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The Victorian Obsession with Death

When considering the Victorian era, a common perspective of the culture is of one that was prudish, stuffy, and dynamic but perhaps with an underlying tone of darkness. The Victorian era brought England to its apex as a world power through rapid industrialization which, although it allowed Britain to rise, brought about many social and economic problems and discussions. The world around the Victorians was constantly changing and the culture itself adapted as well. However, among the many innovations of the era was one constant: death. When analyzing the Victorian culture, it is obvious that coping with one's own mortality is a recurring theme. It permeates every aspect of Victorian life, from literature to the harsh reality of life in Victorian England plagued with deplorable working conditions for the poor and a rapid increase in murder. Death became such a prevalent aspect of Victorian life that mourning became an art form in their culture, exemplified by their ruler herself, Queen Victoria. By analyzing various aspects of Victorian culture, from the "art" of dying to published works of literature with macabre themes, one can clearly see that death was a morbid fascination for the Victorians that surrounded them in every facet of their lives.

Victorian society called for strict rules regarding mourning and the practices related to death. In her article, "A Victorian Obsession With Death" D. Lyn Hunter describes the "fetishistic rituals" that helped surviving family members cope with the loss of their loved ones (Hunter). The utmost example of the extravagance of Victorian grieving rituals is Queen

Victoria. She elaborately mourned the death of her husband, Prince Albert, for 40 years (Hunter). She dressed in all black every day following his death and kept the home exactly as it was the day he died (Hunter). She made her servants set out Albert's clothes, bring hot water for his shaving, scour his chamber pot, and change the bed linens as if he were still there to use it all (Hunter). The Queen also made sure that a bust or painting of Albert was included in every portrait of the royal family (Hunter). As can be seen, up to the highest levels of society, the mourning ritual was pervasive.

Another reason why the Victorians were so ritualistic in their methods of grieving is because death was simply a way of life due to the high mortality rates (Hunter). In London, the average lifespan for middle to upper class males was 44 years of age, 25 for tradesman, and 22 for laborers (Hunter). Quality of life, quality of healthcare, lifespan, amount of wealth, and difficulty of work diminished proportionally to the descent in social class. Hunter states that 57 out of every 100 children in working class families were deceased by the age of 5, exemplary of just how poor the conditions were for lower class communities (Hunter). Since the chances of a long healthy life were far more likely for upper class families, their rituals for death and mourning were far more elaborate.

A practice called "memento mori", Latin for "remember, you must die," though not originating in the Victorian era, was put into practice far more often during this time to reflect the Victorians' strange fascination with death. The remembrance of the deceased was often immortalized through jewelry such as a locket which held a piece of the dead's hair, death masks, or more notably photographs or portraits of the recently deceased (Hunter). Bethan Bell discusses the macabre practice of post-mortem photography in his article "Taken from Life: The Unsettling Art of Death Photography". The photographs were used to commemorate the dead

and “blunt the sharpness of grief” for survivors (Bethan). The images typically reflect the dead surrounded by family, posing as if they were alive, or with the appearance of sleeping (Bethan). Post-mortem photography was popular for infants or children due to the increase of fatal diseases such as the measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever, and rubella (Bethan). Families used death photography as the last, or in the case of children or infants sometimes first and last, opportunity to have a permanent image of their child (Bethan). The art of death and grieving not only permeated the reality of Victorians, but also their published fiction.

During the Victorian era, literacy skyrocketed because of an increase in access to public education. With a more literate society in combination with the abolition of the stamp tax on printing paper in 1855, the demand for a variety of reading material was high. Beginning in the 1830’s, Penny Bloods sold for a penny and became immensely popular among the middle and lower classes as well as children (Flanders). Judith Flanders states in her article “Penny Dreadfuls” that penny bloods, later renamed penny dreadfuls were beloved by the Victorian public due, in part, to their cheap price, easy accessibility, brilliant illustrations, and sensational content (Flanders). Penny dreadfuls told stories of adventure, initially regarding pirates and highwaymen but later shifting to crime, detection, gothic tales, and murder (Flanders). The most successful penny blood was *Mysteries of London* written by George W Reynolds, spanning 12 years, nearly 4.5 million words, with content regarding slums, true crime, and detectives while contrasting “the dreadful world of the slums with the decadent life of the careless rich” (Flanders). As their popularity increased over time, the influence of penny dreadfuls and their content became a concern for parents and society.

In her article “Penny dreadfuls: the Victorian equivalent of video games” Kate Summerscale discusses the ramifications of the younger generation constantly consuming such

dark reading material. Summerscale states that “penny fiction was Britain’s first taste of mass-produced popular culture for the young...like movies, comics, video games” and that its influence “was held responsible for anything from petty theft to homicide” (Summerscale). Most of the periodicals were sold to working-class boys who had been taught to read in state-funded schools (Summerscale). Summerscale reflects on the fact that literate children likely “thoroughly enjoyed the cheap magazines as a distraction from the drills of state-school curriculum and repetitive tasks of mechanized industry” meaning that penny bloods were an escape from their monotonous and often mature lives (Summerscale). The results of such a large population of the younger generation reading macabre tales of horror and crime is supposedly seen in the murder of Emily Coombes (Summerscale). Emily Coombes was found stabbed to death on the 17 of July in 1895 in east London (Summerscale). She had two sons, Robert and Nattie aged 13 and 12 who were found to be the killers (Summerscale). When the police searched the home, they found a stack of penny dreadfuls and cited the murder because of the boys’ reading (Summerscale). Due to the popularity of penny dreadfuls, not only was death a common event in reality, but the Victorians’ younger generation was now reading about it in their leisure time as well.

Death was prevalent not only in cheap fiction, but other works of literature as seen in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem *In Memoriam*. *In Memoriam* was written after the death of Tennyson’s close friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833 (Landow, “An Introduction to In Memoriam”). George P. Landow states, in his article “An Introduction to In Memoriam,” that the set of poems “leads the reader from grief and despair through doubt to hope and faith,” thus allowing the public to be privy to Tennyson’s stages of grief (Landow, “An Introduction...”). Landow considers the methods Victorians use to cope with their grief and states that “Tennyson...found that brief lyrics best embodied the transitory emotions that buffeted him after

his loss, [and] rejected conventional elegy and narrative because both falsify the experience of grief and recovery by mechanically driving the reader through a simplified version of these experiences” (Landow, “An Introduction...”). Tennyson chose to express his grief through poetry rather than the usual stiff and meaningless Victorian mourning rituals that seemed to convey to the world the person was grieving without celebrating the deceased person’s life or experiencing the actual loss at all. Tennyson even remarks on this choice within his poems stating “I sometimes hold it half a sin/ To put in words the grief I feel; / For words, like Nature, half reveal/ And half conceal the Soul within” meaning that Tennyson realizes his chosen method of memorializing Hallam also lends itself to the possibility of the appearance of grief without actual feeling the emotion itself (Tennyson 1190). He reflects that his writings also function mechanically in the lines “A use in measured language lies; / The sad mechanic exercise,/ Like dull narcotics, numbing pain” illustrating that although his writings do help him process his own grief, they sometimes function as a drug, numbing him from feeling the extent of his loss (Tennyson 1190). In the last few lines of Stanza 5, Tennyson compares his writings to the typical Victorian mourning practices stating that “In words, like weeds, I’ll wrap me o’er, / Like coarsest clothes against the cold” which is reflective of the typical Victorian mourning dress in which they would wrap themselves in thick black clothing in order to express their grief to society only rather than fabric, Tennyson chose to clothe himself in rhyme as his mourning dress. (Tennyson 1190). With death permeating every single aspect of Victorian life, from heightened and dramatized rituals of mourning exemplified by their Queen to the constant consumption of published literature regarding death, the culmination of their morbid fascination with death could only result in the Victorians seeking the very thing they were obsessed with by any means necessary.

In England and Wales in 1810, only 15 people were convicted of murder out of a population of nearly 10 million which appears to be quite low, even for a relatively peaceful society (Motion). Approximately 40 years later, statistics increased drastically with 20,000 unexplained deaths in the same region (Motion). In his article, which reviews the book *The Invention of Murder* by Judith Flanders, Andrew Motion discusses the drastic increase in crime rates during the Victorian era using statistics from Flanders' book and what could have led to such an event. Motion contemplates whether the drastic increase could be attributed to several causes such as "simple human curiosity, genuine anxiety, or the efforts of a large supporting industry which stood to benefit from the original crime in various ways" (Motion). Victorians were absolutely obsessed with true crime and murder cases both fictional and real. Motion cites a specific case from Flanders' book to demonstrate the frenzy associated with murder cases. The case of John Thurtell was one of the many murder cases which led to a hysteria of media coverage (Motion). Thurtell, an illegal gambler, bludgeoned to death a fellow gambler by the name of William Weare and dumped his body in a Pond in Hertfordshire (Motion). The crime was immediately sensationalized by the media and became a part of the Victorian obsession with the macabre (Motion). Newspapers used the story to increase their circulations; melodramas were written about the crime for two London theatres; tourists visited the murder scene and paid for tours (Motion). The most telling aspect of the story and of the Victorian fascination with death was that 40,000 people turned out to see Thurtell publicly executed for his crime and even following the execution, the marketing of the story continued long after (Motion). Although the Thurtell case was incredibly sensationalized, there was a far more popular murder case that created a media frenzy unlike the Victorians had ever seen before.

Jack the Ripper is easily the world's most famous serial killer, being that the case remains unsolved even to this day. When one thinks of the Victorian era, the shadowed figure donning a top hat and holding a large knife often comes to mind because the killer is so closely associated to the time. Thomas Walker discusses the tumultuous media frenzy that surrounded the case and why Victorian society was so obsessed with such brutal killings in his article "Jack the Ripper- The First Media Murderer". Sadly, a great deal of what is known of the Ripper killings is based upon "historical speculation, biased media coverage, or simple folklore" (Walker). The name of the killer itself, originating from the infamous "Dear Boss" letter sent to a London newspaper, is now believed to be a hoax perpetrated by a journalist to increase the newspapers' circulation (Walker). Although many theories regarding the killings and suspects were disproved, the media frenzy surrounding the case allowed misinformation to spread like wildfire among the morbidly fascinated Victorians. The mystery that still surrounds the Ripper's identity along with the brutality of the murders combined with the media frenzy surrounding the case created the field of "Ripperology" (Walker). The reason this case was so prominent is due to the media. Newspapers provided "constant updates on the progress of the case, wild speculation regarding the culprit, and angry denunciations of the living conditions in Whitechapel residents" (Walker). The case was a topic of simultaneous fear and interest for all social classes since the lower classes were the victims and residents of Whitechapel while the upper class thrived on the somewhat sensationalized fiction aspect of the story. Although Jack the Ripper may not have been the first serial killer, he did spark the first modern media frenzy that only contributed, if not immortalized, the Victorian fascination with death.

By analyzing multiple aspects of Victorian life and culture, there is no doubt that the Victorians had a peculiar enchantment with the art of dying. The Victorian era was a time of

change, innovation, and hope but with that change came a sense of unease for the future. With the many economic, social, medical, educational, and societal advancements being made, it forced the Victorians to question everything they had known before and thus spawned a fascination with the one thing they knew to be certain, death. As they grasped onto this one constant, death began to permeate every single aspect of their lives until it eventually surrounded them. From their dress, their Queen, their day-to-day rituals, their leisurely and high fiction, to finally culminating in an increase in crime and murder. The Victorians struggled with an internal conflict every single human being battles with, coming to terms with one's own inevitable mortality.

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