

Ben A. Student

Professor Patricia Garrison

English 102.16

14 April 2004

Summary of "Reposing in the Preparation Room"

In an essay titled "Reposing in the Preparation Room," world renown British author and muckraker Jessica Mitford argues that while we may know the entire "geography of the digestive system," these days few of us know much about the process of embalming. If we knew what went on behind the "formaldehyde curtain," she says, we might better understand why morticians are so reluctant to talk about it, either in person or in print. The process can be divided into two big stages: embalming and restoring. First, the "dermasurgeon" lays the body out amid the tools of his trade: the "scalpels, scissors, augers, forceps, clamps, needles, pumps, tubes, bowls and basins," as well as all the "fluids, sprays, pastes, oils, powders, creams" and cosmetics and the props (18). Mitford notes the importance morticians place on getting to work before rigor mortis sets in. A stale corpse is harder to work with.

Next, she says, the mortician drains the blood and replaces it with embalming fluid. The drainage point is especially important, but every mortician has a favorite spot. About three to six gallons of embalming solution are then pumped into the body through the mouth, which has been sewn together to preserve a "pleasant expression." The teeth are polished with Bon Ami and coated with nail polish while the eyes are closed with flesh colored eye caps. Finally, the contents of the abdomen are removed and replaced with "cavity fluid." Then the corpse is smeared with cream to protect its skin from chemical burns and left alone for a while, ideally eight to ten hours, after "the

tissues have become firm and dry”(19).

Restoring is the next phase of the process. At this point, the mortician replaces missing limbs with plaster of Paris replicas. Lips or noses can be modeled with wax. The mortician can even simulate healthy skin texture with cosmetics, or rejoin a head to the torso with splints, wires and sutures covered with a high collar or scarf. He can trim swollen lips or fill out sunken areas with injections of massage cream, being careful to shape the mouth and hold it in place with straight pins or with an “Armstrong Face Former and Denture Replacer,” or by dislocating the jaw and wiring it in the new position. Jaundiced corpses can be heavily made up and displayed under rose colored lights, while those who died of carbon monoxide will already have a “healthy glow”(20-21). Finally, the mortician shaves, washes and dresses the body, fixes the hair, applies the final coat of makeup, cleans the hands and nails and arranges the body in the casket so as to create the impression that the person is resting comfortably (17-21).