VICTORIAN MOURNING:

SOMETHING WOKE

Kristan Ellsworth
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From the middle of the nineteenth century, to the Great War, death meant something more than it does today. *Memento mori*, “remember that you will die”; a reminder of mortality, or the inevitable transformation of life into death became more than a simple Latin phrase. During the Victorian era, *Memento mori* became a symbol of mourning, prevalent in clothing and jewelry, photos, and literature and verse. By the time Queen Victoria died in the beginning of the twentieth century, the effect of death was already diminished, and Victorian death culture had already changed.

In the book *The Hour of Our Death* (1982), Philippe Aries has composed an anthology of the study of death and human reaction to it. To further define the relationship of hair in memento mori, Elisabeth G. Gitter has provided a comprehensive study in her article “The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination” (1984). Diana Fuss talks about the death of death, or the beginning of the clinical death in “Corpse Poem”. In “Browning’s Corpses”, Carol Christ reviews the attitudes towards nineteenth-century death. Jen Cadwallader provides a basis for the study of post-mortem photography in “Spirit Photography Victorian Mourning Culture” (2008). Sonia A. Bedikian writes of the traditional mourning garments and how and what they were constructed from, and attitudes towards them and death, itself in “The Death of Mourning: From Victorian Crepe to the Little Black Dress” (2008). Deborah Lutz reviews the relics of the Victorian mourning era in “The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture” (2011), which also pays particular attention to the feelings of people at the time. Aviva Briefel continues the discussion about the Victorian spiritual movement coinciding with the mourning rituals of the time in ““Freaks of Furniture”: The Useless Energy of Haunted Things” (2017). In his 1904 poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Alfred Lord Tennyson provides a token of remembrance for the poet’s Cambridge friend Arthur Henry Hallam, who died suddenly of a

cerebral brain hemorrhage. *In Memoriam* was read as consolation literature for the bereaved in the Victorian era, and continues to be contemporarily.

Victorian death was a shared death. The family, or even the public, gathered to wait and watch, hoping to learn last words of wisdom, or to know the whole story of a person's life. Rooms in[1] houses held remains in state, people still slept in the death beds of their family members. In contrast, Walter Benjamin, Marxist German Jewish philosopher and author of the book *Illuminations,* said in the 1930s, "today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death." [2]

Victorian death was a remembered death. "We live in the age of a beautiful death, the death of MMe. De Villenueve was sublime," Coraly de Gaix, a young woman whose family published her writings, wrote in her 1825 journal.[3] The sublime death was a death to be talked about and remembered, knowing death would come to all. It was a desirable death that was to be waited for to provide a respite from life. In death, life was remembered and celebrated, but was never as exciting, and unknown, as death.

Victorian death was the beginning of the invisible death, the death of death.[4] As the Victorians moved towards the end of the nineteenth century, their deaths became more clinical and less about comforting those who remained. Death was not discussed with the dying. It was talked around, so as not to allow them to know what was happening. A seriously ill person would

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[1] Deborah Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, And Death Culture." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 01 (2010), 127.
[2] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Ney York: Schocken, 1968), 94.
[3] Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One Thousand Years* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 409.
[4] Diana Fuss, "Corpse Poem," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 1 (2003): 7, doi:10.2307/1344336. And Philippe Aries, "Invisible Death," *The Wilson Quarterly* 5, no. A (1981), 105.

no longer be seen at home, in their bed. Instead, hospitals were becoming more of a footprint in society. A patient would be placed in an uncomfortable, sterile room, devoid of their earthly treasures and pleasures, watched round the clock by doctors and nurses in the same sterile uniforms, and often medicated so as not to know what was happening to their body. Death became taboo.

What we have now, in secular relics – those not of a religious nature - are the remains of the known death. As we view the Victorian death, it is common to see the macabre, or what we see as uncomfortable, but to them, any memento they could keep was a remembrance of a life fulfilled. They had value only to a handful of people, or even just to one, and if that one died, then the relic became an unmarked grave, of worth to no one.[5] It became commonplace around the middle of the eighteenth century to collect and share relics to preserve the history of the object and to continue the story of the individual it was attached to, sometimes literally. Relic culture became such an important part of life and death between the 1850s and the 1880s, that a new industry started, especially in hair jewelry, although vestiges of teeth, hair albums, pictures and wreaths also had their time.[6]

One of the most common relics is the Post Mortem; the photograph of a loved one taken after death. Photography was not common in the mid to late 1800's. Most people could only afford one photograph, and it was not in their lifetime. Spirit photography author Louis Kaplan notes, "Funerary images of dead children in an age of high infant mortality were a popular genre of daguerreotype from the beginnings of photography."[7] Families would gather together, often

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[5] Lutz, 129.
[6] Lutz, 129.
[7] Louis Kaplan, "Where the Paranoid Meets the Paranormal: Speculations on Spirit Photography," *Art Journal* 62, no. 3 (2003)

days after the death of a loved one, when decomposition had begun to set in, and pose for one last photograph, or in the case of children, their only photograph. In the twenty-first century, what many call post-mortem photography is not. In some cases, a family member may be on their death bed, both literally and figuratively, but not entirely expired. A common misconception of post-mortems is the presence of a death stand. Often, a stand is shown behind an individual used to prop them up; however, they were used to keep children who were very much alive quite still during the long exposure times. The waiting time often results in photos without expression. If it is not accompanied by the sagging skin of death, the individual is assuredly not dead. A common misconception of the death photo are that eyes were painted on the individual. It is important to remember that in the early stages of photography, light colors, such as pale eyes, would appear ghost-like, and would often be retouched by the photographer post-development. Occasionally, eyes were painted on the eyelids of a deceased person, but it was also done after the development process, not on the individual.

Although maudlin to twenty-first century standards, wearing the carefully woven hair of a deceased loved one was common practice for Victorian mourners; it provided an expression of grief in an era when excessive outward emotion was not known.[8] A brooch, a ring, an embroidered wall hanging were all commonly made from the hair of a dead person, sometimes multiple people from one family. Prior to the nineteenth century, hair jewelry was simple and not sentimental. In the eighteenth century, hair became a raw material available for the production of jewelry; by the nineteenth century, makers had become expert at hiding the origin of hair in carefully constructed works of art. Sentimental fascination with hair as a powerful medium of

[8] Jen Cadawallader, "Spirit Photography Victorian Culture of Mourning," *Modern Language Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 13, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40346959.

memory cannot only be explained as a technical side effect of the development of mourning jewelry.[9] The design of mourning jewelry influences its function by design, but the story behind the piece is the culminating point of making it mourning wear. It has been marked, at some point, a souvenir. The ambiguous structure of revealed function and hidden story is condensed in the jewelry because it exposes the value of the object and connects it to the intimate sphere of the body; mourning jewels are exhibited secrets.[10]

Mourning rituals in Victorian England were known for being highly regulated gaudy shows of social class. "Mourning" during the period was more noun than verb, referring to the state of one's dress rather than the state of one's feelings.[11] Socially prescribed rules were in place regulating everything from the length of time one mourned, varying by degree relation, to the particular fabric from which mourning clothes were cut. An appropriate dress for the occasion would be widow's weeds, an ensemble of black dress, veil and bonnet, which the widow had to wear for two years to be socially acceptable.[12] Physical displays of grief were undesirable in both men and women, and as Jalland notes "Women did not usually attend upper- and middle-class funerals in the early and mid-Victorian periods, on the grounds that allegedly they could not control their feelings."[13] These social regulations seem to suggest not only that displays of grief were improper, but also that there was a psychological "norm" to grief: two years for a husband, two weeks for a second cousin, and so on. The absence of decoration was to be a visual reminder of the mourner's sorrow. Black crepe was allowed, but other decorations common in the day

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[9] Christiane Holm, "Sentimental Cuts: Eighteenth-Century Mourning Jewelry with Hair," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 140, doi:10.1353/ecs.2004.0059.
[10] Holm, 140.
[11] Cadwallader, 14.
[12] Sonia A. Bedikian, "The Death of Mourning: From Victorian Crepe to the Little Black Dress," *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 57, no. 1 (2008): 38, doi:10.2190/om.57.1.c.
[13] Cadwallader, 16.

were seen as ostentatious and were forbidden. The mourning jewelry had to be dull and lusterless. Brooches and larger ornaments echoed the funeral symbolic motifs that had developed over the centuries: arrows and doves, which represent emotional pain and resurrection; the setting sun, a metaphor for death and resurrection; ivy, a symbol of immortality; forget-me-nots, for remembrance; or hair, which is a symbol of life, because it does not decompose after death.[14] Mourners often wore jewelry made from their loved ones' hair as a continual reminder of their lives together.[15] Any feelings outside of these norms could be viewed as deviant behavior, a subversion of the public good.

The value that Victorian culture placed upon the representation of the dead carried important implications for literary representation. Literature, particularly poetry, was often used to perform a kind of mourning work. Much as the Victorians created material objects that were effigies for the dead, Victorian writers often sought to substitute the literary work for the dead body.[16] The regulation of mourning devalued and discouraged individual feeling, an idea Tennyson raises in *In Memoriam*.[17] He writes:

> The traveler hears me now and then,
> And sometimes harshly he will speak:
> 'This fellow would make weakness weak,
> And melt the waxen hearts of men.'
>
> Another answers: 'Let him be,
> He loves to make parade of pain,
> That with his piping he may gain
> The praise that comes to constancy.'
>
> A third is wroth: 'Is this the hour
> For private sorrow's barren song,
> When more and more the people throng

[14] Bebikian, 40.
[15] Bebikian, 40.
[16] Carol T. Christ, "Browning's Corpses," *Victorian Poetry* 33, no. 3/4 (1995): 392.
[17] Cadwallader, 16.

> The chairs and thrones of civil power?'
> (XXI, 5 – 16)[18]

Tennyson relays three imagined reactions to his grief: the first, that it is socially subservient to encourage others to mourn, the second, that grieving is a vanity, and the third, that mourning would be used to shirk their public duty.[19] Tennyson's *In Memoriam* could be seen as an act of defiance; however, an individual feeling is maintained, a place within the social ring of mourning. Like *In Memoriam*, the spirit photograph is, on the surface, a tribute to one departed, but also like *In Memoriam*, the spirit photograph is a reflection on the act and value of mourning itself.[20]

As the days grew closer to the beginning of what would become World War I, following the death of Queen Victoria, death as it was known to the 'Victorians' was coming to a close. Death began to be something to fear and avoid, not to embrace and look forward to. As clothing styles changed in the 1920s, so did attitudes traditional of mourning. Relics began to lose their stories as generations were forgotten. Jewelry made from hair was no longer worn; wall hangings and pillows were removed from everyday use. Literature and verse began to change. They no longer proclaimed death to be a great reward for enduring life, but as a thing to avoid. Photography became more common. It was no longer necessary to call a photographer to make a journey of a few days to take a long-exposure photograph of a family; cameras were beginning to be household items. Tombstones, the new *Memento mori*, were no longer on the family estate or in the graveyard, but were relocated to cemeteries to be visited once in a while, not every day or once a week. It became convenient to forget the dead.

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[18] Lord Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (Cambridge: University Press, 1904).
[19] Cadwallader, 15.
[20] Cadwallader, 14.

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