

"Now I LAY ME DOWN To SLEEP. . .": SYMBOLS AND  
THEIR MEANING ON CHILDREN'S GRAVEMARKERS  
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*Now I lay me down to sleep*; the bedtime prayer so familiar to many children dating back to the New England Primer of 1781 was a plea to the Almighty to protect the soul of the petitioner during the night. If for any reason death would come while the child was in that vulnerable state of sleep, the Lord was asked to take the soul, thus saving it from other alternatives. Even to this day as we approach a new millennium, this child's bedtime prayer is still invoked.

The Victorian Age was a time when euphemism was very much the rule of the day. It would be correct to assume that the child did not consciously comprehend the symbolic significance of the prayer. However, when visiting burial sites and reading the inscriptions upon the markers there, we frequently see such phrases as: *At rest, Asleep in the Lord, Resting, In the company of angels, Asleep*, and so on. Mourners and visitors quickly saw the implied meaning of the reference being made. Therefore, when looking at the words of the prayer, we can fairly claim that it serves as a good example of euphemism. The other form equating to this lessening of that considered too strong was symbol. Everyone who has studied literature is already acquainted with this. Of the two types, open and closed, it is the closed symbol having one meaning readily recognized by those who encounter it. The antecedent of death was more often than not established through the motif found carved or etched upon the marker. These symbols held the quality of universality crossing racial, national, and ethnic boundaries. For example, the cross was always symbolic of death; whereas, a flower, vine, or other depiction of something living was symbolic of life—eternal life. The laurel wreath stood for victory over death. Death was and is still looked upon as a transition from earthly life to eternal life. Recognition of the lily as symbolic of eternal life and the rose for love became closed symbols as well. Symbols, then, convey a specific meaning relative to death and more specifically to human qualities and are universally understood. Probably most important is the fact that the gravemarker reflects society's attitude towards death at the time of the symbol's implementation.

Humans are the only creatures aware that they will eventually die. Because of this knowledge they plan for that eventuality. As a part of the preparation for the inevitable, serious thought is given to ways in which to memorialize the deceased. There is sometimes much planning in the design and execution of the gravemarker. Nowhere is the impact more apparent than that of the marker for a child. The child has always been revered by its parents; however, it was during the Victorian period that a noticeable shift occurred in the overall philosophy of the family unit especially in terms of a change in perception of the child. Its image was changing to that of being innocent, unblemished, and pure. The child was closely associated with the home (Snyder). As a direct result, the death of a child was treated much differently than that of the adult counterpart. This attitude was reflected clearly in the resulting funerary monuments. Another accompanying change was that of the view of death. By the mid-nineteenth century religious ideas began to alter the shape of the notion of death in America. With the arrival of Arminianism, which advocated that salvation was attainable through good works, Protestant Americans realized it would be better to focus on salvation rather than on damnation (Sloane). The gravesite became a permanent memorial to the successes and good deeds of the loved one. Symbols were being created to convey this new focus. For children, these sites became even more important. Thus, we see more serious attention being paid to the design and use of symbols for the children. With the place of the child in the family and the new religious shift, children who had died were actually being adored in the cemeteries (Sloane) through all kinds of memorial structures and new child-specific symbols.

Throughout the early evolution of symbolic representations for use on children's gravemarkers, emphasis was placed on human mortality. Children very often had the same symbols as adults, but the symbols were smaller to represent the child as a small adult. The skull and bones evolved to the winged skull during early New England times (Dickran and Tashjian). The markers for children very often showed cherubs, or the smaller angels. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a gradual move to lambs, small angels, and guardian angels became more prominent for the child's marker. Once the twentieth century arrived, the use of these same symbols

continued. By mid-century another level emerged. The sudden appearance of images of toys, small animals, and effigies of the deceased became more commonplace. The use of photographic images as depicted on porcelain attachments to the markers was profuse for nearly thirty years beginning at the turn of the twentieth century. As we approach the end of this century, we find a resurgence of the photographic images as well as laser images of the child. Today, we have also included by way of engraved etchings and carvings of the kinds of activities engaged in by the departed child. Also, depictions of those things most cherished in life by the deceased are prominently displayed. At this point it should be noted that grave goods, not to be confused with grave decorations (Edgette 1998), are used to supplement and to underscore the vitality and interests of the child that once lived. Often, the impression conveyed is that of peace and tranquility and knowledge that the child is safe in the hands of the Maker. One could suppose that rest and slumber-like peace is the universal trait prevailing. *I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*

In looking at various examples of children's gravemarkers from around the country it quickly becomes very obvious through emerging patterns that the symbols used are commonly found in all areas of the United States. In Bristol, Rhode Island, for example, there is an ancient slate marker (1700) that shows the six babies who never lived beyond their first year. The marker is approximately seven feet wide and eighteen inches high having six sculpted winged cherubs across its top. Immediately, one is drawn to this marker by its strong visual presence. In 1925 a small child died outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His parents had a small angel mounted to the right of the family monument. It is made of white marble and shows a small angel with spread wings having his hands folded as if he were praying. The overall height of the angel is approximately three feet. Not far from this small angel is one that stands eight feet in height at a grave for an adult. In a paper I gave at the Association for Gravestone Studies at its regional conference in Portland, Oregon, in August of 1998 (Edgette 1998), I made a case for the soul being represented by a winged creature. In terms of class or level, the angel would be first. It is the only human-like non-human symbol used to represent the deceased. Further, much attention has been given to the idea that guardian

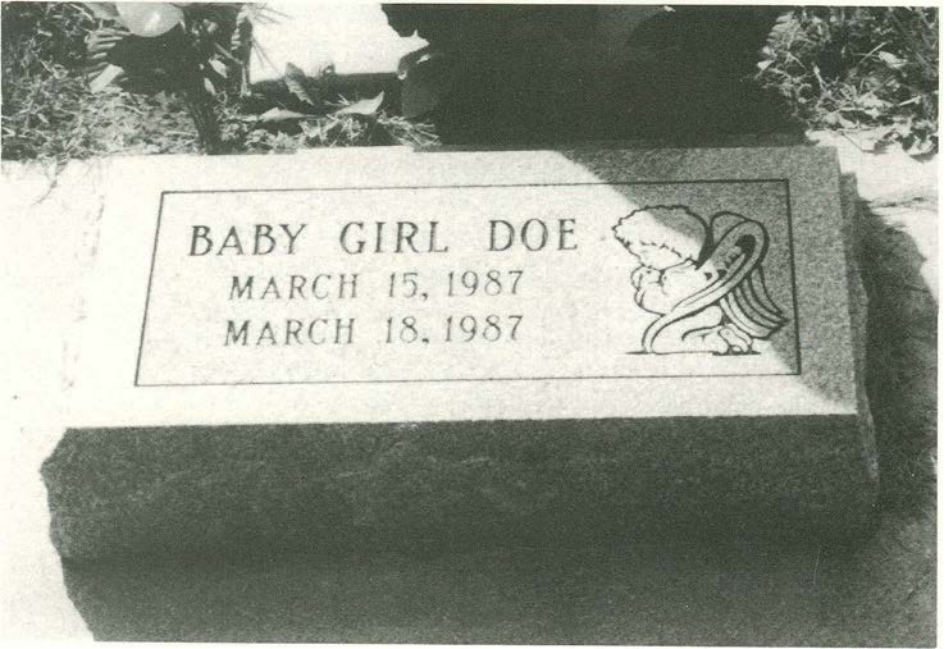
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angels do exist. It is my contention that the angel is simply a way to characterize the soul of the human. In many cultures the use of the bird, a symbol for flight, is the means of transporting the soul to its place in eternal life. Another winged creature found on the markers for children is the butterfly. A double symbol is exhibited here in that the butterfly also suggests a metamorphosis from mortal to spirit. Once more the wings imply flight back to the Father. Angels and other winged creatures, if small in size, are indicative of the child. In the Chester Rural Cemetery not far from Philadelphia is a small flat stone of salt and pepper granite having a small fairy seated atop a small green oblong stone about an inch long embedded into the granite. This is the marker of little Melissa Watt who died at the age of eight years. The tiny fairy with spread wings is symbolic of the spirit or the soul of Melissa. Pattern emerges very quickly when discovering these symbols. In LaSalle, Illinois, in 1987, an abandoned baby was found in a waste can in one of the local cemeteries there. The simple flat, granite stone place atop her grave read: *Baby Girl Doe, March 15, 1987, March 18, 1987*, with an angel carved to the right of the name. This angel was positioned as a side profile facing the name. It is kneeling with hands folded in prayer. The motif depicted is very commonly found across the country. One needs only to visit a cemetery where a section has been dedicated to the burial of children. Among the various designations of these areas would be *Babyland, God's Children, Littlest Angels, and Our Children*. Time or age of the marker does not appear to alter the likelihood of its design or presentation. The only appreciable change is that of the technique used to depict the image, i.e., etching versus engraving versus laser.

The angel does abound and is the most common symbol used to represent the child in death; however, it is not the only one. Included in a long list of motifs directly associated with very young children are rattles, alphabet blocks, tricycles, wagons, highchairs, toy trains, dolls, baby shoes, and the like. The motifs found on the memorials for older children have a tendency to show the kinds of things associated with that age group. Examples include: sports equipment (bats, basketballs, baseball gloves, hockey sticks, pucks, boxing gloves, skis), automobiles, scooters, bicycles, motorbikes, the whole range of musical instruments, school insignias, organizations to which they belonged, class rings, and so on.

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There are times, however, when no motif is found. The wording itself is powerful enough to tug at the heartstrings of the visitor. In upstate New York at a fairly large cemetery there is a flat little stone that reads: *Baby John, born- Jan. 7, 1974, 4 pounds 2 ounces, 18 inches tall, died the same day.* Another, in Yeadon, Pennsylvania, simply reads: *W. W. Colt, aged, 8 months, died, July 1877.* The letters have been stenciled onto a piece of wood cut in the shape of a tablet stone and placed next to his father's military issued marker in the military section of the cemetery. Sometimes there are phrases: *Our gift from heaven, stillborn, our brief joy, our little angel, God's gift, our saint, dearest one,* or simply *baby.* The word when carefully and appropriately chosen can be just as moving as the visual icon.

From the mid-1850s and continuing for the next fifty or sixty years, it was commonplace to see the use of both headstones and footstones at the burial site. The headstone, placed at the head or top of the grave, had a smaller but identically shaped stone at the foot. Usually the only printing on the latter consisted of the departed's initials. Furthermore, it was a time in cemetery design that curbing, coping, and fencing were used to set off the burial plot from those neighboring it. For ease of maintenance and for insurance reasons most of these boundary markers have been removed today. A practice was begun whereby the headstone and footstone were connected by the use of side pieces. The resulting configuration became to be known as a cradle stone because of its visual similarity to the shape of a baby's cradle. However, similar cradles were designed for adults as well. These obviously were larger. It is a very moving sight to see a row of three or four adult cradles with a small one beside the mother's. One of the finest examples of the baby cradle I have discovered was found in Pennsylvania. It consists of a white marble headstone on which is inscribed:

DAUGHTER OF

G. PURTIS & HANNAH M. COX  
 BORN OCT. 22, 1877.  
 DIED APRIL 10, 1879.

"NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP. . ."



NO MORE NEED OF SIGNING.  
WHEN EVENING SHADOWS CREEP.  
THE CRADLE BED IS EMPTY.  
OUR DARLING'S GONE TO SLEEP.

Approximately 48 inches below the headstone is a footstone on which is carved a simple A, perhaps the first initial of the child. Connecting the two stones are sides of matching white marble. Taken as a whole a cradle has been created. The opening in the bed part of the cradle was often filled with flowers or ivy to symbolize everlasting life. In the Chester Rural Cemetery, established

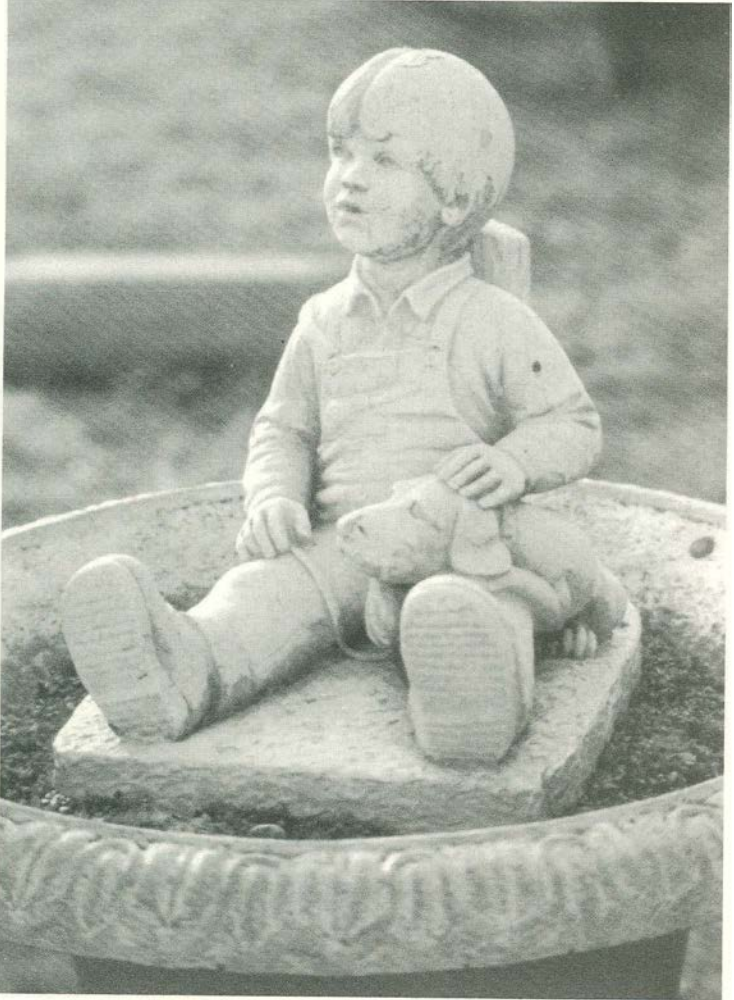
in 1864, is another white marble child's marker. This one has a small baby's cradle bed atop a twenty-inch high pedestal. The cradle is empty with the blanket turned down at an angle to the bottom of the cradle. On the floor next to it can be found two little shoes, one upright and the other on its side. Over the headboard is a cloth-like material draped very carefully going from a left to right direction. This symbolizes the pall or curtain of death that has descended upon the child. The grave contains the mortal remains of a one-year-old who died in 1878.

The use of effigies was popular throughout most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially for those families who could financially afford such monuments. Typically, they were life-sized statues of the deceased child. It is important to note that the resemblance between the sculpted figure and the child were remarkably close. They were the equivalent of carved photographs. The Zurbuch stone in Fort Wayne, Indiana, shows a little boy seated on the ground with legs outstretched leaning against a tree. His right hand is resting upon his right knee. In that hand we see what appears to be the other end of a leash. On his left is a puppy whose head and upper body are resting upon the boy's left knee. The boy's left hand is resting upon the head of the puppy.

The face of the child is innocent with eyes wide open and a hint of smile. His hair is parted in the middle. He is wearing a long sleeved shirt with collar opened at the neck and overalls whose right strap is slightly sliding off his right shoulder while that on the left is securely in place. The gravestone reminds the passerby of a Norman Rockwell subject

At Fernwood Cemetery in a suburb of Philadelphia can be found another effigy. This one depicts "Bicycle Boy," a name known to the residents of Norman VanKirk's neighborhood. Carved by Thomas Wood, a prominent Philadelphia carver in the early 1900s, it presents a small boy with his tricycle. According to local lore, Norman accompanied his parents to Atlantic City, New Jersey, the shore resort, in the summer of 1898. Little Norman having become overheated while riding his tricycle decided to cool off by climbing into a nearby horse trough. Within a few days he had contracted pneumonia and was dead within ten days. Because of severe weathering and the adverse effects of acid rain, the marker today is undergoing restoration at the H. C. Wood Monu-

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ment Company, owned by the great-great nephew of Thomas, the creator of the effigy.

Function was not always looked upon as simply an aesthetic one, but rather a way of personifying the memory of the deceased. Often, it has been discovered that the cemetery effigy becomes the photographic record, a photograph in stone, of notable members who once lived within the community. However, the use of the effigy to immortalize the child by families who were not classified as community notables are found frequently. A charming grave marker in the form of the effigy is found in the Presbyterian Cemetery in Ellettsville, Indiana, of a little boy who has fallen asleep with his hands under his chin. He has very short hair and a



peaceful smile. He is in a kneeling position with his rump up in the air as he sleeps. *If I should die before I wake.*

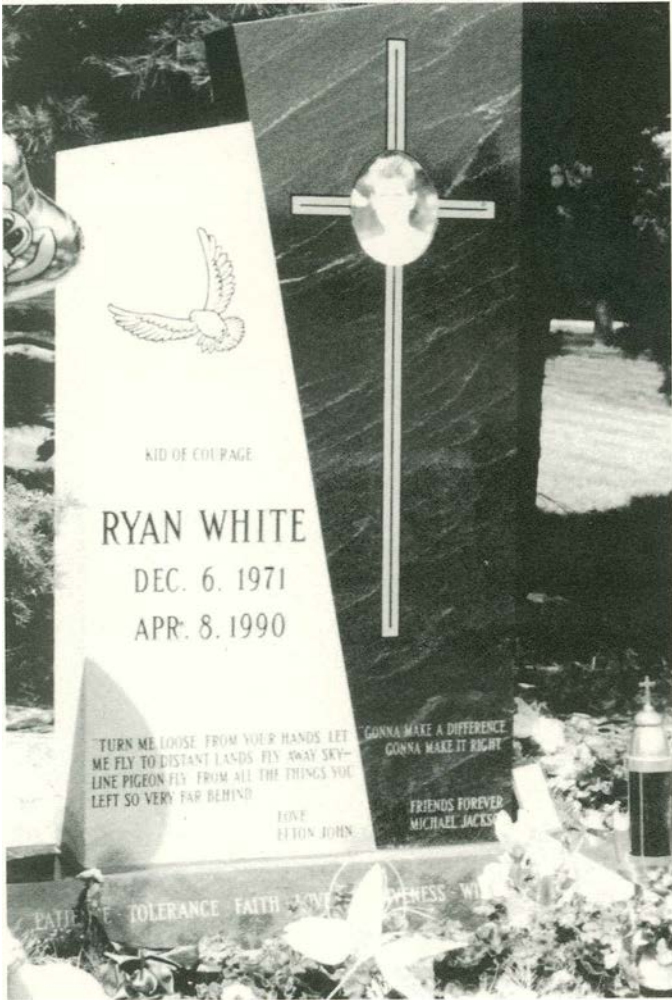
Because of the change in attitude and perspective on death, it became very common for families to photograph their loved ones in death. Photography has been an important piece in the coming to grips with the traumatic impact of dealing with life's disruption caused by the premature passing of loved ones, especially children (Norfleet). The death images are sometimes shocking, some-

times melancholy, but at the same time they can be sobering and comforting; the grief never totally goes away. The loss of a child results in permanent and unbinding sorrow. No other death can compare to it. Shakespeare's *King John* states, "Grief fills the room up of my absent child" (Norfleet). The transferal of a photographic image to porcelain through a special process made it possible to show and to preserve the actual image of the child as they looked in life or at the time of their death. This addition would make its way into the cemeteries throughout the entire nation. In the case of children it was most common to include the picture as an actual attachment to the gravemarker. These photos typically showed the child in eternal sleep in their coffin or casket. It was literally the last view of the child. Cemeteries established from the early 1900s through late 1930s will certainly contain many examples of these photos. After the peak, approximately 1941, these photographs fell into disuse. Many families who would sometimes show the photographs to others began to hide them from public view. The practice was labeled "morbid." A shift again toward death was becoming evident. Since the early to mid-1970s, the resurgence in the interest of using porcelain portraits has arisen. Today, we continue to use these porcelainized photos; however, the images are often "favorite" photos of the child. These poses are from life not death. Also, greater use is being made today of laser etching which enables the designer to transfer the photographic image to granite without any appreciable loss of detail.

Since we now have evidence of more modern designs and presentation, we are seeing the retention of the standard symbols, but they are being configured and arranged in a more modern context. For example there is a marker for a child whereon is a frontal view of the child asleep in the palm of a hand. The hand is presumably that of God. The fingers are strong and at the same time gentle. The fingernails are well manicured and imply those of male. The motif here is obviously a reference to the hymn, *On Eagles' Wings* specifically to the line, ". . . and he will hold you, hold you in the palm of His hand." The size of the child shown would correspond to a very young one. This is substantiated by the inscribed data. Linda Trosley was born on the 15th day of June in 1997 and "became an angel" on April 24, 1998, but will never be forgotten. The motif in this instance is both relative and appro-

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priate. Thus, in examining the gravemarkers of children attention is always drawn first to the motif and then to the inscription. The inscription tends to confirm any implications suggested by the motific symbols.

Death is a part of the life cycle, and it is important that it be treated with dignity and solemnity. Any death is a tragic one, for the loss of any individual is always tragic; however, the power of prayer or faith, support, and the healing qualities of time soften the harshness of death itself. The loss of a child is enormous in its levels of grief and sorrow. It is said that parents are not supposed to survive their children; but this is not always the case. For, everyday somewhere, someplace, somebody is losing a child to that predator, death. Because of the strong belief in the innocence and purity of the child, we have a more difficult time coming to terms with the death. It is through the gravemarker and its employing iconography that the memory of the child is immortalized far better than that of the adult. The innocence guarantees a select seat in the afterlife.

Ryan White, the young man who achieved national attention in the 1980s because his Aids-related illness, is buried in Cicero, Indiana. His gravemarker is made of two-tone granite, unpolished white and polished black. It has his name and dates and three very conspicuous symbols. As one approaches, the porcelain close-up of a young man sporting a happy smile is placed precisely at the center of a cross where the arms come together. It is very attractively designed and the contrast is very stark, gray against deep black. Adjacent to and on the left segment of the marker the reverse is in evidence. Deep black lines meticulously are carved into an unpolished background of white granite.

Centered above, near the top, is a soaring pigeon. This bird is a symbol for the soul, and its being shown in flight indicates return to that place from whence it came. Beneath the eagle are the words *KID OF COURAGE*, obviously an allusion to the pain and suffering he had to endure through his physical battle coupled with the social non-acceptance of the situation. A quotation from Elton John graces the front bottom of this side of the marker:

TURN ME LOSE FROM YOUR HANDS.  
LET ME FLY TO DISTANT LANDS.

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FLY AWAY SKY-LINE PIGEON,  
FLY FROM ALL THE THINGS  
YOU LEFT SO VERY FAR BEHIND.

LOVE

ELTON JOHN

Next to this quotation is a second from Michael Jackson:

"GONNA MAKE A DIFFERENCE,  
GONNA MAKE IT RIGHT."

FRIENDS FOREVER

MICHAEL JACKSON

Finally, along the base of Ryan's memorial stone are the words:

PATIENCE-TOLERANCE-FAITH-LOVE-FORGIVENESS-WILL

Taken as a whole this grave marker embodies all that symbolism is supposed to do. It conveys in iconographic terms our wishes and hopes for the deceased relative on their place in eternity.

Over time we as a culture have always honored our dead. We insist on a dignified and fitting funeral, and we erect suitable and most often tastefully designed gravemarkers. The marker for a child tends to be more poignant than those of adults. The poignancy is manifested in the symbols used thereon. For, regardless of those used, the ultimate request is: *I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

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