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SANDRA FRANZ

Alive, yet dead: Mourning in the Victorian period

This article explores the attitude towards death through two different sources – a photograph of parents posing with their deceased infant as an example of post-mortem photography and Alfred Lord Tennyson’s elegies *In Memoriam* published in 1850. It will argue that even though they are very different by nature the sources share some striking similarities. The pain about the experienced loss is evident and central in both of them.

Death is an inevitable part of life and an experience every human must face eventually. What has varied greatly during different periods are the burial and mourning practices of different societies. This article focuses on Victorian Britain and aims to examine mourning and grief among the middle and upper classes in that period based on two very different sources – a post-mortem photograph of two parents holding their deceased child taken ca. 1845, and the elegies *In Memoriam* by Alfred Lord Tennyson published in 1850.

The class-bound culture shaped every aspect of life in Victorian Britain; therefore grief and mourning were also affected. It cannot be assumed that the behaviour and beliefs about death of the middle and upper classes automatically filtered down to the working classes.¹ Religion played a central role in the life of most middle- and upper-class Victorian families and was not just a matter of convention.² The two major factors that changed these classes’ attitude to death between 1850 and 1918 were the decline in Christian belief and the substantial demographic change caused by the decline of the death rate, both clearly noticeable factors from the 1870s. The death-rate in England and Wales went from 21.8 per 1.000 people per year in 1868 to 18.1 in 1888 to 14.8 in 1908.³ The First World War accelerated the change in religious values and practices around death, reinforcing the decline in Christian belief when ministers failed to explain God’s purpose in the war amid the growing numbers of fallen soldiers; approximately one in eight men were killed. In addition, it destroyed what was left of Victorian mourning traditions since the vast numbers of fallen men could not be mourned in a traditional way. Without seeing the body of their sons and

¹ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian family* (Oxford, 1996), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ B. R. Mitchell, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics: With the Collaboration of Phyllis Deane* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 34-35.

men or participating in a traditional funeral Victorians found it almost impossible to accept the reality of their deaths. Two effects of the growth of unbelief between 1870 and 1918 were the support for cremation and spiritualism. Since some cities simply ran out of burial space, cremation increased in popularity through necessity, despite the practice being in direct contrast to the position held by the church who believed it to be a pagan practice that would make the resurrection of the body impossible. Some people looked to spiritualism as an alternative system of belief. It taught the immortality of the soul and offered the option of communication with deceased loved ones.⁴

Psychologists argue that mourning rituals meet the specific psychological needs of a society during a time of grief by structuring death within a system of values accepted by that society, while also rallying the support of family, friends and community for comfort. The memory of the deceased was and is central to all mourners regardless of their religious belief. The recollection of memories of the lost relationship is the core of the painful process of grief.⁵ The deceased self is almost split into two parts – the intangible spirit of the deceased on the one hand, remembered by the relatives, and the physical mortal remains on the other side. The mortal remains are at the family's mercy, and theoretically, they could do with them whatever they choose regardless of the wishes of the deceased. This makes corpses very vulnerable subjects: abject, and at the mercy of the living.⁶

Victorians felt the need for external physical symbols of remembrance like mourning jewellery in addition to keeping the memory of their loved ones alive in their heads and hearts.⁷ In the initial period of deep grief the mourners sought to keep their loved one's memory alive as vividly as possible,⁸ through monuments, death masks, paintings and mourning jewellery. Another therapeutic method was taking photographs.

The number of daguerreotypes, the first photographs from the Victorian period, that depict death in various forms might seem slightly odd from a modern-day perspective. Images exist of dead adults as well as children, even of parents holding their deceased children and groups of grieving people surrounding a coffin.⁹ Why were these daguerreotypes taken? Apart from the proximity to a dead body which seems at least very unusual from a modern western perspective, a further question arises when thinking about the cost of a photograph in the Victorian period. Even tintypes, the cheapest photographs available that produced a single, positive image on a tinned or

⁴ Pat Jalland, 'Victorian death and its decline: 1850-1918', in *Death in England.: An illustrated history*, ed. by Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings (Manchester, 1999) (p. 252.)

⁵ Jalland, 'Victorian', p. 245.

⁶ Thomas W. Laqueur, *The work of the dead: A cultural history of mortal remains* (Princeton, 2015), p. 1.

⁷ Jalland, *Death*, p. 288.

⁸ Jalland, 'Victorian', p. 246.

⁹ Several examples can be found in Jay Ruby, *Secure the shadow: Death and photography in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), chapter two.

enamelled iron support, were hardly available under 6d, the equivalent of £2 today.¹⁰ What was the purpose of these photographs? Where were they displayed?

Post-mortem photography is the further development of funerary portraiture and stems from a long tradition of posthumous memorial. The first post-mortem daguerreotypes were made in 1841, only two years after the introduction of daguerreotypes in general. Over time the technique shifted from a strictly upper class practice to a middle and even lower class one. The photographs were intended to create the illusion of life in death. A photograph created a tangible object that represented the deceased.¹¹ In addition, daguerreotypes were faster than paintings, and still much cheaper, especially since painters often charged double the cost if the subject was dead.¹² Professional photo studios advertised that they were prepared to take pictures of a deceased person on one hour's notice.¹³ The photographs were displayed in very public forums of the home like parlour tables, mantels and in family albums. Occasionally they were sent to far away relatives who were unable to attend the funeral.¹⁴ By the end of the Victorian period the post-mortem photographs had fallen out of fashion and the images moved more towards images of mourners and funerals, the deceased sometimes just represented by the gravestone.¹⁵

Post-mortem photographs by their very nature forced the photographer to construct the scene actively and to pose the sitter deliberately.¹⁶ Personal items to convey character traits of the deceased were seldom used in the photographs. In most cases, standard props were used to enhance the composition. In addition, the props were usually hidden clues that indicated death. Children were the exception, often holding a favourite toy. Long exposure time was possible without the sitter moving because of discomfort. If relatives were photographed as well, the images often display a lack of emotion.¹⁷

Since one-quarter of all nineteenth-century deaths were infants who died before their first birthday, every mother had to face the possibility that at least one of her children would die at birth or soon after. The death rate in England and Wales per 1.000 live births for infants under one year during the entire Victorian period remained more or less stable at 154.¹⁸

¹⁰ National Museums Scotland, *Victorian Photographic techniques* <<http://www.nms.ac.uk/explore/stories/science-and-technology/victorian-photography/victorian-photography/victorian-photographic-techniques/>> [accessed February 14th 2017]

¹¹ Beth A. Guynn, 'Postmortem photography', in *Photography* pp. 1164–67 (p. 1164.)

¹² Ben Mattison, *The Social Construction of the American Daguerreotype Portrait* (pp. chapter three, "the Mourning Portrait").

¹³ Ruby, *Shadow*, p. 52.

¹⁴ Guynn, *Postmortem*, p. 1164.

¹⁵ Ruby, *Shadow*, p. 99.

¹⁶ Ruby, *Shadow*, p. 62.

¹⁷ Guynn, *Postmortem*, p. 1165.

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Abstract*, p. 36-37.



Fig. 1: Parents posing with deceased infant, ca. 1845, Daguerreotype, 6.5 x 8.9 cm, George Eastman Museum

In Fig. 1 we see a couple, presumably husband and wife. The woman is holding a baby. The pose of the adults is quite commonplace for a photograph in Victorian times and not specific for post-mortem photographs. Their facial expressions are almost neutral, although it can be argued that their eyes convey a certain level of sadness. In any case, this would probably be undetectable if the dead child were removed from the photograph. These daguerreotypes were very intimate objects, depicting people at one of their most vulnerable moments. In itself it is remarkable that a private moment like grief should be deliberately made public through the photographic medium. It is quite likely that it was considered inappropriate to openly convey grief in such a public setting; the long exposure time must also be considered. The couple sits close together, their arms touch; almost intimate gestures of comfort in the face of loss. The main indicator that this is a post-mortem photograph is the fact that the baby seems to be asleep.¹⁹ The simulation of ‘the last sleep’ depicted a sentiment towards death which was very popular throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Sometimes the subjects were seated upright on a chair with their eyes closed. This seated pose also implies indirectly that the subject was only sleeping.²¹ Sleep as a metaphor for death can be read as a form of denial – the deceased is not actually gone, the person they are mourning for is alive, yet dead. It is implied that that person can come back any minute.

¹⁹ Unknown, *Photograph of father with mother holding dead child*, George Eastman Museum. (ca. 1845).

²⁰ Ruby, *Shadow* p. 63.

²¹ Guynn, *Postmortem*, p. 1165.

Several of the aspects mentioned before can be found in this photograph. There are no personal objects. The scene is technically a natural pose with the mother holding the baby. The high mortality rate for infants made photographs of parents and deceased babies quite common among post-mortem daguerreotypes. The fact that the baby seems to be asleep indicates death. And lastly, this photograph stems from the desire to record a last glimpse of family life. It represents a desire to record the deceased with their kin in a last family portrait.

Photography was a highly standardised form of displaying grief, at once both intimate and public. Poetry could also serve both these aspects while simultaneously being very different. *In Memoriam* by Alfred Lord Tennyson is an insightful example from the same period. Whilst an entirely different kind of source there are several similarities between the two artefacts, which will be articulated.

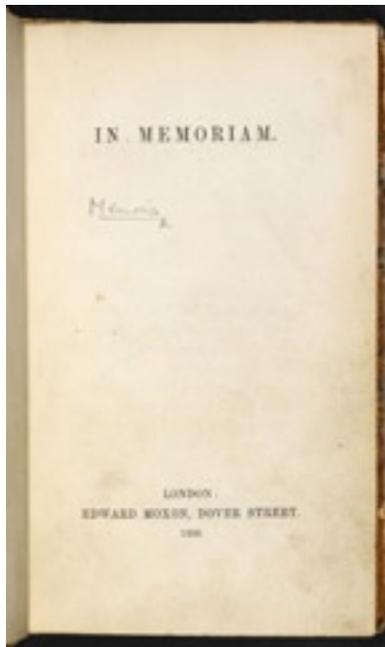


Fig. 2: The title page from the first edition of *In Memoriam* A.H.H., 1850. Furneaux, Holly, An introduction to *In Memoriam* A.H.H.: *British Library: Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*

Tennyson began the 133 elegies that would become *In Memoriam* during the month when he heard of his close friend Arthur Hallam's death at the age of 22 in October 1833. He expressed to mutual friends the wish to create a tribute to the deceased. *In Memoriam A.H.H.* was anonymously published in May 1850, sixteen and a half years later.²² The decision to publish it anonymously is obviously significant and might be a further indication that Tennyson was expressing very intimate feelings and thoughts. It would be interesting to further investigate whether the decision to publish the elegies changed the nature of the poems. Most biographers agree that the passing away of Tennyson's closest friend was the most significant and influential event in the author's life. The two young men met at an impressionable age, a time when they

²² Christopher Rieks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn (London, 1989), p. 201.

were both struggling with severe depression and religious doubts.²³ On the one hand, *In Memoriam* documents a deeply personal experience of intense male friendship and grief. On the other hand, it reflects discussions of the day about science and religion.²⁴ In the central lyrics of 55 and 56, Tennyson even considers the theory of natural selection long before Darwin made it famous in *On the Origin of Species* which was not published until nine years later.²⁵ 'Are God and Nature then at strife/ That nature lends such evil dreams?/ So careful of the type she seems/ So careful of the single life.'²⁶ The persona fails to find a supernatural 'God' because he cannot find a way to him, so that he must rely upon his own resources. The author obviously struggles with the idea that events like death happen because they are part of an almighty God's plan.²⁷ *In Memoriam* is therefore also an insightful source about the public debate about grief and mourning during the Victorian period.

In Memoriam can be read as a mourning monument in verse. This is visible even in the design of the original title page from 1850 (Fig.2) which resembles a tombstone. The poem is a very private expression of grief and therefore in contrast to the elaborate public memorials, tombstones and funerary ritual of the period. Tennyson was aware of this, asking whether the publication of his own feelings can ever be justified:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.²⁸

The first verse reveals anxiety about making the private public, something which is also reflected in Fig. 1. The writing of poetry, though, we see in verse two,²⁹ has through its regularity a pain-numbing effect and is therefore helpful in processing the loss.³⁰

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;
(...)

²³ Karen Hodder (ed.), *The works of Alfred Lord Tennyson: with an introduction, bibliography and head note by* (Ware, 2008), p. 305.

²⁴ Holly Furneaux, *An introduction to In Memoriam A.H.H.: British Library: Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians* <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/in-memoriam#sthash.JzpCjDKc.dpuf>> [accessed February 8th 2017].

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Alfred Tennyson, 'In Memoriam', in *The works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. by Hodder, pp. 309–89 (p. 338.), LV.

²⁷ Henry Kozicki, "Meaning" in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*', in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* Vol 17, No. 4, pp. 673–94 (p. 676.)

²⁸ Tennyson, *Memoriam*, p. 312, IV.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

³⁰ Furneaux, Introduction.

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:
 Thou madest man, he knows not why;
 He thinks he was not made to die;
 And thou hast made him: thou art just.³¹

In Memoriam persistently emphasises the desire for physical contact between the two men, the longing for a touch of hands, chests, lips - 'A hand that can be clasp'd no more.'³² But these aspects can also be seen as a form of coping mechanism in a time of deep grief. Physical contact with the deceased would be comforting, the impossibility of this wish is taunting, which makes it even more painful. Additionally, the longing to touch the lost friend implies the wish that the deceased would return from the grave at any moment.

A hand that can be clasp'd no more -
 Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
 And like a guilty thing I creep
 At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
 The noise of life begins again,
 And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
 On the bald street breaks the blank day.³³

The poem is a more intimate testament to grief than the post-mortem photograph seen above, since it seems to document the author's direct feelings, thoughts and longings. Keeping in mind that the Victorians were only comfortable with public display if it was highly ritualised, which might explain the lack of emotion in Fig. 1, it is hardly surprising that the amount of emotions evident in *In Memoriam* led to suspicions among contemporaries. And it seems as if Tennyson himself was aware of this, and he chose to express his emotions about the loss of his closest friend in a poetic way, creating a female persona that took his role, deliberately adding a romantic aspect to the relationship. Since Hallam was engaged to Tennyson's sister Emilia who through Hallam's death was almost 'widow'd' these two aspects became entangled and the female persona becomes a combination of the two of them.

My Arthur, whom I shall not see
 Till all my widow'd race be run;
 Dear as the mother to the son,
 More than my brothers are to me.³⁴

³¹ Tennyson, *Memoriam*, p. 309, OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII.

³² *Ibid*, p. 313.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 313.

³⁴ Tennyson, *Memoriam*, p. 315, IX.

And if along with these should come
 The man I held as half-divine;
 Should strike a sudden hand in mine,
 And ask a thousand things of home;³⁵

The image of the 'last sleep' can be found in the poem as well:

If Sleep and Death be truly one,
 And every spirit's folded bloom
 Thro' all its intervital gloom
 In some long trance should slumber on;
 (...)
 And love will last as pure and whole
 As when he loved me here in Time,
 And at the spiritual prime
 Rewaken with the dawning soul.³⁶

Previously mentioned aspects can be retrieved here. There is the idea of 'sleep' and 'death' as interchangeable experiences, as well as the hope to 'rewaken' someone, alive but dead, at any moment to return to the living. These hopes can be found several times throughout the elegies, calling sleep 'Death's twin-brother' and hoping for a reunion with the lost friend at a later point:

When in the down I sink my head,
 Sleep, Death's twin-brother, times my breath;
 Sleep, Death's twin-brother, knows not Death,
 Nor can I dream of thee as dead:³⁷

My old affection of the tomb,
 A part of stillness, yearns to speak:
 'Arise, and get thee forth and seek
 A friendship for the years to come. (...)'³⁸

While the parents in Fig. 1 mourn the loss of a baby, Tennyson uses the idea of parents losing a child in a different context:

And doubtful joys the father move,
 And tears are on the mother's face,
 As parting with a long embrace
 She enters other realms of love;³⁹

³⁵ Ibid, p. 317.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 332-333, XLIII.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 344, LXVII.

³⁸ Tennyson, *Memoriam*, p. 355, LXXXV.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 331, XL.

While Tennyson uses the image of a maiden leaving her parents to enter ‘other realms of love’ this can be seen as a euphemism for the world of the dead. And in a broader sense a young person, even if he or she has surpassed the stage of an infant, always leaves grieving parents behind and creates tears on the mother’s face. This can be linked back to the higher mortality rate during the Victorian period, making the loss of a child more likely.

The poem closes with the ode to the bride and the promise of the child as a symbol of a new beginning.⁴⁰ This part emphasises the triumph of life over death. It is possible to argue that this is where the poem was heading from the beginning.⁴¹ It starts with death and ends with the promise of a new life. It can be further argued that the poem shows the persona moving into happiness through his developing consciousness and his willed construction of ‘meaning’ in the disastrous past.⁴²

In summary, aspects of Victorian mourning culture can be identified in both the post-mortem photograph in Fig.1 as well as in *In Memoriam*. Both use images of sleep instead of addressing death directly. Both sources refer to the loss of a child from a parent’s perspective, a more central aspect in the photograph but still detectable in the poem. While the photograph could potentially be very emotional, it seems more restrained than the poem which deals with the author’s personal grief in a very direct, intimate way. Since the photographs were unusually intimate, exposing forms of mourning memorabilia by definition, which linked the mourning relatives visible with the deceased, a direct display of emotions might have seemed to be too much to bear or simply inappropriate. In addition, the photographs were displayed in quite public forums of the home which would have exposed the private grief to everyone who came to visit. Both the photograph as well as the poem are a striking combination of public and private mourning, addressing a moment in which the introspective nature of grief is displayed to the public eye - anonymously in Tennyson’s case and at least to family, friends and acquaintances in the case of the photograph. An interesting question to investigate further would be whether this changed the nature of the individual grief.

Yet the most striking similarity between the two sources is the desire behind them - the wish to document the relationship that has been disrupted through death, a last snapshot to capture what has now been lost forever.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 385-389.

⁴¹ Marion Shaw, *Alfred Lord Tennyson* (Hertfordshire, 1988), p. 38.

⁴² Kozicki, Vol 17, No. 4, p. 675.

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