

Fashioning Death: Victorian Market of Mourning

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Abstract

The Victorian era was marked by great prosperity and the consuming culture of death. As a common rite of passage or a natural conclusion of human life, death at that time and under those economic circumstances became ‘popular’. It allowed commercial ventures to attract people’s attention by preying on their human nature and loss of the loved one. Against that background, there was rapid social growth and urbanization. Overpopulation and pollution led to infectious diseases, such as smallpox and cholera, which posed a great health threat—especially for infants living in London. Thus, in those times, the physical proximity between the dead and the living was very close in urban areas.

The Victorian culture of death involved designing merchandise to support people in their deep mourning and depression. Accordingly, this paper argues that the Victorian merchandizing of death focused on three main mourning goods: cemeteries, funerals, and mourning dress. This study reveals how Victorian’s attitude towards mourning underwent change. To improve the sanitation in cities, the need grew for private cemeteries to bury the deceased. These cemeteries developed into ‘garden cemeteries’ to attract more customers and consequently came to acquire commercial aspects. This wave of commercialization affected funerals and mourning dress; it was entwined with Victorians’ wish for a ‘good death’, which is related to exhibitionism in Victorian mourning.

The commercialization of death appears to have occurred based on respect and bereavement for the loved one. However, Victorians came to find such values in their consumer activities related to mourning. From an examination of the three mourning customs, it is possible to identify a shift in Victorian mourning customs towards commercialization.

Keywords: *Victorian mourning; commercialisation; cemetery; funeral; mourning dress*

Introduction

As a natural conclusion of human life, death produced distinct commercial opportunities for the people living in Victorian England as a ‘popular’ subject. To understand why Victorians obsessed about death, we cannot ignore two significant factors: overly rapid social development and the subsequent urbanization. Environmental pollution (mainly caused by overpopulation and such consequent infectious diseases as smallpox and cholera) was a major cause of death, especially for infants living in London.

Against that background, Victorian society developed broad cultural phenomena related to death—and they extended into the area of merchandising. Elaborate funerals, mourning clothes, coffins, and tombstones were all common Victorian products that were nurtured in a death-centred society.

This study examines three major areas towards determining the commodification of

Victorian death: cemeteries, funerals, and mourning dress. The paper investigates why and how death became a popular commodity. By examining those three aspects of the material culture related to death, I aim to identify the distinguishing characteristics among Victorians with respect to death.

Victorian London and the Spectacle of Death

As noted in many studies, an accurate understanding of the Victorian era demands a proper appreciation of the very close proximity to death that British people generally felt at that time. The distance between the living and the dead became considerably closer in Victorian times. Victorians lived their lives in the vicinity of death—both figuratively and literally.

The cause of this development was the great discrepancy between social and population growth on the one hand and the reactions to the sanitary conditions in Britain’s large cities on the other. In this regard, Catharine Arnold perfectly describes the unhygienic situation of Victorian London, pointing out the disparity with respect to social status:

In shocking reality, London was more necropolis than metropolis, her bustling thoroughfares and sophisticated highways paved with gold for the fortunate few, her side-streets reeking of decay. By 1842, the life expectancy of a professional man was thirty. For a labourer, it was just seventeen. The burgeoning population, drawn to the city for employment, was rocked by a series of epidemics. The high infant death-rate and constant epidemics of cholera, typhoid, measles and smallpox meant that death was always present.¹

Deaths in England and Wales (in thousand)		
	male	female
1838	175	168
1850	186	183
1860	215	207
1870	266	250
1880	273	255
1890	290	272
1900	304	284

Table 1: Statistics of Death in 19th century England and Wales²

Owing to the high death rate and physical proximity to the dead, awareness of the end of life was widespread among people of all social classes. This point has great bearing when discussing the merchandizing of death at that time: the Victorian death market unquestionably capitalized on the growing demand for relieving such anxiety. Ordinary people struggled with the financial problems related to themselves as mourners and—ultimately—as the deceased. Accordingly, the Victorian death market expanded to meet people’s demands to alleviate mortal concerns. ‘Spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification.’³ Given this definition by Guy Debord, Victorian England was so awash with death-related goods that the society were surely the spectacle of death.

Entomb as You Like: Garden Cemeteries

In terms of public health, Victorian London was in a downward spiral: insanitation led to a high death rate, which in turn exacerbated biotic contamination. A major reason for this situation would appear to be a shortage of cemeteries for burials. Concerning the serious shortage of graveyards in London at that time, Rev. Dr. Joynes of the Gravesend Cemetery Company delivered the following speech at the opening ceremony of the Gravesend and Milton Cemetery:

Owing to the increase of population, the soil of some of our church yard is almost putrid; and you cannot perform an office to the death without the risk of infection to the living. (...) To remedy this inconvenience, to preserve the due solemnity of funeral rites, to keep up the honours of the grave, cemeteries have been invented- for the commencement of one of which we are now here assembled.⁴

From the 1830s to 1850s, a ‘cemetery movement’ took place in London as part of efforts to promote public health. Starting with Kensal Green Cemetery (1833), a series of private cemeteries opened in central London: West Norwood Cemetery (1837), Highgate Cemetery (1839 and 1854), Abney Park Cemetery (1840), Brompton Cemetery (1840), Nunhead Cemetery (1840), and Tower Hamlet Cemetery (1841). Those cemeteries, collectively referred to as the ‘magnificent seven’, were authorized by Parliament under expectations that they would accommodate for the deficiency and serve as alternatives to the insanitary burial grounds.

It should be noted that they are all private cemeteries of the type termed ‘garden cemeteries’, supposedly inspired by Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, i.e. commercially run graveyards for the upper and upper-middle classes. To eradicate the common images of unsanitary burial grounds and attract new clientele, the administrators of these new cemeteries prepared elaborately landscaped burial grounds with walkways, pavilions, and mausoleums. Over a couple of decades, their image strategy succeeded in overturning wealthy people’s ideas about metropolitan cemeteries. The *Illustrated Weekly News* on 5 October 1867 introduced Highgate Cemetery using an attracting caption, which emphasized its positive image: ‘Highgate is one of the most charming spots in the neighbourhood of London. (...) The cemetery here contains an immense number of beautiful monuments- many of them to well-known celebrities in all classes of life (Figure 1).’⁵ Accordingly, a sense of improvement in public health came about through the rise of commercial landscaped cemeteries, though that did not actually produce any fundamental solutions.



Figure 1: The View of Highgate Cemetery



Figure 2: Entrance Gateway for a New Cemetery by Augustus Pugin

With respect to the Victorian merchandising of death, the garden cemeteries can be identified as an early intersection of commercialism and mourning. The character of such places was frequently criticized by contemporary architects or cemetery designers. Augustus Pugin, a pioneer of the Gothic Revival, was one such opponent. A satirical sketch drawn by Pugin clearly depicts those cemeteries' shrewd attitude for business, as indicated by the notice stating 'OBSERVE THE PRICES!!! FOR READY MONEY ONLY' on the right-hand column at the entrance gate (Figure 2).⁶ However, despite the feelings of Pugin and other critics, the Victorian market for death expanded, and increasing numbers of companies became involved in merchandising activities. That activity is clearly reflected in publications devoted to the subject. By the end of the nineteenth century, publications on the topic included *Funeral Trade's Gazette* (1882), *Undertaker's Journal* (1885), and *The Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal and*

Monumental Masons' Review (1886). Advertisements for tombstones as well as cremation and embalming services appeared in Harrods catalogues, from which it was evident that metropolitan undertakers and cemeteries had business collaborations (Figure 3 and 4). Those publications clearly show that the mourning industry enjoyed consistent growth and reached a peak in the late Victorian era.



Figure 3: Advertisement for funerals combining a cremation and embalming service

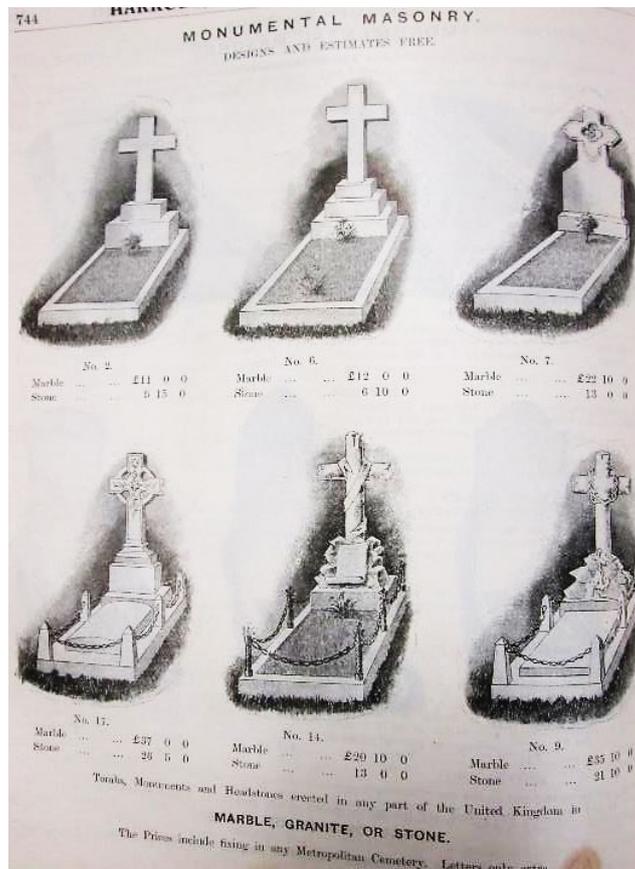
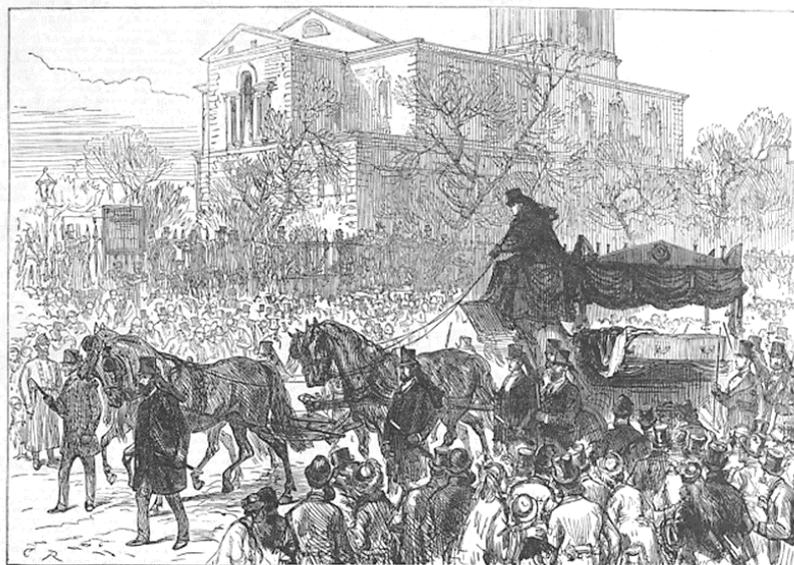


Figure 4: Monumental tombstones on Harrods' Catalogue

Various options for burials in those publications indicate the commercialistic attitudes in wanting to gain more clients. According to *Cassell's Household Guide*, there were various packages for people of all social status for interment and burial at Highgate and Nunhead cemeteries: interment in a brick vault, from £49 7s. 6d.; in a vault that could contain six coffins, from £39 2s. 6d.; in a public vault, from £8 8s.; and in catacombs, from £17 10s.⁷ Those detailed plans allowed people from the middle classes to better-off working-class individuals to obtain appropriate funeral services for the deceased. Eventually, such schemes came to cover poor people, who originally lacked the money for a proper burial.⁸

Commerciality of Funerals and Mourning Dress

Described as 'celebration of the death' by James Stevens Curl, a leading architectural historian, Victorian funerals were characterized by parade-like opulence. Surrounded by onlookers in a bustling street, the neatly furnished coffin containing the deceased was conveyed to the graveyard by an elegantly decorated mourning hearse with horses, coachmen, and other attendants in velvet attire. Luxurious funeral parades going through the city were a typical scene in Victorian times—even though the undertaking business had existed since Hanoverian times.⁹ A sketch of the funeral of a pioneer trade unionist, George Odger, in 1877 depicts the Victorian preference for holding grand public funerals (Figure 5).¹⁰



FUNERAL OF THE LATE MR. GEORGE ODGER: THE SCENE IN BROAD-STREET, ST. GILES'S.

Figure 5: Funeral of the Late Mr. George Odger: the Scene in Broad-street, St. Giles's.

A spectacular funeral was considered the best way for rewarding the deceased. However, such funerals were of course possible only for the wealthy upper and upper-middle classes. As a consequence, undertakers recognized that there were still sales opportunities elsewhere: the people of other social classes accounted for more than 75% of the population.¹¹ To acquire more customers, Victorian undertakers produced a range of plans for funerals, just as they had done for cemeteries. *Cassell's Household Guide* lists general packages for funerals. The two services detailed below help indicate how Victorian undertakers designed funeral plans to accommodate mourners of all social status:

Funeral costing £3 5s. - Patent carriage, with one a horse ; smooth elm coffin, neatly

finished, lined inside, with pillow, &c. ; use of pall, mourners' fittings, coachman with hat-band; bearers; attendant with hat-band, &c.

Funeral costing £53 - Hearse and four horses, two mourning coaches with fours, twenty-three plumes of rich ostrich-feathers, complete velvet covering for carriages and horses, and an esquire's plume of best feathers; strong elm shell, with tufted mattress, lined and ruffled with superfine cambric, and pillow; full worked glazed cambric winding-sheet, stout outside lead coffin, with inscription plate and solder complete; one and a half inch oak case, covered with black or crimson velvet, set with three rows round, and lid panelled with best brass nails ; stout brass plate of inscription, richly engraved four pairs of best brass handles and grips, lid ornaments to correspond ; use of silk velvet pall ; two mutes with gowns, silk hat-bands and gloves; fourteen men as pages, feathermen, and coachmen, with truncheons and wands, silk hat-bands, &c.; use of mourners' fittings; and attendant with silk hat-band, &c.¹²

The reason for the splendour of funerals assuming a sense of rewarding the dead can to some extent be explained by the religious concept of 'the good death'. According to Catharine Arnold, the good death for Victorians meant 'dying peacefully in your own bed, surrounded by family and friends, with a clergyman on hand to administer the Last Rites and your children brought in to kiss you goodbye.'¹³ Arnold believes that meant that Victorians wished their loved ones to undergo a natural, quiet passing into the sleep of death. However, the concept of a good death was also indicative of the need to be viewed by others as a person completed the final process of a life without regrets. From that perspective, it is possible to observe a kind of exhibitionism present with Victorian mourning manners, which was greatly accelerated by the excessive mourning attitude of Queen Victoria for her husband Prince Albert (Figure 6). In other words, Victorians were trying to avoid 'bad death,' caused by less attention to the deceased, by exhibiting the loss of their families or friends through exhibiting their grief.



Figure 6: Queen Victoria and the Portrait of Her Loved Husband

This mourning exhibitionism is evident with the mourners themselves. As part of the spectacle of death, mourning dress also played a considerable role as part of the sumptuous funeral. Unlike in previous centuries, the custom of wearing mourning dress ‘continued to slide gently down the social ladder- now permeating the ranks of the middle classes until by the early twentieth century it had finally reached the very poorest levels of society.’¹⁴ There were strict, complex rules on what people should wear in mourning. Colours, materials, and fabrics all had to be properly considered in light of the relationship to the deceased, the time since death, or sex and age of mourners.¹⁵ Following the complex rules was financially and mentally formidable, with the preparation of ‘[c]aps, hats, coats, dresses, stockings, veils, mantles, gloves, and blouses’ made of “black crape muslin, gauze, cotton and wool.”¹⁶

Surprisingly, this situation with mourning dress became a burden for dressmakers. That was because very extended mourning period made huge demands on the dress:

The preparation of mourning to be worn at the funeral is a task which often becomes a cause of anxiety or even distress to everyone concerned. Of the country tailor, who, perhaps, employs but two journeymen, possibly six suits of black-cloth are ordered to be ready in five or six days’ time. Of the dressmaker, who, it may be, usually employs no more than four seamstresses, perhaps twenty black dresses are ordered, which must all be home by the time of the funeral. The same message is brought from both tailor and dressmaker: *The work can’t be done in any time.*¹⁷

Death was certainly ‘just another excuse for merchandizing and black crape made the fortune of Courtaulds’ to some extent.¹⁸ New traditions were created and disseminated to society, and they constituted an immense promotion for the sales of mourning garb. However, overly elaborate mourning customs eventually became an encumbrance for all mourners.



Figure 7: La Mantelet Sultanne, de Madame Popelin



Figure 8: La Mantelet Antoinette, de Madame Alexandrine

Victorians became wrapped up in inflated ideas about mourning. They possibly considered the lavishness conferred upon death to be a kind of reward for the deceased's ante-mortem achievement. Efforts to change that situation were fruitless: in 1875, the Burial, Funeral and Mourning Reform Association encouraged people to reduce expenditure on mourning merchandise, but that move came to nothing.¹⁹ People followed strict rules for mourning; eventually, they came to be obsessed with wearing mourning dress—or perhaps with the consumption of death itself. In that society, people in mourning dress were presented as fashion models: they figured as a spectacular exhibition for death—as evident with the captions for mourning dress bearing the models' names (Figures 7 and 8).

Conclusions

Victorians lived within the spectacle of the death. Cemeteries, funerals, and mourning dress were all part of that spectacle. However, in the context of social reform, those features also strongly reflect a commercial shift in mourning customs. Owing to poor urban sanitation, cemeteries became profit-making enterprises under company backing. That trend stimulated and accelerated the commercialization of the entire mourning process, and the other two correspondingly held strong commercialism as winning products.

Victorian London was no doubt a consumer society for death. It is important here to consider Jean Baudrillard's definition of a consumer society in *La Société de Consommation*: a consumer society is one in which people appreciate not the value of the goods themselves but the symbolic value of those goods. Based on that definition, it may be concluded that the payment for mourning—buying goods to show the mourners' respect for the deceased—ended up as the direct way of mourning in Victorian society.

Notes

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