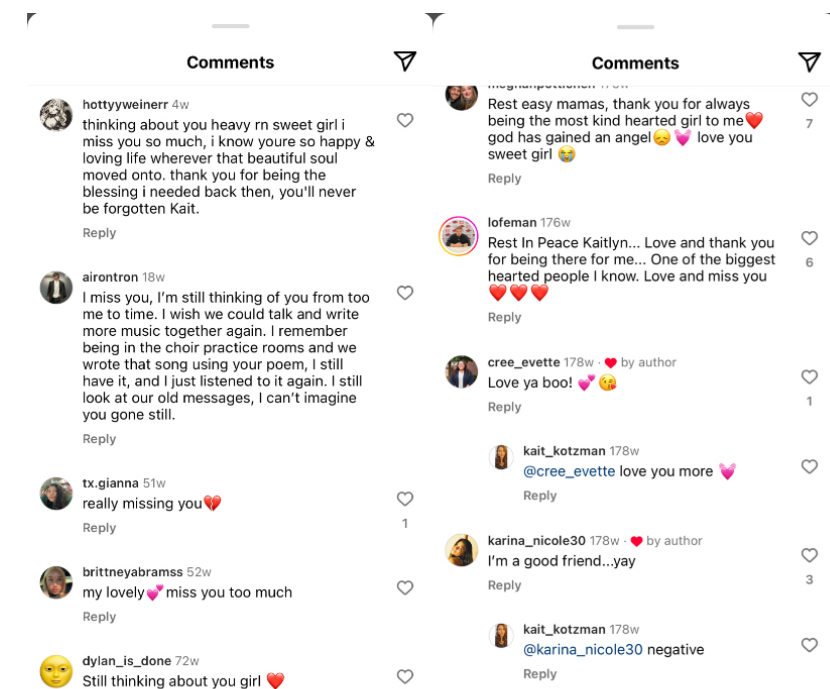


Figure 6

additionally see the transition within this medium between her liveliness and her passing. In her most recent post, we see comments “liked by author” with a short transition just two weeks later to condolences and comments flooding in. Examples of these comments



can be seen within Figure 6 Similar to that of the note in figure C, these comments are addressed directly to her. We see comments such as

“My heart... looking through your profile showed you were so happy and lived [not knowing it] would be your last days... you have such a beautiful heart and God took you too soon, but I know he’ll take care of someone so pure. Rest in peace Kaitlyn.” -

Anonymous

In this comment, there is an acknowledgement of death, as well as her previous posts being a signifier of life. This works under the assumption that many of the mourners are taking social media posts at face value. We can assume that there had been troubles not mentioned in the social media realm, but ultimately the act of having her own curated photos to view and interpret after she passes makes this form of memorial more “Authentically ” an extension of the deceased.

When dealing with upkeep, Kaitlyn's social media acts as a low maintenance memorial. Simply obtaining an affirmation from an account official is all that's needed to sustain its presence over time. Although the account itself has an extra layer of memorialization by commenters of those associated with her, I argue that it would still be a memorial platform if it just had her photographs and was open to access through Instagram. This being said, it puts it in a place of a low commitment memorialization medium seeing that you can open it as you choose and hide it away and trust that it will still be there. With this memorial in particular, the comments tend to lie closer to reminiscing as well as hopeful. There seems to be less of a traumatic tie to the grief.

Considering this was additionally unplanned and only considered a memorial site due to the circumstances of her death, this puts it in a place between placement and displacement similar to that of the shrine.

### *Conclusions*

In all of the examples explored, there comes a notable absence that occurs: the lack of the direct physical connection between the mourner and the deceased, as one would achieve by visiting a traditional gravesite. While in these examples we see homages to gravesites through things such as meaningful messages, carved messages in stone, and the act of looking down to the ground they lack the direct connection of materiality to the life once lived. Although Kaitlyn's social media platform has direct connection from her life to the medium, there is no direct physicality considering the medium is not physical in nature. However, the first two mediums create an extension of the mourner, to the creation of the mourner. Taking out the extension of the deceased. This brings us to the question: if the method of memorialization is not dictated by the deceased, can it truly be considered mourning for the dead, or rather, mourning for the idea of the dead? Though an essence of the deceased still holds true in those places, those places, the lack of a physical body therefore fostering a communal mourning of memory of the dead rather than mourning the dead themselves.

Traditionally, a visit to a gravesite allows mourners to engage in a connection through the physical proximity of their bodies to the final resting place of the deceased. The presence of a mourning space offers a sense of closeness and security in the passing that is often comforting to the mourners. However, with physical memorials, the process of mourning unfolds through the

proximity of one's body to associated objects or locations where the memorials are held, sometimes not even directly related to the deceased.

When you compare these levels of commitment and displacement, the social media memorial stands as the closest to commitment and placement as that of a graveyard. But, in theory it stands furthest from that of a physical graveyard in the medium.

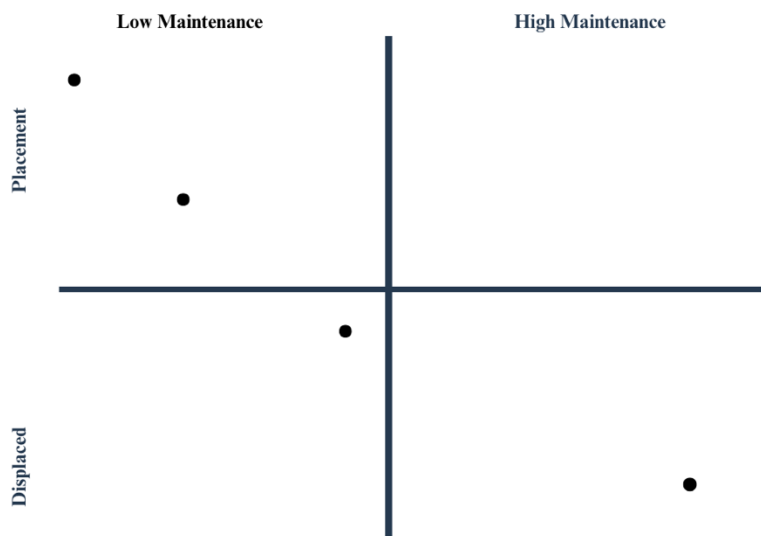


Figure 7

To visually represent this, I've created a chart that can be seen within Figure 7.

From a Maintenance/Placement standpoint we can observe the visual correlation between a typical gravesite (top left corner) and a virtual memorial such as Kaitlyn's (below and

to the left). (Bob and peer review note: I literally could not get additional captions in to label the dots for the life of me, if you know of just a basic way to make a graph like this please let me know <3) But, perhaps it is not the traditional body to body connection that is needed in terms of long-standing grief, but the connection to the likeness of who they were. The street memorial, for instance, despite being one of the least personal options in terms of memorialization, served as one of the least practical and most temporary forms, emphasizing the dynamics at play with mediums in the process of mourning and remembrance.

In conclusion, throughout the comparative analysis of memorialization mediums, we have discussed dynamics of grief tied to that of temporary shrines, permanent memorials, and virtual memorialization, each offering new insights on the way people grieve and how they reflect themselves (the mourner) onto the deceased. We remember people by the memory we implant for them. This analysis of mediums serves to the human impulse to remember and commemorate those who have passed. The findings of this analysis implement the significance that physical proximity, placement, and maintenance can have on impressions of mourning. Overall, it shows a discrepancy between the life of the deceased and the mourner within its sense of materiality.

“I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.”

- Lauren Wise

Works Featured

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