

PAYING RESPECTS: DEATH, COMMODITY CULTURE,
AND THE MIDDLE CLASS IN VICTORIAN LONDON

by

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A THESIS

IN

HISTORY

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank several people for their help during the production of this thesis. My committee chairperson, Dr. Aliza Wong, has granted me her patience, knowledge, and guidance; without her support, I may never have completed this project on time. Dr. Paul Deslandes, my original mentor at Texas Tech University, provided me with much encouragement and assistance – even from Vermont. I also wish to thank Dr. Gretchen Adams, for helping me shape this project in my first semester as a graduate student and providing much encouragement.

Also, I wish to express my gratitude to the History Department of Texas Tech University and my many colleagues.

Lastly, I want to thank my parents, Madeline Mills and Michael Owens, for believing in my abilities and for constant positive reinforcement.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Hearse and four, Sir?” says he. “No, a pair will be sufficient.” “I beg your pardon, Sir, but when we buried Mr. Grundy at number twenty, there were four on’em, Sir; I think it right to mention it.” “Well, perhaps there had better be four.” “Thank you, Sir. Two coaches and four, Sir, shall we say?” “No, coaches and pair.” “You’ll excuse my mentioning it, Sir, but pairs to the coaches and four to the hearse would have a singular appearance to the neighbours...”¹

In the nineteenth century, Great Britain found itself in a very enviable position. Military prowess and missionary zeal combined to create an empire upon which the sun never set. In the heart of the Empire, the Industrial Revolution continued unabated: advances in technology made possible Britain’s dominance of commercial manufactures, which helped usher in a great age of economic prosperity. Members of the expanding middle class benefited the most from this growth. This group, with their recently acquired consumerist tendencies, now enjoyed more opportunities than ever to rid themselves of their newfound disposable wealth.

In contrast to this burgeoning *bourgeoisie*, some of Queen Victoria’s other, less privileged subjects experienced more acutely the negative effects associated with rapid urban growth. Overcrowded and dirty slums, disease epidemics, and, especially between the years 1850 and 1870, rising death rates plagued the working and poor classes of London.² In response to these issues, a reforming spirit swept the consciences of the

¹ Charles Dickens, “The Raven in the Happy Family,” from Household Words 1850-9; as quoted in John Morley, Death, Heaven and the Victorians (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 12.

privileged classes, leading to social change and legislation that ameliorated, to varying degrees, the lives of all those within the city. Despite this, death continued to touch the lives of all classes on a regular basis and the inability to conquer death was a daily reminder of the limits of human ingenuity. Death posed a challenge to the Victorians and it was a challenge that they ultimately could not meet. Therefore, Victorians – especially the members of the middle class, with their growing senses of self-importance – seemed to have a near-obsession with controlling, beautifying, understanding, and civilizing death.

Though this fascination with death transcended class boundaries, its material and consumerist manifestations are most evident in the actions and behaviors of the middle class. This group as a whole had, in addition to the extra income with which to engage in mourning ceremonies of varying degrees of elaboration, a psychological and social motivation to penetrate the ostentatious ranks of the gentry and distance themselves from the working class who struggled in matters of both life and death. The actions and behaviors of the members of this class spoke volumes about how they viewed themselves in relation to other people. Additionally, a new group of capitalists emerged during this time – the commercial purveyors of cemetery plots and death ephemera – that seemed to be aware of these realities and tried their best to satisfy and even exploit the needs of the middle class. The relationship between these people and the middle class needed to be

² See Gareth Stedman Jones, Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), for a description of the growing disparities between social classes.

examined to understand the middle class in general. In the recent historiography of death, these aspects have been neglected.

One of the earliest works on death written in England was the 1926 book Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development by Bertram S. Puckle. This book presents the reader with a broad overview of death-related information from around the world. Puckle discusses everything from superstitions to funerals to embalming; nevertheless, his book does not cover anything in great depth. Apart from Puckle's book, the study of death, especially in Britain, seems to have been relatively neglected until the 1970s. In that decade, however, two seminal works appeared: John Morley's Death, Heaven, and the Victorians (1971) and James Stevens Curl's The Victorian Celebration of Death (1972). Morley's book provides a comprehensive look at the material culture of death in the nineteenth century, with coverage on topics such as funeral ephemera, mourning dress, and monuments and their association with "gentility."³ Morley's book offers little analysis of consumer or middle-class culture in general and tends to focus on the material goods themselves. Curl's ambitious book, which includes an exceptional discussion of the origins of the romanticized Victorian death culture, covers such subjects as royal funerals, funeral ephemera, cremation, and burial reform. However, Curl, whose interest is primarily the study of architecture, devotes the bulk of his book to the development and impact of private cemeteries, especially London's Kensal Green.

Other notable publications concerning death in England have appeared over the last thirty years, but none explicitly deal with the relationship between death and

³ Morley, 11.

Victorian-era middle-class consumerism. Ruth Richardson wrote a very informative book about the unsavory medical aspect of the relationship between paupers and death, Death, Dissection and the Destitute (1987). Patricia Jalland's book, Death in the Victorian Family (1996), is a study of death in Victorian family units, with a focus on the psychological impact of mourning and ritual on the surviving relatives. The outstanding collection, Death in England: An Illustrated History (2000), provides a general examination of the history of death in England. It only contains two chapters that deal with the Victorian period: Julie Rugg's chapter covers the changes in death discourse over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (including discussion of sanitation), while Patricia Jalland's chapter covers the pinnacle and decline of the sentimental Victorian death culture.

Scholars have examined the Victorian culture of death, but these studies have tended to be relatively straightforward explanations of architecture, funeral memorabilia, and burial reform. Additionally, there has been very little written on the business of cemeteries, undertakers, and funerary memorabilia providers. The book Commodifying Everything: Relationships in the Market (2003) includes a chapter by Brent W. Tharp on the commodification of coffins; however, this is presented from a distinctly American point of view. George Nash's chapter in Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture (2000) – entitled “Pomp and Circumstance” – examines the corporatization of death, particularly concerning private cemeteries in Britain.

This thesis attempts to fulfill the need for a study of the relationship between middle-class consumerism and death culture in nineteenth-century England by analyzing manifestations of middle-class death culture – private cemeteries, mourning, funeral

ephemera, and the providers of these. It illuminates concerns about death, funerals, undertakers, burial grounds, and the desire to see government regulation of burial. With deeper analysis, still, the facts provide insight about middle-class attitudes towards health, urbanization, the poorer classes, as well as social reform and government power. Themes of control, regulation, morality, and even national superiority emerge, indicative of greater trends of concern in mid- to late-Victorian life. It becomes obvious that the middle class developed a sense of superiority over the lower classes and they developed a unique, self-serving morality that only benefited other classes by default.

The Making of the Middle Class

Before this study proceeds, one question must be considered: What constitutes the middle class? Historians believe now that the Industrial Revolution had been several centuries in the making by the nineteenth century with which it is most associated. It began, in earnest, in the eighteenth century. During the first half of the century, citizens of England witnessed the rise of the cottage industries, which employed whole towns in the weaving of cotton and wool cloth. The improvement of canals and the development of the turnpike system enabled goods to travel further, thus reducing costs for manufacturers and increasing availability to people all over the country. The continuing enclosure of farmland and the decrease in opportunities for small tenant farmers drove more people to the cities, which in turn provided a ready source of labor for burgeoning manufactured goods producers. Inventions such as the spinning Jenny, cast iron, and the

steam engine revolutionized English industry and set the pace for Britain to become the Europe's manufacturing powerhouse of the first half of the nineteenth century.⁴

This change in industry would lead to an increase in prosperity, which would lead to the growth of the middle social strata. By the middle of the eighteenth century, contemporary social observers (such as politicians and economists⁵) noted the rise of the "middling sort," those people that would form the later, recognizable middle class (though they were not called so until the 1780s⁶).

Class as a unit of study tends to be associated with Marxist interpretation and its focus on the working class and implications for social order; Marxists, however, tended to treat the middle class as an anomaly that would eventually be absorbed by the ruling capitalists or, in historical determinist fashion, into the proletariat.⁷ This study does not discount the Marxist view, as the middle class's relation to the economy is most definitely considered. In the 1980s, British historians realized that the middle class had been neglected in historical class studies and there has since been an increase in scholarship in this area over the last twenty years.⁸ Notable studies of the British middle

⁴ Frank O'Gorman, The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History 1688-1832 (London: Arnold, 1997), 21-4.

⁵ Paul Langford, A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 63.

⁶ O'Gorman, 108.

⁷ Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, ed., The Making of the British Middle Class? Studies of Regional and Cultural Diversity Since the Eighteenth Century (Stroud, England: Sutton, 1998), xxiv-xxv.

class include Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class (1987), Peter Earle's The Making of the English Middle Class (1989), John Smail's The Origins of Middle-Class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire, 1660-1780 (1994), and Dror Wharman's Imagining the Middle Class. The middle class, by its very nature, defies easy explanation. In the most basic description, a member of the middle class is not a member of the estate-based aristocracy or gentry and also not a member of the laboring class. This description leaves much to be desired, as this description may be applied to a large and heterogeneous group of individuals ranging from wealthy industrial capitalists (the true *bourgeoisie*) to small shopkeepers and lesser professionals such as teachers and clerks (the "lower middle class"). In a strict economic sense, these groups appear to have little in common. Recent historians, however, tended to define the middle class by its members relation to production and shared social and cultural mores. Earle described the disparate members of the middle class as "people of capital who were interested in profit, accumulation and improvement."⁹ Culturally, middle class characteristics included an interest in education, strong (and increasingly non-conformist) religious views, liberal political leanings, and faith in the family as the basis of a proper society.¹⁰ Thus, this study relies on a broad definition of the middle

⁸ Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, ed., Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1.

⁹ Peter Earle, The Making of the English Middle Class (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 332.

¹⁰ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13-28.

class; the descriptions of shared cultural attitudes in this study will attempt to bond the various strata of this class.

The middle class interest in accumulation and improvement manifested itself in the rise of middle-class consumerism. Beginning in the eighteenth century, members of the middle class became increasingly interested in “domestic comfort” and, with their disposable income, spent greater amounts on such conspicuous luxuries as clocks, ornate furniture, and bric-a-brac.¹¹ Women played a unique role in middle-class consumption: often concerned with acquiring goods for the comfort of the family, women gained power in the public sphere as later nineteenth-century merchants attempted to harness the power of the female consumer.¹² Books on consumerism are numerous; notable examples are Consumption and the World of Goods (1993), edited by John Brewer and Roy Porter, and Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle Class Identity in Britain 1800-1940 (1999), edited by Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, which is a collection of essays that specifically deal with the middle class. Other works have focused on consumerism as related to specific groups in society, such as women in Erika Rappaport’s Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End (2000) and both genders in The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective (1996), edited by Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough.

¹¹ Earle, 290-301.

¹² Simon Gunn, “The public sphere, modernity and consumption: new perspectives on the history of the English middle class” in Kidd and Nicholls, ed., Gender, 12-24.

Another cultural commonality of the nineteenth-century middle class was their collective near-obsession with death. Death seemed to take on a life of its own, holding sway over the Victorian imagination to an extent evident in art, literature, and spirituality, as well as in material and consumer culture. Literature, including novels, poetry, newspapers, and advertising proved the major vehicle for ideas about death to be disseminated amongst the members of the middle class. The roots of the Victorian culture of death can be found in the eighteenth century, when several different discourses evolved.

Conclusion

The structure of this thesis provides the reader with a history, as well as a detailed description of the consumerist aspects of death. The second chapter examines the intellectual roots of the death culture and how new discourses passed through to the denizens of the nineteenth century. The third chapter explores the rising popularity and meanings of the new private cemeteries and the overwhelming sanitary issues of the middle Victorian period. The fourth chapter covers the business of selling death ephemera to the members of the middle class and the people who sold it. The final chapter looks at the decline of Victorian sentimentality and the increasing popularity of “modern” practices. All chapters emphasize the middle-class association and the deeper meanings.

A social history of the relationship between consumerism and middle-class death practices required analysis of several types of sources. These sources included government reports, advertising, periodicals, and popular literature.

Burial practices came under close scrutiny during the Victorian period, as part of the greater move towards social reform. The government devoted much time and effort to the burial reform movement; the reports generated as a result of this work provided valuable information about funereal procedures among all classes, especially the middle and working classes. The documents supplied straightforward facts about death practices and practitioners. With additional textual analysis, they also provided a greater understanding of the hegemonic middle class's psychological issues concerning death, disposal, and ceremony; these led to greater conclusions about that class's attitude towards reform, consumerism, social relations, and other issues.

Advertising generally reflected the tastes of contemporary consumers. Most advertising of the nineteenth century was found in newspapers and magazines; the middle class enthusiastically consumed such material. Indeed, books such as Lori Loeb's Consuming Angels: Advertising and the Victorian Woman (1994) and Thomas Richards's The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914 (1990) relied upon analysis of advertising to support conclusions about Victorian consumer culture. Merchants of death and mourning items definitely took advantage of the power of advertising to reach target audiences, though certain purveyors embraced it to a much greater advantage. Analysis of the style and wording of death-related advertising, especially in middle-class periodicals, offered insight into how the middle class viewed death and the social ramifications of the trappings often involved.

Contemporary newspapers and magazines contained other sources of information than simply advertisements. Newspapers, such as the Times, and magazines, such as Punch, regularly reported on the debates concerning burial and funeral reform; these

reports reflected the general feelings of the middle class. Additionally, many popular magazines – for example, the Illustrated London News, the Queen, and the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine – dictated middle-class tastes and instructed this group on “proper” etiquette.¹³ The research involved with this thesis also required examination of death-related trade journals, which offered information about the death industry and its workers.

Literature also played an important role in middle class culture; therefore, several pieces of popular literature were assessed for this work. Literature often provided social commentary and affected the attitudes of the middle class at large, even about death and funeral practices.

Analysis of all these sources provided the information with which the conclusions of this thesis were reached. By the end of the paper, the reader should be familiarized with the various consumerist aspects of the Victorian death culture. Firstly, though, a brief explanation of the history of the death discourses and their transmission is in order.

¹³ Morley, 74-6.

CHAPTER II
MORTAL LEGACY: THE INTELLECTUAL
BIRTH OF THE DEATH CULTURE

This chapter posits the theory that several of the discourses of the death culture of the Victorian middle class had decidedly eighteenth-century roots and that these discourses can be identified by textual analysis of literary pieces, including sermons, essays, and poetry (especially the works of the “Graveyard School” of poets). However, in order for those discourses to have reached the nineteenth century, they had to have been transmitted to that century by the burgeoning literature and reading culture of the emergent middle class of the eighteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, literature became popular in the truest sense of the word, in that it became more accessible to the general public. In 1695, the Licensing Act – under which the Crown controlled the number of London printers and regulated what they could print – lapsed. This opened up the industry to large numbers of new printers, in both London and the provinces, and the amount of printed material grew enormously.¹ Literacy had been gradually increasing: although the data is unreliable, it is figured that the elite were almost totally literate and that most of the middle class would have been literate, as well, especially those in trade.² Additionally, the creation and proliferation of

¹ John Brewer, The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 131-6.

² *Ibid.*, 167-8.

the circulating libraries allowed members of the leisured classes access to greater amounts of literature for nominal costs.³

This explosion of literature allowed for a wide range of subject matter to end up in the hands of a middle-class audience hungry for social and personal advancement. No longer was literature the province of extraordinary stories and mythology: authors began to write about the ordinary, to produce moral tales and stories of everyday people. Tracts on science and religion instigated changes in some middle-class minds: essays and tracts from scientists, philosophers, and clergy influenced ideas about the human condition. Since the literature began to reflect so-called “real life,” one may discern that general attitudes about such mundane life passages as birth, marriage, and death presented themselves in these works. The discourses of death present in popular literature undoubtedly both reflected and influenced the beliefs of those who read that literature. The discourses that were most evident and influential were of religious and aesthetic natures.

There were two religious trends that would have strong ramifications for views of death in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the belief in Enlightenment deism and the rise of Evangelical religions, such as Methodism. Both of these religious movements appealed to members of the middle class. Deism appealed to the positivism of members of a class who believed they could improve their stations in life through rational means. Methodism, however, placed less emphasis on the power of the

³ Ibid., 176-83.

established Church, which was traditionally allied with the aristocracy; thus, it encouraged new possibilities for middle-class influence.

Deist Thought

During the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century there was an increase in the number of adherents to deism. A logical result of the intellectual attempt to reconcile the new science with religion, deism claimed that a “supreme being” had designed all elements of the universe, including man, according to a perfect design. It denied the existence of so-called miracles: though God had created the universe, He did not actively intervene in daily existence. Deism, heavily influenced by the fact that science had taken some of the mystery out of the process of dying, turned death into a respite from the difficulties of earthly life.⁴ Believers in deism saw God as a rational force and came to the conclusion that death was not a form of divine retribution, but simply a process of nature which could not be avoided. Thus, deists believed that the death of the body did not deserve as much concern as preparation for what came after death. Deists believed that man should be concerned with the problems of the world that could be figured out and accepting of those things he could not. This deist philosophy is evident in literature concerning death printed during the early part of the eighteenth century.

John Locke, a practical deist though he did not call himself such, said in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding:

⁴ Clare Gittings and Peter Jupp, Death in England: An Illustrated History (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 203-4.

I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension, to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether, and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities.⁵

Locke, therefore, cautioned his readers to direct their energy to understanding things that could be explained using logic and scientific reasoning. Though Locke does not specifically mention death, the timeless question of what happens in death can easily be identified as one of those “things exceeding [the mind’s] comprehension.” Only the physical process of death could be verified; there was no way to know or prove what became of a person after death and man should not waste his reasoning power attempting to explain it.

While Locke’s deist work did not specifically mention death, other writings dealt with the subject more directly. In a 1709 work entitled Death’s Vision Represented in a Philosophical, Sacred Poem, a Mr. Reynolds espouses deist philosophy concerning death, utilizing the language of science. God is a “Rich Painter” who “hangs the Globe in all its Gaudy Tapestry” at the “Centre of this Whirling Main.”⁶ Humans themselves, made of “Atoms too Fine for Mortal Sight,” exist in a world ruled by God’s law:

That Binds and Acts the Vast Corporeal Whole,
That Plays the Universal Soul,
Assigning all their Order, and their Place.
No Wonder, Souls Breathe Union and Agree...
Are by a Stronger Gravitation Join’d,
Whose Love and Harmony is all Refin’d,

⁵ John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (London: Ward, Lock, and Company, 1921), 2.

⁶ Reynolds, Death’s Vision Represented in a Philosophical, Sacred Poem (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1709), 24-7.

This whole World's Law, and Life appears to Be
Nought else but Love and Harmonie.⁷

Utilizing the language of science made the idea of man and his destiny less mysterious to those who subscribed to deist ideals. "Atoms" assured the readers of the truth of man's existence; "Universal" and "Gravitation" alluded to the planets and the idea that man was part of God's greater sphere. Mentions of "Order," "Law," and "Harmony" told readers that man, and his ultimate earthly destiny, were all part of God's plan – natural, logical, and necessary. The poem goes on to explain that the horror of death is propagated by man, as death itself is not a terrible thing. At the end, however, the reader is reminded that death does mean a return to God, who is characterized as a "Mighty Landlord" who calls in man's "Vast Accounts" (the concept of "Accounts" would have made sense to the increasingly commercial middle class) and:

Thus the Poor Globe must cast its Primitive Right,
Be Spoil'd and Drain'd of all its Natives Quite,
Entirely shar'd 'twixt Hell and Realms of Light."⁸

The earth may be the guardian of man during life, but ultimately man must answer to God because God created the earth. Deists attempted to reconcile science and religion by acknowledging God as the ultimate source of all creation.

Another deist-inspired poem, a 1734 work entitled "Know Yourself" begins with the lines, "What am I? how produced? and for what End?" The poem, attributed to physician (and friend of Alexander Pope) John Arbuthnot but published anonymously, wonders:

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Ibid., 73, 59.

Am I th' abandon'd Orphan of blind Chance;
Dropt by wild Atoms, in disorder'd Dance?
Or from an endless Chain of Causes wrought?
And of unthinking Substance, born with Thought?
By Motion which began without a Cause,
Supremely wise, without Design, or Laws.⁹

Using scientific language, the author wonders if man was created by a “Chain of Causes” without reason or “Design.” Did the “Atoms” randomly come together to create man? The poem continues and comes to the conclusion that a human is indeed more than a haphazard creation, of “nobler Birth” and a “superior Lineage”: he is the product of God’s warming the “unthinking Clod with heav’nly Fire: Essence divine.”¹⁰ Thus, the author concludes, that man holds a special place in the design of the universe and that, in death, the “poor Clod” may “Return, and seek thy Father, and thy God.”¹¹ In death, the product of the earth – “the Clod” – separates from the soul – the “Essence divine” that is the product of God. This clod returns to the earth from whence it came, and the soul returns to the Lord who created it.

Deist thought even found its way into established religion, as the clergy attempted to reconcile deism and Anglicanism in order to keep their power in society. One may see deist thought in the printed sermons of the eighteenth century. Sermons were obviously much more formal expressions of religious thought and had more influence amongst believers; sermons could be interpreted by listeners or readers as official Church dogma. Edward Synge was Lord Arch-Bishop of Tuam, a high member of the Church of

⁹ John Arbuthnot, Gnothi seauton. Know Yourself (London: J. Tonson, 1734), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

England. In his sermon, The Way to Eternal Salvation Plainly Pointed Out, Synge used logic to appeal to his readers. He said that it was “the Duty of every Man to search, examine, and enquire into Matters of Religion, until such Time as he finds it proved, to the Satisfaction of his Conscience, what the will of God is, which he stands obliged to perform and fulfil.” Synge claimed that “Man is a rational Creature, endowed with Understanding...to distinguish between good and evil.” He said that man must improve his knowledge, unlike the Heathens, who did not know God because of their lack of understanding.¹² Towards the end of the sermon, Synge even referred to God as an “Artist” who framed the earth and “put it in that Order wherein we find it.”¹³ His language – the use of words such as “rational” and “Understanding” and his exhortation to “search, examine, and enquire” – implies that Synge still subscribed to deist philosophy. A member of the Church of England, in 1734, was most likely to espouse this philosophy as a reaction against the rising influence of the less logical, and more reactionary, Evangelicals. Deism did not specifically take the Church hierarchy out of the relationship between man and God; Evangelicalism, however, did.

Evangelicalism

The great religious movement of the eighteenth century, Evangelicalism began in the 1730s and reached its pinnacle in the middle of the nineteenth century. While the term “Evangelicals” included a number of groups, including Baptists and Unitarians, the

¹² Edward Synge, The Way to Eternal Salvation Plainly Pointed Out (London: R. Williamson, 1734), 4-7.

¹³ Ibid., 15.

sect most associated with the Evangelical movement was John Wesley's Methodists. Originally a member of the Established Church, Wesley and his followers broke off from the Church in 1740.¹⁴ Evangelicals followed an Arminian theory of grace: in order for one to be saved, one had to consciously accept God's gift of salvation. Supposedly, this happened during a "conversion experience" and, only after this experience, could one be assured of salvation. Evangelicals also discounted the role of logic and science as far as salvation; they believed that the Bible – not science or even the clergy – was the *only* guide that could lead one down the proper spiritual path. Members of the middle class proved to be the most susceptible to Evangelical teachings: the Evangelicals' stress on belief in the Bible as the ultimate word of God lessened the importance of its traditional interpreters, the clergy. Therefore, Evangelicalism threatened the traditional rulers of society – the Church and its biggest champions, the aristocracy.

When talk turned to death, Evangelicals believed that all proper Christians should think about death regularly, in order to keep themselves right in the eyes of God. Death without salvation, Evangelical ministers espoused, meant physical and emotional tortures in the flames of a literal and everlasting Hell. All sinners deserved death; the punitive act of death itself was terrible. The actions of the sinner in life, however, depended on whether or not that death would lead to paradise. Wesley, in his published essay "Justification by Faith," explained that Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit condemned all humanity to death and "dwelling in a corruptible, mortal body." However, this death

¹⁴ Frederick Dreyer, The Genesis of Methodism (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Lehigh University Press, 1999), 13.

could be defeated by man by accepting Jesus's sacrifice; then, God would "reinstale [man] in his favour" and "restore [those] dead souls to spiritual life."¹⁵

Evangelicals purposely used the power of the printing industry: they produced sermons, hymns, and poems that emphasized their theology in order to attract more followers. Sermons were perhaps the most common form of literature, with an average of three appearing on the market each week.¹⁶ Poetry was the most widely published; approximately forty-seven percent of printed material contained poetry.¹⁷ Because members of the middle class were the most voracious consumers of printed materials, they were the most likely members of society to come into contact with Evangelical writings in all forms.

Samuel Deacon, a General Baptist minister in Leicester, published his New Composition of Hymns and Poems, Chiefly of Divine Subjects in 1784. In "Encouragement to Seek the Lord," Deacon implored readers to "chearfully [sic] prepare, To worship God devoutly" and to "Bow down your hearts before his throne; / And make your wants, and sorrows known." He warned his readers that, after death, it will be too late:

No counsel in the grave is found!
No preparation under ground!
No day of grace for sinners there,
Who slight the calls of mercy here.¹⁸

¹⁵ John Wesley, John Wesley, A Library of Protestant Thought, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 199-200.

¹⁶ Brewer, 172.

¹⁷ Ibid., 172.

Deacon was saying that sinners must convert before the day of death because, once dead, a soul goes straight to eternal salvation or eternal death and damnation. The grave is not a purgatory in which one may take time to consider their options. In his “The King of Terrors,” he forewarned of the “tyrant...with terror in his face” who was out to “flay the human race!” A Christian must be “prepr’d to die” or cannot experience “everlasting joy.” He ended with these hopeful words for those who seek redemption:

O! fly to Christ without delay!
He ever lives to save!
Then you may smile at Death today:
And triumph o’er the grave!¹⁹

While poetry and hymns were influential, a traditional sermon carried the most weight in the eyes of believers. In Evangelical minister George Burder’s 1797 sermon “Death and Judgment,” he cautioned that “Death is in itself awful,” “universal,” and “removes us from our nearest relations and dearest friends.”²⁰ While death is certain, the moment of death is uncertain; thus, the good Christian must be ready and in a state of justification or else face condemnation to “everlasting fire...the devil and his angels” and separation from Christ.²¹ His use of the unsettling imagery of Hell was typical of

¹⁸ Samuel Deacon, New Compilation of Hymns and Poems, Chiefly on Divine Subjects (Leicester, England: George Ireland, 1784), 29-30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 71-2.

²⁰ George Burder, Death and Judgment: A Sermon on Hebrews ix. 27 (London: Button, Conder, Chapman, and Matthews, 1797), 3.

²¹ Ibid., 10.

Evangelical sermonizing and calculated to scare potential sinners away from temptation and towards the word of God.

Thus, Evangelicals tended to focus on the emotional aspect of one's relationship with God and the need for sinful people to prepare their souls for what was beyond death; it was a type of rebellion against what they considered the "fashionable deism" of the Enlightenment.²² Both philosophies toward death are a change from tradition, however, in the fact that they take the emphasis in death away from the death of the body and place it onto the afterlife. In both cases, death represents something that can be considered a positive, reuniting the deceased with his Creator in an everlasting peace.

In religion, Deism (not always wildly popular among the masses in any event) faded in popularity amongst the middle class, who increasingly turned to the Evangelical religions. The Evangelicalism of the nineteenth century, however, was marked by an overly-optimistic positivism; many of the Evangelical ministers toned down the hellfire-and-brimstone rhetoric and emphasized the promise of eternal life for believers.

Evangelicals tended to believe in the idea that the human condition could be ameliorated through the cumulative action of individual self-reform, an idea popular amongst the liberal-minded and increasingly progressive middle class – a group that highly valued hard work and individualism. Faith and daily work on one's own self-welfare would result in rewards in the afterlife. Also many religious Nonconformists began to think of

²² Gittings and Jupp, 235.

death as the first step in reuniting forever with deceased family members in a home-like Heaven, an idea often absent from eighteenth-century Evangelical teachings.²³

The Aesthetic Discourse

The aesthetic discourse of death in the eighteenth century was marked by melancholy, which blended with the idea of sentimentality as the century progressed. The idea of melancholy itself, however, was not new. The theory of the “four humors,” conceived in the Middle Ages, claimed that one would suffer from melancholia if they had an excess of black bile. In 1621 scholar Robert Burton, interested in understanding its nature, published his ambitious work The Anatomy of Melancholy. This work influenced other writers in turn, such as John Milton in his 1631 poem “Il Penseroso.”²⁴ In the poem the narrator discusses his relationship with a personified “Melancholy,” who accompanies him on a walk in the night through nature. “Thou Goddess sage and holy,” Melancholy, allows the narrator to experience the world in a more realistic manner.

Milton alluded to death at the end of the poem:

Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before mine eyes.
And may at last my weary age
Find out the peaceful hermitage,
The hairy gown and mossy cell,
.....
These pleasures, Melancholy, give,
And I with thee will choose to live.²⁵

²³ Gittings and Jupp, 235-7.

²⁴ Walter Kendrick, The Thrill of Fear: 250 Years of Scary Entertainment (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 11.

Milton wrote to “Dissolve me” – the body – in order to release the soul into “ecstasies” so that it can reach “heaven.” This dissolution allows the soul to escape “the hairy gown and mossy cell” – the traditional woolen burial shroud and the grave – in order to reach “the peaceful hermitage” of the afterlife. “Melancholy” allowed the respite of death to come and, thus, Milton preferred to live with death always on his mind. Milton obviously influenced generations of poets after him and melancholy would remain a dominant poetic theme.

Melancholy definitely characterized the elegy, a unique type of poetry written for funerals, which became increasingly popular during the seventeenth century.²⁶ Elegies were written on the occasion of a death, in order to give the mourners something to ponder during and after the funeral. The writers of elegies often personified death and filled their lines with unpleasant images of mortality, generally to inspire the living to ponder their own future fates. In his 1653 “Elegie,” written to commemorate the death of Sir Nathaniel Barnardiston, writer Christopher Burrell described Death as:

Raw bon’d carcass, of his Head the *haire*
And flesh is falne, and left the *skul* all bare;
His *eyes* no *eyes*, cannot be seen nor see,
Worm-eaten *nose*, one *jaw*, no *teeth* hath he...²⁷

Burrell’s poem is also full of “dead mens bones,” “chambers,” and “Coffins planched sure.”²⁸ Elegies continued to be popular into the eighteenth century, though they tended

²⁵ John Milton, The Poetical Works of John Milton (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1954), 507.

²⁶ Kendrick, 11.

²⁷ Christopher Burrell, “Elegie”; quoted in Kendrick, 12.

to become less graphic. In 1705, the Observer magazine published “An Elegy on the Death of the late Famous Doctor Titus Oates”; though short on gory details, the technique of personifying death remained. Death was described as a “*Lyon*” and caster of a “fatal Net,” who caught “poor Titus Napping.”²⁹ Even the eminent Samuel Johnson used this technique of personification: in his elegy, “On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet,” he spoke of “hovering Death [preparing] the blow” and breaking the “vital chain” of life.³⁰

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the elegy influenced writers to produce a new type of poetry. Thomas Parnell’s “A Night-Piece on Death,” considered the first example of what nineteenth century literary scholars would dub the “Graveyard School” of poetry, was published posthumously in 1721.³¹ Often associated with the Gothic movement, this group of poets (who did not collaborate or associate with each other) included Parnell, Robert Blair, Edward Young, and Thomas Gray. The “Graveyard Poets,” who generally had different goals when writing their works, mixed the imagery of the elegy with melancholy, producing a unique kind of horrific and pensive poetry. Common elements include graveyards, yew or cypress trees, night, and – most of all – a lesson for the living reader to ponder. These poems could be considered elegies without the benefit of a funeral.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹ An Elegy on the Death of the late Famous Titus Oates (London: privately printed, 1705), 1.

³⁰ Samuel Johnson, The Complete English Poems, ed. J.D. Fleeman (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1971), 140.

³¹ Kendrick, 11.

Parnell's "Night-Piece" features a narrator observing a churchyard, for no obvious reason except for personal meditation. The narrator states:

Now from yon black and fun'ral Yew,
That bathes the Charnel-House with Dew,
Methinks I hear a *Voice* begin;
.....
It sends a Peal of hollow Groans,
Thus speaking from among the Bones.³²

Though not a member of the clergy like Blair or Young, Parnell used his images to compel his audience to ponder their fates. He wrote of the sorrowful-looking yew tree and "the Charnel-House" and "Bones" in order to remind readers of the earthly scenes and consequences of mortality. Parnell personified death in the ultimate way: Death speaks the closing lines of the poem, assuring "pious Souls" that "their Chains [will be] cast aside" and they will "Clap the glad Wing, and tow'r away, / And mingle with the Blaze of Day."³³ Parnell countered his overtly gloomy imagery with religious hope: by writing that the religious souls will escape the grave and go to the bright light of an eternal heaven, he gave his readers reason to not fear the grave. Even Death himself is an optimist.

While Parnell's specific theology is unclear, Robert Blair, a fervent Evangelical, purposely wrote his poem The Grave (1743) to tell readers that the grave is a constant reminder of the Christian's need for salvation. Supposedly, Blair only used the "Graveyard" style because it was popular and would encourage people to read his

³² Thomas Parnell, Collected Poems of Thomas Parnell, ed. Claude Rawson and F.P. Lock (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1989), 170.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170-1.

poem.³⁴ A “sensational” poem in that style would be more likely to arouse the desired feelings in readers. At the beginning of the poem, Blair provoked the reader with the announcement that his “Task” is “To paint the gloomy Horrors of the Tomb; / Th’ appointed Place of Rendezvous, where all These travellers meet.” He set his narration at “dark Night, Dark as was *Chaos*,” filled with “Gloom,” howling wing, and the screeching of owls. The poem associates night with death, as it was representative of the darkness of the grave and the separation between daylight on earth and the eternal light of God. The narrator ponders death and the dead amidst the “low-brow’d misty Vaults, (Furr’d round with mouldy Damps, and ropy Slime,)...The Mansions of the Dead.” Once again, the yew tree appeared (and it would become a common resident of the “Graveyard” poems), as did the human remains that represent mortality:

Well do I know thee by thy trusty *Yew*,
Chearless, unsocial Plant! that loves to dwell
‘Midst Sculls and Coffins, Epitaphs and Worms:
Where light-heel’d Ghosts, and visionary Shades,
Beneath the wan cold Moon (as Fame reports)
Embody’d, thick, perform their mystick Rounds.
No other Merriment, Dull Tree! is thine.³⁵

Throughout the poem, Blair reminded readers that fame, beauty, and glory cannot escape death, and that only the righteous will escape the dreadfulness of the grave. Since Blair was an Evangelical, he used typical Evangelical rhetoric to frighten the unsaved: he articulated the sinfulness of man and how humankind deserved “Inundation” with “molten Stone and Globes of Fire, Involv’d in pitchy Clouds of Smoke and Stench.” At

³⁴ James A. Means, introduction to *The Grave. A Poem (1743)*, by Robert Blair (Los Angeles: The Augustan Reprint Society, 1973), i.

³⁵ Blair, 4.

the end, however, he promised the believer a happy, new beginning at Judgment Day: “the slumb’ring Dust...shall wake...With a new Elegance of Form” and shall reunite with “the conscious *Soul*...Nor *Time*, nor *Death*, shall ever part them more.” Blair’s eighteenth-century audience would have appreciated the poem for its religious meaning of preparing for death by seeking the Lord; nineteenth-century audiences read it for its melancholia, rather than the sober religious messages, because Victorian Evangelicalism tended to be exceedingly positive.³⁶

Undoubtedly the most popular (in both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries) of the “Graveyard” poems was The Complaint; or Night Thoughts by Anglican clergyman Edward Young. Published in nine parts between 1742 and 1745, the poem runs to almost ten thousand lines. Night Thoughts was reportedly inspired by the successive deaths of Young’s wife, son-in-law, and daughter-in-law, and brought on by Young’s insomnia. Not nearly as descriptively bleak as Blair’s poem, Young’s opus still invokes the melancholy nature of his precursors:

How populous, how vital, is the grave!
This is creation’s melancholy vault,
The vale funereal, the sad cypress gloom;
The land of apparitions, empty shades!

Words like “funereal,” “sad,” and “gloom” are meant to remind the reader that death itself is a grim event. The grave is “vital” and “populous” because all humans are destined to end their earthly life there; the corpse cannot escape it. The universal presence of death creates “apparitions” and “empty shades” that loom over humanity.

³⁶ Means, introduction to Blair, ii-iv.

After the darkness, Young alluded to his message of Christian salvation and presented his appeal to the reader to not fear death:

All, all on earth is shadow, all beyond
Is substance; the reverse is folly's creed:
How solid all, where change will be no more!³⁷

Young cautioned the reader not to procrastinate in the duty of seeking salvation: he called procrastination the “thief of time...Year after year it steals...And to the mercies of a moment leaves / The vast concerns of an eternal scene.” He said that a man can resolve to give himself to God for years, but, regardless of his readiness, death may come at any moment and thwart his good intentions:

And why: Because he thinks himself immortal.
All men think all men mortal, but themselves...³⁸

In Young, one sees a glimmer of the positivism of religion (“all on earth is shadow [something transitory], all beyond [heaven – the afterlife] is substance [unchanging, eternal, and meaningful]”) that was to mark the next century’s optimistic outlooks on death.

The last of the “Graveyard Poets,” Thomas Gray, published his classic Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard in 1751. Gray was a poet and scholar, not a clergyman, and he takes a slightly different approach to his poem, focusing on the lamentation of the churchyard’s inhabitants, rather than overtly attempting to save the readers’ souls. The narrator, accompanied by the personified “darkness” and his thoughts, travels to the

³⁷ Edward Young, The Poetical Works of Edward Young (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1913), 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-4.

churchyard in order to meditate amongst the tombs; the landscape contains typical landmarks:

Save, that from yonder ivy-mantled Tower
The moeping Owl does to the Moon complain
Of such as wandring near her secret Bower
Molest her ancient solitary Reign.
Beneath those rugged Elms, that Yewtree's Shade,
Where heaves the Turf in many a mould'ring Heap,
Each in his narrow Cell for ever laid
The rude Forefathers of the Hamlet sleep.³⁹

Once again, night is associated with the extinguishing of life by death. The “moeping Owl” – a denizen of the night – complains to the “Moon” of those who would dare invade the churchyard and try to understand death (“Molest her ancient solitary Reign.”). The bodies of the “rude [possibly unenlightened] Forefathers” inhabit “many a mould'ring Heap” and each corpse rests in “his narrow Cell” of a grave. The narrator considers those “Forefathers,” noting how they will no more experience the “blazing Hearth,” ambitious toil, and the love of wife and children. He wonders if a personified death can be persuaded to release its prisoners back to the world of the living:

Can storied Urn, or animated Bust,
Back to its Mansion call the fleeting Breath?
Can Honour's voice awake the silent dust,
Or Flattery sooth the dull cold Ear of Death?⁴⁰

Gray's narrator, at the end, highlights one individual and assures readers that, even though the body may remain in the churchyard with the crumbling stones and they may want them to return to the living, the soul has gone to a place without sorrow, protected

³⁹ Thomas Gray, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (New York: Heritage Press, 1951), 86.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

in “The Bosom of his Father & his God.” Gray ended his poem with broad hope, as he placed no religious caveats on the promise of an escape from the grave and a peaceful afterlife. Though Gray is often considered the last of the “Graveyard Poets,” echoes of their work can be seen in the work of some contemporaries, most notably Oliver Goldsmith.

These discourses on death that developed during the eighteenth century became the intellectual basis of the Victorian culture of death; the Victorians, however, tailored them to satisfy their evolved belief system. The result was a unique literature that has become stereotypically identifiable with the Victorian middle class.

The Victorian Synthesis of Eighteenth-Century Discourses

The combination of Evangelicalism and Romanticism manifested itself in middle-class literature, such as this poem printed in 1846 in Sharpe’s London Magazine, “The Dying Father to His Daughter:”

To me, my sweet Kathleen, the benshee [sic] has cried,
And I die, - ere to-morrow I die;
This rose thou hast gather’d and laid by my side,
Will live, my child longer than I.
My days, they are gone like a tale that is told –
Let me bless thee, and bid thee adieu;
For never to father, when feeble and old,
Was daughter so kind and so true.

.....
O Kathleen, my love, thou couldst choose the good part,
And more than thy duty hast done:
Go now to thy Dermot, be clasp’d to his heart –
He merits the love he has won.
Be duteous and tender to him as to me;
Look up to the Mercy-seat then;
And passing this shadow of death, which I see,

Come, come to my arms back again.⁴¹

The lamentations remained, but the settings changed. Scenes of lamentation took place in homes or churches – domestic, safe places that were important to the middle class. Family replaced the yew trees, owls, and deteriorating tombs of the eighteenth century.

Deism may have passed out of fashion, but the middle class interest in science – especially its relation to public health – increased. The urban reform movements, especially in London, blamed overcrowded cemeteries and improper body disposal for “miasmas” and “effluviums” that poisoned the air and water of the cities. For that reason, the middle class took a Foucauldian view of the human body when it came to literature: bodies were something to be studied for scientific reasons, not something that should be displayed either literally or figuratively in literature or cemeteries.⁴² Mentions of skulls, bones, and death as “raw bon’d carcass” mostly disappeared from popular literature. The personification of death did not disappear; the monstrous personifications generally, however, did.

Therefore, one may see how the eighteenth century’s death discourses affected the culture of the nineteenth century. Though, the differences are

⁴¹ Professor Smyth, “The Dying Father to His Daughter,” Sharpe’s London Magazine (April 4, 1846), 368. Only the first and third stanzas are quoted here. The magazine’s cover carried a dramatic illustration of a distressed young woman grieving in front of her old father’s dying body. Sharpe’s apparently published literature submitted by its readers, no doubt many members of the melodramatic middle class.

⁴² See Michel Foucault’s A History of Sexuality for an explanation of this.

definitely worth noting, as they mark important distinctions between the two centuries' philosophies – not simply on death, but on religion, science, and the human body.

Conclusion

The transmission of death discourse to the Victorians happened mostly through literature. The largest number of literary consumers came from the middle class and several developments in the nineteenth century allowed this group greater access to this literature that influenced them.

First, the greater availability of cheap goods and cheap labor allowed many in the middle class greater leisure time, as basic household tasks could be completed by servants.⁴³ The middle class also benefited from the growth of the subscription library, which had appeared in the eighteenth century; this allowed individuals access to more books than they could possibly purchase, for a comparatively low cost. Serialization of novels also made work more accessible. Reading of periodicals and newspapers in England during the nineteenth century increased, mostly due to “technology, literacy, swift distribution, [and] lower prices.”⁴⁴ Not only would readers be exposed to news, science, travelogues, and fiction concerning death, they would also be increasingly bombarded by advertising. Moreover, middle-class servants also read the literature

⁴³ Richard Altick, The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 85-6.

⁴⁴ Rosemary T. Van Arsdel and J. Don Vann, ed. Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 7.

tossed aside by their employers; this meant that hegemonic ideas about death spread through lower levels of society more rapidly.

Two other important components of the nineteenth century affected the middle class reading public: Evangelicalism and the increase in rail travel. Evangelicalism stressed the importance of the individual's actions in seeking salvation, and (as noted earlier) Bible reading was essential to this search. Additionally, many Evangelicals struggled with what to do with increasing free time; they often shunned entertainments such as dancing, concerts, play-going, and cards as un-Christian, and reading became a preferred, proper pastime. Furthermore, Evangelicals wanted to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath; thus, with this free day, many working people had no choice but to stay home with a book, magazine, or newspaper.⁴⁵

On the other hand, the very human development of railroad travel increased readership amongst the middle class. Many of this class commuted to and from work in the cities and often passed time, in transit and waiting for trains, with books and magazines purchased at stores in railroad stations.⁴⁶ The number of commuters grew as the middle class increasingly moved out of London proper, to escape the unpleasantries of life in the crowded, polluted city. Soon, the extramural travel of the living inspired the same trend of movement for the dead: areas outside the city became attractive places for the bodies of those who lived there. Inevitably, suburban life would be followed by the suburban afterlife.

⁴⁵ Altick, 87-8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 89.

CHAPTER III
BURIED MEANINGS: CEMETERIES
AND SANITARY REFORM

Burial in London became a major issue during the nineteenth century. Social reformers and popular critics decried the state of intramural burial grounds and called on the government for action. Enterprising individuals saw opportunities in this situation and several companies formed, all with plans to open private, for-profit cemeteries in suburban London.¹ Thus began the rise of the so-called “garden cemeteries” – expensive and exclusive burial grounds covered in lush landscaping and ornate funerary architecture – that were both practical and beautiful additions to the metropolis. The new cemeteries provided the members of the middle class with opportunities to claim their social status, distance themselves from the poor, and experience new aesthetic pleasures – even after death.

The History and Problems of Intramural Burial

To understand the genesis of these middle-class attitudes in connection with burial, one must briefly consider London’s past. A look into the history of the metropolis helps one to understand the problems Victorians faced concerning death and disposal. A number of Victorian historians believed that the Romans – in approximately 43 A.D. – built Londinium on the site of an older settlement, since the new settlers used a derivative

¹ James Stevens Curl, The Victorian Celebration of Death, 2d ed. (Stroud, England: Sutton, 2000), 44-55.

of the Celtic name *Londinion*. Most modern historians believe that the Romans simply, in accordance to their practices, picked a new site and christened it with a local name for the moral benefit of their conquered subjects.² Both the Victorian and modern historians can agree on one thing: London is old, having existed as a city for approximately two thousand years. Over those years, millions of people died; how did various groups handle the disposal of bodies?

Romans, who utilized both cremation and interment, often buried the urns and coffins containing the remains of their dead just outside the walls of the City.³ The spread of Christianity brought churches to London and, by the Middle Ages, the City divided itself into parishes, each with its own church. The parish church became the agency which provided for the inhabitants of the parish from birth to death. Thus, to protect its flock in the latter event, each parish church possessed a vault, a burial ground, or both, in which its members could be interred and their relatives would be assuaged that the body rested in a consecrated place, while awaiting Judgment Day and impending resurrection. As Christianity condemned the pagan (though more sanitary and less space-consuming) practice of cremation as incongruous with the idea of resurrection, the burial grounds continued to fill over the years, often causing the grounds to swell higher than street level. By the seventeenth century, John Evelyn wrote in his *Diary* of churches becoming “*Charnel-Houses*” with the “ground sinking as the Carcasses [sic] consume”

² Stephen Inwood, *A History of London* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1998), 14-5.

³ Mrs. Basil Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: Gresham Press, 1896), 24-8.

and declared this “prejudicial to the health of the living.”⁴ When plague visited the City (as it often did during the Middle Ages and the early modern period), disposal of the dead pushed London’s resources to their limits and more people began to wonder if the bodies of the dead did not affect the welfare of the living. In the wake of the dual disasters of the 1665 plague visitation and the Great Fire of 1666, rebuilding planners Evelyn and Christopher Wren suggested that large cemeteries be laid out in the suburbs for the protection of the health of those in the City.⁵ Wren stated his reasons for ridding the metropolis of intramural interments:

I would wish that all burials in churches might be disallowed, which is not only unwholesome, but the pavements can never be kept even, nor pews upright: and if the church-yard be close about the church, this is also inconvenient, because the ground being continually raised by the graves, occasions in time a descent by steps into the church, which renders it damp, and the walls green, as appears evidently in all old churches.⁶

The rebuilders of the City virtually ignored these suggestions, though one four-acre section of land north of central London acquired in 1665 became the Bunhill Fields burial ground, a popular final resting place for Nonconformists that remained in use for almost two hundred years.⁷

⁴ John Evelyn, The Diary of John Evelyn, ed. E.S. De Beer (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 737.

⁵ Curl, Victorian, 32.

⁶ Quoted in Edwin Chadwick, A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns. (London: W. Clowes, 1843), 147.

⁷ Curl, Victorian, 33.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the conditions of inner-city burial grounds grew worse. In 1721, the Protestant Reverend Thomas Lewis wrote a tract on burial in churches and church-yards, in which he claimed that the unhealthy and “dangerous” practice only continued due to greed of the clergy.⁸ Accommodation for the bodies of the recently-deceased often required the disinterment of parts of bodies that had not entirely decayed; thus, few relatives attended any kind of graveside services or actual burials, as the experience could be both morally and physically distressing.⁹ Additionally, “Resurrection Men” – grave robbers – plundered urban burial grounds to provide bodies for the anatomists of the Enlightenment. Author Ruth Richardson pointed out that the rise in the activity of the Resurrection men coincided with growth in the business of undertaking, as middle- and upper-class people turned to these professionals to provide funereal items that would protect their loved ones’ bodies from ending up on the table of the anatomists – a fate tainted by the fact that it was only officially sanctioned as further punishment for executed criminals.¹⁰

Surprisingly, though, it was not until the late seventeenth century that the general populace even noticed the problems of city churchyards. In the early eighteenth century,

⁸ The self-explanatory name of Lewis’s tract is Seasonable Considerations on the Indecent and Dangerous Custom of BURYING in Churches and Churchyards, with Remarkable OBSERVATIONS historical and philosophical. Proving that the Custom is not only contrary to the Practice of the Antients [sic], but fatal, in case of INFECTION (London: A. Bettesworth, 1721). Bespeaking his strident Protestant convictions, he blames the Catholics for starting the practice. From Curl, Victorian, 40-1.

⁹ Curl, Victorian, 38.

¹⁰ Ruth Richardson, Death, Dissection, and the Destitute (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 4, 272-3.

the idea of the dead body did not generally arouse fear or disgust. A funeral invitation called on mourners to “accompany the corpse” and often featured such *memento mori* as skulls, crossbones, and death personified as a skeleton.¹¹ Literature did not shy away from portrayal of corpses. In Henry Fielding’s 1749 novel, Tom Jones, a fight scene between working-class girl Molly and offended genteel parishioners culminates in the churchyard, where Molly hurls the skull of a long-deceased townsman at one of her pursuers. The fight, not the disinterred bodies, is what the narrator finds disturbing. In “Graveyard” poet Robert Blair’s 1734 poem, The Grave, his narrator wanders “‘Midst Skulls and Coffins, Epitaphs and Worms” and ponders death among the “low-brow’d misty Vaults, (Furr’d round with mouldy Damps, and ropy Slime,)...The Mansions of the Dead.”¹² By the end of the seventeenth century, viewpoints changed and the corpse became something to be feared. The reasons were not superstitious; rather, they were fears aroused by new theories of sanitation and health.

Taking advantage of both fears and the greater need for non-consecrated burial spaces for Dissenters, individual proprietors began to open small private cemeteries and chapel vaults in the City. Though these often promised better conditions and safety for the dead and the visiting relatives, the owners of these grounds filled their spaces beyond capacity and often indecorously disposed of older bodies to make room for new ones (though the valuable coffin fittings often escaped destruction to find new life on the second-hand market).

¹¹ Richardson, 14.

¹² Blair, 4.

The growing middle class now faced a dilemma when it came to burying its dead. The atrocious state of burial grounds in London conflicted with the middle class's growing sense of self-worth and romantic ideals of "resting in peace." The privileged classes' luck was about to change, however.

The Beginnings of the "Garden Cemetery" Movement

In 1824 George Frederick Carden, a barrister and philanthropist, developed a scheme to open a new suburban "cemetery" – he purposely called it a cemetery in a linguistic attempt to distance his project from the unsavory burial ground – in London.¹³ Carden's first attempt to attract investors to his General Burial Grounds Association in 1825 failed. He tried again, under the name of the General Cemetery Company, in 1830. The company, according to its prospectus, aimed to provide "PLACES OF INTERMENT, Secure from Violation, Inoffensive to Public Health and Decency, and Ornamental to the Metropolis."¹⁴ Obviously he aligned himself with the greater civic improvement movements evident in the nineteenth century. Carden desperately wanted to recreate Paris's celebrated Père-Lachaise Cemetery; he advised potential patrons that Père-Lachaise caused:

wonder and astonishment [to] engross the soul...within a space of sixty-four acres...the remains of 100,000 mortals are here consigned to the tomb. – No small portion were endowed with worldly goods, and their families or friends have erected to them 15000 monuments.¹⁵

¹³ Curl, Victorian, 44.

¹⁴ General Cemetery Company, Prospectus of the General Cemetery Company, (London: privately printed, 1830), front cover.

In a possible attempt to convince his benefactors of a broad customer base, he continued his description with “the prince and the peasant are, nevertheless, equal here.” Carden certainly could not have picked a more relevant inspiration for his scheme than Père-Lachaise. The French capital faced the same sanitary problems concerning intramural burial as London. In 1763, the Parliament of Paris passed its first in a series of decrees calling for the rehabilitation or closure of Parisian burial-grounds. By 1790, the government began the “disinfection” (the complete removal of all remains to the infamous Paris catacombs) of the city’s largest and most notoriously unhealthy cemetery, les Saints-Innocents; even its 1780 closure had not been enough to reduce its threat to the public health.¹⁶ The cemetery of Père-Lachaise opened in suburban Paris in 1804, attracting those who desired to secure a peaceful and beautiful final resting place for themselves and their families. The popular cemetery ushered in a new obsession with funerary monuments that would spread across Western Europe: between 1814 and 1830, Père-Lachaise saw approximately 1,879 erected per year, including the new “chapel tombs.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 31. This description is from an attachment that was originally included with the 1824 Prospectus of the General Burial Grounds Association.

¹⁶ Phillippe Ariès, The Hour of Our Death (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 483-500.

¹⁷ Ariès, 518 and 536-7. The author claims that British cemeteries developed as an example of the American “rural” cemetery model. The most notable example of the American rural cemetery was Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts (see Stanley French’s “The Cemetery as Cultural Institution: The Establishment of Mount Auburn and the ‘Rural Cemetery’ Movement” in *The American Quarterly* 26 (March 1974), 37-59,

Carden enticed potential investors by appealing to more than just their aesthetic interests in his “great National Improvement.” Carden tried to attract benefactors from a wide economic spectrum, knowing that most of the interest would likely come from the more solvent members of the middle class. According to the Prospectus, the “Capital is divided into small Shares, to afford an opportunity to a greater number of individuals to unite in an undertaking of such general interest.” Carden offered his future shareholders a tentative assurance of security, noting that “necessary measures will be taken” to limit their liability to the monetary value of their shares.¹⁸ As an additional incentive, shareholders received “tickets of precedence,” at the rate of one ticket for each five shares; these *transferable* tickets, “according to numerical order of the shares,” allowed the bearer to select preferred places in the cemetery for graves. The Prospectus also noted that subscribers gained the privilege of re-interring previously deceased relatives in the cemetery – “at reduced fees.”¹⁹ Any “National improvement” in England, according to Carden, necessitated appeals to the economic and social aspirations of the middle classes.

After obtaining Parliamentary approval in 1832, Carden and his backers in the General Cemetery Company set their plans into motion. In January of 1833, the General Cemetery of All Souls, Kensal Green, opened and received its first interment. The

and Blanche Linden-Ward, Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery (1989).) This was in contrast to Paris’s crowded cities of stone. British cemeteries, in actuality, seemed to have characteristics of both.

¹⁸ General Cemetery Company, A4.

¹⁹ Ibid., A4.

cemetery covered between seventy and eighty acres, with Gothic and Greek-inspired chapels, a water-gate opening up onto a canal, and abundant foliage, giving it a park-like, Elysian appearance.²⁰ Beneath the large Anglican chapel, a series of catacomb vaults awaited the bodies of wealthy, safety-conscious clients. A visitor described a trip to this first of the new “garden” cemeteries:

After a pleasant walk of between two and three miles along the Harrow road, the handsome, substantial-looking Doric gateway meets the eye on the left, standing a little back; we pass through, and the grounds of Kensal Green Cemetery are before us. These are extensive, comprising about fifty acres, and are surrounded with a lofty wall on either side of the gateway, now almost covered by a wide belt of young forest-trees, evergreens, and shrubs...In the interior the grounds are divided by broad winding and straight walks, the rest being laid out in grassy lawns, relieved by parterres of flowers, clumps of trees and shrubs, and, above all, by the glitteringly white monuments of every possible outline, style, and size, from the simple flat stone, up to places large enough for their owners to reside in whilst living.²¹

As opposed to the old intramural burial grounds, this cemetery provided the public with a bucolic scene, where works of art by both nature and man impressed all comers.

The builders kept middle-class sensibilities in mind when they laid out the cemetery: they wanted the experience of the visitors to be one of peace and enjoyment.

They realized that visiting the graves of deceased loved ones was an essential element of

²⁰ Curl, Victorian, 52-8. For a more detailed explanation of all aspects of Kensal Green Cemetery, see Kensal Green Cemetery: The Origins and Development of the General Cemetery of All Souls, Kensal Green London, 1824-2001 (Chichester, England: Phillimore, 2001), a volume edited by Curl.

²¹ Charles Knight (ed.), London, iv (London: J.S. Virtue & Co., Ltd., 1841-4, revised and corrected by Edward Walford, c.1870), 170-1; quote and note taken from Curl, Kensal Green, 149.

the Victorian grieving process.²² The unpleasant state of intramural burial grounds made these emotional outings virtually impossible. At Kensal Green, on the other hand, the calling relatives encountered broad avenues and winding paths, complete with “a very delightful view...over the western environs of the metropolis.”²³ Meandering through such a garden of foliage and “art” not only pleased the relatives: in 1863, Charles Dickens visited Kensal Green and discovered quite a number of visitors, only one of which wore mourning.²⁴

The landscaping even reflected the middle-class’s taste for gardening, complete with the cedar trees that were then in vogue.²⁵ Nature itself fell victim to the controlling impulses of the middle class, as the entire environment represented a construction based upon middle-class Victorian sensibilities. Gardens represented a familial haven, representative of idealized country life and the “myth of Old England.”²⁶ This kind of haven seemed a perfect place for the inevitable spiritual reuniting of a family.

²² Pat Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 292.

²³ “Report on the first meeting of shareholders after incorporation,” The Penny Magazine for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, iii/150 (August 2 1834), 299. Quote and note from Jennifer Freeman, “The Cemetery Buildings,” in Curl, Kensal Green, 155.

²⁴ Charles Dickens, “Kensal Green,” part of his series “The Uncommercial Traveller.” All the Year Round, 10, no. 230 (September 19, 1863), 93.

²⁵ Brent Elliott, “The Landscape of Kensal Green,” in Curl, Kensal Green, 292.

²⁶ Lori Anne Loeb, Consuming Angels: Advertising and the Victorian Woman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.

The Symbolism of Cemeteries

Middle-class values and beliefs became manifest in the cemetery itself.

Surprisingly, the builders of Kensal Green eschewed the Romantic Victorian Gothic Revival-style architecture popular at the time: they felt that it “did not suggest solidity and security,” two things that their middle-class clients expected from this cemetery.²⁷ They instead built Greek-inspired chapels, walls, and gates, complete with commanding columns and cast-iron bars and accoutrements. Additionally, they felt that Gothic may have associated the cemetery with “Popery,” the Catholicism that the middle class mind connected with superstition and, worse, the Irish.²⁸ Most English citizens considered the Irish backwards colonists and slaves to the autocratic Catholic Church; both groups were traditionally seen as enemies to the staunchly Protestant English. The cemetery’s Classically-inspired architecture represented not only security and Protestantism, but also the inspiration the middle class found in their collective interest in ancient civilizations.

The decorations on the tombs and monuments were indicative of the positive religious attitudes of many middle-class Victorians. The eighteenth century’s traditional motifs of bodily mortality, such as skulls and bones, gave way to the nineteenth century’s signifiers of rest, resurrection, and eternal life, such as poppy garlands, draped shrouds, and ringed serpents.²⁹ Inexplicably, the urn – inspired by the pagan vessels which held cremated remains – became the most ubiquitous item on tombs. In the cemetery, the

²⁷ Freeman, “The Cemetery Buildings,” in Curl, Kensal Green, 151.

²⁸ Ibid., 151.

²⁹ Christopher Brooks, “The Monuments of the General Cemetery of All Souls, Kensal Green: Meaning and Style”; in Curl, Kensal Green, 215.

lesser attention paid to the state of the body (the absence of representations of decaying mortal forms) allowed the observers to focus on the spiritual aspects of passing to the next world, rather than the pornographic and macabre.

Expressions of Victorian values concerning gender were on display in Kensal Green. Visitors often saw the broken pillar over the grave of a family patriarch, representing the importance of the male head to the stability of a family. Many tomb designers included grieving female forms on the monuments: Victorians saw females as weak and prone to emotional outbursts, and especially liable to the pain of loss. Also, a beautiful female form added grace and elegance to a monument, thus making the object more physically appealing.³⁰

Many tomb sculptors looked to the exotic foreign land of Egypt for ideas. The mysterious pyramids, built as resting places for dead pharaohs, were magnificent and relevant inspirations for the creators of Kensal Green's funerary architecture.³¹ Egyptian-style obelisks, especially, appeared frequently on the sepulchral landscape.³² This interest in Egyptian architecture reflected a growing curiosity about that country, which would extend into the next century. Also, both Egyptian- and Greek-inspired architecture

³⁰ Ibid., 215-7. Despite modern misconceptions, sexuality was very much a component of Victorian life.

³¹ Ibid., 217.

³² Not everyone liked the new styles of memorials found at Kensal Green: Charles Dickens, for example, thought such symbols as draped urns and obelisks were completely unrepresentative of English religion and society. He recounted his discovery of a monument that combined obelisk, pedestal, and draped urn; he remarked that it left "nothing to be desired – except perhaps a crowbar, with which to make an end of the whole thing." Dickens, "Sacred to the Memory," All the Year Round 15, no. 375 (June 30, 1866), 594.

allowed Dissenters an opportunity to create monuments associated with a dignified death, without the use of the overt religious symbols, such as crosses and angels, often used by Anglicans.³³ This use of ancient symbolism may also be viewed as an appropriation of Oriental imagery, as a result of the discoveries of Empire expansion. The symbols were used as commodities – bought by Occidental wealth, the symbols represented imagined power and greatness, rather than any true ties to those plundered civilizations.

An Investment in Eternity

Aside from the aesthetic appeal, burial in Kensal Green offered its inhabitants something no parish churchyard could guarantee: peaceful rest in perpetuity. A vault or private grave at Kensal Green constituted (in terms of cost per square foot of area) an expensive piece of property. The cemetery promised resident-owners of those pieces of property security far into the conceivable future; a grave represented a solid investment in real estate! Parish churchyards charged much lower fees because the burial would not be in perpetuity; since each generation of parishioners paid dues to the church, each earned its opportunity to be buried there. That meant that older generations, who were no longer contributing to upkeep, “lost their leases” and could, in the eyes of the aldermen, rightly be disinterred.³⁴

³³ According to a tour guide at Highgate, Dissenters were forbidden from using such symbols.

³⁴ For this reason, parish churchyards often forbid (or charged exorbitant fees for) the use of the increasingly popular lead and iron coffins. For example, St. Peter-Le-Poor, Broad Street, charged an extra £50 for non-parishioner burial in an iron coffin!

By 1843, the savvy middle-class denizen was able to enhance his or her visit to the cemetery by purchasing Benjamin Clark's Hand-Book for Visitors to the Kensal Green Cemetery. In his volume, Clark described the cemetery's history and offered anecdotes about many of the residents and their graves. Quotes from the tombs of surgeons, barristers, teachers, and the like celebrated the lives of the *bourgeoisie* and their contributions to family, friend, and nation. Clark made this astute observation at the end of his guide:

Intermingled with the graves of the rich and those high in the roll of Fame...it is exceedingly gratifying to meet, not infrequently, with stones, whereon may be traced high encomiums, on faithful servants, penned by the benevolence of meritorious employers.

According to Clark, the “humble menial” – that servant who executed the duties of his or her Providentially-destined station – was lucky enough to find a final resting place where “poverty and wealth are equal.” Undoubtedly, members of the middle class found this comforting, as it said more about their own class's “benevolence” than the servants' service.³⁵

The end of the book conveniently contained prices for the various levels of interments and, not surprisingly, perpetual residency in this “admirably-adapted asylum for the dead” did not come cheap. A catacomb vault, which accommodated up to twenty coffins, cost £199. An open ground vault grave, which accommodated an average of six coffins, cost between £15 15s. and £21; the brickwork for such a grave required an additional outlay of between £12 and £31. For all vaults, the company also charged a fee

³⁵ Benjamin Clark, Hand-Book for Visitors to the Kensal Green Cemetery (London: Joseph Masters, 1843), 86.

for each coffin placed in the vault, as well as a fee for opening and closing the vault at each interment. A simple private grave, with the privilege of erecting a head- and footstone, cost £3 3s.³⁶ None of these fees included the costs for such things as maintenance, monuments, services, or high-priced funeral trappings. In comparison, an adult burial with a simple service in a parish churchyard cost an average of just over two pounds, wooden coffin not included.³⁷

The cemetery succeeded, attracting those who could afford it: it offered security, a picturesque visiting place for the deceased's relatives, and a last opportunity to make a social statement with the location and decoration of one's tomb.³⁸ A number of other garden cemeteries opened in the wake of Kensal Green: West Norwood (1838), St. James's Cemetery (known commonly as Highgate, 1839), Nunhead (1840), Brompton (1840), Abney Park (1840), and Tower Hamlets (1841). The prices of plots in these other cemeteries were almost identical to those charged at Kensal Green: the family of Elizabeth Johnson, the first person to be interred at Highgate, "paid three guineas for the plot [which would accommodate three more bodies in the future], thirteen shillings more than the minimum price."³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 87.

³⁷ John Cauch, The Funeral Guide (London: by the author, 1840) contains fees for most of the churchyards, burial grounds, and cemeteries open in 1840.

³⁸ Curl, Victorian, 60.

³⁹ Felix Barker and John Gay, Highgate Cemetery: Victorian Valhalla (Salem, N.H.: Salem House, 1984), 24.

Abney Park represented an anomaly amongst the new garden cemeteries. The earlier cemeteries – such as Kensal Green and Highgate – needed the permission of Parliament to open, who required the cemeteries to pay a fee to the deceased’s parish for loss of the income from the traditional parish burial. Congregationalists controlled the joint-stock company which opened Abney Park and the cemetery contained no Anglican consecrated ground.⁴⁰ The earlier cemeteries did contain non-consecrated ground set aside for Dissenters, as they wanted to attract the business of those who had limited opportunities for burial in the City (though, one may note that in Highgate a hedge of chestnut trees made sure this area was “discreetly screened from the eye of Conformists).”⁴¹ Abney Park, however, opened its gates to all faiths for burial in this most lush of the garden cemeteries.⁴² This was significant because the middle class contained a growing number of Dissenters.

The Debate Over Burial

Coinciding with the openings of the garden cemeteries, London saw an increase in the amount of criticism of intramural burial. It began in the popular press: numerous contributors wrote to these publications to complain about the state of burial grounds in the metropolis. In November 1838, a London citizen could have picked up a copy of Penny Magazine (Charles Knight’s pioneering illustrated periodical, with a circulation of

⁴⁰ Curl, Victorian, 101-3.

⁴¹ Barker and Gay, 15.

⁴² Curl, Victorian, 103.

up to 200,000⁴³) and perused the following description of a burial ground in the neighborhood of Golden-lane, as described by a Mr. Bullen who said that:

Graves in these grounds are dug and left open from one Sunday to another, or till they are filled with bodies; no more earth is thrown in them than will just fill up the sides of each coffin; when seven or eight bodies are interred, then it is filled up, and not till then, be that a week or a fortnight.⁴⁴

Bullen also informed his reading audience of his conclusion that the unsanitary conditions of the burial grounds presented a threat as a source for endemic diseases of the lower classes: “One of the reasons why the pestilence attacks the poor first, [is] by their visiting those pest-grounds as mourners.”⁴⁵ The venerable London Times (the metropolis’s daily newspaper with the highest circulation⁴⁶), in the years 1841 and 1842 carried numerous editorials and letters that contained graphic descriptions of the atrocious state of burial grounds. An anonymous writer presented these lurid facts to Times readers on October 28, 1841:

The workmen, in digging a grave in the burying ground of a chapel much frequented, broke in upon a common sewer, and deposited the coffin there...The floor of Enon Chapel, Clement’s-lane, measures in length 59 feet 3 inches, or thereabouts, and in width about 28 feet 8 inches, so that its superficial contents do not exceed 1,700 square feet...[and] the whole space could not contain more than 1,200 [coffins], yet it is stated with confidence, and by credible authority, that from 10,000 to 12,000 bodies have been deposited in this very place within the last 16 years...The vast

⁴³ Van Arsdel and Vann, 139.

⁴⁴ “London Improvements. – No. 1., London.,” Penny Magazine (November 1838), 464.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.

⁴⁶ Lucy Brown, Victorian News and Newspapers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 27.

numbers of burying places within the bills of mortality are so many centres or foci of infection, generating constantly the dreadful effluvia of human putrefaction, acting according to the circumstances of locality, nature of soil, depth from the surface, temperature, currents of air, its moisture or dryness, and the power of resistance in those subjected to its influence (and who is not?), as a slow or an energetic poison.⁴⁷

All but the poorest classes of London would be able to read about current issues, including the problems with burial grounds. Contrarily, periodicals provided members of the middle and upper classes with the opportunity to read glowing accounts of the garden cemeteries, such as this opinion from a writer, published in Ainsworth's Magazine, describing Kensal Green in 1842: "What an escape...from the choked charnel house to that verdant wide expanse, studded with white tombs of infinite shapes, and stone marked graves covered with flowers of every brilliant dye!"⁴⁸ This is similar to the language used by advertisers to sell various commodities to the middle class: the language appealed to romanticism, individualism, and status, and the separation of the privileged citizens from the masses.⁴⁹ Judging from language and content alone, one ascertains how the media influenced middle-class opinions on the desirability of certain final resting places over others. How many members of the Resurrection-hopeful middle class desired to face God's Final Judgment in a place such as Enon Chapel?

Around this time, a number of social reformers emerged who aimed to create enough negative public opinion concerning burial grounds to force the government to

⁴⁷ "Burial of the Dead in the Metropolis," Times London, October 28, 1841.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Morley, 42-3.

⁴⁹ Loeb, 128-40.

respond. “Burial places in the neighbourhood of the living are...the cause, direct or indirect, of inhumanity, immorality, and irreligion.”⁵⁰ So stated George A. Walker in his 1839 publication, Gatherings from Graveyards. Walker worked as a physician in Drury Lane and had gathered information from nearby burial grounds and became convinced that they caused the most sanitary problems for the living. Walker’s horrific (and emotionally-charged) accounts of conditions “shocked contemporary opinion.”⁵¹ The following quotations illustrate Walker’s sensational style, the first being a description of a symptom of the notorious Enon Chapel interments and the second describing the condition of the burial ground of St. Ann’s, Soho:

This insect, a product of the putrefaction of the bodies, was observed on the following season to be succeeded by another, which had the appearance of a common bug with wings. The children attending the SUNDAY SCHOOL held in *this chapel*, in which these insects were to be seen crawling and flying, in vast numbers, during the summer months, called them ‘body bugs’ – the stench was frequently intolerable...⁵²

St. Ann’s, Soho. – There is only one burying-ground belonging to this parish; it is walled in on the side next to Prince’s Street; close to this wall is the bone house; rotten coffin wood and fragments of bones are scattered about...The ground is very full, and is considerably raised above its original level; it is overlooked by houses thickly inhabited. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood have frequently complained of the past and present condition of this place. The numbers of dead here are immense.⁵³

⁵⁰ George Walker, Gatherings From Graveyards (1839); quoted in Morley, 32.

⁵¹ Curl, Victorian, 113.

⁵² Walker, Gatherings; quoted in Curl, Victorian, 116.

⁵³ Walker, Gatherings; quoted in Holmes, 209.

Other writers, such as Charles Knight and James Peggs, spilt ink on the troubles with graveyards, though they often lifted information from Walker.⁵⁴ Walker's personal crusade – he published four studies related to the subject during the 1830s – probably, more than anything, convinced the government to take action. Unfortunately, Walker never received the governmental recognition he probably deserved for his tireless efforts. In an 1849 Punch article, the writer opined that Walker would probably earn the reward of most genuine public benefactors – “to be utterly neglected as long as he lives.”⁵⁵

Critics of social conditions, such as Walker, often influenced public opinion enough to cause the government to respond. When the public clamored for social reform, it pressured the two major parties (liberal Whigs and conservative Tories) in power to pass important initiatives. The Reform Bill of 1832 revamped Parliamentary representation and enfranchised a portion of the middle classes. The evangelical Tories pushed through a Factory Act – mostly concerned with limiting child labor – in 1833, though it was a less-radical version than was initially proposed: the Whig party, which contained a high number of middle-class capitalists (especially factory owners), would not pass anything more radical. Social reform bills usually called for some kind of centralization of government authority and this was antithetical to the workings of a modern, “liberal” society.

Social reform was not always prompted by charitable motives. In 1834, a Whig government passed a rather unsympathetic Poor Law Amendment, as it was mostly

⁵⁴ Curl, Victorian, 117.

⁵⁵ “A Word for Mr. Walker,” Punch 17 (July-December 1849), 136.

passed to “relieve the middle classes of the burden of the poor rates.”⁵⁶ The law attempted to make the workhouse so unappealing to the poor that they would be forced to become productive members of society – hopefully, working for a middle-class Whig capitalist. One notices that this is also a Utilitarian stance. Utilitarians believed strongly in self-sufficiency and economy in all actions; they figured that the government should adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude and, for the benefit of all, allow individual economic growth to improve individual lives.⁵⁷ When burial reform became an issue, the government looked to the Utilitarian Edwin Chadwick to investigate the problems.

Edwin Chadwick and Government Reform

Edwin Chadwick was one of nineteenth-century Britain’s most influential champions of social reform. A trained lawyer and fervent Utilitarian, he became Assistant Commissioner of the Poor Law Commission in 1832 and secretary of that body in 1834. He created the first sanitary commission in 1839 to investigate the conditions of the working class in Whitechapel, London, to assist that poor borough’s attempts to understand and stem the spread of epidemic diseases. The findings of this commission led Chadwick to begin a more extensive study of the conditions faced by the working class, the results of which were published in 1842 as the Report on an Enquiry into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain. In 1843 the government commissioned Chadwick to follow this report with one on burial and death;

⁵⁶ Stuart E. Prall and David Harris Willson, A History of England Volume II: 1603 to the Present (Fort Worth, Texas: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1991), 597, 602-3.

⁵⁷ Prall and Wilson, 588.

this report was published as the Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns, which specifically dealt with sanitary issues relating to the treatment and disposal of corpses.⁵⁸

In this comprehensive 258-page report Chadwick exposed the atrocious practices related to the disposal of bodies – practices that he believed were causing physical and mental harm to the living. According to Chadwick, overcrowded cemeteries, improper burials, poor or non-existent body preparation, and delayed interment caused illness, moral strife, and even death for those left behind. Chadwick utilized mortality statistics, anecdotal evidence, medical reports, eyewitness accounts, and expert opinions to back his claims. In addition to his criticisms, he offered possible solutions for these problems and cited examples of countries that had implemented successful burial legislation or procedures.

The language used by Chadwick and his interviewees provides evidence of the opinions of the hegemonic forces of London and England at the time. Chadwick outlines the “sanitary evils” caused by graveyards of “imperfectly interred” bodies: miasmas and effluvioms poisoning the air and water, causing “impurity which is injurious to the public health,” and “mental pain and apprehensions of the survivors and feelings of abhorrence of the population, caused by the suspicion and knowledge of the disrespect and desecration of the remains of the persons interred.”⁵⁹ To solve the problems of

⁵⁸ Deborah Wiggins, “The Burial Acts: Cemetery Reform in Great Britain, 1815-1914” (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1991), 88-91.

⁵⁹ Edwin Chadwick, Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns (London: W. Clowes, 1843), 27-31.

intramural burials, Chadwick suggested that new cemeteries be built beyond the suburban areas of London, perhaps even a national cemetery that could represent a source of British pride. He believed that the existing joint-stock company cemeteries produced more profit than societal benefit; after all, they were filling up quickly and were rapidly facing encroachment as a result of the City's growth. He also called for – at the very least – government management of cemeteries and undertaking concerns, with a set of standards to which all entities must conform.⁶⁰

For several years, the government made no attempt to pass legislation in order to solve the burial crisis, though discussion and debate continued. By 1848, however, a major cholera pandemic was sweeping through Europe, and public health discourse became more urgent.⁶¹ In London, a cholera outbreak aggravated two serious death-related problems: cholera deaths would fill burial grounds with a greater number of bodies and these bodies would potentially contaminate their environment, producing more cases of disease.

The burial debate reached its height in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Readers of magazines, newspapers, and even literature could not help but become acutely aware of the problems regarding intramural burial. In 1848, an anonymous poet produced a work called The Cemetery, which described the horrid conditions in the intramural burial grounds:

Hark! Cracks the mattock on a coffin lid;
And earth gives up her injured dead, unbid.

⁶⁰ Chadwick, 140-50.

⁶¹ Wiggins, 96.

Wrought loose as mole-hill 'neath th'oft ent'ring tools,
Each opening grave, a banquet meet for Ghoules,
Bids yawn in livid heaps the quarried flesh;
The plague-swoln charnel spreads its taint afresh.⁶²

An 1849 spoof appeared in Punch, in which Hamlet waxes poetic over the remains of citizens in a London churchyard. In a place where “the very undertaker cannot rest in his grave,” Hamlet (as portrayed by “Mr. Punch”) examines the remains of a parish alderman, Heavisides, whose body turned to “sulphuretted [sic] hydrogen” which turned to typhus and then “poisoned” his ward.⁶³ Charles Dickens, interested in social reform himself, joined the discourse with his publication of the anonymous poem “City Graves” in his popular magazine Household Words in 1850. This poem described the “white and glistening bones” and “jagged end of coffin planks,” which “e'en the worm disowned,” that protruded from the ground of intramural burial places.

Chadwick finally received his recognition when the Metropolitan Interments Act (the first in a series of burial acts that appeared over a span of approximately sixty years) received Parliamentary approval in 1850. The framers of the Act had three objectives:

1. The permanent discontinuance of interments in all intramural burial-places.
2. The economical and solemn interment of the dead in suitable cemeteries at a distance from the metropolis.
3. The substitution of interment by an agency acting on behalf of the public, for interments conducted on the trading principle by individual enterprise, or joint-stock speculation.⁶⁴

⁶² The Cemetery (1848); quoted in Curl, Victorian, 109.

⁶³ “Hamlet in the London Churchyard,” Punch 17 (July-December 1849), 145.

⁶⁴ Great Britain, Report of Preliminary Proceedings Under the Metropolitan Interments Act (July 3, 1851), A2.

The first two measures required the closure of all burial grounds within London proper and the establishment of large national cemeteries beyond the suburbs of the city, on land purchased with private loans instead of public funds. Chadwick also desired the creation of a Burial Commission, which would oversee this relatively complicated enterprise.⁶⁵

However, in the General Board of Health's second annual report on the Act (printed in April 1852), the members admitted that "none of the provisions of that Act had then been carried into effect for the public relief."⁶⁶ What explains the failure of this desperately-needed piece of legislation? The sixty-eighth clause of the bill stated that "no Purchase, Building, or Work, where the Purchase Money or the estimated Expenses...exceeds One hundred pounds, shall be made...without the approbation of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury."⁶⁷ The bill lacked support from the middle-class populace due to the collective fear of centralization. In the eyes of many, a government Burial Commission ran the risk of becoming yet another bureaucratic agency with an exorbitant amount of power. Also, and probably most importantly, the fact that this agency controlled all undertaking duties represented a stifling of free trade.⁶⁸ The government remedied these problems in the Burial Bill of 1852 (passed in July 1852), which allowed for decentralization: the bill allowed parishes to establish local burial

⁶⁵ Wiggins, 99-104.

⁶⁶ Great Britain, Second Annual Report of the General Board of Health, Under Section 73 of the Metropolitan Interment Act (April 21, 1852), A2.

⁶⁷ 13 & 14 Victoria, C. 52, LXVIII; quoted in Wiggins, 110.

⁶⁸ Wiggins, 104.

boards and to buy land for cemeteries just outside of the metropolis.⁶⁹ The bill, overall, succeeded: successive burial bills addressed less pressing problems over the next sixty years.

An Interesting Alternative

Between the passage of the first and second bills, another joint-stock company materialized on the scene – proposing a novel way to solve burial problems (and to make money!). In 1850 a pamphlet entitled Extramural Burial: The Three Schemes, penned by an anonymous author, appeared. In it, the anonymous author compared clergy plans, Chadwick’s plan, and the plan of a company called the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company. The writer dismissed the clergy plans as completely motivated by avarice. Criticism of Chadwick’s plan centered on two things, the first of which was that the proposed location for the new national cemetery was still much too close to the metropolis. According to the author, “no comprehensive metropolitan burial field ought to be nearer [to the center of London, generally considered the site of St. Paul’s Cathedral] than 24 miles.” The second condemnation arose from nationalist pride: the author stated that Chadwick’s plan was based upon the “Continental principle, that the interment of the dead is a most unfit subject for commercial speculation.” In other words, the plan prevented free trade in the death industry and that was simply not the British way. The author declared the London Necropolis Company’s plan the best. Not only would free trade be allowed, but the company’s proposed cemetery conveniently lay

⁶⁹ Curl, Victorian, 141.

roughly twenty-four miles from the center of London in Woking, Surrey.⁷⁰

Unsurprisingly, the author of this pamphlet turned out to be Richard Broun, one of the founders of the company.

Broun and partner Richard Sprye declared their scheme “in every way adequate to the public requirement [according to 1850 legislation].”⁷¹ The company purchased approximately two thousand acres near Brookwood (many referred to the cemetery as “Brookwood” rather than by its proper name), a place with the preferred type of cemetery soil – “close, dry, and gravelly.” The company expected this large amount of land to accommodate London burials for hundreds of years, and its distance from the city virtually guaranteed that the living faced no health threats from the cemetery’s decomposing tenants.

The most novel aspect of Brookwood involved transport of the deceased. Taking advantage of the ever-expanding rail networks, the company collaborated with the London and South-Western Railway to send mourners and the deceased to the cemetery in railroad cars. Supposedly, this would be the most dignified way to transport the funeral party to the cemetery; it also saved some families the expense of providing a hearse and carriages. All classes of people rode the same train to Brookwood, where they were deposited at the station most convenient to the grounds in which their funeral would take place. On the surface, it seemed like all classes were treated equally. However, this

⁷⁰ [Richard Broun], Extramural Burial: The Three Schemes (London: Effingham Wilson, 1850), 28-30.

⁷¹ London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company, The London Necropolis and National Mausoleum (London: R. Clay, Sons, and Taylor, 1884), 10.

was not the case. At the each end of the journey, mourners sat in separate waiting rooms: first- and second-class mourners relaxed in a more secluded area than those attending third-class or pauper funerals. On the train, the funeral parties remained segregated in compartments proper to their class (it is unclear whether this was the case with the bodies, which filled a separate train car).⁷² Thus, the purchased funerals reflected the social hierarchy that was ever-present in English society.

Brookwood (which came to be known as the “Westminster Abbey of the middle classes”⁷³) became a success because the company catered to every need of the grieving family. A family created a funeral as simple or as complex as required. By the end of the century, the company owned the facilities to make statuary and coffins and could handle all undertaking responsibilities.⁷⁴ This made the difficult arrangements of a funeral much easier for the surviving relatives, thus increasing the attractiveness of choosing the company.

Conclusion

Cemetery companies generally shied away from aggressive advertising, as they often attracted customers on reputation or location. Individuals often sold unneeded plots in periodicals, usually pointing out the attractiveness of the deal. One ad read: “GRAVE FOR SALE. – A New Private Grave, 6 ft. 6 in. by 2 ft. 6 in., in Consecrated Ground –

⁷² John Clarke, London’s Necropolis: A Guide to Brookwood Cemetery (Stroud, England: Sutton, 2004), 16-7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

Kensal Green Cemetery, London; good position.”⁷⁵ Another appealed to a status-conscious buyer: “A family vault for sale (under cost) in the best part of Highgate Cemetery.”⁷⁶ A consumer generally dealt with the chosen cemetery through an undertaker or funeral company; thus, cemeteries sometimes advertised in trade journals. In 1897, the General Cemetery Company advertised their Kensal Green cemetery in a trade journal, touting their special funerary provisions: a tent (“For Wet Weather”), an organ (“For Music at Solemn Service”), and a new-fangled columbarium (“For Cremation Urns”).⁷⁷

The growing complexity of funerals raised the profiles of undertakers and other providers of funeral ephemera over the course of the nineteenth century. While these capitalists simply took advantage of the opportunities presented to them, they often faced criticism for their enabling of the wasteful practices of modern funerals. Were they truly grasping opportunists or pioneering entrepreneurs in an ever more materialistic society?

⁷⁵ Undertakers’ and Funeral Directors’ Journal and Monumental Masons’ Review 12, no. 3 (March 1897), xviii.

⁷⁶ Times (November 6, 1914); quoted in Bertram Puckle, Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development (London: T. Werner Laurie, Ltd., 1926), 154-5.

⁷⁷ Undertakers’ and Funeral Directors’ Journal and Monumental Masons’ Review 12, no. 1 (January 1897), xv.

CHAPTER IV
AMBITIOUS UNDERTAKINGS: PURVEYORS
OF FUNERAL EPHEMERA

The individuals who provided members of the middle class with death-related material varied greatly and gained higher profiles during the nineteenth century. Undertakers supplied the basic items needed to take care of disposal of the body, though they often persuaded people to purchase much more than was necessary. Other businesspeople offered material for the survivors, the most notable being the sellers of mourning. Though all groups could be accused of taking advantage of the grieving, undertakers garnered the most blame for the “evils” they caused to all members of society.

The Maligned Undertakers

Edwin Chadwick, in his Report, seemed to reserve his most biting criticism for those who handled the funerals of the working and middle classes:

The expense of interments, though it falls with the greatest severity on the poorest classes, acts as a most severe infliction on the middle classes of society, and governs so powerfully the questions in respect to the present and future administrative arrangements, and involves so many other evils, as to require as complete an exposition as possible of its extent and operation.¹

Undertakers, who provided not only the burial of a body but the funeral that accompanied it, faced accusations of price-gouging and monopolistic or haphazard practices. A

¹ Chadwick, 45.

“proper” funeral, one based upon the traditional funerals of the aristocracy and aspired to by almost all members of the middle and working classes, averaged anywhere from £25 to £100 (and the higher in the middle class one rested, the greater the amount added to that £100).² These funerals often included a number of mourners (mutes, stave-bearers, plume-bearers, pallbearers), silks for those, velvet palls, horses with elaborate plumage, a hearse with coachmen, and possibly mourning clothing and jewelry for the invited family and friends. The more elaborate the funeral, the greater the social statement so members of the middle class (and even the labouring classes) made every effort to arrange a proper funeral. The need became especially acute after the large amount of publicity generated by several high-profile funerals, including those of Prince Albert and the Duke of Wellington. Chadwick and many of his interviewees felt that large numbers of the laboring class jeopardized health and sanitation by retaining dead bodies in their homes for the often long period of time that it took to raise money for the desired funeral. Chadwick and his experts were not the only people who criticized undertakers: many scorned or satirized this group who, supposedly in the name of greed, pushed their unnecessary ephemera on grief-addled, yet socially-conscious, customers.

This criticism actually began in the eighteenth century, though it was limited because elaborate funerals had not yet become standard practice in the middle class.

“Graveyard Poet” Robert Blair wrote, in *The Grave*, of funerals:

But see! the well-plum'd *Herse* comes nodding on
Stately and slow; and properly attended
By the whole Sable Tribe...

.....

² Ibid., 70.

How rich the Trappings, now they're all unfurl'd,
And glittering in the Sun!...

.....
But! tell us, Why this waste?
Why this ado in Earthing up a Carcase
That's fall'n into Disgrace, and in the Nostril
Smells horrible? Ye *Undertakers!* tell us,
'Midst all the gorgeous Figures you exhibit,
Why is the Principal conceal'd, for which
You make this mighty Stir?³

Blair pointed out that the “Herse” and the funereal “Trappings” seem superfluous – is not the goal of a burial to remove the “Carcase,” which is so offensive to the mourners?

Blair seems to imply that perhaps the funeral should *display* the body so that it properly reminds mourners of their fate – something that plumes, velvets, and carriages cannot do.

It should also be noticed that he blames the undertakers for this “waste,” not the mourners.

The business of undertaking began to flourish by the 1730s. As the middle class grew, so did the collective interest in funerals that befit that class's new status in society. A decent funeral, if organized independently, proved to be costly. An undertaker provided all the trappings of a decent funeral on a rental basis, thus saving the family time and money.⁴

Many accused the undertakers of greed. In article fifty of his Report, Chadwick discussed the number of undertakers available to the metropolitan area and their approximate levels of business. He argued that there were many people involved in the

³ Blair, 10-1.

⁴ Ralph Houlbrooke, Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480-1750 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 286.

trade of undertaking, but that a relatively small number of “masters” monopolized the business. Smaller tradesmen (part-time undertakers, listed under such labels as “undertaker and carpenter,” “undertaker and auctioneer,” and “undertaker and upholsterer”) worked through this oligarchy and there developed a complicated and corrupt system of costs. Chadwick claimed that there were “no less than 730 persons” competing to handle the funerals of the estimated 114 deaths per diem.⁵ Thus, undertakers, especially the masters, were accused of charging exorbitant fees in order to make a profit with this competition.

Many people apparently felt that any person who would take advantage of mourning families could not be a “normal” person; as a result, members of the undertaking profession often faced assaults on their collective character. An 1850 Punch poem described undertakers as “Blank of looks as black of coat, / With eyes almost dropping brine.”⁶ In another, also written during the height of the burial crisis, the anonymous writer personified undertakers as greedy, dour, and disconcerted with the possible loss of intramural business:

From Undertakers’ dismal den
Mutes, mourners, we invite;
Up rouse ye, then, my merry, merry men
‘Tis for the dead we fight.
.....
Grief for the dead may lose some power
If we its sphere enlarge,
By making, in affliction’s hour,

⁵ Chadwick, 53-4.

⁶ “The Battle for Intramural Churchyards,” Punch 18 (January – June 1850), 207.

A stunning funeral charge.⁷

The writer implied that the undertaker and his cronies were not part of society as whole; they were disconnected with human feelings by nature. He supported his point by claiming that those men tricked people into “feeling better” by cheating them out of large sums of money spent on grand funerals. An illustration from around the same period portrayed a typical view of an undertaker: a frowning, red-nosed man outfitted in a ridiculous black-banded mourning hat. A popular song of the mid-nineteenth century, “The Undertaker’s Man,” recounts the misfortune of a poor soul who is only fit for such a job. His love ran off with a “military ‘friend,’” causing his face to grow “grave” and his feelings “sad and mute.” Apparently, working in the undertaking trade was more than just an occupation: it practically became a character flaw, which wreaked havoc on one’s physical appearance.

Of course, many undertakers did little to dispel the myths that they were unhealthily tied to their occupations. Some even made their plight worse. In a trade journal article, one gentleman noted a “Universal Conspiracy” against undertakers, claiming that:

It would seem that the whole world was leagued against [us]...Physicians devote all their energies to cheat him out of a funeral: life-saving appliances are invented for the same purpose, and boards of health seem to have no other object but to decrease the mortician’s business...The people should be given a fighting chance to die, in the interest of our trade.⁸

⁷ “The Song of the Undertaker,” Punch 18 (January – June 1850), 215.

⁸ Undertakers’ and Funeral Directors’ Journal and Monumental Masons’ Review 12, no. 1 (January 1897), 22.

Writings like this certainly made it appear that undertakers saw life as a struggle against the world at large. Another writer for the journal lauded the “long absence of sunshine” in the early months of 1897, claiming the “gloom and darkness” led to a greater number of deaths and caused the undertakers to be “correspondingly brisk and elated.”⁹ A non-industry person may very well have interpreted this quote as evidence of undertakers’ lack of basic human empathy. Regardless of stereotypical beliefs about the characters of undertakers, members of the Victorian middle class continued to employ these men in the pursuit of the proper funeral.

Tools of the Trade

So what ephemera did the undertaker typically provide? First and foremost, one must order a coffin for the deceased. Prior to the sixteenth century, usually only the wealthiest members of society had the privilege of eternal rest in a coffin. According to Ralph Houlbrooke, a coffin became a necessity for any respectable funeral “between 1550 and 1750.”¹⁰ By the nineteenth century, coffins (for the middle class) became more than simply a pine box separating the body from the earth. Most customers obtained, at the very least, an elm coffin. For additional security (and cost), one could enclose the elm shell inside a lead coffin: most believed that lead kept contaminants in and body snatchers and unscrupulous gravediggers out. If burial would be delayed for any reason, the relatives attempted to obtain a metal coffin, as these could trap the “effluvia”

⁹ Undertakers’ and Funeral Directors’ Journal and Monumental Masons’ Review 12, no. 3 (March 1897), 41.

¹⁰ Houlbrooke, 339.

produced by a decomposing corpse. But what if burial was exceptionally delayed and there was a risk of a coffin burst? A funeral provider in Derby, “T. Lloyd,” advertised a “PATENT METALLIC AIR-TIGHT COFFIN,” which had a “Patent Escape valve for Gas,” to prevent such an unpleasant event.¹¹

“Coffin furniture,” including inscription plates and handles, often came from metal-working companies in the north, such as Birmingham. These companies competed for undertakers’ business by advertising in trade journals. Shelley & May advertised “over 500 patterns” of brass and nickel-plated “registered coffin furniture in the newest and most approved designs.”¹² William Garrad, of Warwick Works in Birmingham, promoted their variety of “COFFIN FURNITURE...From the Cheapest Stamped Tin to the most massive Sets in Polished Brass, German Silver, Nickel Plated, Electro Gold & Electro Silver.”¹³ The myriad types of coffin furniture available allowed the undertaker to upgrade any coffin to the exacting standards of decoration desired by his materialistic customers.

During the funeral procession, the coffin and its exquisite furniture would be covered by a pall, usually of black velvet. The pall originally functioned as a covering for the body during the funeral procession, before the coffin became commonplace. The

¹¹ “T. Lloyd,” Company brochure (Derby, England: privately printed, date?), 14.

¹² Ad from Funeral Trades’ Gazette, September 1, 1884, p. 6; reprinted in Trevor May, The Victorian Undertaker (Princes Risborough, England: Shire Publications Ltd., 1996), 10.

¹³ Undertakers’ & Funeral Directors’ Journal & Monumental Masons’ Review 1, no. 5 (July 22, 1886), viii.

pall-bearer, however, retained a place of honor in the funeral procession and the pall became another useless, yet traditional, accoutrement.¹⁴

Transportation to the cemetery required the hiring of a hearse and one or more coaches for the mourners. The hearse originated as a means of transport for noble bodies: funeral processions were considered the prerogative of the wealthy and respected. Nobles were often the only people privileged enough to travel; therefore, they often died far from their intended final resting places. Candles often topped these hearses, necessary to facilitate travel of the processions at night. As time progressed and hearses became part of the daytime middle class funeral processions, ostrich plumes replaced the candles. The hearse became more elaborate in the nineteenth century, with Gothic and baroque styles being the most popular towards the end of the century.¹⁵ Hearse makers advertised in trade journals, touting their patented designs. John Marston & Company, of Birmingham, claimed that the new, improved “Patent” funeral carriage “increased the trade of all who have adopted them.”¹⁶ These companies also provided carriages, which undertakers could provide for the funeral. The greater the number of carriages attending a funeral procession, the greater the social statement. Often, it became irrelevant if those carriages contained mourners; just the sight of the carriages impressed upon onlookers the importance of the personage ahead in the hearse.

¹⁴ Puckle, 115.

¹⁵ May, 14.

¹⁶ Undertakers’ and Funeral Directors’ Journal and Monumental Masons’ Review (July 22, 1887), viii; reprinted in May, 13.

Either two or four horses pulled the hearses; the horses often found themselves weighted down by black velvet palls and ostrich plumes – a tradition reminiscent of the chivalric traditions of noble funerals.¹⁷ As with carriages, the relatives often employed the greatest number of horses they could afford. Horses were very important to the undertakers' business: in fact, trade journals almost always dedicated a section of each issue to the current price of horse feed crops.

Probably the most superfluous (and most foreign to contemporary readers) parts of any proper Victorian middle- or upper-class funeral were the so-called “professional mourners.” In the tradition of noble funerals, many people accompanied the procession, including various classes of individuals who felt a duty to accompany the body of their lord. The noble family often dispensed mourning garb to these people, which varied in elaboration depending on their relationship to the deceased.¹⁸ The Victorian funeral often included two distinct types of professional mourners, who added traditional “pomp” to the circumstances. The first were staff-bearers (separate from the pall-bearers), who carried staffs covered in black material. These bearers aped the traditions of the heraldic bearers of the traditional noble funeral.

The second were the mutes. Mutes, according to Bertram Puckle, descended directly from the “Roman mime, who likewise dressed in black, but [wore] a portrait mask of wax...of the deceased.”¹⁹ Modern mutes did not wear masks; they did, however,

¹⁷ Puckle, 127.

¹⁸ Houlbrooke, 293.

¹⁹ Puckle, 66.

wear black clothing – usually including cloaks, top hats with trailing hatbands, and gloves. Instead of representing the deceased, the mute often represented the undertaker (if the undertaker was not present at the funeral). Mutes often stationed themselves near the door of the church or home during the funeral, symbolically acting as protectors of the deceased. After the funeral, they accompanied the funeral procession to the burial, keeping their visages appropriately sullen until their paid duty ended.

Of course, a family had the option of paying more and adding greater numbers of strangers to the procession. According to the popular Cassell's Household Guide, a “large London undertaking firm” offered a range of funerals, costing from £3 5s. to £53. The first class of funeral only provided a coachmen and one non-specific “attendant.” A £14 14s. funeral provided eight men to serve in various positions. For a funeral costing £23 10s., the company provided – specifically – two mutes, eleven men “as pages,” and coachmen. At the top level (an extravagant £53 funeral), the family paid for two mutes and fourteen assorted men to act as “pages, feathermen [yes, horses were not the only living things adorned with these often tacky plumages], and coachmen,” all adorned with the proper black mourning clothing.²⁰

Undertakers and their minions often faced the wrath of the public as the Victorian funeral became more and more elaborate. In Chadwick's Report, witnesses described the hired hands at funerals as “blackguards.” It was claimed, that it was not uncommon for these fellows to stop “in parties at public houses on their return from places of burial”;

²⁰ Cassell's Household Guide (1869-70); quoted in Julian Litten, “Burial at Kensal Green Cemetery”; in Curl, Kensal Green, 339-40.

this, in addition to their false sorrow generally made a “mockery of solemnity.”²¹ Also in his report, Chadwick interviews an undertaker, “Mr. Wild,” who essentially admits that he has no idea of the aristocratic origin (and, thus, non-meaning to non-aristocrats) of the elaborate funeral trappings which he provides.²²

Chadwick, whose report supplemented the larger report on the welfare of the labouring classes, blamed the retention of bodies in homes for causing much of the ill health of the members of that group. In interview after interview, medical experts and clergymen offered tales of working class sickness and death caused by contact with the bodies of recently-deceased loved ones retained in the small living and working spaces occupied by the families. They described scenes of bodies being laid out on beds and tables for three days to two weeks, poisoning the air with miasmas and producing maggots and putrefied, infectious leakages. In these interviews, one notices certain class-related observations. For example, when John Liddle, a medical officer of the Whitechapel district of the Whitechapel Union, was asked if he observed any “peculiar habits among lower classes when it comes to the corpse,” he answered:

What I observe when I first visit the room is a degree of indifference to the presence of the corpse: the family is found eating or drinking or pursuing their usual callings, and the children playing. Amongst the middle classes, where there is an opportunity of putting the corpse by itself, there are greater marks of respect and decency. Amongst that class, no one would think of doing anything in the room where the corpse was lying, still less of allowing children there. [emphasis added]²³

²¹ Chadwick, 54-5.

²² Ibid., 49.

²³ Ibid., 35.

Chadwick seemed to agree with this, even drawing the conclusion that such “callousness” and “demoralization” of the working class towards death created “a reckless avidity for immediate enjoyment” and “carelessness,” which – he implied – led to the “prevalence of habits of savage brutality.” In other words, he appeared to be drawing a conclusion that these attitudes possibly caused members of the laboring classes to so disregard other human beings that the survivors turned into criminals!²⁴ As stated before, Chadwick believed in the ideals of Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarians, a group that felt that each individual had the responsibility to improve his or her own station. With that in mind, one may make the assumption that Chadwick’s desire for poor reform stemmed less from humanitarian motives than from a desire to protect the middle class from disease and crime spread from the lower classes. This attempt to keep the lower classes at a distance was characteristic of the middle class and they would increasingly engage in this type of behavior throughout the rest of the century.²⁵

Additionally, both nationalistic and gender biases appear in this report. One notices that, in descriptions of the laboring classes, the interviewees almost always distinctly pointed out “the Irish poor.” These vignettes often portray the Irish as overly-religious, even superstitious, and engaged in unusual customs in regards to retained dead bodies.²⁶ This view of the Irish was common: Ireland was essentially a British colony and the British populace considered them Popish, superstitious, and less civilized. The

²⁴ Ibid., 45.

²⁵ See Jones, 1-16.

²⁶ See Chadwick, 31-35, for examples. References to the Irish are scattered throughout the sections on the labouring classes.

nineteenth century saw the “Irish Question” – the British government’s attempts to deal with that rebellious island – regularly discussed by Parliament. Besides the nationalistic tones, one glimpses attitudes toward gender. In section forty-four of the report, Chadwick noted the “duty that attaches to male relations” to prevent “painful associations and visible images of the changes wrought in death” from affecting the women and small children of the family; the best way to do this was to remove the corpse immediately after death, which would only be possible after Chadwick’s reforms had been instituted by the government.²⁷ Chadwick, and members of his class, wished to see the traditional gender roles upheld and the family protected – which led to the benefit of society as a whole.

The Opinions of Charles Dickens

Author Charles Dickens, perhaps more than any other popular author (he was the most popular author of the nineteenth century), criticized middle-class funerary aspirations and the men who provided the means. In 1838’s Oliver Twist, orphan Oliver is sent to work at the undertaking shop of Mr. Sowerberry, under the auspices of apprentice Noah. At Oliver’s first funeral he observes the burial of a pauper woman: at the funeral, the woman’s mother is provided a proper black cloak for mourning-wear (which Mr. Sowerberry dutifully removes at the end of the service) and the coffin is placed in a grave “so full that the uppermost coffin was within a few feet of the surface.”²⁸

²⁷ Chadwick, 44.

²⁸ Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist (New York: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), 34-5.

In 1852's Bleak House Dickens criticized the pretentiousness of upper-class funerals, which were what the middle and lower classes looked to for funerary inspiration. At the funeral of the murdered Mr. Tulkinghorn, Dickens wrote that, besides Sir Leicester Dedlock, "there are only three other human followers...but the number of inconsolable carriages is immense." He said that, "among the undertakers and the equipages," the "Peerage contributes more four-wheeled affliction than has ever been seen in that neighborhood." Commonly, at upper class funerals, persons of note sent their carriages in lieu of their selves as a sign of respect. Thus, the more carriages in attendance, the higher the deceased's supposed social status (though, as Dickens implied in his lampoon, it did not always reflect the depth of sorrow at the loss). He continued:

The Duke of Foodle sends a splendid pile of dust and ashes, with silver wheel-boxes, patent axles, all the last improvements, and three bereaved worms, six feet high, holding on behind, in a bunch of woe. All the state coachmen in London seem plunged into mourning...²⁹

The descriptions of the "bereaved worms" and mourning coachmen obviously represented Dickens's disgust at the idea of paid mourners.

In Great Expectations, funeral operators Trabb & Co. take over Pip's sister and brother-in-law's house for her funeral. Pip describes the scene as ridiculous, complete with ostentatious crepe wrappings, bearers of dubious origins, and a meager buffet table.

The funeral procession to the cemetery begins when:

The remains of my poor sister had been brought round the kitchen door; and, it being a point of Undertaking ceremony that the six bearers must be stifled and blinded under a horrible black velvet housing, with a white

²⁹ Dickens, Bleak House (London: The Folio Society, 1985), 689.

border, the whole looked like a blind monster with twelve human legs, shuffling and blundering along...³⁰

Of course, the whole event was worth the trouble as the “neighbourhood...highly approved of these arrangements, and we were much admired as we went through the village.” Immediately after the end of the funeral and the departure of the mourners, Trabb & Co. “crammed their mummery into bags, and were gone.”³¹ Dickens clearly viewed the elaborate funeral process (provided by greedy undertakers) as a ridiculous “monster” – something that took the true feelings out of the funeral in the name of hegemonic “respectability.” Dickens apparently had a life-long distaste for elaborate funeral trappings and specified in his will that attendees to his funeral wear “no scarf, cloak, black bow, long hat-band, or any other such revolting absurdity.”³² While people certainly admired Dickens and enthusiastically consumed his literature, the evidence leads one to believe that the middle class tended to ignore Dickens’s level-headed approach to obsequies.

Advertising and the Death Industry

As the nineteenth century progressed, it became evident that advertising would become a powerful force in the market. It seems that most undertakers did not take advantage of advertising, however. A writer for the Undertakers’ and Funeral Directors’

³⁰ Dickens, Great Expectations (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 212-4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

³² Dickens, Great Expectations, 213. This information and the quote is found in chapter XXXV, note number 6, written by the edition’s editor, Edgar Rosenberg.

Journal and Monumental Masons' Review implored his fellow tradesmen to take advantage of this increasingly important tool:

ADVERTISE! ADVERTISE! ADVERTISE! YOU CANNOT DO WITHOUT IT! Perhaps you don't like it, perhaps you can quote instances when it has done harm, but it is none the less true that the man who keeps himself before the public is the man the public know...Whilst advertising is no new thing, its intelligent employment as a necessary factor in business is comparatively new...[The advertising undertaker] has a perfect right to insist that the advertising columns which he patronizes shall not impress the reader with that doleful feeling which a neglected graveyard with weather-beaten tombstones generally arouses.³³

By the end of the nineteenth century, advertising had grown in importance. Appealing imagery became increasingly essential to catch the eyes of consumers – advertisements could not be dull (like a “neglected graveyard”). Undertakers needed to take advantage of this new medium to attract savvy and socially-conscious consumers. So, while the traditions of the undertaking industry tended to remain rooted in the past, the continued success of that trade in the progressively more competitive free market depended on the techniques of the future.

At least one business outfit used cheerful, respectful advertising to attract those who found traditional undertakers exceedingly expensive (or intimidating). Shillibeer's, opened in 1842 by George Shillibeer (who started in the cab business³⁴), advertised in the Daily News in 1851 that a person could save “one half” by employing his company over the nearest undertaker (“who generally has to hire all the requirements, and consequently inflicts two-fold profits”). For only thirty guineas, the company provided a “first-rate

³³ Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal and Monumental Masons' Review 12, no. 7 (July 1897), 87.

³⁴ May, 13.

funeral fit for a nobleman, with lead coffin, case, hearse and four, two coaches and pairs, and all needful fittings.” For a mere £10 10s., one could experience a “respectable hearse and coach funeral” and artisans’ funerals started at a mere £4.³⁵ Everyone wanted a “respectable” funeral and Shillibeer’s claimed it could provide this by – essentially – cutting out the middleman of the undertaker.

While undertakers continued their business of conducting elaborate funeral and mourning ceremonies throughout the nineteenth century, often without the benefit of advertising, other providers of mourning material did use it. The makers of mourning fashions for women took the best advantage of this.

The process of mourning for the family began, but did not end, with the funeral. A contemporary book, A History of Mourning, claimed that the elaborate procedures of the nineteenth-century were rooted in antiquity. Claiming that the Egyptians started it all, the author maintained that the Greeks and the Romans continued and refined the traditions. “It is from this ancient people [the Greeks],” he asserted, “that we obtain the custom of wearing black as mourning.” He continued:

Among the Romans...it was not imperative for a man in old Rome to wear mourning at all; but it was considered very bad taste for a male not to show some external sign of respect for his dead. With women, on the other hand, it was obligatory.³⁶

Thus, many believed the tradition of wearing black and the gender discrepancies of mourning carried a classical pedigree.

³⁵ Daily News (April 30, 1851), 8.

³⁶ Richard Davey, A History of Mourning (London: Jay’s Mourning Warehouse, 1889), 13-7. It should come as no surprise that the printers of this book, a mourning sales outfit, desired mourning to be portrayed as well as possible.

Immediately following a death, family members needed to arrange for mourning clothing to be furnished in time for the funeral. After the funeral, mourning only need be worn by members of the family, the extent of which was closely regulated by society. Social code required a widow to wear mourning for her husband for approximately two and a half years: one year and a day in “deepest mourning,” followed by the gradual reduction to “half-mourning.” On the contrary, a widower only wore a black suit for three months before resuming normal dress. Times allotted for mourning ranged from three months to two years for other relatives (dependent upon degree of closeness), but the longest periods were always designated for women.³⁷

“Deepest” mourning clothing was made of non-shiny black material, usually a material such as bombazine covered with crepe (a crimped, excessively dull material). A mourning cap with a veil was required, as were black petticoats and (often) undergarments edged with black ribbon.³⁸ All jewelry and ornamentation needed to be simple and black. Jet – a type of shiny coal formed from driftwood – was often used, the finest coming from Whitby, England. Black cut glass and, later, plastics were economical alternatives.³⁹ Any accoutrements – including parasols, muffs, and cloaks – must be black and devoid of any ornamentation not made of jet.

Eventually, a woman who exited the period of deepest mourning could begin to utilize more fashionable fabrics for her clothing, including silk, taffeta, and tulle. All

³⁷ Lou Taylor, Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 303.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁹ Morley, 66.

clothing remained black, however, until she reached the period of “half-mourning.” During this time, a woman could add muted colors to her wardrobe, including gray, violet, and even mauve.⁴⁰

In the past, a woman had to employ a tailor and spend large amounts of time and money to engage in this process. By mid-century, however, purveyors of mourning seized their opportunity to join the “department store” revolution. Beginning in 1863 with Whiteley’s “Universal Provider” store, various firms expanded their premises and varied their wares with the goal of attracting the new “shopping lady.” As it became more and more acceptable for the middle-class woman to venture to the West End in search of material goods, the new department stores became destinations in themselves. A respectable woman could shop for everything she needed in a safe and respectable environment.⁴¹

In this environment, the mourning warehouse flourished. Beginning in 1841, four major mourning sales establishments had opened on Regent Street in the West End: Jay’s Mourning Warehouse (1841), Pugh’s Mourning Warehouse (1849), Peter Robinson’s ‘Court and General Mourning Warehouse’ (1853), and Nicholson’s ‘Argyle General Mourning and Mantle Warehouse’ (1853).⁴² These enterprises provided ready-made

⁴⁰ Taylor, 146-7.

⁴¹ Erika Rappaport, Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27-30. Rappaport’s book is a fine source for an explanation of the department store/public shopping phenomenon.

⁴² Morley, 73. It should be noted that these stores generally predated Whiteley’s. They experienced their greatest growth once other department stores flourished, as it became more acceptable for women to venture forth into the City. See Rappaport and

mourning wear at affordable (for the middle and upper classes, at least) prices in the short amount of time necessary. Prices stayed down because the stores could buy materials on such a large scale and produce (especially after the invention of the sewing machine in 1846) the garments quickly.⁴³ The companies also provided the safe environment and professional employees that would assuage a grieving woman at this time. Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion praised the location and services of Peter Robinson's, saying that it was:

a house in which we can order every detail required for mourning in a comfortable private room, free from observation or if we are unable to go to Regent Street, we can give our order to the very intelligent traveling assistants who will come to our house...bringing a choice of dresses, costumes, mantles, chapeaux, petticoats, hosiery, gloves, and necessary jet ornaments as brooches, earrings etc.⁴⁴

With a number of these warehouses competing for the middle-class pound (not to mention the smaller drapers and tailors), advertising became an absolute necessity.

All consumer product advertisers of this time aimed to attract women, the “angels in the house” and often the members of families in charge of deciding on household- and family-related purchases.⁴⁵ During the earlier part of the nineteenth century, periodical advertising consisted of line-divided, small print typed ads. An advertisement for

Judith Walkowitz's City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London for more information.

⁴³ Taylor, 188-93.

⁴⁴ Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion; quoted in Taylor, 189.

⁴⁵ Loeb, 33-4.

mourning often read much like this: “SUPERIOR BLACK VELVETEENS by the Yard; or in Costumes made up in Exquisite Taste. Patterns free. PETER ROBINSON’S Mourning Warehouse, Regent-street.”⁴⁶ Towards the end of the century, however, middle class consumers reigned supreme and advertisers competed for their attention and money by creating large illustrated ads, complete with persuasive copy that promised gentility in tandem with acquisition.⁴⁷ Purveyors of mourning now utilized these large ads (which appeared in popular illustrated periodicals such as the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, the Queen, the Graphic, and the Illustrated London News), complete with a picture of a fashionable model and copy that assured the buyer that shopping at their establishment suited her good taste. An 1890 advertisement for Jay’s Mourning Warehouse in The Queen (which covered a full page, complete with seals affirming the company’s royal connections as purveyors of mourning to Queen Victoria and Alexandra, Princess of Wales) announced that Jay’s offered “the largest, the choicest, the best selection” of “black, black & white, and all shades of grey goods...in THE WORLD.” The ad promoted their new imports of “very elegant novelties”:

Messrs Jay are constantly receiving from Paris MODEL MANTLES of the most *recherché* character. These models, after they have been copied, are offered at far lower prices than they could be bought at in Paris, and are suitable for ladies who are not in mourning...Messrs Jay are constantly receiving new millinery from the first houses in Paris, and the most approved forms are at once copied to suit every degree of Mourning.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Illustrated London News (January 16, 1869), back cover.

⁴⁷ Loeb, 7.

⁴⁸ The Queen, 1890; reprinted in Loeb, 87.

Many considered Paris Europe's most fashionable city; thus, advertisers often mentioned the city as the source of their "constantly" arriving fashions. A woman could feel assured that, even in this most solemn of times, she would be fashionable and socially acceptable. These ads appealed to the social and fashion tastes of middle class women, as well as appealing to their desires to get the most for their families' money. The ads, however, often attempted to reach the broadest market: an ad for Peter Robinson's claimed that the outfit could provide "Inexpensive Mourning, as well as the richest qualities...upon advantageous terms, to Families."⁴⁹ The advertisements worked for the companies, whose cause would be served by another event that put mourning directly into the public eye.

Conclusion

Along with the middle class-conscious advertising, an event happened in December 1861 which brought respectability to over-the-top mourning practices: Prince Albert, consort to the Queen and defining woman of the age, died a "Good Death." Victoria headed a long period of national mourning, beginning with Albert's grand funeral and subsequent entombment at the massive mausoleum at the royal residence of Frogmore. Victoria and her court held the greatest sway over fashion and mourning in the country. Though the nation ostentatiously grieved along with her for the proper time, Victoria never let go of Albert's memory: she remained in perpetual mourning until her death in January 1901, a period of almost forty years.

⁴⁹ Advertisement reproduced in May, 20.

Queen Victoria's image became, in advertising, something that enhanced the value of the commodities, as well as representing the spirit of the country. Victoria became a kind of mother image to the people, something to be sentimentalized and revered.⁵⁰ Thus, Victoria's image, in both advertising and news, influenced members of all classes. Since she took the idea of mourning to heart, many people followed her example. While Victoria's obsessive conduct found few imitators among Victorian women, her strict adherence to mourning made the social importance of these rituals that much more important. Victoria's influence certainly increased society's need for the services provided by the purveyors of death material.

⁵⁰ Thomas Richards, The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 96-104.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, an examination of the relationship between the commodity culture and the death culture of the middle class during the nineteenth century provides interesting information about this evolving class in general. With examination of the history of the discourses, one may see where the middle class attitudes about death came from and how those attitudes became so prevalent. Analysis of the material manifestations of this death culture – the cemeteries, funereal items, and mourning clothing – do not only offer evidence of contemporary attitudes towards death and the death industry, funeral costs, states of burial grounds, and the government's movements toward the creation of a regulated burial system. Careful investigation of the sale, use, and publicity of these items also supports broader conclusions about middle-class attitudes towards health, urbanization, the poorer classes, social reform, consumerism, and government power. Additionally, explanation of the social situation and methods of the purveyors of death-related items gave a better understanding of Victorian society as a whole. After this discussion of the burgeoning death industry, however, it is important to outline the new discourses and changes that led to its decline.

Growing Criticism

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the ever-present critics of the Victorian funeral became more vocal. Individual members of the clergy joined the fight against the waste and sentimental misappropriation of elaborate funerals and mourning.

An extremely popular tract by W.H. Sewell, vicar of Yaxley, Suffolk, entitled Practical Papers on Funeral Reform, Mourning Dress, and Obituary Memorials attacked “Vested interest among commercial classes, custom among the enterprising middle class, and...fashion amongst the aristocracy” that continued to keep funerals and mourning complicated. He reminded his readers that “the burial of the dead is a work of piety both to GOD and man.”¹ Sewell believed that these “vested” interests placed survivors’ focus on non-religious aspects of the mourning process; he, being a member of the clergy, felt that consideration of greater spiritual concerns should be the focus of those still living. He also complained that the amount of time between decease and burial (which he thinks should be as short as practically possible) was often “fixed by the family tailor or the ladies’ dressmaker.”² He thought all convoluted mourning and funeral practices should be abandoned, due to the economic and social pressures it placed on families.

In 1876, social reformer Katherine Hume-Rothery published her Anti-Mourning, in which she chastised those who propagated the elaborate mourning rituals of the day. She lectured her audience to:

Think of the burden imposed by this miserable custom on the less wealthy classes...deprived by death of their main or sole provision...are, in the senseless slavery imposed by fashion in this respect, driven, lest they be condemned, by that dreaded censor, the world, as heartless and dead to all proper feeling – driven to spend their last farthing, or worse, to incur debt they cannot pay...in this foolish mockery of supposed respect to the dead.³

¹ W.H.Sewell, Practical Papers on Funeral Reform, Mourning Dress, and Obituary Memorials (London: Literary Churchman, 1883), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ Katherine Hume-Rothery, Anti-Mourning. A Lecture Against the UnChristian Custom of Wearing Mourning for the Dead, 2d. ed. (London: James Speirs, 1876), 10-1.

She certainly criticized ostentation in funeral rites, seeming to imply that social pressure led to destabilization to the family unit. One might even view her censure as a broad condemnation of conspicuous consumerism in general. Hume-Rothery assured the readers that they have no reason to mourn in death, as “we know that our dear ones...pass immediately to a happier, purer...life than they have ever led, or could ever lead here.”⁴ Once again, the religious positivism appears, even as late as the 1870s, though circumstances in England were about to affect a change in attitudes.

In 1875 a group formed, which called itself the “National Funeral and Mourning Reform Association”; this group was primarily comprised of upper-class individuals. A couple of years later, the Church of England formed its own “Funeral and Mourning Reform Association,” comprised of “the whole body of bishops, a number of the deans and other dignitaries of the Church...and other persons of influence in the country.”⁵ It is interesting to note the membership of these groups: did the traditional ruling groups harbor surreptitious motives for stifling the funerary aspirations of the lower classes?

Regardless of their unpublished motives, they vowed to reform funerary rites, starting at the top. The Church of England group claimed that the wealthiest classes’ funeral spending “was a kind of instruction to the poorer classes to do the same.” Raising the money for a proper funeral required time for less fortunate people and the health hazards caused by holding on to bodies affected everyone. The group also desired to stop the practice of constructing brick graves and advocated the use of perishable coffins,

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Daily News (May 5, 1886), 2.

which allowed the body to quickly dissolve into the earth. Francis Seymour Haden invented the “Earth to Earth” coffin, “made of paper pulp or millboard in a framework of wood and with a wooden bottom, covered externally with cloth”; it was sturdy enough for burial, but allowed for easy decomposition.⁶ Haden, conveniently, belonged to the Church’s Reform Association. Overall, the Association wanted “to bring about the adoption of a simpler and less expensive funeral...more in accordance with the hope that those whom they laid in the grave [the survivors] would meet again in the future.”⁷ All this should be done, however, with the vested interests of the “present” and “future generations” of parishioners in mind.⁸

About the same time, another group that had the interests of present and future generations in mind came into the public eye. The forward-thinking Sir Henry Thompson formed the Cremation Society of England in 1874 to help publicize and increase the use of this practice. In his “The Treatment of the Body after Death,” Thompson argued that cremation prevented the sanitary problems of burial and freed valuable land for urban and agricultural use.⁹

Cremation was not, technically, illegal. However, there were no regulations for the practice; anyone performing a cremation was subject to investigation (not to mention,

⁶ Arnold Wilson and Hermann Levy, Burial Reform and Funeral Costs (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1938), 84.

⁷ Daily News (May 24, 1886), 2.

⁸ Church of England Burial, Funeral, and Mourning Reform Association, The Interment of the Dead (Manchester: John Heywood, 1888), 18.

⁹ Wilson and Levy, 41.

public offense). Many lawmakers' main objection was that a body, once cremated, could provide no evidence of foul play; thus, they expected clandestine murders (such as poisonings) to increase in number.

In April of 1884, a small committee presented the first bill dealing with cremation to Parliament: the Disposal of the Dead (Regulation) Bill. According to Dr. Charles Cameron, one of the bill's sponsors, its purpose was to:

Afford guarantee for the detection of foul play before corpses are permitted to be buried and to provide for regulation of cremation, a practice which, uncontrolled at present, is fraught with danger to the community, but which under proper regulations...presents a chance of effecting [sic] a most important social and sanitary reform.¹⁰

The supporters of the bill argued eloquently in favor of cremation; unfortunately, the House of Commons defeated the bill, 149 to 79. The fact that an unexpected seventy-nine people voted in favor was testament to their brilliant effort, however.¹¹

Why was popular sentiment so against the practice of cremation? Perhaps the reluctance stemmed from the religious beliefs of the age; in fact, many put forth this reason. Some believed that God would be unable to piece together the ashes of a cremated body at the Resurrection, thus keeping that person from entering into Heaven. An article in the Times tackled this question, stating "such objections will not stand a moment's quiet thought"; after all, "the men whom we most revere as saints and martyrs expressed a stronger and more consistent faith by giving up their own bodies to the

¹⁰ Wilson and Levy, 48.

¹¹ Ibid., 48.

flames.”¹² William Eassie, the first Secretary of the Cremation Society, claimed that cremation would enable remains to be deposited inside the holy confines of churches again.¹³ Even an Anglican bishop, Bishop Fraser, speaking at the opening of a cemetery in Bolton said of the ancient practice of cremation:

The ancient Romans believed in immortality, and yet they believed in burning the bodies of their dead. Urn-burial was certainly as decent as the practice of interment...The omnipotence of God is not limited, and He would raise the dead whether He had to raise our bodies out of churchyards, or...out of an urn in which they were deposited 2000 years ago.¹⁴

Cremation, it seemed, certainly did not prevent proper religious observance. Fraser admitted that his apprehensions against cremation stemmed from “association more than anything else.”¹⁵

How come the middle class did not embrace this sanitary, rational disposal method? They probably felt that the funerary customs they had grown accustomed to were the only proper ones – old habits died hard. Perhaps members of the middle class disliked the idea of cremation because it hastened the possibility of earthly oblivion. Even if ashes could be kept in urns in columbariums or deposited in churches, the idea of the instant destruction of the body may have frightened people who were overly concerned with making their social mark. Also, the process of reducing the body to ash

¹² Times (March 8, 1884); quoted in Wilson and Levy, 48.

¹³ Morley, 95.

¹⁴ William Robinson, God’s Acre beautiful, or the Cemeteries of the future (London: The Garden Office, 1880), inside front cover.

¹⁵ Morley, 91-2.

reduced it to the perceived fundamental elements of all mankind, making the most privileged member of society equal with the poorest.

Regardless of popular opinion, the cremation movement pushed on. England's first crematorium, the Woking Crematorium, began operation in 1885. By 1900, its yearly total number of cremations had reached 301.¹⁶ As Britain faced a growing population and became increasingly secular, cremation rose in popularity. Between 1920 and 1935, the number of cremations in Britain increased from 1,796 to 9,614 per year.¹⁷ By 1958, 30.58 percent of all bodies in Britain were cremated (that percentage was over sixty percent in most urban areas), making the nation the cremation leader in Europe.¹⁸ Apparently, as the middle class progressed, the stigma of cremation lessened.

While cremation was being hotly debated at the turn of the century, the technique of arterial embalming was being strangely ignored in Britain. In February 1897, Mr. Halford Mills, "Graduate of the United States School of Embalming," advertised sale of his skills on the cover of the Undertakers' and Funerals' Directors' Journal. He touted the wonders of this technique, reporting that a body "embalmed, Sept. 19th, in London sent to New Zealand, Arrived Nov. 24th, PERFECT."¹⁹ Inside the same issue, a writer

¹⁶ P. Herbert Jones and George A. Noble, ed., Cremation in Great Britain (London: The Cremation Society, 1931), 15.

¹⁷ Wilson and Levy, 52.

¹⁸ Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, Funeral Customs the World Over, 4th edition (Butler, Wisconsin: The National Funeral Directors Association of the United States, 1994), 570-1.

¹⁹ Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal 12, no. 2 (February 1897), front cover.

recounted the experience of an “official high in responsibility in London,” who had considered cremation as a sanitary alternative to burial for his son-in-law. According to the writer, the gentleman “had never heard of the advantages which come from MODERN EMBALMING.” One would assume that members of the middle class may have viewed embalming as a way to preserve the body of a loved one for eternity, in addition to “protecting” the environment. The practice never caught on in Britain as it did in America and, as late as 1960, only about 1,000 registered embalmers serviced the entire nation. The British Institute of Embalming claimed that, not only did the British populace hold on to funereal habits, undertakers and the government never strongly supported the practice.²⁰

The Victorian discourses of death, propagated by the middle class throughout the century, faced challenges at the *fin de siecle*. Those living in the last twenty years of the century witnessed what has been dubbed the “Age of Pessimism,” characterized by the doubts of Christianity and man’s superiority brought on by the publication and widespread dissemination of such works as Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species and The Descent of Man.²¹ Works such as these implied that man was not the special creature designated by God to rule the earth; thus, some believed that life became essentially futile and all human endeavors (including the consumption of vast quantities of goods) became pointless. These uncertainties led to increasingly realistic or even pessimistic views of

²⁰ Habenstein and Lamers, 560.

²¹ Markus Neacey, “Lost Illusions and the Will to Die in New Grub Street,” Gissing Journal 34, no. 4 (October 1998): 2.

both life and death, especially in the literature of such writers as Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf.

The Great Wars and Continued Change

The burial rituals of the nineteenth century were beginning to be abandoned for simpler rites and the very modern, very sanitary disposal method of cremation. Over a hundred years of overly-sentimentalized and individual celebrations of death could not prepare the collective middle-class consciousness for the horrors of World War I, which effectively sounded the death knell of the Victorian way of life. The staggering number of casualties in the Great War profoundly and permanently affected the collective mentality of the nation. Nothing romantic about death can be found in Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth":

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
- Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.²²

²² Wilfred Owen, War Poems and Others, ed. Dominic Hibberd (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 76.

The poem mentioned the sounds of guns and war bugles taking the place of mourning bells and choirs. This poem tried to represent the idea of the real grief that people on the homefront would feel. Owen, who died in combat mere months before the end of the Great War, personally saw the effects of the modern world (and modern warfare) on the bodies of young men in the war. He realized that, in the light of mechanized death and lack of humanity, there was no place left in the new world for the empty funerary rituals of Victorian society.

The old traditions of mourning became impracticable for several reasons. First of all, public morale needed to be maintained: the sight of thousands of women dressed in elaborate black garb would have been difficult for anyone to bear. The other reasons were practical. Geoffrey Gorer explained that:

The holocaust of young men had created such an army of widows; it was no longer socially realistic for them all to act as though their emotional and sexual life were over for good, which was the underlying message of the ritual mourning. And with the underlying message, the ritual too went into discard.²³

Another reason for abandonment of female mourning practices was the need for women to take the place of men in both house and workplace.²⁴ These same issues became more acute after the greater tragedy of World War Two. With the dramatic changes of the twentieth century, the Victorian celebration of death was truly over.

The individual monuments of the dead, so popular in the nineteenth century, gave way to the collective memorial of the twentieth. After the First World War, the Imperial

²³ Geoffrey Gorer, Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain (London: Cresset Press, 1965), 6.

²⁴ Taylor, 267.

War Graves Commission opted for starkness and uniformity in military burial grounds, thinking that style would be more consoling to both veterans and the general populace.²⁵ After both the First and Second World Wars, virtually every village and town in Great Britain featured maudlin memorials, commemorating the settlement's war dead. In London, such memorials as the Cenotaph and Westminster Abbey's Tomb of the Unknown Warrior played host to solemn Remembrance Day ceremonies. These represented national pride and collective grief, as the wars touched the lives of most generations of Britons in the twentieth century. Elaborate private funerals became less and less important, especially during the wars when families often had no bodies to bring home and bury.

The once-loved garden cemeteries filled, even as their idyllic locations were being incorporated into the expanding borders of the metropolis. As the nineteenth century came to a close, the fortunes of these cemeteries began to decline, as more democratic and less decorative cemeteries began to attract more people. By the 1960s and 1970s, many of the garden cemeteries faced uncertain futures, threatened by bankruptcy, neglect, and vandalism. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, most of the garden cemeteries found new life as tourist attractions, restored and maintained by various volunteer organizations. The cemeteries have become social constructions: promoted as embodiments of traditional Victorian mores, they appeal to both the morbid and historical interests of tourists and reinforce the visitors' preconceived notions. These historically-significant portions of the London landscape benefit from the work of groups like the

²⁵ Joanna Bourke, Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 226-7.

Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery and the Friends of Highgate Cemetery. Because of them, future generations will be able to examine and enjoy these fine manifestations of Victorian culture.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century saw the middle class become the arbiters of culture, a position that – it may be argued – that class still occupies today. During the nineteenth century, however, it became obvious that it was not political or moral power that would keep them in that position: the power of money began to rise above the power of the churches, the politicians, and the families. Wealth allowed the members of the middle class to impose their values – about such things as government control, urbanization, health, gender, even aesthetics – on all levels of English society. While middle class ideals about the proper funeral and mourning procedures changed with the modernization of society, that class still remains the dominant trendsetter in this area. Those hegemonic “powers-that-be” made a deal with the middle class that seems to have been sealed with the words “till death do us part”; however, the deal appears to even transcend that final stage of life.

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