The Dead and the Dying: A Comparative Study of Class in Relation to the Design and Cultures surrounding Victorian Funeral Traditions

Anthea Lilley, MA Design History Graduate 2021

Those living in Victorian England viewed death very differently from today's society. This experience of leaving this mortal coil was incomparable. If you had led what equated to a good life then you were assured of a 'Good Death' which was a fitting end to a Christian life. To have a 'Good Death' meant you died in your bed surrounded by friends and family and, if your religion so desired, a clergyman to administer the Last Rites. As your earthly life drew to a close your children were ushered in for a final farewell. You had the opportunity for famous last words. You were at peace. This may appear absurd to modern life but since the Middle Ages society had been schooled in *ars moriendi* – the art of dying. (Jalland, 1999, p17) They were taught that dying required both courage and virtue and during a time when life expectancy was not very high people had to be prepared for this eventuality. The unrepentant sinner went straight to hell, a small minority went directly to heaven and the vast majority who need to be saved were sent to purgatory. (Jalland, 1999, p.17)

Statistics may indicate that the living conditions for working people had improved vastly during the reign of Queen Victoria. Whilst this may be true of those in steady employment, the reality for many was a life of relentless struggle to make ends meet. The majority of working people were on what is now known as zero hours contracts, they were reimbursed for each day they worked. Unfortunately, their services could be dispensed with during slack periods. When this happened, the family could find themselves in dire straits. New employment was frequently found some distance from the family home which involved

travel the cost of which they could ill-afford consequently they were obliged to walk a considerable distance. The majority of living conditions for many Victorians were insanitary and overcrowded and as such were a recipe for frequent epidemics of cholera, smallpox and other diseases which were potentially life threatening. Thus, death was an almost daily occurrence. The pious Victorians did not fear death, their concern was not to die alone or not be properly mourned. They were firmly believed that the souls of the departed ascended into heaven where they were re-united in the after-life.

It is generally assumed that the Victorian obsession with death was a result of the sudden death of Prince Albert. However, the culture of death was already in place, Victoria's reaction helped fuel it allowing the middle and upper classes deal with death in a very public fashion and to mourn the departed with a passion. The middle classes in particular were anxious to follow the example of royalty and slavishly copied the use of black edged stationary and visiting cards. As well as the stationery the bereaved had to follow a certain dress code of black accessories all of which were intended to carry the message of the deeply felt grief (Weston-Thomas, nd). Although royal attitudes towards mourning gradually percolated through society many who sought to follow did not always see how impractical they were. The royal family had the wherewithal to afford such an ostentatious show of grief which was denied the rest of the population. (Ibid.)

After the death of Prince Albert, the process of mourning became more formalised and commercial. The impact of Albert's death was catastrophic and was something from which Queen Victoria never

recovered. Her grief was iconic, and she became the presiding genius of mourning: she spent her remaining years in mourning. So overwhelming was her grief that she continued to wear mourning clothes until her death some forty years later.

Whilst her attitude towards mourning may have appeared correct at the time of Albert's demise as the years progressed and she did not remove her widow's weeds there were many who considered her a self-indulgent woman who thought the whole country should share her grief. Her disappearance from public life led to some calling for a republic. It was only on her death did she regain her popularity and perhaps this was due to her longevity: she had been on the throne for so long that the majority of the population could not imagine life without her as a figurehead.

Modern deaths usually take place in hospitals and care homes. During the nineteenth century most deaths occurred in the home and when this happened the house went into immediate mourning. Windows were closed and curtains and blinds closed, clocks were stopped, and mirrors and other reflective surfaces were covered. It was thought that these shiny surfaces had the ability to trap the spirit of the recently departed. The family were now obliged to put on a display of ostentatious grief.

Mourning dress was obligatory. The use of black for mourning is thought to have originated during Roman times when the mourners thought they could prevent being haunted by the ghost of the deceased by dressing in black. They thought they would appear to be invisible to the dead

especially if the burial took place at night. Black is symbolic of night, thus its suitability. (Puckle, 1926, p.64)

Throughout the nineteenth century the wearing of mourning dress filtered down throughout society until it reached even the poorest. The long-established affluent families saw this as an insult to their wealth and their status and were determined to maintain their position with even more ostentatious displays. Not to be outdone the middle classes, many of whom had acquired their wealth from trading and industry, were determined to break down the barriers which denied them access to the upper echelons. They copied every detail of aristocratic behaviour.

The death of Prince Albert had a great impact on the middle classes. They found it almost impossible to resist the elaborate etiquette of family funerals and the wearing of mourning clothes. If the Queen could shroud her ever increasing figure in black, they could do likewise. (Taylor, 2009, p.122) Victoria was the symbol of Christian widowhood who initiated the cult of mourning which became part of life for all sections of society during her lifetime. Mourning became obligatory and if the customs were not adhered to it was thought to be a sign of disrespect. Grieving widows were pressurised into conforming by family and neighbours.

A young servant girl had married a house painter. Unfortunately, within a year of the marriage he fell from a ladder and was killed. The widow bought a cheap black dress and a very simple black straw hat to wear at the funeral. A few days later her former employer met the girl who was now swathed in crape and her face barely visible under a hideous

bonnet, complete with streamers and veil. When asked why she was so attired she explained that her *'life had been had been made unbearable because she did not want to wear widow's weeds. If she did not wear a bonnet it proved that they had not been married.'* (Puckle, 1926, pp.66-67)

Society became bound by the rules of mourning wear it was an essential part of every upper-class lady's wardrobe. Indeed, they never travelled without a set of mourning clothes. These ladies lived in constant fear of being socially ostracised not having the correct mourning wear on any given occasion. These women made a serious study of their dress choosing the most the most elegant and socially correct gowns, they reflected the most fashionable styles of the day. Much to the delight of the fabric manufacturers these gowns required copious amounts of fabric and trimmings, some could include six to seven hundred yards of trimmings.

Whilst the wealthiest and most fashionable women had their mourning attire made by court dressmakers the less affluent used the services of cheaper dressmakers. These orders had to be fulfilled using the correct fabrics, dull and with no shine. Textile manufacturers saw the commercial possibilities of producing the required fabrics.

The Courtauld family made their fortune by producing black crape which was needed in vast quantities. There were those entrepreneurs who decided to open *magasins de deuil,* these were emporia which provided the clientele with every conceivable item of clothing needed.

Figure 1: Jay's Mourning Warehouse, Regent Street, London

The first and most famous was Jay's Mourning Warehouse opened in 1841 in Regent Street, eight years later a second store appeared, Pugh's Mourning Warehouse, also on Regent Street. In 1853 Peter Robinson opened the Court and General Mourning Warehouse, this was known as black Peter Robinson's. Finally, Nicholson's opened the Argyle General Mourning and Mantle Warehouse, thus Regent Street could boast four large mourning shops. These stores were all situated in the affluent area of London. The chief selling point for these stores was the speed with which they could deliver the goods no matter what time of day or night.

Peter Robinson was anxious to capture the upper-class market and advertised that it kept a carriage waiting twenty fours a day which was sent to the home of the bereaved to show the latest fashions and measure for their needs. This black carriage was fitted with the mourning accoutrements, the coachman and the two fitters were suitably attired in black. (Flanders, 2004, p.342)

This rapid turnover had been achieved by the introduction of the sewing machine in 1850 which had speeded up the manufacture of the mourning clothes. Once the mourning period was over, those widows who could afford bespoke garments found themselves with unwanted clothes, fashions changed so quickly. They needed to dispose of them. In the modern atmosphere of sustainable fashion these women were ahead of their time, the garments were recycled. They placed advertisements in magazines such as *Exchange and Mart* in the hope that the clothing would be bought by the newly widowed who, in turn

sold on their coloured clothes which they could no longer wear.

(Ashelford, 1996, p.239)

Figure 2: Toilettes de Demi-Deuil pour Jeunes Filles (Victorian Mourning Dress) c.1880

Although these emporia were used by the more affluent members of society for the vast majority it was a case of make do and mend. They made their own outfits, had coloured dresses dyed or merely embellished an everyday gown with black ribbon and lace. Many frugally minded women retained their mourning wear ready for the next bereavement. However, some enterprising person began the rumour that it was unlucky to keep mourning clothes, especially crape, once the mourning period was over.
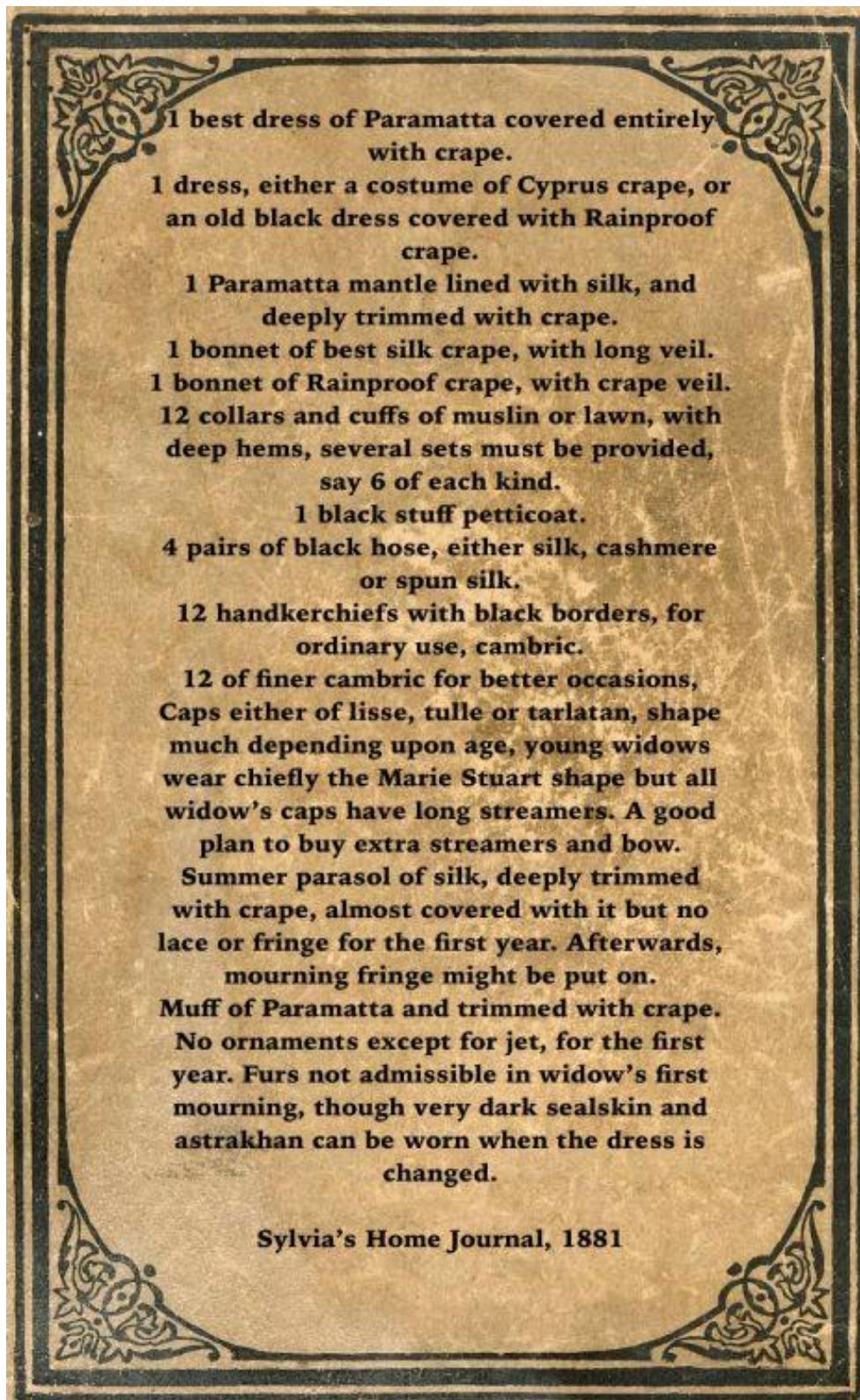
Consequently, this practise fell out of favour and a whole new wardrobe had to be purchased for each subsequent death. Puckle found it astonishing that the family of the deceased could appear in swathes of black almost immediately no matter what the family circumstances were. He concluded that much came from the pawn shop. (Puckle, 1926, p66) Families wanted to be seen to pay respect to the departed but many poorer families found this almost impossible. The quality and quantity of someone's mourning wardrobe was an indication of their status in society. The most 'economical' mourning dress, made from Borada crape, a cheap mourning fabric, which Peter Robinson's Mourning Warehouse had in stock in 1887, cost £2 19s 6d. Mourning wear was extremely lucrative, after all it was a necessity.

Mourning clothes were a family's outward display of their inner feelings and the rules for who wore what and for how long were extremely complicated. Help was at hand in the shape of manuals and popular journals such as *The Queen* or *Cassell's* which gave copious advice about appropriate mourning etiquette. Deepest mourning clothes had to be made in non-reflective fabric symbolising spiritual darkness.

1 best dress of Paramatta covered entirely with crape.
1 dress, either a costume of Cyprus crape, or an old black dress covered with Rainproof crape.
1 Paramatta mantle lined with silk, and deeply trimmed with crape.
1 bonnet of best silk crape, with long veil.
1 bonnet of Rainproof crape, with crape veil.
12 collars and cuffs of muslin or lawn, with deep hems, several sets must be provided, say 6 of each kind.
1 black stuff petticoat.
4 pairs of black hose, either silk, cashmere or spun silk.
12 handkerchiefs with black borders, for ordinary use, cambric.
12 of finer cambric for better occasions, Caps either of lisse, tulle or tarlatan, shape much depending upon age, young widows wear chiefly the Marie Stuart shape but all widow's caps have long streamers. A good plan to buy extra streamers and bow.
Summer parasol of silk, deeply trimmed with crape, almost covered with it but no lace or fringe for the first year. Afterwards, mourning fringe might be put on.
Muff of Paramatta and trimmed with crape.
No ornaments except for jet, for the first year. Furs not admissible in widow's first mourning, though very dark sealskin and astrakhan can be worn when the dress is changed.

Sylvia's Home Journal, 1881

Figure 3: What Every Well-Dressed Widow Needed, Sylvia's Home Journal, 1881

Figure 4: Mrs Howes in deep mourning, ca. 1860-1870

(copyright with the Museum of the City of New York)

Following the example of Queen Victoria mourning periods grew ever longer and even the remotest relatives were mourned, thankfully, only for a very short period of three to six weeks. The length of the mourning period depended upon the relationship to the deceased. Society dictated different periods of mourning and these were supposed to reflect the natural period of grief. Widows were expected to wear mourning for a minimum of two years. Presumably everyone else suffered less.

The mourning rules were extremely complex leading to a great many social pitfalls. It was very difficult to establish the correct rules as advice varied from one source to another. Perhaps Queen Victoria took the correct approach by wearing mourning clothes for the rest of her life. These conventions could mean that a family could come out of mourning for one relative only to find themselves wearing black for another relative. Women bore the burden of mourning for longer periods than men, thus they could find themselves dressed in black for many years. Although a widower was able to remarry as soon as he pleased, even whilst still mourning his late departed wife, he was still bound by etiquette. The bridegroom could remove his mourning for the ceremony but was expected to return to it the following day. The bride was not immune from mourning either. She was unable to wear an outfit in a colour of her own choosing, she was expected to wear black or shades of half mourning in memory of the first wife.

Widows often found themselves in an invidious position. They frequently lost both income and status which had been given to them by marriage. Unless they were well-born or rich in their own right many found

themselves cast adrift and sometimes homeless. Although some were fortunate enough to remarry very often their contemporaries regarded this act as somewhat distasteful. It was seen as being unfaithful to the memory of a husband who had by this time been dead for more than two years. This action was almost akin to physical infidelity. For too many women this premature widowhood witnessed them descending the social scale. They could find themselves removed from their homes which they had been reared to understand were their reasons for existence and were extensions of themselves and their place in the world. (Flanders, 2004, p.347)

Writing in 1913 for the Fabian Society, Maud Pember Reeves made the observation that many were of the opinion that the working class did not plan for the future. Her research illustrated how wrong this assumption was. Each week varying amounts of money were saved, not to benefit their children, but to invest in burial insurance. A death in the family, whether expected or unexpected, placed a huge financial burden on the relations. Despite this many families were determined not to bear the stigma of having a pauper's funeral. Many members of the middle class failed to understand why the working class were willing to *'squander money on funerals.'* (Pember Reeves, reprint 2013, p.58) This view was held by many who failed to understand the significance of these funerals.

The working-class people were perceived and perceived themselves as removed from the prosperous middle class. They encountered death on an almost daily basis. The sick invariably died at home and the corpse

remained there until the interment. To many observers these people appeared to view death with ambivalence.

Florence Bell was the wife of the local ironmaster, Sir Hugh Bell, in Middlesbrough. She made a study of the working families in Middlesbrough which contained her own observations gained from interviews with local people. Her findings were published in the book, *At the Works*, in 1907. She made visits to the families of their employees to offer help and advice. She was also instrumental in the building of the Winter Gardens in Middlesbrough which were designed to provide cheap indoor entertainment as an alternative to public houses.

Figure 5: Lady Florence Bell, photographed in 1911

When she encountered these families, she was somewhat alarmed at the way in which impending death was discussed quite freely before the dying person. A son from a large family was dying from an incurable disease and the family spoke of their intention to move to a house in a healthier neighbourhood but couldn't do so as long as he was alive. (Bell, 1985, p.88) They appear not to have taken the dying man's feelings into consideration, perhaps he was filled with remorse for the burden he had placed on his family. Julie-Marie Strange purports that impending death can be viewed with *'dread, uncertainty and, for some at least, distaste'.* (Strange, 2002, p.146) However, dying at home gave the person the opportunity to sort out personal affairs.

How and where a person dies are particular to that person as is the response to the death, which is often overlooked by the organisation of the funeral. David Vincent contends that this is due to a lack of a vocabulary for grief among the working class. (Vincent, 1981, p.45) He further suggests that insecurity of daily life make grief appear as an indulgence, consequently they hid their grief. There was always the spectre of destitution, however, Julie-Marie Strange rejects this notion suggesting that individuals developed their own methods of coming to terms with grief.

During the nineteenth century childhood deaths were relatively commonplace especially amongst the poorer element of society. It was not unusual for families to lose at least one or two children and the poorer they were the more likely they were to experience the loss of

even more children. Florence Bell, who had three children of her own and two step-children (the eldest was Gertrude Bell who was highly influential in British imperial policy making in the Middle East) opined that some mothers 'achieved comparative immunity from bereavement'. (Bell, 1985, p.192)

Although some mothers never recovered from losing a child there were those who took a more sanguine approach. An Irishwoman who had lost all her children when they were babies said, *'it was better that they should go when they were young, for I know they are little saints in heaven'*. (Bell, 1985, p.192) Some of these mothers had insured their children, thus many were thankful when they died as they could claim the insurance. Bell was shocked to witness one mother's annoyance that the child had died a week before she could claim the money. (Bell, 1985, p.78) However, Bell had failed to realise the financial constraints under which these people were living which was perhaps understandable in her position.

Florence Bell tells of a woman whose husband had been sent to hospital in London. She followed him there to help nurse him. Unfortunately, he died soon afterwards, and she was sent a donation to pay for her return journey and help with her expenses for a few weeks after his death. The widow was seen on her return *'clad in the mourning weeds of the stage, including a long black skirt, a deep crape flounce, and everything complete'*. (Bell, 1985, p.72) Julie-Marie Strange considers that Bell's observation of such clothing belonged to the stage suggests that this was an unusual site in a north east industrial town. (Strange, 2005, p.119)

The cost of the mourning and what she considered to be a 'proper' funeral took up most of the donation which, under normal circumstances would have lasted the widow for a month. As a result of her actions, she was obliged to request more help. Bell did offer a sympathetic ear, she acknowledged that *'these wild outbursts of expenditure generally take place in a crisis of emotion, it is not easy at the time to preach against them'.* (Bell, 1985, p.78)

Whether you were rich or poor the mourning clothes gave the wearer a sense of dignity of having done 'the right thing' by the deceased. (Richmond, 2013, p.130) The importance of mourning dress cannot be understated. Various working- class institutions kept wardrobes which could be loaned out to the family. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the Dockers' Union loaned a very simple black woollen dress, shawl and bonnet for a widow to ear at her husband's funeral. However, not everyone approved of such an arrangement; there had to be an element of sacrifice, hence the mourners were obliged to purchase a new wardrobe for each bereavement no matter how short the interval. (Richmond, 2013, p.130)

Whilst those who could afford to grieve in relative affluence the poor had a horror of a pauper's funeral. Such a funeral was a sign of abject poverty and degradation. There were those undertakers who were willing to perform the last offices for the poor on the condition they were paid a weekly sum of 1s. 6d. It could cost as much as £4 to bury an adult, less for children, consequently this debt must have dragged on forever. As Liza Picard pointed out there were occasions when the bereaved family was unable to afford the down payment. This situation

saw the corpse staying in the same room as the family. When this happened neighbours sometimes clubbed together to help pay for the funeral. (Picard, 2005, p.360)

Florence Bell considered this type of expenditure as *'may not be wise, is generous and beautiful'.* (Bell, 1985, p.76) She thought the amount spent on charity by the very poor was an act of self-sacrificing kindness by people who were *'constantly ready to help one another'.* (Bell, 1985, p.76) If someone in their community had an accident or was suddenly taken ill, a 'gathering' was made at the works and everyone contributed what he could to help until the worker was ready to return to work, or if death had occurred, to contribute towards the funeral expenses which were usually greater after an accident. Although some men had been insured the amount payable was so small most of it was spent on the funeral. One widow was heard to remark that she had 'put him away splendid' forgetting that her house was almost bare of necessities, and she would very little money to buy food. Another widow very proudly stated after the death of her husband that she had *'buried him with ham',* meaning that those who had attended the funeral had partaken of ham sandwiches. (Bell, 1985, p.77)

For many people of the working class a funeral was a social occasion, something not to be missed, it was sometimes referred to as 'a slow walk and a cup of tea'. The days preceding the funeral were spent in a frenzy of preparation, not only had the house to be thoroughly cleaned but the food needed to be cooked. For some widows this could be equated to a party. Some children thought it was a party as they were served food they did not usually eat, such as ginger cake, jam

sandwiches and home-made wine. Although many viewed the funeral tea as an extravagance it was part of the acceptance of death. Julie-Marie Strange thought the tea could *'represent a thanksgiving for the dead'*. It could also be construed as a gesture of thanks to friends and neighbours for their support at a difficult time. (Strange, 2002, p.158) These funerals usually took place on Sunday. The cynical members of society suggested that Sunday funerals allowed the mourners to imbibe freely whilst the more sympathetic realised that the mourners did not have to lose any pay, they did not have to take time off work in order to attend.

Covid 19 does not appear to have changed modern attitudes towards death. Although many have succumbed to the deadly virus, we want to pretend that it does not exist. Mourning is kept well out of sight, segregated from everyday life, we mourn in private. The dark romantic gloom of the Victorian attitude to death is something to be ridiculed. However, James Stevens Curl considers that the Victorian celebration of death is *'touching, pathetic and rather absurd: it would be a great mistake if we were to dismiss it as hypocrisy, commercialism and fraud'*. (Curl, 1972, p.xiv)

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