

**This Mortal Coil: Death and Bereavement in Working-Class Culture,
c.1880-1914.**

**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of
Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy by Julie-Marie Strange.**

August 2000.

ABSTRACT

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Notions of respectability and patterns of funeral expenditure have been the central themes in recent discussions of responses to death among the Victorian and Edwardian poor. Analyses of working-class grief have, therefore, been firmly located within a materialist paradigm. Disputing the notion that poverty blunted working-class sensibility, I argue that grief was a complex and diverse experience which was articulated both verbally and symbolically. Social rituals centred on the treatment and interment of the corpse helped to facilitate individual expressions of loss, condolence and commemoration. Moreover, I demonstrate that antipathy to the pauper grave was not merely the antithesis of a 'respectable' culture of death. Rather, aversion to burial 'on the parish' signified a desire to express identity and claim ownership of the dead.

The most significant contribution to death scholarship in recent years, Pat Jalland's Death in the Victorian Family (1996), illustrates how customs associated with death helped assuage grief. Jalland's focus on elite families consciously excludes the working-classes from this culture of loss. My research contests this omission. I suggest that working-class concepts of bereavement were malleable: they allowed for the pragmatic management of bereavement. This did not, however, annul the capacity to experience profound and lasting grief. Drawing on a rich variety of qualitative sources (autobiography, oral testimony, burial board records, poor law guardians' reports, social surveys, lunatic asylum records and local, national and medical press) my research not only challenges current historiography on responses to death, but suggests that many orthodox perceptions of working-class cultural norms need to be substantially re-examined.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors, Andrew Davies and Jon Lawrence for their constant support, advice and (sometimes blunt) criticisms. I am also extremely grateful to Julie Rugg of the Cemetery Research Group, York University, for plentiful suggestions on bibliographical references, for 'cemetery-talk' and criticisms of drafts. I would also like to thank Audrey Linkman, Joanna Bourke and Margaret Crowther. Thanks also to the staff at Bolton, Preston and Stalybridge record offices who have been patient, helpful and encouraging. I take full responsibility for the opinions expressed in this thesis.

For friendship, discussion and laughter, thanks to Jane Collins and all those who have brightened my days with frivolous emails. For unstinting love and encouragement, thanks to my parents, David Strange and Christina Strange, and my sister Suzanne. Special thoughts for Sylvia Ann Bamber in whose memory this thesis was conceived and written. Finally, I am indebted to Ian George, thankyou - come fly with me.

Abbreviations.

BOHT - Bolton Oral History Transcript.

BRO - Bolton Record Office.

LRO - Lancashire Record Office.

LVRO - Liverpool Record Office.

MOH - Manchester Oral History.

PRO - Public Record Office.

WRO - Wigan Record Office.

Introduction

*There's a grim one-horse hearse in a jolly round trot;
To the churchyard a pauper is going, I wot:
The road is rough, and the hearse has no springs,
And hark to the dirge that the sad driver sings:-
Rattle his bones over the stones;
He's only a pauper, whom nobody owns...*

*Poor pauper defunct! he has made some approach
To gentility, now that he's stretched in a coach;
He's taking a drive in his carriage at last,
But it will not be long if he goes on so fast!
Rattle his bones over the stones;
He's only a pauper, whom nobody owns...*

*But a truce to this strain! for my soul it is sad
To think that a heart in humanity clad
Should make, like the brutes, such a desolate end,
And depart from the light without leaving a friend.
Bear softly his bones over the stones,
Though a pauper, he's one whom his Maker yet owns.
Thomas Noel, 1841.¹*

At length the day of the funeral, pious and truthful ceremony that it was, arrived... two mutes were at the house-door, looking as mournful as could be expected of men with such a thriving job in hand; the whole of Mr Mould's establishment were on duty within the house or without; feathers waved, horses snorted, silk and velvets fluttered; in a word, as Mr. Mould emphatically said, 'everything that money could do was done'.

Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit, 1844²

The pauper grave and the lavish funeral are the most notorious symbols of the working-class culture of death from the early years of Victoria's reign to the devastation of the First World War. The juxtaposition of the quotations above reflects contemporary and historiographical perceptions of the two funerals as binary opposites, not only in modes of burial but in a cultural landscape also. The pauper grave signified abject poverty and carried the taint of the workhouse; the pauper

¹ 'The Pauper's Drive' by Thomas Noel cited in full in Arnold Wilson and Herman Levy, Burial Reform and Funeral Costs (London, 1938), p. 56.

² Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit (Everyman, London [1844], 1968), p. 309.

corpse was tossed unlovingly into a pit to rot in anonymity; and, should anyone accompany the disposal of this creature, they were to be pitied. Conversely, giving the dead a ‘good send off’ epitomised respectability; it provided an excellent opportunity for revelry and display; and the funeral party were the object of jealousy and social rivalry. The excerpts above are taken from the period which witnessed the implementation and establishment of the New Poor Law and the beginning of a commercial boom in mourning culture. Yet, as stereotypes, they are almost invariably linked to a century of funerary excess and a horror of burial on ‘the parish’. Like many dichotomies, however, the pauper burial and the respectable funeral has lent itself to oversimplification. Notably, there is no concept of grief in the representation of either funeral. My thesis challenges this crude caricature of the working-class culture of death. My principal aim is to shift the focus of analysis away from a preoccupation with consumerism and respectability in order to re-write the narrative of working-class responses to death in terms of *grief*.



Since the latter decades of the nineteenth century, definitions of death have been rooted in medical discourse and have tended to describe expiration as an event.³ However, death is also an abstraction, the declaration of which is a cultural process.⁴ Crucially, death is inseparable from bereavement. The bereaved are classed as those who knew the deceased with a degree of intimacy. Bereavement as a state of being usually refers to the aftermath of death when rites of mourning (cultural representations of bereavement) identify those who are bereft and provide the means for disposing of their dead in a meaningful way. As archaeologists and

³ Death is medically and legally defined as the moment when the heart and lungs cease to function. There are, of course, numerous ethical questions concerning assisted death, brain death and the artificial sustenance of physiological functions. See for instance, David Lamb, Death, Brain Death and Ethics (London, 1985), Robert Lee and Derek Morgan, Death Rites: Law and Ethics at the End of Life (London, 1994), and Frances Kamm, Morality, Mortality (New York, 1996).

⁴ See Karen Grandstrand Gervais, Redefining Death (Yale, 1986), Jacques Chorán, Death in Western Thought (New York, [1963] 1973), pp. 81-7 and Lindsey Prior, The Social Organisation of Death (Basingstoke, 1989).

anthropologists have noted, the negotiation of death across cultures takes place within the context of verbal and symbolic social rituals which acknowledge bereavement, provide a rationale for mortality and an afterlife, and assist the bereaved with re-integration into the world of the living.⁵ Such rites are the cultural symbols for expressing and making sense of the feelings of loss which we term *grief*. However, the signs available for the articulation of an innate sense of loss differ greatly. Moreover, grief is inextricable from the languages which give it social meaning. Thus, as Paul Rosenblatt notes, 'culture is such a crucial part of the context that it is often impossible to separate an individual's grief from culturally required mourning.'⁶

Since the publication of Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' in 1917, grief in western culture has become increasingly pathologised,⁷ it has acquired a symptomatology and recognised 'stages' of recovery and resolution: an initial period of shock, disbelief and denial is followed by an intermediate period of acute mourning, typified by severe somatic and emotional discomfort and social withdrawal, which eventually leads to restitution.⁷ Thus, the cultural scripts which render bereavement comprehensible in the west in the twentieth century draw heavily on concepts which define grief as 'normal' but which also set it against loose understandings of 'normal grief'. None the less, bereavement is also defined as an experience unique to each individual: 'Grief is not a linear process with concrete boundaries but, rather, a composite of overlapping, fluid phases that vary from person

⁵ See Joachim Whaley, 'Introduction' in Joachim Whaley (ed.), Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death (London, 1981), pp. 1-14 and Jonathan Dollimore, Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture (London, 1998).

⁶ Paul Rosenblatt, 'Grief: The Social Context of Private Feelings' in Margaret Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe and Robert Hansson (eds.), Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research and Intervention (Cambridge, [1993] 1994), pp. 102-11 (p. 104).

⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' in J. Strachey (ed.), Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London, [1917] 1957). For other major works in the development of a pathology of grief see Melanie Klein, 'Mourning and Its Relation To Manic-Depressive States' in E. Jones (ed.), Contributions to Psychoanalysis (London, 1940), pp. 125-153 and Colin Murray Parkes, Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life (New York, 1972).

to person'.⁸ Or, as the sociologist Tony Walter, quoting Frank Sinatra, states: 'I did it my way'.⁹ The disaggregation of bereavement is generally associated with the privatisation and individualisation of death in the aftermath of the First World War.¹⁰ Unprecedented numbers of horrific and ugly deaths during the war rendered civil burial customs which were rooted in consumer culture inappropriate. In addition, a burgeoning medical profession increasingly sanitised death.¹¹ Moreover, changing patterns of religious belief suggest that the march of science and the tragedy of war consolidated the secularisation of British culture.¹² The implication inherent in notions of the privatised death is that the bereaved began to grieve in subdued and introspective mourning rituals.

In comparison, Victorian and Edwardian cultural representations of grief drew on notions of consumerism and communality. Death was frequent and, more often than not, occurred within the home. The corpse remained with the family until burial whilst neighbours, relatives and friends called to view the body and offer their condolences. A thriving industry in mourning paraphernalia (such as clothing, jewellery, stationery, shrouds, plumes and hearses) facilitated tremendous opportunities for expenditure, rendering the funeral a consumer good, the display of which signified economic and social status. Moreover, the funeral drew kin and neighbours into a public event which articulated loss and sympathy.¹³ Yet, as chapter one in this thesis will highlight, it is the working-class funeral as a text on consumerism, thrift and respectability which has attracted historiographical comment. Furthermore, as the antithesis to the 'respectable' funeral, antipathy to pauper burial

⁸ Stephen Shuchter and Sidney Zisook, 'The Course of Normal Grief' in Stroebe et al., Handbook of Bereavement, pp. 23-43 (p. 23).

⁹ Tony Walter, The Revival of Death (London, [1994] 1997), p. 2.

¹⁰ Phillipe Ariès, The Hour of Our Death (New York, 1984), pp. 559-601 and David Cannadine, 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain' in Whaley, Mirrors of Mortality, pp. 187-242.

¹¹ Joanna Bourke, Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War (London, 1996), pp. 210-52 and Walter, The Revival, pp. 9-22.

¹² Pat Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family (Oxford, 1996), pp. 2-3.

¹³ See John Morley, Death, Heaven and the Victorians (London, 1971) and Julien Litten, The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450 (London, 1991).

has been understood, almost exclusively, in relation to the social stigma of poverty. The funeral as a cathartic ritual has been sidelined or overlooked.

David Cannadine has questioned the degree to which expenditure could ameliorate grief. Indeed, he suggests that 'the Victorian celebration of death was not so much a golden age of effective psychological support as a bonanza of commercial exploitation.'¹⁴ Taking my chronological starting point as the decade in which lavish mourning culture peaked, the 1880s, I would reject many of the assumptions inherent in Cannadine's claim. To begin, I contend that the extravagance and, significantly, the social snobbery of working-class funerals has been exaggerated. I also argue that the working-class culture of death was typified by public rites of mourning which were, first and foremost, languages of loss and condolence. Moreover, those rites were appropriated by individuals and invested with personal significance. Thus, I conclude that the individualisation of grief is not a post-Great war phenomenon but, rather, was central to the social meanings of burial ritual even in the heyday of Victorian ostentation.

In highlighting the disaggregation of the working-class culture of bereavement, however, it is also necessary to outline the definition of working class deployed in this thesis. Definitions of class are notoriously problematic. In particular, the mutability of identity has called the usefulness of class as a tool of analysis into question. As Patrick Joyce has argued, few members of the proletariat defined themselves in a vocabulary of class consciousness.¹⁵ Moreover, identity was configured in multiple forms which overlapped and intersected with each other. More recently, however, claims have been made for reinstating the analytical significance of class. Notably, Andrew Miles and Mike Savage have attempted to reclaim class analysis, arguing that

¹⁴ Cannadine, 'War and Death', pp. 190-1.

¹⁵ Patrick Joyce, Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914 (Cambridge, 1991). Joyce argues that if there is a broad category of identity to rival class it is that of 'populism', which he locates as a 'set of discourses and identities which are extra-economic in character and inclusive and universalising in their social remit', p. 11.

the examination of language as a self-contained text is 'unduly restrictive'.¹⁶ Instead, they posit a framework of analysis which is sensitive to contingency but makes connections between diverse economic, social, cultural and political developments to argue for class formation.¹⁷ David Cannadine, meanwhile, has reminded us that class as a category for organising the understanding of social difference was all pervasive in British society throughout the period under consideration here.¹⁸ Not only do the approaches of Miles and Savage and Cannadine argue persuasively for the importance of class, they demonstrate respectively the distinction between class as social position and class as culture.

In this thesis, the term 'working class' is used primarily in the first sense, as an adjective signifying manual workers and their families: these are the people who form the core of this study. That said, I have not sought to operate within any rigid occupational classification of class since I am fully aware both of the inherent arbitrariness of assigning labels such as 'manual' and 'non-manual' to many jobs and of the social complexity of many households.¹⁹ Moreover, I am *not* defining the group identified as a cohesive and uniform body. Indeed, it may be more appropriate to refer to the working classes. Repeatedly, I draw specific attention to 'the poor' as a distinct group within the working classes. Again, this a problematic and arbitrary definition. It can be used as a generic term for those defined as not middle or upper class. It can also refer to degrees of privation which are, in themselves, dependent on abstract concepts of the poverty line.²⁰ Within the context of this research, however,

¹⁶ Mike Savage and Andrew Miles, The Remaking of the British Working-Class, 1840-1940 (London, 1994), p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁸ David Cannadine, Class in Britain (London, 1998).

¹⁹ Jon Lawrence, 'The British Sense of Class', Journal of Contemporary History, 35, 2 (2000), pp. 307-18.

²⁰ For instance, poverty could depend on maintaining physical efficiency or concepts of 'human needs' which made allowances for recreational pursuits. See Andrew Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939 (Buckingham, 1992), pp. 26-8.

‘the poor’ refers to those who were the least well-off among the working classes and includes a *shifting* population in addition to those perceived as *shiftless*.²¹

Crucially, I am *not* arguing for a single working-class culture of death and bereavement, nor that working-class culture was hermetically sealed from outside influences. Rather, I am working within a framework which configures the working-class culture of death as Other: working people were perceived and perceived themselves as removed from a prosperous middle-class culture. This difference was written into both the external and internal representations of their cultural practices, including those surrounding death and bereavement. For instance, to many middle-class commentators, the particularity of the working-class culture of death, especially the candour and apparent resignation of bereaved and the disproportionate expenditure on death rather than life, was a source of incredulity and incomprehension. Conversely, the middle-class funeral was a spectacle of material affluence far removed from the common working-class experience of having the payment of one’s funeral planned for from birth.

My exploration of cultural practices in relation to death has also raised wider questions concerning the social history of the late Victorian and Edwardian working class. Notably, I call for a reassessment of notions of respectability in relation to death. Undoubtedly, the impulse to save for a private grave and antipathy towards the pauper grave were almost universal among the working classes. Yet there is a tendency to refer to this distinction as the single defining feature of the working-class culture of death. As a tool of analysis, however, this dichotomy fails to account for the fluidity of respectability and it overlooks the cathartic effects of the funeral and the use of ritual as a site for the expression of loss. It also neglects to consider grief in the aftermath of burial. My thesis argues for a flexible definition of the ‘respectable

²¹ See for instance, Seebohm Rowntree, Poverty: A Study of Town Life (London, [1901] 1922) for discussion of causes of primary and secondary poverty and William Grisewood, The Poor of Liverpool and What is to be Done For Them (Liverpool, 1899) for analyses of destitution caused by unemployment, ill health or the death of a breadwinner.

burial' which prioritised the dignity of the dead and, significantly, could be adapted to include interments in the pauper grave. In addition, I suggest that candour and resignation cannot be equated with apathy and that material privation was not tantamount to blunted sensibility. Poverty necessitated pragmatism; it did not cancel the sentimental and emotional underpinnings of family life. I also highlight the struggles of widowers to maintain the integrity of their families, despite economic hardship, social prejudice and the distress of bereavement. This not only illustrates the importance of familial relationships, it suggests that a culture of domesticity and childcare, networks of support and expressions of feeling were not the preserve of women but often shared by men also.



The thesis is structured thematically. As noted above, chapter one is a critique of the themes which have dominated scholarship on death (such as the establishment of cemeteries, expenditure on funerals and antipathy to pauper burial) and analyses of working-class culture (notably, respectability and materialist paradigms of sensibility) in recent decades. In addition, I use this chapter to signpost the arguments pursued throughout the thesis which address the problems and omissions in current historiography. I introduce my own findings in chapter two with the contention that familiarity with death did little to annul the shock, fear, devastation and despair of bereavement. Moreover, I illustrate how responses to death were mediated through a multiplicity of identities, such as religion, occupation, kinship, age, geography, community, mode of death, the availability of networks of support and finance. Likewise, bereavement entailed a myriad of losses (notably, the loss of intimacy, companionship, self-identity and role, lifestyle, economic security and visions of the future).²² I demonstrate the ways in which solicitous care of the sick and of the corpse helped the bereaved to re-negotiate a sense of selfhood in relation to the dead.

²² Shuchter and Zisook, 'The Course of Normal Grief', p. 28.

In fulfilling obligations to the deceased, the bereaved asserted their ownership of the cadaver and ensured that it was treated with dignity and respect.

These themes are pursued in chapter three with an exploration of the funeral as a public forum for expressions of personal loss, sympathy and condolence which also reaffirmed the identity and dignity of the deceased. I argue that whilst mourning rites were bound in a loose consensus concerning the acknowledgement of grief and respect for the dead, these were appropriated by individuals and invested with personal meaning. The ability to claim such rituals also indicated that obligations to the corpse had been fulfilled. Furthermore, I suggest that stereotypes of lavish and extravagant funerals and social rivalry have been exaggerated. Most rites associated with the disposal of the corpse cost very little or were improvised. In this sense, I read the *respectable* funeral in dual terms: as the public means by which private understandings of grief were mediated and the assertion of the identity and dignity of the deceased.

Chapter four develops these themes in relation to the pauper burial. Reading antipathy to the pauper grave against the significance of caring for and claiming the corpse, I argue that parochial authorities often circumvented or prohibited the bereaved from claiming autonomous rites of mourning and commemoration (for instance, many guardians prohibited the memorialisation of the pauper dead at the site of their interment). Moreover, the ownership of the cadaver passed from the relatives of the deceased to the union. Thus, the pauper burial deprived the bereaved of shared languages of loss and identity. However, I also suggest that the historiographical preoccupation with the pauper burial as the antithesis of the respectable funeral has obscured the potential to redefine respect. Thus, whilst the pauper funeral was far removed from cultural ideals, this did not preclude the bereaved investing rudimentary gestures of dignity and identity with personal understandings of *respectability*.

The significance of claiming dignity and identity in the immediate context of the funeral is pursued in chapter five with reference to the cemetery as a landscape for grief. I explore the significance of burial ground as a sacred space and argue that whilst municipal authorities were keen to promote a fixed definition of the sanctity of the cemetery, the bereaved public invested the burial ground and, more specifically, the gravespace, with individual and fluid meanings. Indeed, whilst the private burial plot was crucial to perceptions of dignified interment, this importance was often temporary. Attitudes towards gravespace in the post-interment period were often characterised by ambivalence, families sometimes failed to install a headstone and often neglected to care for their gravespace and/ or sold the deeds to the plot. I argue that the ambiguities inherent in the 'neglected grave' must be contextualised within a culture of pragmatism. Crucially, this did not annul or eclipse sensibility or the desire to commemorate the dead. Rather, as chapter six demonstrates, expressions of grief and remembrance were pliable.

Exploring grief outside of the rites associated with the disposal of the corpse, chapter six advances a concept of grief which emphasises the availability of a shared language for making sense of loss within a personal and public context. In particular, I challenge contemporary perceptions of privation, pragmatism and resignation in the face of death as signifiers of working-class fatalism and apathy. I re-read subdued expressions of loss to argue that they were symptomatic not so much of suppressed grief or blunted sensibility, but of deliberate strategies to manage feeling in tandem with the necessities of life. Indeed, it was the absence of a coherent and shared understanding of what grief looked and sounded like outside of cultural mourning rites that rendered it so ephemeral to external observers. My analysis argues that grief was made manifest in abstract and mutable forms, during and after the funeral. I also explore notions of chronic grief as a means of gauging perceptions of normative bereavement, resolution and restitution.

Intended as a preliminary conclusion, chapter seven coalesces the themes of the thesis into a case-study of the working-class culture of bereavement with reference to the deaths of babies and young children. I argue that sensational claims concerning the extent of infanticide (especially in relation to the insurance of infant lives) have obscured a working-class culture of grief in response to the deaths of young children. Parents, especially mothers, often cared for sick babies and children with devotion and self-sacrifice. The deaths of babies and children were frequently met with grief, although this may not have been visible to external observers. Moreover, the burial and mourning rites accorded to the young were crucial as means of claiming the dignity and identity of the dead and permitting the bereaved and those who sympathised with them to express loss and condolence. Likewise, parents and siblings often treasured memories of the deceased child, even if formal commemoration was overlooked on account of financial hardship.



Given that my thesis turns on a concept of grief as a complex and diverse experience, it is not surprising that I make extensive use of personal testimony. Much has been written concerning the use of autobiography and oral testimony as historical sources. In particular, the value of the individual narrative, invariably posited within the context of the narrator's *present*, as a reliable and valid evocation of the past has been questioned. Memory is inherently selective and draws on multiple myths, relating to both the public and private self, the present and the past.²³ As Carolyn Steedman notes, the very act of reconstructing the past changes it. The reader's interaction with that reconstruction adds further inflection.²⁴ Joan Scott argues that the use of *experience* is problematic when it is interpreted as incontrovertible *evidence* of

²³ See Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (London, 1990), pp. 1-22. See also Agnes Hankiss, 'Ontologies of the Self: On the Mythological Rearranging of One's Life History' in Daniel Bertaux (ed.), *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (London, 1981), pp. 202-9.

²⁴ Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing Autobiography and History* (London, 1992), p. 5.

knowledge. For Scott, experience is always already both an interpretation *and* that which needs to be interpreted.²⁵

As Scott implies, the *problems* of individual narrative need not negate its value: much depends on how we read and interact with such material. The author of personal testimony articulates an interpretation of events as conceived from the distance of retrospection and evaluation. Martin Kohli suggests that the mythical element in these accounts is indicative of the narrator's current identity. In turn, this *self* evaluates and references the past to give a 'situational' and 'historical truth', specific to that moment and individual.²⁶ Conversely, Alessandro Portelli suggests that the stories related through personal testimony offer subjective visions of a social world. These may be partial, nostalgic and particular to the individual, yet when academic analysis draws upon a 'cross-section of subjectivities', it is no less credible than analyses which deploy alternative sources since all sources are necessarily subjective.²⁷

In this sense, personal testimony can be read as one individual's window into a particular past. The distance of time and retrospection need not detract from the validity of the account to the author within the context of narration. My use of retrospective accounts of death and bereavement indicates the peculiarity of the experience of grief whilst highlighting the broadly consensual cultural understandings of mourning. Moreover, I borrow from the techniques of cultural history to read the language of bereavement in these accounts as texts in themselves: metaphor and rhetorical device are also richly suggestive of attitudes towards love and loss. To a point, profound grief was (and is) *inexpressible*. Thus, silence itself is also significant.²⁸ This dualistic approach to sources is pursued throughout the thesis: I

²⁵ Joan Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17, 2 (1991), pp. 773-97.

²⁶ Martin Kohli, 'Biography: Account, Text, Method' in Bertaux, *Biography and Society*, pp. 61-76.

²⁷ Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, 12 (1981), pp. 96-107. For a discussion of history as inseparable from the literary genre, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 80-100.

²⁸ Stanley Stylianos and Mary Vachon, 'The Role of Social Support in Bereavement' in Stroebe et al., *Handbook of Bereavement*, pp. 397-410 (p. 404).

attempt to re-create a vision of the social past, albeit an imperfect and partial one, whilst considering the potential for language (verbal and symbolic) to act as a metaphor for feeling.

This thesis draws upon a wealth of little-used empirical material, the sheer collation of which represents a contribution to our perceptions of working-class culture. For instance, the medical records of lunatic asylum patients whose insanity was assigned to the death of a loved one represent one of the few texts to describe grief as a potentially devastating experience for members of the working classes. Those who entered asylums were usually accompanied by their next of kin who narrated the biography of the patient and the history of their illness. I read these stories, along with those of the patients themselves, as conceptual frameworks for definitions of normative and chronic grief and appropriate expressions of loss. Like most 'official' texts, however, the stories produced by families were filtered through the perceptions of medical attendants. In a similar vein, I make extensive use of the reports of the assistant medical officer of health for Liverpool in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The snapshots of working-class lives and words represented are, inevitably, refracted through the medical officer's interpretative skills and values. None the less, the wealth of detail along with the suggestive language utilised to constitute characters and themes in these reports offer a fascinating perspective into the conditions, anxieties and prejudices of lives we rarely glimpse.

The minutes and correspondence for numerous burial boards and cemetery superintendents indicate a municipal discourse of the respectable funeral, the sanctity of the cemetery and the commemoration of the dead. However, they also highlight more substantive issues relating to the desecration of graves, the acquisition and maintenance of burial plots and the use of the cemetery as a landscape for grief, in the context of the funeral and in the aftermath of interment. The records of Bolton burial board are particularly rich: the corporation retained much of its correspondence and applications for the exhumation of corpses from pauper graves for re-interment in

private burial spaces. This material is suggestive of the concerns of those forced to consign their dead to a pauper grave and the perceived implications of their subsequent disinterment. Moreover, Bolton records indicate a trend of graveowners utilising the deeds to their burial plot as a commodity, selling or loaning gravespace in formal and informal systems of exchange.

Transcripts of meetings of poor law guardians demonstrate the creation, implementation and, sometimes at least, rejection of definitions of the pauper grave which drew on notions of degradation and antipathy. Yet the records also offer an insight into the meanings inscribed by the poor onto the pauper grave. Notably, resolutions by guardians to remove mourning paraphernalia from the pauper coffin and to prohibit the memorialisation of the pauper dead at the site of their decay points to a deliberate policy of withholding access to cultural rites of burial. This not only indicates an inability and/ or unwillingness to recognise the significance of mourning customs (many of them inexpensive and modest) for assuaging grief, it also points to the attempts of the poor to invest the ignoble parochial burial with rudimentary gestures of love and loss. Again, the language utilised in these texts is richly suggestive. In particular, criticisms of the guardian's treatment of pauper corpses were repeatedly expressed with reference to the burial of dogs. As a foil to the pauper grave, the analogy is telling: it implied that the parish grave was no better than an inhuman pit whilst the cadaver occasioned the less consideration than that given to the disposal of an animal.

I have also made extensive use of the works of investigative journalists and contemporary social commentators. These texts represent self-conscious attempts to gain an insight into working-class life. Rhetorical devices were used to create colourful characters and emphasise facets of working-class culture which were often shocking to the author's sensibilities. Indeed, journalists and social observers were unable to separate themselves from an authoritative identity. Moreover, their attempts to understand working-class lives were bound by an inability to empathise with a

mentality that prioritised the immediate present over the possible future.²⁹ None the less, such texts advance perceptions of a ‘real’ social world and the relationships between its inhabitants. Furthermore, the implicit prejudices of authors frequently express more about the working-class culture of death as Other than explicit descriptions of cultural practices. The techniques of social commentators were not far removed from those of the novelist who aimed to present a vision of working-class culture and the personalities who populated it. Contemporary fictional accounts are deployed throughout this thesis as evocative portrayals of working-class lives. In particular, the works of authors who wrote from a semi-autobiographical perspective offer an intimate vision of working-class life which was not constrained by the formalities of oral history or the conventions of autobiography.

The analysis of burial board and other municipal records from Liverpool, Bolton and several towns in the North-west gives the thesis a strong local dimension, but this is emphatically not intended as a local or regional study. For practical reasons, oral history evidence has been drawn mainly from the North-west. This is not the case, however, with other forms of personal testimony such as autobiography and fiction. Here, material has been used from many different localities, especially London districts and South Wales mining communities, in order to flesh out the diversity and individuality highlighted by local sources. Finally, the thesis also engages extensively with self-consciously national sources, such as newspapers and the Lancet, which sought to provide an Olympian commentary on the habits of the people and to make strategic interventions that would change many of those habits. I weave these sources together in a bid to create a vivid narrative which incorporates a wide variety of perspectives on working-class responses to death and bereavement.

In seeking to explore the diversity and fluidity of grief, I have deliberately chosen to avoid quantitative analysis. Counting the epithets on headstones would not have

²⁹ Ross McKibbin, The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950 (Oxford, 1990) pp. 167-96.

offered the window into working-class sentiment of my qualitative material. Likewise, the quantification of the numbers of cadavers exhumed from pauper graves would not indicate the meanings inscribed onto disinterment, reburial or antipathy to the pauper grave. Similarly, my research focuses on asking *why* some families failed to commemorate their dead and neglected their graves rather than to what extent this occurred. To a point, aggregate statistics would also negate, or at least obscure, my emphasis on the individual at the heart of the culture of bereavement. Much of my analysis explores abstract expressions of sensibility and the mutability of grief, neither of which seem suited to quantification. Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent we can measure intimacy, love and loss or, indeed, whether it is desirable to try. Rather, I have tried to write an account of working-class responses to death which pulsates with the richness and complexity of individual lives.

Chapter One

Revisiting the Victorian and Edwardian Celebration of Death

Popular perceptions of the Victorian celebration of death owe much to Charles Dickens. An ardent campaigner for funeral reform, Dickens ridiculed the middle and working classes for aping the burial customs of the aristocracy. The tendency to equate extravagant funerals with respectable status did little more, he suggested, than render such spectacles absurd. That they were ‘highly approved’ by neighbours and friends reinforced the notion that the disposal of the dead was a theatrical display where any concept of grief was rooted in pride and snobbery rather than the personal expression of loss.¹ Notably, when sincere cries of sorrow were manifest, they were deemed inappropriate and contrary to the idea of the genteel burial.² The facilitator of these exhibitions - the undertaker - was invariably cast as a parasite, growing fat on a morbid diet of death, grief and social jealousy.³ Greed further manifest itself in the rise of the joint-stock cemetery company and the commercialisation of burial space.⁴ Moreover, a thriving trade in funeral dress and increasingly complex codes of mourning etiquette signified a growing cultural fascination with the macabre.⁵ In contrast, burials ‘on the parish’ testified to the punitive philosophy embedded in the New Poor Law.⁶

Historical analyses of the Victorian and Edwardian culture of death have drawn extensively from the images bequeathed by Dickens to conclude that bereavement in

¹ See for instance, the funeral of Pip’s sister in Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (Penguin, Harmondsworth, [1861] 1982), pp. 298-301.

² See Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit, pp. 312-3.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 303-14. See also Charles Dickens, ‘The Raven in the Happy Family’ in Bert Matz (ed.), Miscellaneous Papers of Charles Dickens (Chapman and Hall, London, [1850] 1908), pp. 192-6.

⁴ See Charles Dickens, ‘A Popular Delusion’ in Harry Stone (ed.), Uncollected Writings from Household Words (London, [1850] 1968), pp. 113-22. For references to overcrowded churchyards see Charles Dickens, Bleak House (Norton, London, [1853] 1977), p. 202.

⁵ See Charles Dickens, ‘Trading in Death’ (1852) in Matz, Miscellaneous Papers, pp. 349-58.

⁶ Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist (Oxford University Press, Oxford, [1838] 1982), pp. 25-33.

the nineteenth century was characterised by commercialisation and a preoccupation with social status.⁷ This *celebration* of death stretched from the early years of Victoria's reign to the horrors of mass bereavement occasioned by the Great War.⁸ However, the notion of celebration might be more appropriately tied to a culture of consumerism rather than death. The individual experience of grief in this *celebratory* literature is eclipsed by stories of social aspiration and respectability. Not only did the funeral afford spectacular opportunities for the display of affluence, the burial plot itself was inscribed with meaning beyond its purpose. The location of a gravespace and the memorial installed over it signified the social position of the deceased and the bereaved to the extent that the cemetery was read as a mirror on the spatial segregation of the living. At the very bottom of this hierarchy was the pauper's grave, located in the least attractive (slum) areas of the ground. The antithesis of 'respectable' burial, interment in a common grave testified to the failure of the individual: ceremony and mourning paraphernalia were usually prohibited, coffins were insubstantial, and bodies (interred in numbers of ten or more) putrefied in obscurity.

This chapter will examine the principal components of the celebration of death as outlined in current analyses to argue for an alternative approach to exploring the working-class culture of death in the decades between 1880 and the outbreak of the First World War. Taking my cue from the pioneers of a historical literature on death, this discussion starts with an exploration of the Victorian celebration of mourning, the rise of the private cemetery, and the juxtaposition of pauper and respectable funerals. Whilst acknowledging the significance of the cemetery and concepts of respectability, I contend that histories of death and grief are circumscribed by a preoccupation with the funeral and gravespace as status symbol. Moreover, I suggest that concepts of the respectable funeral have failed to account for fluid notions of

⁷ See especially Morley, *Death, Heaven and Litten*, *The English Way of Death*. Also James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Devon, 1972).

⁸ Cannadine, 'War and Death', pp. 187-242.

decency and respect for the dead, an oversight which also permeates analyses of antipathy to pauper burial.

Furthermore, the concentration on social rituals of burial and mourning has sidelined the spiritual significance of the funeral and individual responses to death. Recent literature concerned with grief has highlighted the problems inherent in reconstructing experiences generally perceived as socially invisible.⁹ I will suggest, however, that it is the disparate experience of the individual which is the crucial component of any attempt to assess cultural responses to bereavement. Orthodox notions of the culture of death as a set of fixed social rituals, defined and understood exclusively in terms of respectability, need to be reassessed. I conclude this review of the historiography of death, therefore, by positing a conceptual understanding of the culture of *death* as something socially visible in shared rituals of burial and mourning, the meanings of which were malleable. In this sense, social rituals were appropriated by individuals and invested with personal significance to create a culture of *grief* which was diverse, pliable and subject to perpetual reinterpretation.

Phillipe Ariès: The Hour of Our Death

If Dickens is widely quoted as a contemporary source, one of the most referenced historical studies of the culture of death is Phillippe Ariès' The Hour of Our Death, published in 1983.¹⁰ This 'magisterial' and 'pioneering' work has earned Ariès the status of 'the most significant recent historian of death'.¹¹ The ambitious chronology, geographical remit, and thematic scope of this book expanded the historiography of death from a preoccupation with cemetery companies and lavish funeral rituals to an exploration of the celebration of death in relation to grief, philosophical perceptions

⁹ Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family and Sarah Tarlow, Bereavement and Commemoration: An Archaeology of Mortality (Oxford, 1999).

¹⁰ Ariès, The Hour. See also Phillippe Ariès, Western Attitudes Towards Death from the Middle Ages to the Present (Baltimore, [1976] 1994).

¹¹ Walter, The Revival, p. 14, Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, p. 7 and Dollimore, Death, Desire and Loss, p. 63.

of the self, theology, and the growth of a medical profession. Drawing on literature, liturgy, testament and iconography, The Hour of Our Death highlights four principal epochs defining the Western culture of death: the tamed death, death of the self, death of the other and finally, the invisible death.

The period from early Christianity until the late-seventeenth century was, Ariès suggests, typified by a culture of tamed death. As a familiar component of communal life, death invoked neither fear nor awe: the dead and living co-existed in a simple, organised, public framework.¹² Yet subtle changes in the eighteenth century, concerning the conceptual relationship between ‘man’ and Nature and doctrinal edicts on the judgement of the soul (the moment of judgement moved from the Apocalypse to the deathbed), provided the impetus for a culture of death which fixed on the self. Death became a personal struggle with God and the point at which the individual gave final meaning to their biography. The increased significance of the dying individual and their moral reconciliation with God encouraged melancholic introspection and a tendency to romanticise the ‘good’ death.¹³ Ariès links this heightened sensitivity to the rise of the ‘beautiful’ death in the nineteenth century: death was perceived as mysterious and awesome whilst the focus of the deathbed scene shifted from the dying individual to the mourner/s. Thus, bereavement became the defining feature in the culture of death: deaths were unbearable and bereaved lives were infused with melancholy. Nothing reflects this more than the mushrooming of a mourning industry and the metamorphosis of the undertaker from lowly tradesman to astute professional. Furthermore, the idea of hell was superseded by more diffuse notions of an afterlife: the celestial sphere bore a striking resemblance to the domestic home whilst notions of physical reunions in heaven assumed an unprecedented secular significance.¹⁴

¹² Ariès, The Hour, pp. 5-92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-293.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 409-551.

Yet the increasing professionalisation of medicine and growing concerns over public health issues fused to stigmatise death. The corpse became a source of contagion as the dying and the dead were removed from a domestic and personal environment to the clinical and sanitised space of the hospital. Death was no longer romantic but a forbidden subject, defined by disease.¹⁵ Ariès terms this final epoch the ‘invisible death’, a notion encapsulated in Geoffrey Gorer’s essay, ‘The Pornography of Death’, first published in 1955. According to Gorer, death in modern Britain had become as ‘disgusting’ as sex had been to the Victorians. Declaring that ‘no censorship has ever been really effective’, Gorer called for the readmission of grief and mourning into modern society - replete with all its Victorian ‘parade and publicity’.¹⁶

Ariès was deeply influenced by Gorer. Indeed, Jonathan Dollimore suggests that one of the chief problems with Ariès’ work is his underlying thesis that Western culture has moved from a healthy relationship with death, typified by open mourning, to a pathological one where death is taboo.¹⁷ Like Gorer, Ariès sees this as a failure both for the community and the individual. However, Ariès’ call for a return to a celebration of death is rooted in his own idealisation of a bygone culture of grief and loss.¹⁸ As Joachim Whaley has noted, Ariès’ study ‘can be read as an extended polemical tract’ based upon ‘confused’ historical evidence and emotional involvement with the subject.¹⁹ Moreover, Ariès’ claim to have written an expansive history rests on a tendency to make sweeping generalisations from narrow material and to describe rather than analyse the cultural changes he identifies.²⁰ The principal focus of the book is France, with comparative examples randomly culled from other Western

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 559-601.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Gorer, ‘The Pornography of Death’ first published in *Encounter*, October 1955 and reprinted in Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1965), pp. 169-75.

¹⁷ Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss*, p. 121.

¹⁸ Ariès, *The Hour*, pp. 611-4.

¹⁹ Whaley, ‘Introduction’ in Whaley, *Mirrors of Mortality*, pp. 8-9. See also Neil Small, ‘Death and Difference’ in David Field, Jenny Hockey and Neil Small (eds.), *Death, Gender and Ethnicity* (London, 1997), pp. 202-221 (p. 208).

²⁰ Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss*, p. 63.

countries (mainly England and America). Yet Ariès overlooks the problems of comparing countries with different economic, social, cultural and religious identities. For instance, it is doubtful whether Ariès' model of Catholic France can be applied to a largely Protestant and Nonconformist English population, especially given the marginality of the doctrine of purgatory in post-Reformation Britain.²¹ Ralph Houlbrooke's analysis of death in England, 1480-1750, demonstrates the importance of the Protestant Reformation for shifting fundamental perceptions of eschatology (the study of death, judgement, heaven and hell) and concepts of 'good' and 'bad' death. Moreover, Houlbrooke challenges the chronology of the family's assumption of a central role in deathbed drama: the removal of Catholic death rites allowed familial support to manifest itself visibly from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as opposed to the eighteenth and nineteenth.²²

Ariès' definition of 'culture' is exclusively tied to an educated and/ or wealthy elite. As Pat Jalland has noted, his heavy reliance on the writings of the Bronte family seems a 'limited and eccentric' source to read as representative of a British cultural shift towards the 'beautiful death'.²³ Diffuse identities, such as those relating to class, gender and ethnicity, have no place in Ariès' grand chronology. That Ariès neglects the diversity of experience is also apparent in his concept of cultural change as a neat and self-contained process. David Cannadine, for instance, has criticised both Ariès and Gorer for constructing a 'beguilingly symmetrical argument' which draws on a highly sentimentalised vision of a 'golden age of grief'.²⁴ Cannadine contends that historians and sociologists have retrospectively romanticised the Victorian culture of death and overlooked the impact of the Great War on attitudes towards bereavement. Indeed, Cannadine turns the argument around to suggest that interwar Britain was

²¹ For discussion of the concept of purgatory in England see Rosemary Horrox, 'Purgatory, Prayer and Plague: 1150-1380' in Peter Jupp and Clare Gittings (eds.), Death in England: An Illustrated History (Manchester, 1999), pp. 90-118.

²² Ralph Houlbrooke, Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750 (Oxford, 1998). See also Clare Gittings, 'Sacred and Secular: 1558-1660' in Jupp and Gittings, Death in England, pp. 147-73.

²³ Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, p. 8.

²⁴ Cannadine, 'War and Death', pp. 187-8.

obsessed with death and that the best time to die and grieve was not the nineteenth century, but the twentieth.²⁵

Others have taken issue with Ariès' division of cultural change into identifiable epochs and his definition of twentieth-century death. Both Tony Walter and Lindsay Prior contend that far from being surrounded by silence, death in the twentieth century is spoken of in a new and/ or different language (largely legal and medical) which Ariès either failed or refused to recognise.²⁶ In turn, Philip Mellor posits a more fluid paradigm based on the *presence* and *absence* of death in twentieth-century culture. The sequestering of death from public space highlights modernity's fixation with control, which in turn has made death's presence in private space threatening.²⁷ Neil Small also points to the issue of control. Whilst acknowledging Ariès' concern with layers of significance within symbolic representations of death, Small criticises his notion of historical time as a discrete and identifiable process. It is through such modernist structures, Small asserts, that Ariès seeks to control and contain his subject. Indeed, in emphasising death as the apotheosis of control, Small highlights the irony inherent in 'death scholarship' which 'claims too much of the domain of rationality' and, therefore, 'seems to miss the mark.'²⁸

Such criticisms illustrate the shortcomings of Ariès' grand narrative. This is not to suggest that attitudes towards death have remained static, but that forms of expression and understanding have changed. As Dollimore asserts, nothing is entirely new in cultures of death. Rather, attitudes towards death and loss are characterised by the perpetual appropriation and reinterpretation of familiar themes.²⁹ In a similar

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Walter suggests that whilst notions of grief are absent in public discourses of death, they find expression in a personal (and emotionally painful) private discourse of death. Walter, The Revival, p. 23. Prior argues that death has not disappeared but been invested with new meaning. Prior, The Social Organisation, pp. 4-12. See also Sally Cline, Lifting the Taboo: Women, Death and Dying (London, 1995), p. 39.

²⁷ Philip Mellor, 'Death in High Modernity: the Contemporary Presence and Absence of Death' in David Clark (ed.), The Sociology of Death: Theory, Culture, Practice (Oxford, 1993), pp. 11-30.

²⁸ Small, 'Death and Difference', p. 209.

²⁹ Dollimore, Death, Desire and Loss, pp. ix-xxxii.

vein, the underlying argument of this thesis suggests that the social rituals surrounding the disposal of the dead in late Victorian and Edwardian England capitalised on shared notions of ‘custom’. However, participation in a social culture of death facilitated the mediation of an intensely personal grief, which rendered the interpretation of shared understandings of bereavement malleable. Accounts of chronological change in the culture of death tend, therefore, to refer to mutations in the social expression of bereavement rather than individual interpretations of grief.

The Cemetery

In Ariès’ narrative, the Victorian preoccupation with the death of the Other was manifest in the cultic commemoration of the dead. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the celebration of death was the vast commercial investment in the disposal of the dead. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the early literature relating to death in the nineteenth century fixed its gaze on the cemetery. James Curl set the precedent for this focus with the publication of The Victorian Celebration of Death in 1972.³⁰ Curl’s analysis focused on the ‘cemetery movement’: the trend for private companies and, after 1850, municipal bodies to establish extramural cemeteries. He argued that the impetus for moving the disposal of the dead from the churchyard to the cemetery derived from public health scandals concerning overcrowded graveyards from the 1820s onwards. However, perceptions of burial space also began to change in tandem with a growing culture of *celebrating* death. Cemetery design was informed by a ‘strongly moral’ impulse to civilise, educate and uplift the common man.³¹ In addition, elaborate memorials to the dead signified the status of both the deceased and their mourners. Curl’s reading of the cemetery as a landscape where biographies adopted cultural meaning, and the reality of putrefaction was concealed beneath lofty notions of morality and sentimentality, anticipated Ariès’ notion of the beautification of death. Moreover, Curl’s condemnation of late-

³⁰ Curl, The Victorian Celebration.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

Victorian municipal cemeteries as hygienic but ‘lacking completely in taste, elegance, charm or architectural quality’ also hints at a nostalgia for a culture which unashamedly celebrated death.³² Like Ariès, Curl pioneered a new field of research. However, his analysis rests on a similarly limited concept of culture: early Victorian cemeteries may have been filled with ‘noble memorials’ for an elite but the bodies of paupers were buried in pits with little ceremony and no headstone.

Curl’s thesis of a cemetery *movement* implies a unified body of interests with a shared concept of the purpose of the burial ground. Yet local and regional studies of cemetery development have highlighted a variety of concerns at work. Jim Morgan’s study of the campaign for burial reform in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Leeds emphasised controversies between the Established Church and Dissenters over rights of access to the burial ground.³³ Conversely, Stuart Rawnsley and Jack Reynolds’ analysis of Undercliffe Cemetery, Bradford, portrayed the private cemetery as a landscape for expressing social and political status.³⁴ More recently, Peter Jupp’s account of the campaigns undertaken between 1821 and 1844 to close the burial ground at Enon Chapel in London has highlighted an interplay between ecclesiastical, economic and sanitary issues.³⁵ John Pinfold’s examination of burial in London’s Green Ground during the early nineteenth-century has similarly pinpointed a variety of vested interests motivating the provision of new burial space.³⁶ Julie Rugg has taken this challenge further, arguing that no single ideology informed the establishment of cemeteries, even within individual cemetery companies. For instance, the foundation of the Liverpool Necropolis in 1825 was precipitated by multiple issues: the desire to protect corpses from body-snatchers, the provision of an

³² Ibid., p. 158.

³³ Jim Morgan, ‘The Burial Question in Leeds in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’ in Ralph Houlbrooke (ed.), *Death, Ritual and Bereavement* (London, 1989), pp. 95-104.

³⁴ Stuart Rawnsley and Jack Reynolds, ‘Undercliffe Cemetery, Bradford’, *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), pp. 215-221.

³⁵ Peter Jupp, ‘Enon Chapel: No Way For the Dead’ in Peter Jupp and Glenys Howarth (eds.), *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal* (London, 1997), pp. 90-104.

³⁶ John Pinfold, ‘The Green Ground’ in Jupp and Howarth, *The Changing Face*, pp. 76-89.

unconsecrated burial ground for a large Dissenting population, the concern over the city's overcrowded churchyards and the promotion of civic pride.³⁷

The second strand in Curl's narrative, the creation of new cemeteries as aesthetic havens, often termed 'garden cemeteries', emphasised the cemetery as a forum for the expression of class distinction. One of the most impressive examples of Victorian cemetery design, Highgate Cemetery in London, illustrates the capacity of burial plots to articulate snobbery and social status. As Felix Barker notes, the elaborate memorial stone was utilised to narrate a personal biography through which the assets and achievements of the dead (and the bereaved) would reach a public audience.³⁸ Sylvia Barnard also illustrates how the cemetery mirrored the social stratification of the living by using a history of Leeds' Beckett Street Cemetery as the springboard for a social history of the Victorian city.³⁹ The late twentieth-century interest in cemetery conservation has ensured a degree of longevity for such biographies, with many cemetery-heritage guides focusing on extravagant memorial stones erected to public dignitaries and the wealthy.⁴⁰ As D. Schuyler's study of American cemeteries and Thomas Kselman's analysis of French cemeteries demonstrate, the cemetery as a text on class structure is not restricted to industrial Britain.⁴¹ Indeed, Jessica Mitford's acerbic account of the funeral industry in modern America illustrates the ongoing

³⁷ Julie Rugg, 'The Emergence of Cemetery Companies in Britain, 1820-53', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1992, p. 356.

³⁸ Felix Barker (introduction) and John Gay (photographs), Highgate Cemetery: Victorian Valhalla (London, 1984).

³⁹ Sylvia Barnard, To Prove I'm Not Forgotten: Living and Dying in a Victorian City (Manchester, 1990).

⁴⁰ See Chris Brooks (ed.), Mortal Remains: The History and Present State of the Victorian and Edwardian Cemetery (Exeter, 1989). Also H. Murray, This Garden of Death: the History of York Cemetery (York, 1991), M. Wade-Matthews, Grave Matters: A Walk Through Welford Road Cemetery, Leicester (Leicester, 1992), James Walvin, 'Dust to Dust: The Celebration of Death in Victorian England', Historical Reflections, Spring (1983), pp. 353-71. For outline of issues surrounding the re-use of grave spaces and the conservation of cemetery ground see John Ernst, 'Land for the living? - The Land Use and Conservation of Urban Cemeteries and Churchyards', Local Government Policy Making, 17, 4 (1991), pp. 14-22.

⁴¹ D. Schuyler, 'The Evolution of the Anglo-American Rural Cemetery: Landscape Architecture as Social and Cultural History', Journal of Garden History, 4 (1984), pp. 291-304 and Thomas Kselman, Death and the Afterlife in Modern France (Princeton, 1993).

perception of the bereaved public as status seeking snobs, a notion which permits the persistent marketing of burial space as 'God's Little Million-Dollar Acre'.⁴²

As Rugg notes, however, notions of the cemetery as a mirror on social differentiation have dominated research at the expense of more nuanced analyses of burial space as a text on cultural concepts of death.⁴³ One of the few studies to have developed this theme is Thomas Laqueur's 'Religion and the Culture of Capitalism'.⁴⁴ Breaking away from simply describing the cemetery as a reflection of class structure, Laqueur aimed to explore the manner in which the commercialisation of burial space interacted with changing attitudes towards death. The move from traditional burial in the Anglican parish churchyard to interment in the secular cemetery was, Laqueur suggested, 'a sign that the underlying cultural assumptions of capitalism had taken root'.⁴⁵ This was especially evident in the distinction between the private and the common grave, 'an almost parodic equation' of the gulf between the respectable middle-classes' retreat into suburban privacy and the poor who lived and died in public.⁴⁶ Trading in death, hitherto an outrageous proposition, became the norm via the rise of the joint-stock cemetery company. The cemetery, founded on principles of profit, represented 'a new kind of institution' which enabled the expression of 'new cultural formations'.⁴⁷ Overall, the creation of a language of death which broke from religious and reverential vocabulary to speak unashamedly in consumerist terms not only reflected social change but 'embodied it, making it manifest, translating it into emotionally resonant forms'.⁴⁸

⁴² Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (London, 1998), pp. 81-100.

⁴³ Julie Rugg, 'A Few Remarks on Modern Sepulture: Current Trends and New Directions in Cemetery Research', *Mortality*, 3, 2 (1998), pp. 111-28.

⁴⁴ Thomas Laqueur, 'Cemeteries, Religion and the Culture of Capitalism' in Jane Garnett and Colin Matthew (eds.), *Revival and Religion Since 1700* (London, 1993), pp. 183-200.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197. Ironically, it was the mass graves which accrued some of the most lucrative returns on the principal of 'wholesaling of interment'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Laqueur suggests that compared to the exclusivity of the Anglican graveyard, the new cemetery gave expression to cultural pluralism. Laqueur's vision of the cemetery as a cultural institution is, however, one which appears to be exclusively defined by a monied elite. This may support his assertion that the cemetery was a product of consumer culture, whereby those with fewer resources were less visible. However, he overlooks the possibility that the cemetery held meaning beyond the cost and location of a grave. Moreover, his emphasis on the *differences* between Anglican-church burial and secular-cemetery burial ignores the *continuities* in burial customs, begging the question: how far did the novelty of the commercial cemetery company change concepts of death? Significantly, most people, regardless of denomination, continued to request some form of religious burial service. In addition, cemeteries were often divided into denominational sections. In this sense, the 'religious community' which Laqueur maintains was quashed by the cemetery was, to an extent, recreated in the denominational portions of cemetery land. Furthermore, in stressing that the disposal of the dead had become a commercial venture, Laqueur omits to consider the pains taken by many local authority burial boards after 1850 to reassure the public that no profits accrued from the burial of the dead.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Laqueur's thesis - that concepts of death were imbued with meaning in a larger web of cultural transformation - highlights the potential for shifting analysis of the cemetery to new ground. As Rugg asserts, cemetery research has yet fully to consider the relationship between cultural perceptions of the corpse and burial space. More significantly, perhaps, there has been almost no study of the cemetery as a landscape for the expression of more disparate forms of identity or, indeed, of grief itself.⁵⁰ My own research suggests that the primary importance of gravespace lay in its associations with dignity, identity and decent burial. In the post-interment period,

⁴⁹ See for instance, p. 175 below.

⁵⁰ Julie Rugg, 'A Few Remarks', pp. 118-20. See also Julie Rugg, 'Researching Early Nineteenth-Century Cemeteries: Sources and Methods', *The Local Historian*, 28, 3 (1998), pp. 130-44 and Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher and Georgina Neophytou, 'Sustaining Cemeteries: The User Perspective', *Mortality*, 5, 1 (2000), pp. 34-52.

however, bereaved families tended to be ambivalent towards the burial plot, often leaving it to fall into disrepair and failing to install a headstone over the grave. Moreover, the burial plot was a piece of private property and, on occasion, utilised as such with grave deeds being sold or loaned in formal and informal networks of exchange.⁵¹ This is not to suggest that the bereaved were indifferent to the commemoration of the dead or that the burial ground had no significance as a landscape for grief, but that memorialisation need not be confined to the cemetery.⁵² Thus, whilst Rugg's call for research to 'reconstruct a robust narrative' of the cemetery pinpoints new avenues for exploration, it perpetuates a fixation with burial space as the chief signifier of attitudes towards death. Clearly, the disposal of the dead is a crucial feature of any culture of death and bereavement. Yet, in order to reconstruct more robust accounts of cultures of death, historians must move beyond the walls of the cemetery.

The Respectable Burial and Pauper Shame

There can be little doubt that, for some at least, funeral culture expanded into the realms of extravagance during the nineteenth century.⁵³ Indeed, the perception of the undertaker as a greedy opportunist was inextricable from notions of unprecedented funeral expenditure and the 'invention' of common funerary custom.⁵⁴ Olivia Bland characterises the Victorian culture of death as one of 'suffocating sentimentality'

⁵¹ See chapter five below.

⁵² See pp. 204-10 below.

⁵³ The epitome of the Victorian extravagant funeral was that of the Duke of Wellington in 1852. A military spectacle of massive proportions, the funeral took three months to organise. See Olivia Bland, *The Royal Way of Death* (London, 1986), p. 157. For an overview of growing extravagance in all aspects of funeral culture see Litten, *The English Way*, pp. 85-118, 143-71.

⁵⁴ The sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick drew attention in the 1840s to the promotion by undertakers of (expensive) heraldic burial customs in common funerals. See 'Reports of Commissioners on Sanatory Condition of Labouring Population of Great Britain: Supplementary Report on Result of Special Inquiry into Practice of Interment in Towns', by Edwin Chadwick, PP 1843 (509) XII.395. See also Samuel E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Edwin Chadwick* (London, 1952). Also Morley, *Death, Heaven*, pp. 7-31, and Glenys Howarth, 'Professionalising the Funeral Industry in England, 1700 - 1960' in Jupp and Howarth, *The Changing Face*, pp. 120-34. Jani Scandura compares the Victorian undertaker to the vampire. Jani Scandura, 'Deadly Professions: *Dracula*, Undertakers and the Embalmed Corpse', *Victorian Studies*, 40, 1 (1996), pp. 1-30.

where people became glutted with gloomy trappings.⁵⁵ However, a burgeoning funeral industry which catered for most pockets meant that the celebration of death was ‘as popular in the slums of the East End as in the royal household.’⁵⁶ Incredulous health reformers and philanthropists frequently castigated the poor in both rural and urban communities for wasting resources on the disposal of the dead whilst the living went hungry.⁵⁷ Yet, for many, the *expensive* funeral was equated with the *respectable* burial: among the working classes at least, the ‘best of everything’ was a shared cultural euphemism for burying the dead with *decency*. Indeed, it is the interrelationships between these three factors - expense, respectability, and decency - which dominate discussions of the working-class culture of death.

As John Morley notes, burial costs tended to be read as a tangible measure of loss. Yet the expensive funeral held more significance, within a cultural context at least, as a display of social and economic status - embodied in the notion of *respectability*. According to Morley, the funeral testified to the narrow working-class definition of respectability. The ability to finance a lavish funeral necessitated retaining corpses in the homes of the living (a singularly insanitary and unrespectable habit) whilst exercising thrift only in relation to burial insurance implied a skewed sense of financial priority. Moreover, such status as the respectable funeral could buy was usually short-lived, depending as it did on one payment of burial club money.⁵⁸ ‘Respectability’ in burial, therefore, rested on attempts to ape the habits of the wealthy rather than any moral imperative.⁵⁹ Thus, grief was not simply subsumed to, but replaced by, shallow snobbery and social jealousy.

Drawing attention to the sheer incomprehension expressed by critics of the working-class culture of death, Paul Johnson has proposed a more nuanced analysis of

⁵⁵ Bland, *The Royal Way*, pp. 161-7.

⁵⁶ Paul Johnson, *Saving and Spending: The Working-Class Economy in Britain, 1870-1939* (Oxford, 1985), p. 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ Morley, *Death, Heaven*, pp. 19-31.

⁵⁹ Curl reaches a similar conclusion. Curl, *The Victorian Celebration*, pp. 9-11.

working-class funeral expenditure, placing the respectable burial firmly within a culture of consumerism. The persistent financial insecurity of most working-class families fostered a culture of saving for extraordinary expenditure (the funeral is typical - but clothes, day trips and ornaments are other examples). The items purchased subsequently acquired a social symbolism beyond their intrinsic economic worth.⁶⁰ Thus, for people who owned very little, 'almost any possession and the display of this possession, was a way of broadcasting and establishing one's social worth.'⁶¹ In this sense, expenditure became synonymous with a specifically working-class concept of 'respectability'.

The most popular form of thrift in the late nineteenth century, burial insurance provided the means by which the working classes could purchase a private gravespace and mourning paraphernalia. Concurring with Morley (and Dickens before him), Johnson notes the 'intensely competitive edge' to working-class funerals, derived in part from a belief that 'greater expense conferred increased respectability.'⁶² However, to gauge the cultural meanings attached to such funerals, Johnson insists that the desire for expense must be set against the negative impulse of avoiding the stigma of a pauper funeral. In this light, he argues that the extravagant burial - even where the deceased had expired in the workhouse - made sense: 'if the shame of pauperism was to fall on a family, then at least it could be minimised at reasonable cost by ensuring that the final send-off was glorious.'⁶³ For those unable to buy exclusive rights to a burial plot, the sheer indignity of the pauper burial compounded the sense of shame attached to pauperism in general. It is significant that the two authors responsible for pioneering the historiography of the Victorian celebration of death almost entirely ignore the pauper funeral, an omission which reflects both the social marginalisation of the pauper and the fact that there was little

⁶⁰ Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, p. 11.

⁶¹ Paul Johnson, 'Conspicuous Consumption and Working-Class Culture in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 38 (1988), pp. 27-42.

⁶² Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, p. 44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

to *celebrate* in this mode of interment.⁶⁴ Burial in a pauper grave was the ‘ultimate degradation’ for the individual and the ‘ultimate disgrace’ for a Victorian worker’s family.⁶⁵ Indeed, definitions of the ‘proper’ funeral were usually set in opposition to the parish burial which was ‘abhorred as a disgrace to the bereaved household’.⁶⁶

There is a tendency, however, to refer to the distinction between respectable and pauper burial as the single defining feature of working-class attitudes towards death. This is not to suggest that all accounts of death and burial have been reduced to a crude dichotomy, but that such literature fails to explore the cathartic effects of the funeral, the use of ritual as a forum for the creation and expression of loss, and the fluid meanings invested in notions of respectability and pauperism. For instance, despite Johnson’s refreshing account of burial insurance, it is disappointing that his discussion of the impetus to subscribe to burial clubs is so brief. Undoubtedly, the desire for display and antipathy to pauper burial played crucial roles in the widespread working-class adherence to burial insurance, yet not only do such accounts assume a shared understanding of a direct relationship between *expense* and *respectability*, they define the *decent* burial exclusively in terms of *display* whilst overlooking concepts of grief and/ or personal expressions of loss.

I would suggest that customs such as laying out the dead, viewing the corpse, and partaking in funeral processions and teas not only allowed the bereaved to articulate a sense of loss, they also acted as forums for the verbal and symbolic expression of condolence and sympathy from neighbours and friends. In addition, rituals surrounding the cadaver facilitated a renegotiation of identity and the relationship

⁶⁴ Curl dispenses with the common grave in a sentence (*The Victorian Celebration*, p.6), whilst Morley mentions pauper burials only in the context of threats to public health (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 35, 37).

⁶⁵ Carl Chinn, *Poverty Amidst Prosperity: The Urban Poor in England, 1834 - 1914* (Manchester, 1995), p. 104 and F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830 - 1900* (London, 1988), p. 200.

⁶⁶ Ellen Ross, “Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep”: Respectability in Pre-World War One London Neighbourhoods’, *International Labour and Working Class History*, 27 (1985), pp. 39-59.

between the dead and the bereaved.⁶⁷ Moreover, whilst pauper burial was clearly abhorrent to the majority of bereaved families, we know very little about those who did have pauper funerals and the meanings they inscribed onto notions of common burial, death and decency. I argue that much of the shame inherent in the pauper burial was not related to loss of social status but to issues of dignity, decency and the ownership of the dead.⁶⁸

Defining Respectability

Respectability was (and is) a slippery concept. It is, therefore, unclear how useful this tool is for analysing attitudes towards death. Moreover, the preoccupation with the funeral as a badge of working-class respectability has militated against broaching broader questions concerning concepts of death and bereavement, formulated and expressed external to - or in conjunction with - issues of consumerism and status. As Ellen Ross has illustrated, notions of respectability as a fluid identity gained increasing recognition in the 1970s alongside a growing interest in the divisions within the working classes which operated to create separate and sometimes conflicting identities and interests.⁶⁹ Even Geoffrey Best's 'brisk, conclusive and uncomplicated' notion of respectability (the aspiration to be a gentleman) acknowledged the adoption of the 'respectable front' by the working man.⁷⁰ However, later studies located respectability as a specifically working-class concept rather than one invoking the absorption of middle-class values.⁷¹ Thus, by 1979, Peter Bailey could assert that 'respectability' had moved from being used as a 'convenient

⁶⁷ See pp. 75-82, 86-95 below.

⁶⁸ See chapter four below.

⁶⁹ Ross, 'Not the Sort', p. 39. Much of this interest was borne out of a critique of Hobsbawm's 'labour aristocracy' thesis. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, [1964] 1979), pp. 272-315.

⁷⁰ Peter Bailey on Geoffrey Best's use of 'respectability' in 'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?': Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability', *Journal of Social History*, 12, 3 (1979), pp. 336-53. See also Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875* (London, [1971] 1979), p. 286.

⁷¹ See especially Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870 - 1900: Notes on the Remaking of the Working Class', *Journal of Social History*, 7, 4 (1974), pp. 460-508.

and unfocused shorthand' for elite values to a notion 'invested with a new consequence and complexity'.⁷² However, historians still underestimated the dynamics of respectability and tended to overlook its relation to human geography and the behaviour patterns of the urban dweller. Bailey was critical of texts which, although less categorical than their Victorian counterparts, continued to portray respectability as a cultural absolute, pinning the 'working-class respectable' into a 'characterological strait-jacket'.⁷³ Rather, Bailey contested, respectability was a role adopted in particular situations and used as a 'calculative' or instrumental ploy in relations with members of other social groups.

As Ross notes, these histories tend to focus on male culture and the workplace, effectively excluding women, the neighbourhood, and the household from studies of working-class culture.⁷⁴ For instance, whilst criticising male work-centred histories of respectability, Brian Harrison tends to define the 'life-cycle' he associates with respectability as dominated by the choices of the 'respectable man'. Women appear only as wives and household managers rather than cultural players in their own right.⁷⁵ Contesting the predominance of these histories, Ross argues that women were the very embodiment of respectability, not only within a domestic and familial context but within the culture of the community also. Moreover, women acted as household representatives in relations with 'outsiders'.⁷⁶

Ross emphasises the prominence of the rough/ respectable division in the language of Victorian and Edwardian culture, a dichotomy which drew on both moral behaviour and material status. It was this link between the moral and material that made respectability such a 'mystifying word' and which continues to render the concept

⁷² Bailey, 'Will the Real Bill Banks', p. 336.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 337.

⁷⁴ Ross, "'Not the Sort', pp. 39-40.

⁷⁵ Brian Harrison, Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain (Oxford, 1982) pp. 157-216.

⁷⁶ Ross, 'Not the Sort', pp. 39-40. Robert Roberts also promotes a vision of Edwardian working-class matriarchs as the guardians of a highly developed sense of social propriety. Robert Roberts, The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century (London, 1971), pp. 42-3.

‘confusing’ today.⁷⁷ Ross catalogues differing criteria for respectability according to upper and working-class perceptions. Most importantly, however, she is keen to emphasise what working-class respectability was not: ‘a filtered-down version of its bourgeois forms’. Rather, respectability referred to a ‘fluid and variable idea’ which was reorganised and redefined according to working-class precepts.⁷⁸ Those who adhered to fixed definitions of respectability often did so to their own cost. It meant fiercely defending privacy and prohibited borrowing money or goods whilst militating against participating in gossip and wider social networks of friendship and exchange.⁷⁹

Thus, respectability remains a complex notion subject to perpetual renegotiation. In this sense, it seems curious that accounts of the respectable working-class funeral take so much for granted. If respectability was so fluid, is it not possible that the concept of the respectable funeral was also subject to multiple, diverse and highly individual interpretations? This is not to dismiss respectability from analyses of working-class culture, but to suggest that almost glib references to the funeral as the touchstone of working-class respectability need further exploration.⁸⁰ Moreover, whilst Paul Johnson has pointed the way to analysing the cultural significance of buying *into* the consumer culture which perpetuated and manifested notions of respectability, most accounts of working-class funerals come to an analytical halt with the issue of social and economic status as embodied in the glorious funeral procession.

Dignity, Decency and Social Inclusion

One of the earliest studies to examine the relationship between consumer culture, funeral costs and social status, Burial Reform and Funeral Costs (1938), by Arnold

⁷⁷ Ross, ‘Not the Sort’, p. 40.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁸⁰ See pp. 95-100 below.

Wilson MP and Professor Herman Levy, noted the importance of the respectable funeral for cementing a sense of social inclusion.⁸¹ In this context, the distinction between the private and public grave extended beyond straightforward notions of economic and social status to consider the wider cultural meanings invested in the interment of the dead. Thus, the pauper burial was not only synonymous with the shame of poverty, it engendered social exclusion and offended the dignity of both the dead and the bereaved by denying - not so much pomp and display - but the fundamental assertion of individual identity. Noting the resolution by London County Council in 1930 to improve the standard of 'punctuality, decency and decorum' of pauper funerals, Wilson and Levy argued that antipathy to the common grave would persist so long as the bodies interred in pauper graves were 'related to each other only by the fact that all alike are paupers.'⁸² Thus, the *indecent* of pauper burial rested on the perceived 'loneliness of the corpse, for whom nobody cares except the Poor Law Authorities'.⁸³ For those already socially marginalised by poverty, the inability to express attachment and identity in death and grief fostered feelings of guilt and shame which exceeded social jealousy.

This is not to suggest, however, that Wilson and Levy ignored the importance of a culture of 'respectability'. The pauper funeral was, they argued, only the negative side of the *problem* of working-class funeral culture. Acknowledging that most commentators interpreted working-class funeral expenditure as symbolic of 'vanity and the love for show', Wilson and Levy argued that the *proper* funeral was a complex expression of notions of self-respect and dignity.⁸⁴ In one sense, this was linked to a desire to display the fruits of burial club thrift. Of rather more consequence was the bereaved's wish to treat the dead with respect and the guilt they experienced if the dead were denied this dignity. It was this emotional vulnerability that rendered the funeral so expensive: the bereaved were exploited. According to

⁸¹ Arnold Wilson and Herman Levy, Burial Reform and Funeral Costs (London, 1938).

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Wilson and Levy, the canny undertaker capitalised on the fact that ‘every human instinct’ deterred the grief-stricken from comparing prices and haggling for cheaper burials.⁸⁵ Not only did undertakers refuse to print pricelists, they usually issued unitemized bills. Moreover, many applied direct pressure on the bereaved to subscribe to associations between respect, dignity and expense: ‘you cannot have anything else but polished oak in a road like this’ and ‘Your husband’s noble figure is just fitted to a rosewood casket, and it is only suitable for him’.⁸⁶

Wilson and Levy’s proposed solution to such issues was for the state to assume control of the disposal of the dead, meeting costs from National Insurance. This would not only obliterate the pauper burial, but would also reduce inflated expenses associated with funerals.⁸⁷ Wilson and Levy’s analysis highlighted the complexity of notions of the respectable culture of death, portraying the culture of ‘extravagance’ in a more sympathetic light. More recently, Melanie Tebbutt has asserted that the working-class commitment to saving for funerals can be read as a desire for status, but one which testified to a ‘determination to be valued’.⁸⁸ In this sense, funeral expenditure was the most visible means of expressing sentiment. As Mark Drakeford has argued with reference to late twentieth-century pauper burials (re-named ‘social fund burials’), such visibility is particularly significant to those who feel their position within society to be marginal and threatened: ‘People who have not been accorded dignity in life need to seize it with particular urgency at times of death.’ Moreover, attempts by county councils to market their low-cost funerals to poorer families have met with limited success: ‘cheap’ funerals represent a ‘genuine choice’ only for those

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. ix. This is a sentiment echoed by Mitford: most funeral directors rely on the disorientation of the bereaved and their willingness to set aside the prudence of ‘shopping around’ to succumb to the ‘impulse buy’. Mitford, The American Way, pp. 20-33.

⁸⁶ Wilson and Levy, Burial Reform, p. 88. Quotes drawn from Bertram Puckle, Funeral Customs, Their Origin and Development (1926), p. 98 and L. Quincey Dowd, Funeral Management and Costs (1921), p. 14.

⁸⁷ Wilson and Levy, Burial Reform, pp. 169-79. They were rather more in favour of cremation but thought that the introduction of crematoria throughout Britain would prove inconvenient and expensive, p. vii.

⁸⁸ Melanie Tebbutt, Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit (Leicester, 1983), p. 17.

who do not feel their social position to be threatened by other assaults on their citizenship. For the poor, the funeral not only confirms their relationship with the deceased but reaffirms the 'meaning and purpose of a life where such qualities have been called into question.'⁸⁹

Thomas Laqueur equates the rise of the funeral as an 'occasion to represent, with unrivalled clarity, the possibility of social worthlessness, earthly failure, and profound anonymity' with the growth of capitalism.⁹⁰ The industrial revolution transformed the funeral from a passive, austere affair which expressed community identity into a consumer good which made wider references to the relationship between the deceased and society, between the governed and the governors, and between the rough and respectable. By 1850, therefore, the parish funeral had become a metaphor for the new consumer culture which grew out of the industrial revolution: 'to provide oneself with a dignified funeral was, consciously or not, to abandon the plebeian ways of the old order and to participate in the respectability of the new.'⁹¹ Moreover, the funeral had come to represent society's final judgement on the deceased. In this context, 'the pauper funeral became the final stamp of failure'.⁹²

In Laqueur's narrative, the celebration of death is a celebration of social identity within a culture of capitalism. Whilst the notion that the funeral signified a sense of social inclusion is convincing, Laqueur portrays the transformation of pre-industrial communal burial rites into the respectable funeral as an almost seamless process whilst failing to consider the potential for the funeral to hold cultural significance outside economics and measures of status. Furthermore, Laqueur's assertion that funerals prior to the industrial revolution were communal affairs which bore little relation to status is based on scanty evidence and considers only the economics of

⁸⁹ Mark Drakeford, 'Last Rights? Funerals, Poverty and Social Exclusion', *Journal of Social Policy*, 27, 4 (1998), pp. 507-24.

⁹⁰ Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, 1, 1 (1983), pp. 109-31.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

burial. For instance, social exclusion was powerfully signified in pre-industrial society by the burial of suicide victims, convicted felons, and unbaptised children in unconsecrated ground. He also omits the consideration that whilst the funerals enacted in pre-industrial parish churchyards expressed a sense of social inclusion, the 'social' was essentially hierarchical: the magnificent memorials dedicated to members of the landed gentry were far removed from the simple stones of labourers. In addition, Laqueur overlooks those instances where despite the interment of the dead in a pauper grave, the bereaved pursued rituals of mourning associated with the respectable funeral.⁹³ This does not conflict with Laqueur's outline of the pauper funeral as the epitome of social exclusion. Rather, it illustrates that pauper and respectable burials were not mutually exclusive. Families could take elements of the respectable burial and apply them, where possible, to the interment of the dead in a pauper grave. Moreover, whilst the absence of independence and exclusive right of burial may have offended concepts of respectable burial, there is little to indicate whether interment in a pauper grave influenced attitudes towards the corpse, the pattern of grief for survivors and perceptions of identity, kinship and the afterlife. Simply juxtaposing the respectable burial with the pauper grave is not sufficient to explain or account for working-class attitudes towards death and dying, the disposal of the corpse, or, significantly, grief.

The Anatomy Act, 1832

Overall, therefore, analyses of the respectable burial have rested on the negative associations of the pauper funeral. Ruth Richardson's Death, Dissection and the Destitute has, however, posited a different interpretation of the 'popular' culture of death and antipathy to the pauper grave.⁹⁴ According to Richardson, the definition of the respectable burial lay not so much in the display of wealth or status but in the

⁹³ See pp. 143-9 below.

⁹⁴ Ruth Richardson, Death, Dissection and the Destitute (London, 1987). Richardson uses the phrase 'popular' rather than 'working-class' culture of death. See also Ruth Richardson, 'Why Was Death So Big in Victorian Britain?' in Houlbrooke, Death, Ritual, pp. 105-17.

concept of the 'safe' burial. Her thesis begins in the early decades of the nineteenth century with the heyday of bodysnatchers (also known as 'burkers' or 'resurrectionists'). As medicine became increasingly professionalised, the demand for cadavers with which to teach anatomy rose dramatically. The licit market for corpses was limited to bodies taken from the gallows, so anatomy schools began to engage in the illegal trafficking of cadavers.⁹⁵ The theft of fresh corpses from graves not only offended notions of decency, ownership and the laying of the dead to rest, it violated popular spiritual beliefs which equated the physical integrity of the body with the resurrection of the soul.⁹⁶

In principle, all graves were at risk from disturbance by burkers. Yet, Richardson argues, the sheer flimsiness of cheap coffins and the practice of piling ten or more bodies into one pauper grave rendered the burial spaces of the poor particularly vulnerable. Consequently, a wave of 'burkophobia' swept the nation's workhouses whilst riots erupted in towns where graverobbery was discovered or suspected.⁹⁷ The passage of the Anatomy Act through parliament in 1832 was widely anticipated to remove the threat to the corpses of the poor. In fact, it pandered to the demands of anatomists by sanctioning the dissection of *unclaimed* pauper corpses. Thus, 'what had for generations been a feared and hated punishment for murder became one for poverty.'⁹⁸ Indeed, Richardson perceives the Act as inextricable from the New Poor Law of 1834: not only did effective implementation of the Anatomy Act depend on the machinery of the Poor Law but both embodied a punitive philosophy towards poverty.⁹⁹ The vulnerability of the poor was further exacerbated, however, by the abuses of unethical parish guardians and medical practitioners: the wishes of the dead were easily overlooked, some medics 'claimed' bodies in the spurious capacity of

⁹⁵ See also V. A. C. Gatrell, The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770- 1868 (Oxford, 1994), pp. 255-8.

⁹⁶ Richardson, Death, Dissection, pp. 7-22.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-1.

friend, and the Act did not prevent the removal of organs from the remains of paupers who were legitimately claimed.¹⁰⁰

Richardson's pioneering study shifted narratives of antipathy to pauper burial away from a preoccupation with respectability to consider the fate of the corpse and notions of resurrection as integral to the Victorian culture of death: the trappings of increasingly expensive funerals were indicative of a desire for a secure burial (with double and triple, lead lined coffins for instance) rather than a concern for the display of affluence. Thus, Richardson claims that the body-snatching scandals of the early nineteenth century shaped the culture of death for the rest of the Victorian and Edwardian period. Yet, as she later concedes, the numbers of pauper corpses actually passed onto medical schools for anatomisation frequently fell short of demand, especially after the turn of the century as attitudes towards poverty changed and increasing numbers of parish authorities refused to implement the Act.¹⁰¹ Richardson tries to reconcile her assertion that the Act remained influential, however, by introducing several 'sub-texts' into the popular culture of death at the close of the nineteenth century, the principal of which is respectability.¹⁰²

Richardson's reversion to a respectable/ pauper dichotomy for the end of the century implies that she herself is unconvinced by the longevity of her chronology. Moreover, her suggestion that antipathy to the pauper burial became mythologised and 'taboo' to the point where people did not really know *why* it was hated is unconvincing.¹⁰³ Failure to consider the implications of burial in a pauper grave within the broader cultural context of identity, independence, and kinship highlights the paucity of Richardson's approach to late nineteenth-century custom. Richardson's study remains a significant contribution to the historiography of death, especially with reference to the decades flanking the Anatomy Act. It is disappointing, however, that having

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 233-4, 237-8.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 276.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 273.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 280-1.

placed the spiritual status of the cadaver as a focal point in her early discussion, she neglects to consider changing attitudes to the corpse. This is symptomatic of her analysis as a whole. Having defined the grave only in relation to the security of corpses, Richardson omits any consideration of changing cultural perceptions of the burial ground - especially with reference to the establishment of private and municipal cemeteries.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, in emphasising anatomists and poor law guardians as the key figures in cultivating fear of pauper burial, Richardson paints the poor as passive victims in the aftermath of the 1832 Act. For instance, she overlooks forms of resistance to the Anatomy Act - such as workhouse inmates bequeathing their remains to each other in order to be claimed upon death.¹⁰⁵ Richardson also neglects to consider the cultural meanings attributed to a dignified burial beyond her notion of secure interment and, later, respectability. In concluding her chronology with the idea that antipathy to the pauper grave was simply the negative of a consumer culture, Richardson implies a vacuous populace whose capacity to create independent meaning was easily supplanted by elite driven forces. The most glaring omission from Richardson's account of the Victorian culture of death, however, is the absence of a discussion relating to complex issues of grief, custom and identity.

Religion

The absence of concepts of spiritual belief and grief in Richardson's account is indicative of a common trend within the historiography of death. I will address the issue of grief below. Where religion has been considered in relation to burial, it has generally been in the context of the near-monopoly of the Anglican church on burial privileges.¹⁰⁶ Texts which have addressed more abstract questions, such as

¹⁰⁴ See also Rugg, 'The Emergence of Cemetery Companies', p. 356.

¹⁰⁵ See for instance a report in 1886 that paupers bequeathed their bodies to each other in order to avoid dissection, *Lancet*, 28 August 1886, p. 427.

¹⁰⁶ Until the Burial Act of 1880, the expression of denominational difference at burials in consecrated ground was prohibited; the service and officiating minister had to belong to the Established church. After the Burial Act, services could take the preferred form of relatives and be led by the minister of their choice. See Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Volume Two* (London, 1970), pp. 202-7.

eschatology, crises in faith and the impact of Darwinism on Christianity, have focused exclusively on academic and theological debates within and between an educated, literary elite.¹⁰⁷ The significance of the burial service for the working-class culture of death has, however, been almost entirely ignored. As Elizabeth Roberts has noted, this may derive from a tendency for individuals to recall the secular rituals attached to burial rather than the burial service, the vicar, or the church where the funeral was held.¹⁰⁸ In addition, the historiography of religious belief among the working classes has, perhaps, militated against attempts to explore spiritual meanings attached to the burial service. Falling rates of attendance at places of worship during the nineteenth century fostered a contemporary and historical literature of secularisation. However, as Geoffrey Gorer noted in the 1960s, death and the disposal of the dead remained the preserve of religious bodies long after the working classes had, by all accounts, succumbed to spiritual indifference. In mid-twentieth century Britain, the vast majority of individuals continued to request a Christian burial service whilst even those who explicitly identified themselves as 'irreligious' ascribed to vague concepts of an afterlife, often utilising a Christian language of spiritual immortality to rationalise death.¹⁰⁹

General analyses of religion offer little insight into the meanings attached to the interment of the dead in consecrated ground and/ or the reading of a religious burial service. Indeed, orthodox approaches to religion among the working classes have fixed on the 1851 census and later, more localised, surveys of church attendance. Figures highlighting a gradual decline in the church-going population have been interpreted as evidence that the working classes grew increasingly apathetic to religion in tandem with the social upheavals of industrialisation and urbanisation. Much of this literature has concentrated on the failure of the clergy to relate to an

¹⁰⁷ See Martha McMackin Garland, 'Victorian Unbelief and Bereavement' in Houlbrooke, Death, Ritual, pp. 151-70, Geoffrey Rowell, Hell and the Victorians (Oxford, 1974) and Michael Wheeler, Heaven, Hell and the Victorians (Cambridge, 1994).

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way of Death' in Houlbrooke, Death, Ritual, pp. 188-207.

¹⁰⁹ Gorer, Death, Grief, pp. 30-42.

alienated working class and the increased division of urban centres into separate ideological and cultural worlds.¹¹⁰ In this context, recourse to the church or chapel for the disposal of the dead was rooted in a cultural concept of 'God's acre' as the traditional repository for the dead and the customary landscape for enacting the secular funeral. Moreover, given the image of the clergy as distant figures in these accounts, it seems unlikely that the bereaved would have negotiated a personalised burial service with the officiating minister. Indeed, this literature leaves little scope for any individual notions of spiritual significance to engage and interact with a formalised religious service.

More recent, 'revisionist', analyses of religion have contested reference to falling rates of attendance as indicative of an increasingly secular working class. For instance, Callum Brown has emphasised the role of church-based voluntary organisations and the tendency for municipal authorities to promote evangelical agendas of social reform to argue that few individuals would have been untouched by religion at some point in their lives.¹¹¹ Such analyses emphasise the distinction between concepts of 'indifference' and 'difference'. Official Christian doctrine held little significance in comparison to a working-class version of Christianity which prioritised practical deeds and was characterised by a 'consumer-like' selection of what was relevant to individual needs.¹¹² In this sense, recourse to the Christian service of interment did not conflict with irregular or non-attendance at church/chapel. Rather, individuals could exercise a version of Christianity whereby

¹¹⁰ See Standish Meacham, 'The Church in the Victorian City', Victorian Studies, 11, 3 (1968), pp. 359-78, Brian Harrison, 'Religion and Recreation in Nineteenth Century England', Past and Present, 38 (1967), pp. 98-125 (also printed in Harrison, Peaceable Kingdom, pp. 123-56), Henry Pelling, 'Religion in the Nineteenth Century British Working Class', Past and Present, 27 (1964), pp. 128-33, Hugh McLeod, Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City (London, 1974), pp. 280-3, Hugh McLeod, 'Religion in the City', Urban History Yearbook, 1978, pp. 7-22 and Alan D. Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740 - 1914 (London, 1976).

¹¹¹ Callum G. Brown, 'Did Urbanisation Secularise Britain?', Urban History Yearbook, 1988, pp. 1-13.

¹¹² Gerald Parsons, 'A Question of Meaning: Religion and Working-Class Life' in Gerald Parsons (ed.), Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume Two - Controversies (Manchester, [1988] 1997).

interaction with the church as an institution was only pursued in circumstances deemed necessary.

Neither of these schools of thought give a satisfactory account of the almost universal turn to the clergy (of whatever denomination) at times of death. Studies such as James Obelkevich's analysis of rural Lindsey have emphasised the popular appropriation of formal religious services, such as baptism and burial, to argue for separate worlds of belief.¹¹³ Thomas Laqueur's account of the switch from a culture of burial in the churchyard to the cemetery also implies two separate communities of interest. According to Laqueur, burial in the commercial cemetery dissolved the notion of burial ground as a sacred space.¹¹⁴ Like Obelkevich, however, Laqueur omits to consider the potential for perceptions of spirituality, burial and formal religion to be invested with pliable meanings. Such accounts also neglect the question of adherence to a specific denomination. As Owen Chadwick has noted, the campaign against the burial privileges of the Established church was spearheaded by a political and intellectual elite.¹¹⁵ The perception of denominational identity among the working classes is cloudy, most analyses emphasising a utilitarian approach to institutional attachment (selective engagement with church organisations when of direct material or social benefit) alongside small pockets of strong religious affiliation (such as Nonconformity in South and North Wales).¹¹⁶ The decision to inter the dead in a specific denominational burial ground with a corresponding minister, however, remains to be explored alongside broader questions of the perception of burial space as sacred and, indeed, the character of belief itself.

As Sarah Williams has recently highlighted, analyses of religion which rely on quantifiable data - even those which acknowledge the difficulty of defining *belief* as

¹¹³ James Obelkevich, Religion and Rural Society in South Lindsey 1825 - 1875 (Oxford, 1976).

¹¹⁴ Laqueur, 'Cemeteries, Religion'.

¹¹⁵ Chadwick, The Victorian Church, pp. 202-7.

¹¹⁶ See W. R. Lambert, 'Some Working-Class Attitudes Towards Organised Religion in Nineteenth-Century Wales' in Parsons, Religion in Victorian Britain, pp. 96-114.

opposed to interaction with an institution - overlook the complexity of attitudes towards formal religion.¹¹⁷ For Williams, the problem with both orthodox and revisionist accounts of popular religion lies in the agenda they set for research, invariably tied to notions of decline, urbanisation and secularisation.¹¹⁸ Even more nuanced readings of popular culture based upon participant testimony, such as Hugh McLeod's recent *Piety and Poverty*, persist in approaching working-class belief through notions of secularisation.¹¹⁹ Thus, far from adopting a more flexible definition of 'belief', McLeod's reading of oral evidence simply leads him to conclude that the 'church-going minority' was larger and the decline of churches more gradual and complex than previously thought.¹²⁰ Moreover, accounts which juxtapose a popular/ folk religion with an elite religion limit the possibilities for exploring the fluidity of spirituality. Lawrence Taylor's analysis of religion as a discourse whose narrator has a wide range of voices and imagery at their disposal has illustrated how religious belief can take the form of multiple voices which demand to be heard, not in isolation, but in concert, however disharmonious they may be. Taylor refers to this subcultural diversity as 'fields of religious experience' which coalesce in a 'loosely bounded "interpretative community"' with a generally shared understanding of religious meaning.¹²¹ Williams' study of religious belief in popular culture in Southwark, 1880-1939, expands Taylor's emphasis on the fluidity of religious narrative. Moving away from notions of *subcultural* diversity, Williams draws attention to the perpetual recreation and reinterpretation of belief by the *individual*. Rejecting attempts to define both categories of belief and religious activity (which were probably alien to the experience and perception of the historical actors concerned), Williams argues instead for a loose understanding of belief which

¹¹⁷ Sarah Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c. 1880-1939* (Oxford, 1999). See also Sarah Williams, 'The Language of Belief: An Alternative Agenda for the Study of Victorian Working-Class Religion', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 1, 2 (1996), pp. 30-17.

¹¹⁸ Williams, *Religious Belief*, pp. 1-23.

¹¹⁹ Hugh McLeod, *Piety and Poverty* (New York, 1996).

¹²⁰ Hugh McLeod, 'New Perspectives on Victorian Class Religion: The Oral Evidence', *Oral History*, 14, 1 (1985), pp. 31-50.

¹²¹ Lawrence Taylor, 'The Languages of Belief: Nineteenth-Century Religious Discourse in Southwest Donegal' in Marilyn Silverman and P. H. Gulliver (eds.) *Approaching the Past: Historical Anthropology Through Irish Case Studies* (New York, 1992), pp. 142-75.

prioritises participant criteria.¹²² It is, she contends, only by engaging with the language, symbolism and imagery created and used by historical actors themselves that it becomes possible to explore the multiple roles, uses and concepts relating belief to broader notions of popular culture.

Thus, Williams outlines belief as a dynamic process which drew on folklore, superstition, formal belief and occasional or conditional conformity to institutions. The secular/ popular and the spiritual/ official languages of belief were not mutually exclusive but inextricable parts of a web of broader cultural meaning. Williams' conclusion that belief was complex and amorphous suggests the potential for the burial service to be appropriated by individuals and perpetually recast and redefined. That historiography has latched onto the secular rituals of burial is, perhaps, indicative of an assumption that only the secular could be imbued with individual meaning. Adopting Williams' stance, even the fixed text of the burial service need not be interpreted in a purely doctrinal light. Rather, interaction with religion at the interment of the dead was a crucial component of mutable and highly individual interpretations of the decent and proper funeral.¹²³

Thomas Kselman's analysis of funeral conflicts in nineteenth-century France goes some way to illustrate this point. During the early nineteenth century, civil burial in France tended to be occasioned by the refusal of clergy to provide a Catholic service. The improvisations made by families forced to organise a burial outside the format sanctioned by the Catholic church (and by freethinkers who *chose* to forego the service) provides an insight, argues Kselman, into the sentiments and values of people confronting death. On one level, the denial of burial honours deprived the bereaved of an important source of consolation - not least because rejection of the dead by the Catholic church implied that prayers for the souls of the dead were futile. Yet, Kselman continues, negative impact was also derived from the withholding of

¹²² See also Sarah Williams, 'The Problem of Belief: The Place of Oral History in the Study of Popular Religion', *Oral History*, 24, 2 (1996), pp. 27-34.

¹²³ See pp. 100-6, 153-61 below.

traditional rites as a source of shame: it conferred dishonour on the dead but, equally significant, it removed customs which were used to establish an individual's place within a community. Where rituals had to be improvised, they aimed to emulate the purpose of the Catholic burial: to reaffirm identity, to console the bereaved and to articulate hope. Thus, Kselman warns against crude readings of secularisation and calls, instead, for an appreciation of forms of belief as positive forces for innovation which operate in tandem with wider cultural changes.¹²⁴

For most, therefore, the burial service was inseparable from shared understandings of the decent, customary funeral. Indeed, as Jennifer Leaney highlights, the failure of early cremationists to appreciate this relationship may well explain why late Victorian and Edwardian cremation propaganda failed to impress upon a wide public.¹²⁵ Cremation not only offended concepts of bodily resurrection, but arguments based on utility, hygiene and economics bore little relevance to a working-class culture of death. Peter Jupp also notes that cremation propaganda was anathema to a conservative working-class perception of the funeral as a means to express identity, affection for the dead and a sense of social status. Moreover, the whole culture of death was focused on the interment of the dead. Jupp perceives this as crucial to notions of physical resurrection.¹²⁶ I would argue, however, that burial was the climax of the funeral - both in a spiritual and secular sense. Thus, cremation not only questioned concepts of resurrection, but the whole social and cultural significance of customs geared towards the grave. Indeed, as Wilson and Levy noted in the late 1930s, 'the forces of tradition' would long preclude the extension of cremation.¹²⁷ It is, therefore, impossible to separate the secular rituals of the funeral from spiritual significance. For many, the religious burial service was a custom imbued with

¹²⁴ Thomas Kselman, 'Funeral Conflicts in Nineteenth-Century France', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), pp. 312-32.

¹²⁵ Jennifer Leaney, 'Ashes to Ashes: Cremation and the Celebration of Death in Nineteenth Century Britain' in Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual*, pp. 118-35.

¹²⁶ Peter Jupp, 'The Development of Cremation in England, 1820-1990: A Sociological Account', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1993.

¹²⁷ Wilson and Levy, *Burial Reform*, p. vii.

meaning extra to spirituality: it signified community membership, expressed identity and was interpreted as a right of citizenship. Concepts of the sanctity of the cemetery and the burial service were, therefore, a shared language of death ultimately subject to individual appropriation and interpretation.

Grief

Failure to consider the personal meanings invested in the burial service highlights a fundamental shortfall in the historiography of death: themes of commercialism and respectability have dominated analyses at the expense of addressing the individual experience of grief. Given that death and grief are synonymous, this gap in analysis is startling. Sarah Tarlow has noted this with reference to the archaeology of the cemetery, arguing that a focus on burial ritual has tended to marginalize personal emotion. Yet, she asks, how can we consider death without exploring grief?¹²⁸ The underlying tenet of Tarlow's study is that material culture is dialectical: grave memorials can be read as texts on love and loss in that they act as metaphors for feeling. The metaphors utilised on headstones draw on notions of sleep and journeys, both of which act as a means of 'presencing' the deceased and rendering the separation wrought by death temporary.¹²⁹ Tarlow identifies the nineteenth century as a boom period in the culture of installing headstones over graves, growing from the rise of affective individualism during the eighteenth century and the cultivation of a desire to own the dead as individuals.¹³⁰ Yet the perceived hiatus between Victorian and twentieth-century cultures of death is, Tarlow contends, misplaced. The experience of bereavement remained essentially the same throughout the two periods. What changed was the form of expression. By the turn of the twentieth century, the material culture of the Victorian period had already become formulaic and clichéd. The grief occasioned by mass death in the Great War was, therefore, too exceptional

¹²⁸ Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration*, pp. 28-34.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-6.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-7.

for this culture to suffice.¹³¹ Clare Gittings has argued in relation to the early-modern period that religious change made only a limited impact on cultures of grief: doctrinal change altered the expression of bereavement rather than fundamental feelings of loss.¹³² Tarlow's long chronology (five hundred years) reiterates this point: bereavement as a cultural *expression*, subject to change, is different from fundamentally persistent personal responses to death.

Tarlow's discussion of metaphor as archaeological artefact is a refreshing addition to a historical literature which has read the burial ground all too literally. Her claim to have written a history of grief over five centuries rests on marrying the historical artefact with the archaeological. However, her 'historical' documentation is scanty and rarely supports an account of grief whilst her archaeological evidence is limited to reading the gravestones of burial grounds in the Orkney islands.¹³³ Tarlow's aims are, perhaps, more impressive than her achievements: her study tells us more about how we read artefacts and trends in commemorative practice than the experience of bereavement. Moreover, having drawn attention to the discrepancy between material culture and individual emotion, Tarlow then focuses on the material expression of emotion rather than the mediation between the material and the personal.

The limitations of Tarlow's work are, however, indicative of some of the difficulties in writing about grief. Similar problems emerge in the reading of Pat Jalland's recent work, Death in the Victorian Family.¹³⁴ Jalland's exploration of death and bereavement broke new ground in the study of death by fixing on personal grief. Her research is, she asserts, committed to 'experiential history', a commitment based on the view that the people of the past 'must first speak to us in their own words', especially those words which reveal 'their innermost lives'.¹³⁵ In searching for the

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 147-67. See also Cannadine, 'War and Death'.

¹³² Clare Gittings, Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England (Beckenham, 1984), p. 59.

¹³³ Tarlow, Bereavement and Commemoration, pp. 1-19, 50-75.

¹³⁴ Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

subjective experience of the Victorian in mourning, Jalland utilises private diaries, correspondence, wills and memorials to the dead from fifty-five families, spanning the period from 1830 to 1920. Jalland refers to the 'immense obstacles' in the path of experiential history and notes the assumption that private experience is impossible to research. Yet she seems to see these problems in terms of source material rather than as more substantive issues associated with reconstructing individual accounts of personal experience.¹³⁶ Enthusing that 'rich experiential source material certainly does exist', Jalland reads this material as *evidence* of grief rather than as a textual representation of grief.¹³⁷ Furthermore, she fails to engage any discussion relating to her reading of - and involvement in - such texts alongside her own re-creation of these narratives in a different context.¹³⁸ This is not to suggest that we cannot write about grief, but to call for a recognition that the analytical division between the 'inner experience' and social and cultural ritual is false: both are mediated through multiple linguistic and symbolic representations.

Death in the Victorian Family is structured thematically, the first half dealing with experiences of dying and death, the second tackling grief and mourning. Throughout, Jalland is concerned to illustrate the ways in which customs associated with death and burial helped to assuage grief: rituals symbolised and reinforced the finality of death and loss, whilst offering consolation to the bereaved through an affirmation of religious belief, articulation of private and social memory, and familial displays of sympathy. In particular, the funeral week 'began the process of working through grief with the help of a supportive structure of public mourning rituals and family unity'.¹³⁹ Memorials to the dead, consolation literature, memento mori and 'rituals of sorrow' all provided longer term means of dealing with the onslaught of grief.¹⁴⁰ The value of

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 8-11.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

¹³⁸ Tarlow's introduction addresses such problems in detail and concludes that the analysis of grief is, in part, an analysis of one's own responses to loss. Tarlow, Bereavement and Commemoration, p. 21.

¹³⁹ Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, p. 12.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 300-17.

Jalland's study, however, lies in the fact that she has moved the discussion of death beyond the boundaries of funeral custom (and expense) and the cemetery to consider grief as a pervasive experience which often stretched from the illness of the dying to long after their burial had taken place.

Although advances in medicine were influential in effecting a change in attitudes towards death and dying (notably the ability to give more accurate diagnoses and advances in palliative care), Jalland sees religion and, to a lesser extent, demography as the principal motors of change in attitudes towards death. Both factors were reinforced by the Great War.¹⁴¹ She suggests, however, that if death in the nineteenth century is to be characterised in terms of a single model, it would be that of the Evangelical ideal of the 'good death', characterised by persistent faith, humility and submission to the will of God in the face of loss. As Jalland notes, prolonged and agonising deaths not only heightened the belief that suffering with fortitude was a virtue, but such deaths gave unbelievers time to repent their sins and turn to God.¹⁴² However, this also meant that sudden deaths, suicides and the deaths of unbelievers were categorised as 'bad deaths' which can only have exacerbated the grief of the Evangelical bereaved.¹⁴³

We must ask, however, how useful a single model is in exploring what must have been a highly individual and diverse experience. Here lies a tension within the book. Whilst Jalland herself is wary of using a single model for all (she notes that the good death model was the *most* important for *most* Christians)¹⁴⁴ and is keen to emphasise the personal experience of the individual, she has a tendency to revert to a potentially crude dichotomy between the good and bad death as a framework for her analysis. Whilst the ideal of the good death may have been potent within an Evangelical setting, it is questionable how useful this model is for discussing attitudes towards

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 17-58.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-76.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

death and grief outside this culture. Jalland concedes that Evangelicalism was in decline by the end of the nineteenth century, and that attitudes towards death and dying had already begun to change before the Great War.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, within Evangelical culture itself, Jalland highlights the discrepancy between the literary ideal of the good death and the trauma and agony which accompanied many deathbed scenes.¹⁴⁶

The title of Jalland's study is perhaps misleading as the 'family' in question is strictly the middle- and upper-class family, reinforcing a persistent trend in the historiography of death. As David Cannadine has noted, research into grief in the Victorian and Edwardian periods has relied on a 'much biographied elite'. The assumption that the attitudes of this elite were representative of the working-class culture of death is, however, 'easier to assert than it is to prove'.¹⁴⁷ Jalland also recognises that cultures of death in Victorian Britain were class-bound and warns of the danger in 'assuming that the behaviour and beliefs about death of the middle and upper classes automatically filtered down to the working classes'.¹⁴⁸ Yet, as noted above, comparatively little work on working-class cultures of death and bereavement has been undertaken. Consequently, Jalland's study augments our understanding of a culture we already know about whilst consciously excluding that which remains obscure.

There appears to be an assumption within Victorian death scholarship that high mortality rates, poor living conditions and persistent poverty fostered an ambivalence among the working classes towards personal loss. The lavish funeral, in this context, was not only an exercise in snobbery and an excuse for a party, it provided an adequate forum for the expression of mourning - grief as such, therefore, was contained within the rituals surrounding death. Once those rituals were complete, a

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-8.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-38.

¹⁴⁷ Cannadine, 'War and Death', p. 241.

¹⁴⁸ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 1.

family could take stock of the financial outcome of death and burial and return - recovered - to daily life. This neat concept of a culture of grief is, apparently, supported by working-class autobiography. Reviewing such texts, David Vincent notes that 'bereavement is everywhere in these pages'.¹⁴⁹ Yet the biographies are not dominated by death. Vincent interprets this as a capacity to survive experiences which, in the late-twentieth century, would have a 'shattering effect' on the personality and life of the bereaved.¹⁵⁰ Thus, Vincent's analysis starts from an assumption that death was *not* a shattering experience for the majority of working-class families in nineteenth-century England.

Vincent acknowledges the difficulties inherent in reading autobiography as a text on experience. Firstly, most autobiographies omit the inclusion of private and emotional feelings. Where such details are addressed, the authors' grasp of language tends to prove inadequate, encouraging the use of religious and secular clichés. Furthermore, Vincent suggests that many biographers felt such details were inappropriate material for *respectable* biographies concerned with the development of moral and intellectual personalities.¹⁵¹ Whilst the absence of a language for grief may have impeded the expression of such sentiments, Vincent warns against the imposition of the historian's own interpretations on silent landscapes.¹⁵² Having noted the analytical problems faced by the use of autobiography as a source, however, Vincent goes on to read the literary silence on matters of grief as indicative of a culture of emotional containment.

In the majority of autobiographies Vincent consults, accounts of bereavement are summarised in one or two simple statements. Where bereavement occurred in childhood, Vincent points to the absence of sufficiently sophisticated linguistic and

¹⁴⁹ David Vincent, 'Love and Death and the Nineteenth-Century Working Class', *Social History*, 5 (1980), pp. 223-47. Reprinted in David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Working-Class Autobiography* (London, 1981), pp. 39-61.

Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 39-61.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 40-6.

conceptual frameworks as an explanation for brevity or the utilisation of formulaic phrases. The bereaved adult, however, was in a better position to ‘observe and control’ their response to bereavement.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, the ‘key factor’ shaping bereavement was the interaction between death and poverty. Clearly, material circumstances were integral to the manner in which families dealt with the dead and financial fortunes could be adversely affected by death as much as they might be relieved.¹⁵⁴ Yet Vincent’s assertion that: ‘The loss of a close relation was so bound up with the material problems of life that at worst it seemed no more than an intensification of the misery of existence’ betrays a general belief that the working classes were rarely touched by extreme, or to use Vincent’s phrase, ‘pure’ grief.¹⁵⁵ In seeking to promote a theory of ‘containment’ in relation to financial management, Vincent denies the working-class autobiographer a fundamental component of human emotion which he implicitly confers on those in wealthier circumstances. Indeed, he uses an example of ‘atypical’ grief (a father who abandoned work on the death of his child) to argue that: ‘Nobody else could afford the luxury of investing so much emotion in a child that its death, and its death alone, could have such a devastating psychological effect.’¹⁵⁶ This assertion rests on two misguided assumptions.

Firstly, Vincent appears to suggest that grief and work are mutually exclusive. In arguing that few men had time to grieve, Vincent equates grief with a suspension in daily routines and responsibilities. It is also worth noting that Vincent refrains from explaining his distinctions between containment, grief, and ‘pure’ grief. Moreover, in concentrating on the working man, he ignores bereaved women and overlooks the potential for grieving parents, spouses and siblings to turn to each other within domestic time and space. Conversely, depression and despondency may not only have been perceived as inappropriate subjects for biography, individuals may have experienced difficulty in expressing their negative feelings when they felt a higher

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid..

responsibility (economic, emotional and/ or social) to surviving family members. This leads us onto the second problem in Vincent's account. Having noted the difficulties inherent in reading *silence* in autobiography, Vincent then falls into the trap of equating the literary containment of grief with 'coping' and recovery in an experiential context. In addition, whilst concluding that family experience differentiates 'otherwise homogeneous social, economic and occupational sections of the population', Vincent insists that it is still possible to make historical generalisations about working-class cultures of love and death.¹⁵⁷ Given that grief was so essentially personal, one must question whether it is desirable to make such generalisations. Vincent's own conclusions illustrate the analytical confusion such conflicts perpetuate: having argued that the working-classes were unable to 'afford the luxury' of 'pure' grief, Vincent closes his overview with the assertion that although poverty blunts the sensibilities whilst affluence facilitates more 'humane' feelings, this cannot be equated with an 'obliteration' of affection among the poor.¹⁵⁸ In sum, therefore, Vincent himself seems unconvinced by his own reference to a narrow sociology of class and the crude equation between material wealth and feeling.

That Vincent's principal focus for analysis rests on the deaths of children is unsurprising given that infant and child mortality rates remained very high until the First World War. Furthermore, the attitudes of working-class parents towards the death of their offspring has proved the mainstay to perceptions of a working class incapable of experiencing grief in all its awfulness and complexity. At its most crude, this approach is embodied in the notion that 'the value of infant life is determined by the forces of supply and demand'.¹⁵⁹ Anthony Wohl comments that it would 'doubtless be comforting' for the reader to concur with middle-class social reformers who argued that although distressing, the massive numbers of infant deaths were *less* distressing to the working classes whose sensibilities were dulled by poverty, filth and

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-61.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁹ Lionel Rose, *The Massacre of the Innocents* (London, 1986), p. 5.

all-round hardship. Possibly unable to comprehend the horror and inhumanity of mass child death, the contemporary reformer tended to assume that indifference was the inevitable outcome of such experience: 'Deaths of babies were so common, so *expected*, that working-class parents accepted them stoically and passively, without much pain or remorse'.¹⁶⁰ Yet, suggests Wohl, stoicism was often - like respectability - an adopted front and it would be easy, especially for an outside observer, to mistake passivity and fatigue for callous indifference.¹⁶¹

Historical analyses have tended to reiterate and elaborate the Victorian moral panic concerning the murder and manslaughter of children.¹⁶² As Ann Higginbotham has argued, contemporary and retrospective literature has probably exaggerated the estimates of infanticide.¹⁶³ More importantly, however, assumptions about human relationships as governed by 'elementally animal' instincts which hide beneath a fragile veneer of religious and ethical ideals encourage the notion that poverty was, and is, synonymous with the neglect of children.¹⁶⁴ This is not only a highly complex and controversial issue, it tends to overlook the potential of the working classes to have loving and affectionate relationships with their offspring, no matter how young or how *replaceable*. In a sense, therefore, David Vincent has reproduced the assumptions of late Victorian and Edwardian commentators unable to reconcile poverty, love and loss. My own research suggests that grief among the working classes manifest^{ed} itself in numerous forms: devoted nursing of the sick, emotional distress, funeral ritual, memory and commemoration. Moreover, the concept of grief was (and is) flexible: verbal reticence need not signify containment, fatalism or indifference. Pragmatism often had to take precedence to ensure the survival of the bereaved. This did not, however, annul the distress of grief. Rather, the linguistic

¹⁶⁰ Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London, 1983), p. 41.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² In particular, the insurance of infant lives attracted criticisms that parents valued a prospective burial club payment more than the lives of their children. For discussion of controversies surrounding infant insurance and parental neglect see pp. 231-9 below.

¹⁶³ Ann Higginbotham, "Sin of the Age": Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, 32, 3 (1989), pp. 319-37.

¹⁶⁴ Rose, *The Massacre*, p. 187.

expression of grief was *managed* and channelled through malleable symbolic and abstract means. In this sense, I adopt a definition of grief which rests on the *fluidity* of experience, articulation and identity rather than fixed concepts of (good and bad) bereavement.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

Since the publication of Geoffrey Gorer's 'The Pornography of Death' in 1955, there has been a backlash against the taboo of death and grief in twentieth-century culture. Indeed, the deluge of texts claiming to teach the public how to die and grieve points, rather more, to an obsession with death.¹⁶⁶ As Tony Walter observes, we seem to be experiencing a 'revival of death'. Walter's use of the term 'revival' hints at the Evangelical tone of those who promote an openness with death and bereavement. Yet 'revival' also harks back to a bygone era where death and grief were not taboo, but celebrated. In outlining the revival of death, however, Walter highlights a more sophisticated concept of the celebration of death which relies on public and private discourses of death. The private discourse, where death and bereavement are confronted in a fragmented, disparate and personal way, is dependant on a public discourse of death, created and managed by the professionals who deal with the dying, the dead and the bereaved. Thus, death can only be reclaimed from the realms of taboo if it is managed and sanitised.¹⁶⁷

Yet it seems plausible to suggest that death and grief were never really forbidden or taboo in the first place. Rather, the culture of death adopted new shapes and meanings, necessitating different paradigms of expression and analysis. Recent literature on the sociology of death has increasingly focused on different languages of

¹⁶⁵ See chapter six below and for discussion of grief in relation to infants and children, pp. 253-9 below.

¹⁶⁶ As Tony Walter notes, by the late 1980s over 2,000 books were in print in the English language which dealt with death and dying. Walter, *The Revival*, p. 1.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

death and grief, illustrating that traditional dichotomies between 'good' and 'bad' bereavement and the segmentation of culture into epochs of death have been misguided.¹⁶⁸ Some have argued that few deaths can be categorised as 'good' or 'bad' on a personal level whilst definitions of death formulated by medical professionals and the bereaved conflict to such a degree that categories of dying are of little general use.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, such literature casts doubt over whether a culture of death can be identified within any given chronology or social/ cultural group. Attitudes towards death and bereavement are invariably created from multifarious identities and experiences which rarely operate in isolation from each other. In addition, death and grief are abstract concepts, defined and identified by complex social processes which are inseparable from cultural meaning.¹⁷⁰ Thus, categories of death and dying which rely on dichotomies and refer to monolithic cultures have overlooked the pliability of cultures of death and grief and the experience of the individual.

With reference to the late-Victorian and Edwardian working classes, I argue for a flexible and inclusive definition of the culture of death which embraces diversity and difference and, importantly, explores the individual experience of grief.¹⁷¹ The vast majority of bereaved families participated in social rituals which were imbued with shared understandings of decency, dignity, custom and respectability. In the context of common burial rites, therefore, it is possible to identify a culture of death. However, it is imperative to recognise that whilst the rituals of mourning were inscribed with shared social meaning, they were also appropriated by individuals and invested with personal significance. Moreover, personal concepts of death and grief

¹⁶⁸ See Mellor, 'Death in High Modernity', Jenny Hockey, 'The Acceptable Face of Human Grieving? The Clergy's Role in Managing Emotional Expression During Funerals' in Clark, The Sociology of Death, pp. 129-148, Small, 'Death and Difference', and Neil Thompson, 'Masculinity and Loss' in Field et al., Death, Gender, pp. 76-87.

¹⁶⁹ Jane Appleton, 'Peaceful Death: A Concept Analysis', paper presented to Fourth International Conference on Death, Dying and Disposal, Glasgow Caledonian University, 3 - 6 September 1998.

¹⁷⁰ Prior's study of death in modern Ireland charts how death is inseparable from cultural, medical and legal discourses which organise and make sense of mortality. Prior, The Social Organisation.

¹⁷¹ See also Julie-Marie Strange, 'Death and Dying: Old Themes and New Directions', Journal of Contemporary History, 35, 3 (2000), pp. 491-9.

were elastic and subject to perpetual re-interpretation. Overall, *the* working-class culture of death was a social forum for mediating a private, individual discourse of death, grief and condolence. Thus, whilst images bequeathed by Dickens continue to offer a colourful representation of extravagance, superficiality and snobbery, it is time for historians to rethink concepts of the celebration of death.

Chapter Two

Sickness, Death & Caring for the Corpse

As the previous chapter demonstrated, discussion of the working-class culture of death and bereavement has been dominated by limited notions of respectability and the funeral as a consumer good. Likewise, David Vincent's suggestion that working-class grief was 'contained' has placed concepts of love and loss firmly within a reductive materialist paradigm.¹ This picture of working-class bereavement is based upon a series of erroneous assumptions: that poverty blunted the sensibility of the poor; that loss was manifest through the material culture of the funeral; and that grief had to be 'pure' to be profound.² This chapter aims to challenge these assumptions, firstly, by illustrating that grief often preceded death and the funeral, beginning with the care of the sick and the corpse. Secondly, I suggest that definitions of 'pure' grief are unhelpful. Rather, responses to bereavement were mutable: they adopted a variety of forms and meanings both within and between individuals.

Beginning with notions of familiarity with death, I explore working-class attitudes towards the sick and the corpse in a bid to identify verbal and symbolic expressions of loss. The poor were often castigated by medical professionals and social reformers for their apparent fatalism in the face of sickness and death. Such criticism was compounded by the reluctance of the poor to pay for professional medical assistance, especially when set against the money spent on funerals. Yet definitions of care which hinged on formal medical structures ignored the informal patterns of caring for the sick in working-class communities and households. Moreover, fatalism could easily be confused with shifting priorities in response to disease and mortality: if death seemed inevitable, resources could better be expended on soothing the dying rather than pursuing medical aid which would ultimately prove fruitless.

¹ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 39-61.

² The phrase 'pure grief' is Vincent's. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

To recognise that poverty impacted upon responses to sickness and death is not, however, to concur with Vincent's conclusions relating to 'contained' grief. Rather, my analysis of care for the sick and the treatment of the cadaver as sites for the expression of loss suggests a rather more humane reading of working-class responses to death. For instance, the act of washing and laying-out a corpse could be perceived as a final gesture of intimacy and affection. It also assisted the bereaved in renegotiating the boundaries between themselves and the dead whilst building a 'memory picture' of the deceased at peace.³ Furthermore, external attempts to interfere with the remains of the dead (such as the removal of the corpse to a mortuary or the conduct of a post-mortem examination) tended to be met with hostility from the poor. This may indicate beliefs relating to the metaphysical properties of the cadaver and the need to protect the dead from evil or danger.⁴ Yet at the turn of the twentieth century, families were possessive of their dead largely from a desire to claim ownership of the corpse and ensure that it was treated with respect.⁵ Thus, individual perceptions of the spiritual status of the corpse sat alongside a powerful need to fulfil secular obligations to the dead which not only accorded dignity to the corpse but also formed linguistic and symbolic landscapes for the expression of loss and condolence.

Familiarity with Death

Despite falling mortality rates, death remained a frequent visitor to the working-class home at the turn of the twentieth century. Poverty, poor housing and limited access to medical provisions predisposed the working classes to disease and malnutrition whilst reducing their chances of recovery.⁶ Anticipating the analysis of Vincent, a journalist in Liverpool in 1883 commented that disease and death were so familiar to the poor that they were merely accepted as mundane incidents in life rather than personal tragedies.⁷ Indeed, the language and imagery of death

³ For discussion of the 'memory picture' see Mitford, *The American Way*, p. 16.

⁴ Richardson, *Death, Dissection*, pp. 8-22.

⁵ This theme is also developed in chapter four with reference to the pauper grave.

⁶ Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, pp. 80-141.

⁷ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 8 November 1883, p. 5.

permeated everyday speech. Margaret Penn's autobiography of her childhood in a late-Victorian Lancashire village is peppered with images of, and references to, death. For instance, Penn's mother reflects that she would 'as lief see our John lying stiff in 'is coffin as walking out wi' Winnie Dumbell'.⁸ When an aunt marries, Penn's grandmother weeps 'as if she was preparing for [her] funeral instead of her wedding'.⁹ Later, the same grandmother sews her drunken son-in-law inside a sheet (in order to beat him) and looks 'as though she wished it were his shroud'.¹⁰ In a similar vein, mortality and decay could be discussed in candid and humorous terms. In her autobiography, Jipping Street, Kathleen Woodward recalled a friend who, 'in the days when she little dreamed of death', had been fond of saying that she wanted to be wrapped up well in her coffin 'to prevent the 'maggots taking liberties' with her'.¹¹ In his social commentary People of the Abyss (1903), Jack London described a malnourished elderly man who, baring his wasted torso, asserted that he was only 'fit for the anatomist'.¹² Moreover, individuals frequently prepared for their own expiration. One dressmaker from Bolton, born in 1903, recalled how winding sheets were sometimes given as gifts. Her own linen sheets 'for when I died to be wrapped in' had been bought for her by an aunt.¹³

The forthright manner in which the poor discussed death was often shocking to middle-class sensibilities. Pat Jalland has noted a trend in the late-nineteenth century for wealthy families to protect the sick from knowledge of terminal illness and approaching death, preferring the deathbed scene to be 'uncluttered by emotional confessions and farewells and by scenes of intense religious significance'.¹⁴ Furthermore, the middle and upper classes began to distance themselves from the corpse, increasingly employing others to deal with the laying-

⁸ Margaret Penn, Manchester Fourteen Miles (Firle, [1947] 1979), p. 6. Dialect retained.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹ Kathleen Woodward, Jipping Street (London, [1928]1983), p. 79.

¹² Jack London, The People of the Abyss (London, 1903), p. 87.

¹³ Bolton Oral History Transcript (BOHT), Tape 166, Reference: AL/LSS/A/007.

¹⁴ Jalland links this to changing medical paradigms of palliative care which emphasised rest and freedom from stress, and the decline of Evangelicalism. Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, pp. 117-18.

out of the dead.¹⁵ In this context, it is hardly surprising that in the course of her study into the lives of ironworkers and their families in 1907, Florence Bell was horrified to observe the frankness with which impending death was discussed within the homes she visited.¹⁶ On calling at one house, she noted that imminent death was not only 'discussed quite freely' before the dying man but that his family were explicitly making plans dependant on his death: 'they were going eventually to move into another house in a healthier quarter, but could not do so as long as he was alive'.¹⁷ The candour and fatalism in such accounts were clearly shocking to Bell. Yet whilst she recoiled from unequivocal confrontations with mortality, the domestic conditions of most working-class families necessitated sharing living space with the sick, the dying and the dead. To a degree, such proximity with death demystified the dying process and left little room for embarrassment and/ or denial.

In tandem with high mortality rates, this frank and open culture introduced death to young children. Reporting on 'Squalid Liverpool' in 1883, one journalist was incredulous that children were so familiar with the sight of the hearse that it held no horror for them.¹⁸ It was not uncommon in some areas for children to play at 'funerals'.¹⁹ Reminiscing about her childhood in Edwardian Bolton, one millworker recalled the wax effigy of an infant corpse displayed in the window of a local undertaker's office. She and her friends had not flinched at the exhibit but found the 'doll-like' figure a source of interest, comparing it to the infant corpses they saw in neighbours' houses.²⁰ From the respective distances of class and

¹⁵ Jalland does not explicitly state whether the families concerned considered contact with the corpse 'unpleasant' or whether this is her own value judgement. *Ibid.*, p. 100. and pp. 211-12. See also Mary Chamberlain and Ruth Richardson, 'Life and Death', *Oral History*, 11, 1 (1983), pp. 31-44 (p. 40).

¹⁶ Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (London, [1907] 1985).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-8.

¹⁸ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 8 November 1883, p. 5.

¹⁹ Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal: Women's Lives in the Rhondda, 1881-1911' in Angela John (ed.), *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939* (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 109-34 and Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (Oxford, 1993), p. 189. See also James Walvin, *A Child's World: A Social History of English Childhood, 1800-1914* (Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 29-44 and Diana Dixon, 'The Two Faces of Death: Children's Magazines and Their Treatment of Death in the Nineteenth Century' in Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual*, pp. 136-50.

²⁰ BOHT, Tape 89b, Reference: AL/SP/1/015.

retrospection, both accounts infer disapproval of such easy acquaintance with death. Yet within the context of time and space, candour was a pragmatic response to the conditions in which people lived and died. For instance, one Bolton weaver, born in 1906, recalled the childhood experience of temporarily sharing her bedroom with her dead grandmother and two dead siblings. Asked if she had been frightened by the presence of these silent relatives, she replied that 'it was something were always [sic] had been'.²¹ In this sense, the absence of fear and/ or revulsion enabled the bereaved family to maintain a degree of order, as defined by themselves, to their domestic living and sleeping arrangements.

There is a danger, however, of confusing a familiarity with death with indifference, thereby overlooking the diverse and complex experiences of shock, fear, relief and grief. Furthermore, the concept of familiarity with death was (and is) subject to multiple interpretation. In her autobiography A Bolton Childhood, Alice Foley observed how children 'of the streets' were acquainted with death from an early age.²² For Alice, this acquaintance was rooted in the custom of visiting the houses of the dead in order to view the corpse. Despite experiencing direct contact with the physical remains of the dead, death as a metaphysical phenomenon remained 'something awful and mysterious' which 'would never be known to me or mine.' Thus, when Alice's brother died, 'suddenly and without warning', all notions of familiarity seemed irrelevant to the unfamiliar anguish wrought by personal grief.²³

Alice Foley's experience of bereavement should also alert us to the danger of equating poverty and high mortality rates with a devalued appreciation of life. It is worth noting that in aiming to emphasise the horrific conditions in which some of the working classes lived, social commentators frequently cast death as the friend of the poor, heralding release from hardship and privation (more so than the workhouse). George Sims noted that:

²¹ BOHT, Tape 15b, Reference: AL/LSS/A/010.

²² Alice Foley, A Bolton Childhood (Bolton, [1973] 1990), p. 37.

²³ *Ibid.*

there are men and women who lie and die day by day in their wretched single rooms, sharing all the family trouble, enduring the hunger and the cold, and waiting without hope, without a single ray of comfort, until God curtains their staring eyes with the merciful film of death.²⁴

Similarly, Jack London related the sentiments of an elderly and destitute man queuing for admission to the workhouse: 'I wish I was dead, I wish I was dead. Can't come any too quick for me.'²⁵ In the novel The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, Robert Tressell suggested that the inclination among the working classes to wish their time away was, unwittingly, a desire to die.²⁶ In a more explicit portrayal of the death-wish, Tressell's protagonist Owen repeatedly contemplates family-suicide as a means to ending privation: 'it would be far better if they could all three die now'.²⁷ Likewise, Philpot, a colleague of Owen's, looks to the graveyard where 'all those who were dear to him had been one by one laid to rest' and muses that 'he would not be sorry when the time came to join them there'.²⁸

This depressing vision of life as a slow and bitter journey towards death was an effective rhetorical strategy for radical and socialist writers. It revealed little, however, of the poor's vision of themselves whilst negating the possibility of finding small pleasures in life, however hard. London himself noted that tenderness and affection were not unknown to the most abject: 'some were poor, wretched beasts, inarticulate and callous, but for all that, in many ways very human.'²⁹ Likewise, it is significant that Tressell's hero ultimately rejected his intention to kill his family: 'We've always got through somehow or other... and we'll do so still'.³⁰ Yet the flipside of this literary device was that the working

²⁴ George Sims, How the Poor Live (London, [1889] 1984), pp. 56-7.

²⁵ London, The People, p. 65.

²⁶ Robert Tressell, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists (London, [1914] 1993), p. 93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.506.

²⁹ London, The People, p.96.

³⁰ Tressell, The Ragged, p.585.

classes could also be portrayed as indifferent to death, even to the point of callous neglect.³¹

That rhetorical devices could manipulate perceptions of the working-class culture of death highlights the potential gulf between a language of fatalism and the diverse experience of individuals. For instance, Bell noted that the occupational hazards faced by ironworkers were a constant source of anxiety to their dependants. Bell found the 'simple heroism and endurance' with which fatalities were met a 'constant source of wondering admiration'.³² There is, perhaps, an element of fatalism in Bell's description of a culture of endurance where death is 'ever present and ever anticipated'.³³ Indeed, as the wife of the proprietor of the ironworks, Bell herself was implicated in the deaths of men in her husband's employ. Yet if such a fatalism implies a sense of helplessness, it might also suggest a steely determination to confront death and disaster where they occurred. The pragmatism which some perceived as indifference and apathy (bred by familiarity) could signify the public survival strategy of those hit by bereavement.

Languages of fatalism and familiarity in relation to death also concealed the fear and trauma of the dying. Kathleen Woodward's autobiography painted a vivid image of her slow-dying father repeatedly asking, with 'sunken eyes filled with tears', what he had done to deserve such suffering. He was simultaneously afraid, filled with self-pity, and remorseful for the burden he placed on his family.³⁴ Bessie Wallis, born in 1904, recalled that her grandfather had committed suicide rather than suffer a slow and painful death from liver cancer.³⁵ As illustrated by the demise of Mrs. Hewett in The Nether World, George Gissing imagined that those dying in poverty not only feared death itself but were also anxious for those they left behind:

³¹ This was particularly true with reference to infant and child mortality. See chapter seven below.

³² Bell, At the Works, p. 103.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Woodward, Jipping Street, p. 16.

³⁵ John Burnett (ed.), Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s (London, 1982), p. 308.

She made a brave fight against disease and penury and incessant dread of the coming day, but month after month her strength failed. Now at length she tried vainly to leave her bed. The last reserve of energy was exhausted, and the end was near.³⁶

It is only after relating her fears for the future of her family to an old friend that Mrs. Hewett can slip from life, ‘without a pang, as though death had compassion on her.’³⁷ A report in the Liverpool Weekly Courier in 1892 illustrates the extremities to which fears relating to death could escalate. Willis Enright, a five-year-old from Blackburn, was murdered by his mother who then tried to cut her own throat. According to the boy’s father, his wife had been ill for some time with no hope of recovery, she was afraid to die and could not bear the thought of leaving her children behind. Enright’s account may simply represent an attempt to minimise the horror of his wife’s behaviour. Nevertheless, his story suggests an understanding of death as something to fear, both in relation to oneself and those left behind.³⁸ Thus, familiarity with death cannot be equated with indifference or acceptance of death.

Caring for the sick

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, new research into preventative medicine and the treatment of disease superseded more traditional medical paradigms rooted in clinical diagnosis alone. Moreover, the advent of vaccination against certain diseases facilitated a degree of protection for those responsible for the care of the sick.³⁹ Yet working-class budgets rarely made provision for medical aid. Even in the comparatively affluent households of skilled workers, sickness constituted a drain on resources, especially if the patient was also the breadwinner. In many families, doctors tended to be consulted only when all hope

³⁶ George Gissing, The Nether World (London, [1889] 1986), p. 186.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

³⁸ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 19 March 1892, p. 5.

³⁹ See Wohl, Endangered Lives, F. B. Smith, The People’s Health, 1830-1910 (London, 1979), William Bynum, Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, 1994), and Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, pp. 98-118.

of recovery was gone.⁴⁰ Such was the rarity of summoning the doctor that his attendance upon the sick may have been read as a sign of impending death.⁴¹

That the working classes appeared reluctant to invest in medical facilities augmented the claims of critics that they held life cheap, particularly when juxtaposed with the sums of money invested in death. As the novelist Arthur Morrison illustrated in his story 'On the Stairs', the 'great expense' of 'a 'ansome funeral' often necessitated the deployment of resources available for medicines into coffers for an anticipated funeral.⁴² In satirising the 'respectable funeral', Morrison emphasised the absurdity of a culture which elevated the disposal of the dead over medical provision for the sick. F. M. L. Thompson and Paul Johnson have noted that despite a significant number of adult men subscribing to friendly societies at the end of the nineteenth century, much of the insurance sought was solely for burial purposes.⁴³ In her study of Lancashire funeral customs, Elizabeth Roberts noted that only one respondent from an oral history sample of 170 reported that their family did not subscribe to a burial club. In comparison, only a few respondents could recall their families having paid health insurance.⁴⁴

Investigating the budgets of thirty working-class families between 1909 and 1913, Maud Pember Reeves concluded that burial insurance was a 'calamitous blunder', the only beneficiary being the undertaker.⁴⁵ She also speculated that if the mania for burial insurance, 'the one great universal thrift of the poor', were channelled

⁴⁰ See Bell, *At the Works*, p. 86. For comparative middle- and upper-class attitudes towards illness and medical profession see Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 77-118.

⁴¹ A sketch in the Liverpool satirical magazine *The Porcupine* of 'A Sailor's Wife' portrayed a dying woman who refused to call a doctor so as not to alarm her children. *The Porcupine*, 5 June 1880, pp. 150-1.

⁴² Arthur Morrison, 'On the Stairs' in *Tales of Mean Streets* (New York, [1912] 1970), pp. 154-62. In this instance, the protagonist of the story deposits money donated for the purchase of medicine for her sick son into her savings for plumes and mutes at his funeral.

⁴³ Both authors note the difficulty of assessing numbers for sickness insurance policy holders as the term 'friendly societies' included societies providing a range of policies and those which dealt with burial only. Nevertheless, Thompson and Johnson agree that those who insured themselves for medical provision and/ or sickness benefit were much smaller in number than those holding burial premiums. Thompson, *The Rise*, pp. 200-3 and Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, pp. 48-74.

⁴⁴ Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way', p. 190.

⁴⁵ Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week* (London, [1913] 1979), pp. 73-4.

into maintaining health, 'we should have a stronger nation'.⁴⁶ Florence Bell was more sympathetic, noting that even with excellent household management and a regular income, few families could afford to spend money on formal remedies for illness.⁴⁷ Indeed, 'the spectre of illness and disability is always confronting the working man; the possibility of being from one day to the other plunged into actual want is always confronting his family.'⁴⁸ That 'even the sensible and respectable' workman often failed to join a sick club could be rationalised: most breadwinners were aware of the value of insurance but harboured suspicions relating to the security of their money, bureaucracy, and the need to undergo medical examinations.⁴⁹

Given the infrequency with which the working classes came into contact with the medical profession, it is unsurprising that practitioners and institutionalised healthcare were viewed with suspicion.⁵⁰ Kathleen Woodward noted that her friend Jessica Mourn refused to visit a doctor or the hospital, a place she had loathed ever since 'Magi Murphy went in to be cut about the ear, and, getting mixed up with the tonsil cases, came out without her tonsils.'⁵¹ In 1883 the Assistant Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool, Edward Hope, lamented that it was 'usual' for families issued with orders for the removal of sick relatives to hospital to ignore them.⁵² Even in cases where the patient expressly stated their wish to be taken to hospital, some families were reluctant to permit admission. Mary Carbett was sick with typhus but too ill for removal to hospital when Hope visited her house in September 1883. A doctor had been in attendance for thirteen

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Bell, At the Works, p.67.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.47.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.118.

⁵⁰ Wohl suggests that doctors were often perceived as overbearing and condescending. Moreover, as the medical profession were still unable to *cure* most diseases, practitioners should have understood the appeal to the working class of traditional and folk medicines. Wohl, Endangered Lives, pp. 18-19.

⁵¹ Woodward, Jipping Street, p. 144.

⁵² LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 16 October 1883. Hope was assistant to the Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Stopford Taylor, in Liverpool from 1883 until 1895 when he succeeded the post of Medical Officer of Health. Hope became renowned for his work on identifying infectious diseases and combating infant mortality. For an overview on his work in public health in Liverpool see Edward Hope, Health at the Gateway: Problems and International Obligations of a Seaport City (Cambridge, 1931).

to/

days but to little effect. Despite this, and the fact that ‘the patient has all along expressed the strongest wish to be taken to hospital’, Mary Carbett had remained at home.⁵³ In the light of Hope’s report on Netherfield Hospital, however, it is hardly surprising that families were afraid to send their sick there. The wards were in a dirty condition, bearing a ‘cheerless and poverty-stricken aspect’, nursing was ‘wholly inefficient’ and basic rules relating to hygiene and the isolation of infectious cases were in abeyance.⁵⁴

Furthermore, hospitals which were affiliated to the workhouse carried, however loosely, associations with pauperism.⁵⁵ In June 1884, Hope visited Thomas and Mary Farrington, aged twelve and fourteen respectively, who were both sick with smallpox. Their parents ‘strongly desired and urged’ the removal of the children to hospital. On application to the relieving officer, however, they were informed that ‘they would have to pay, also that they would have to go to the workhouse, also that they would be “pauperised”, and that they would be on the list of paupers for a year.’ Hope’s emphasis that the family were ‘clean and respectable’ reinforces the sense of shame inherent in equating admission to the hospital with the workhouse. That the parents had chosen to keep the children at home in light of the relieving officer’s statements further implies the fear of stigma and the degree of confusion associated with seeking medical assistance.⁵⁶

With reference to healthcare, Sheila Adams has illustrated how different systems of knowledge were (and are) accorded differential value.⁵⁷ Within a middle and upper-class worldview, professional and formal medical aid were defined as appropriate forms of care. Conversely, informal and/ or traditional systems of caring for the sick and the dying were not only devalued, they were less visible and difficult to measure. Moreover, access to formal structures of care often

⁵³ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 21 September 1883.

⁵⁴ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 12 January 1887.

⁵⁵ Johnson notes that until the 1920s, each patient entering a Poor Law infirmary had to obtain an order for admission from the relieving officer. Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, p. 73. See also Margaret Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929: The History of an English Institution* (London, 1981), pp. 156-90.

⁵⁶ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 24 June 1884.

⁵⁷ Sheila Adams, ‘A Gendered History of the Social Management of Death in Foleshill, Coventry, During the Interwar Years’ in Clark, *The Sociology of Death*, pp. 149-68.

compromised the self-respect and dignity of the poor, not least by permitting the intrusion into the home of a critical 'professional' who would subject applicants to scrutiny and supervision.⁵⁸ Yet in the context of a female centred culture of mutual assistance, the shared experience of economic hardship and the absence of public welfare provision fostered an organised and effective neighbourhood structure of care for the sick and the dying.⁵⁹

Seebom Rowntree noted that even among those with a weekly income under eighteen shillings (Rowntree's 'Class A'), neighbours were usually willing to assist with caring for the sick, either by assuming domestic chores, nursing, or treating the patient to a small delicacy.⁶⁰ Emily Evans, born in Manchester in 1900, recalled that her mother often helped to nurse sick friends and neighbours in lieu of them having to call the doctor.⁶¹ Bell also emphasised the willingness among the working classes to share the emotional and financial burdens of care:

In one case the husband, an ironworker, had been ill with rheumatic fever and pneumonia, the wife with consumption - both hopelessly ill; the husband died first, and the kindly neighbour... offered to take in the dying woman, who shrank from going to hospital. She took the invalid into her house and, when the mother died, adopted the child.⁶²

Readiness to help could, however, place neighbours at risk from illness. In August 1883, Edward Hope visited the 'clean and respectable' Jordan family in Mann Street. Following the death of a neighbour, Mrs. Blackburn, from a suspected liver complaint, William Jordan had allowed the relatives of the dead woman to move into his home pending the funeral. A few days after their arrival, however, the Blackburn children became ill with typhus, which soon spread to the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-6. See also Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I', *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (1983), pp. 4-27 and Elizabeth Roberts, 'The Working-Class Extended Family', *Oral History*, 12, 1 (1984), pp. 48-55.

⁶⁰ Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 73.

⁶¹ Manchester Oral History (MOH) Tape, Emily Evans, Tape 1127.

⁶² Bell, *At the Works*, p. 117.

Jordans.⁶³ Whether Jordan would have housed the Blackburns had he known they were carrying typhus (probably, in retrospect, from their mother) is doubtful. Nevertheless, that the arrangement appears to have been conducted between William Jordan and Joe Blackburn suggests that networks of aid were not the preserve of women.

Whilst most families relied on neighbours for assistance, clergymen might also obtain access to the sick. Lily Smith (born 1894) noted her mother's reluctance to summon professional medical help when her father lay dying from typhoid and pneumonia, yet the local parson called regularly to inquire after the sick man.⁶⁴ A series of articles in the Liverpool Daily Post in 1883 emphasised the ability of the priesthood to permeate the homes of the Roman Catholic poor where death and illness were rife.⁶⁵ Indeed, the priest was often trusted at the close of life, whether a family were particularly religious or not. Unable to offer any pain relief, a priest could represent an emotional and spiritual balm in the midst of 'rags and misery'.⁶⁶

Financial outlay on medical care for the sick was, by its very nature, a gamble most families could ill afford. As Mary Chamberlain asserts, the minimal fee for calling upon the 'Shilling Doctor' represented a substantial sacrifice for most: 'A shilling could go a long way then'.⁶⁷ Even after the 1911 Insurance Act, personal medical services remained limited. Thus, family and home-centred care for the sick was 'the usual and obvious resort' for the working classes.⁶⁸ Moreover, the rejection of formalised medical care was matched by a 'heyday' in quack medicine. Recalling his childhood in Edwardian Salford, Robert Roberts noted that not only did families stall summoning formal medical help, non-payment of doctors' bills was the most common reason Salford residents were sued in the

⁶³ All recovered apart from Joe Blackburn who also contracted typhus and died. LVRO HEA 2/1, 10 August 1883.

⁶⁴ MOH Transcript, Lily Smith, Tape 644.

⁶⁵ Liverpool Daily Post, 7 November 1883, p. 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* The article reported how one elderly woman, dying amid decrepitude and poverty, looked with 'terrible earnestness' at the priest who sat beside her bed as death approached.

⁶⁷ Chamberlain and Richardson, 'Life and Death', p. 31.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

county courts.⁶⁹ Clearly, a mindfulness of domestic economy and a distrust of medical proficiency needs to be weighed against the fear and desperation which impelled families to summon assistance for which they could not pay. Thus, economic hardship need not eclipse sensibility. Rather, a culture of self-sacrifice and solicitous nursing within the context of 'making ends meet' signified, for some at least, expressions of affection, a fear of death and a language of loss. It is worthwhile, therefore, to reassess working-class attitudes towards death and dying not in the light of professional assistance sought, but in the shifting of priorities.

Death and the Family

The manner in which individuals died no doubt influenced the grief of those close to them. This is an accepted component of modern bereavement theory and one reiterated by Jalland with reference to models of the good and bad death in Victorian middle and upper-class families.⁷⁰ Sudden deaths (especially among the young and healthy) are thought to provoke feelings of anger and guilt alongside intense expressions of disbelief and shock. In comparison, prolonged illness and the expectation of death give both the dying and the bereaved an opportunity to internalise the knowledge of death before it takes place, enabling the renegotiation of identities and the sorting of financial and domestic affairs.⁷¹ In view of the criticisms levelled at the poor with regard to the disparity in financial expenditure on healthcare and funerals, one might suppose that dominant models of good and bad death operated in reverse for the working classes. I would argue, however, that dichotomised models of death are of limited use: death and grief are rarely so straightforward. Rather, the dying process was typified by a medley of emotions and sensations, none of which were fixed or universal for those who were dying or for those they left behind.

⁶⁹ Roberts, *The Classic Slum*, p. 124.

⁷⁰ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 17-38, 59-76.

⁷¹ See for instance Sally Cline, *Lifting the Taboo*, Walter, *The Revival*, Ruth Picardie, *Before I Say Goodbye* (London, 1998), Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London, 1970), Mary Bradbury, 'Contemporary Representations of "Good" and "Bad" Deaths' in Donna Dickenson and Malcolm Johnson (eds.), *Death, Dying and Bereavement* (London, 1993), pp. 68-71. See also Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family*, pp. 183-219.

Clearly, sudden or unexpected death rendered medical aid marginal or superfluous. For instance, Elsie Oman's mother was 'ill, dead and buried within a fortnight' from typhoid fever.⁷² Likewise, Edna Thorpe found her mother 'dead in bed' from heart disease, the blunt phrase suggesting the shock of sudden and unexpected death.⁷³ The notion that sudden deaths circumscribed suffering may have soothed the bereaved but the circumstances of sudden deaths could be traumatic in themselves. Violent and accidental deaths were particularly shocking, not least because they usually disfigured the corpse.⁷⁴ Deaths from suicide were especially traumatic: not only did the bereaved experience shock and disbelief, they often felt culpable and/or a degree of social stigma.⁷⁵ Annie Swindells, born in 1880, developed 'sleeping sickness' and 'every other thing you could mention with nerves' in the aftermath of her father's suicide in 1905. Devastated by the death, Annie's recovery from the bereavement was a 'bitter and uphill fight'. That her father had always been prone to depression did nothing to lessen the impact of his death.⁷⁶ The inquest into the death of John Murphy in July 1891 revealed that his wife had discovered him hanging from the ceiling with a rope tied around the neck. His body had begun to putrefy and he was black around the mouth. Cutting him down, she laid John on the floor, hid the rope and concealed the bruises around his neck. She then called for assistance. Yet not only was the bruised neck discernible to the doctor certifying the death, John had left a number of farewell notes. Asked why she had attempted to obscure the cause of death, Mrs. Murphy stated that she had wanted to avoid the social disgrace of suicide.⁷⁷

Reports in the local press and coroner's inquests often implied that personal relationships were partially accountable for suicide attempts. Thus, the coroner overseeing the inquest into the suicide of James Edwards, aged forty-five, in Liverpool in 1906, explicitly charged the deceased's wife with culpability for the

⁷² MOH Transcript, Elsie Oman, Tape 602.

⁷³ MOH Transcript, Edna Thorpe, Tape 81.

⁷⁴ See p. 87-8 below.

⁷⁵ Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 1987) and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 69-76.

⁷⁶ MOH Transcript, Annie Swindells, Tape 934.

⁷⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 3 July 1891, p. 4.

death: a drunken woman who had raised her children in a slovenly fashion, Mary Edwards had, he suggested, probably driven her husband to despair.⁷⁸ The inquest into the suicide of fifteen-year-old Emmeline Connelly in September 1897 highlighted a fractious relationship between the girl and her parents. On discovering Emmeline in the street with twelve young men late one Saturday night, her father censured her - 'A nice gang you were with. You disgrace me in these respectable buildings' - and sent her to bed. Going to check on her later that night, Connelly found that Emmeline had disappeared from their rooms. Her broken body was later discovered in the yard below. She had thrown herself from the tenement balcony. At the coroner's inquest, both parents related how they had endeavoured to prohibit Emmeline from mixing in bad company. According to her father, the shame of being found in such company had impelled Emmeline to end her life. Implicit in the statements of both Connelly and his wife was a degree of culpability for the death: they had failed to prevent Emmeline cultivating undesirable friendships only to induce a fatal sense of shame. That the coroner used the case as a warning to other 'flighty young girls' can have done little to assuage their grief.⁷⁹ The inquest into the death of Thomas Wallace, a labourer from Liverpool (aged forty-two), also suggested the role of familial relationships in precipitating suicide. Wallace had reportedly been depressed for some time due to unemployment. The day preceding his death, Wallace's wife, the breadwinner of the household, had expressed the wish that he would find work, to which he replied 'God knows that it is not because I don't look for it'. At ten o'clock the next morning, Thomas was found hanging from the ceiling of the room where he had been sleeping by himself.⁸⁰ Whilst explicit charges of accountability for suicide were rarely expressed, the stories concerning events preceding death hint at the immense scope for personal recrimination which can only have exacerbated grief, shock and despair.

Many deaths, however, were slow and painful. Caring for the terminally ill usually entailed some disruption in domestic arrangements and effected a strain on

⁷⁸ Liverpool Daily Courier, 4 July 1906, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Liverpool Echo, 8 September 1897, p.3.

⁸⁰ Liverpool Echo, 27 December 1897, p. 4.

household budgets: the sick became redundant as wage earners, carers might be tied to the home whilst medicines and doctor's fees necessitated extraordinary expenditure. Medical principles of palliative care in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period emphasised the role of sanitation, rest, fresh air and nourishment as basic but effective means of soothing the dying.⁸¹ However, the domestic circumstances of most working-class families prohibited luxuries such as privacy, peace and protein-rich foodstuffs. In one sublet house visited by Edward Hope in 1883, neighbours and children were crowded around three tenants who lay ill with typhus.⁸² In June 1883 Hope discovered Mary Blake, aged fifty, sick with fever in a filthy room almost bare of furniture.⁸³ The following day, he visited a three-roomed home, described as 'very dirty', which housed eleven people, four of whom had typhus. The inhabitants survived on bread and tea, along with mussels and 'similar marine vermin', whilst sleeping on packs of straw.⁸⁴ At a sublet house in Brick Street in 1883, two residents had recently died from typhus. In July, a third tenant, Edward Earley, contracted the disease. Earley had been unemployed for four months and relied on his wife to support the family of two children, his mother and sister: they were all malnourished and very dirty.⁸⁵ An investigation into the McCann family in August 1885 revealed that the house was 'full of squalid people', comprising of drunks and women with bruised faces and black eyes, whilst two relatives lay bedridden with typhus.⁸⁶

Privation need not, however, preclude improvised systems of care. Many families were solicitous of the sick. Bell noted that even though illness wrought havoc on a household, it also brought out 'still more the unselfish devotion' of spouses and children.⁸⁷ Self-sacrifice was particularly notable with reference to contagious disease. In September 1883, Hope noted that a kindly neighbour had nursed Mary Carbett from the onset of her typhus until the patient's mother arrived from the country. Mary's mother, 'a sickly old woman of 73', was herself 'terribly afraid of

⁸¹ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 86-91.

⁸² LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 18 July 1883.

⁸³ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 21 June 1883.

⁸⁴ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 22 June 1883.

⁸⁵ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 17 July 1883.

⁸⁶ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 28 August 1885.

⁸⁷ Bell, *At the Works*, p.174.

the fever'. She had good reason to be, for she died three weeks after her daughter.⁸⁸ Selflessness also manifest itself in the reluctance to remove the sick to hospital, even if this necessitated personal hardship. In the autumn of 1883 Hope visited the home of a widow, Mrs. Birkett, who was nursing her son, aged fifteen. Despite having to pawn her clothes in order to buy food for the boy, Mrs. Birkett contested his admission to hospital for fear 'he might break his heart'.⁸⁹ Florence Smith recalled how families in Edwardian Durham 'sat up with them you know, when they were dying, they weren't taken off to hospital like they are now'.⁹⁰ Implicit in this reflection is the notion that those who died in hospital were denied the comfort of being with their relations or friends in a familiar and unregulated environment. Yet caring for the dying within the home also permitted continual surveillance of the sick. Florence Jones carefully charted her mother's slow death from consumption. As death drew near, each encounter with her mother was marked by an eager search for signs of life: 'I knew I must keep checking that she was still breathing. Every morning I expected to find that she'd died in the night'.⁹¹ The ability to witness life, and indeed death, possibly fostered a sense of control in an otherwise helpless situation. Conversely, the discipline and rigidity of hospital regulations denied unlimited access to the dying and probably inhibited relatives' displays of emotion.

Undoubtedly, caring for the terminally ill when few palliatives were available was difficult, even for those who could afford professional medical assistance. Recourse to alcohol as a means of dulling pain and numbing mental faculties may not have been perceived as acceptable to middle-class critics, but such measures were, perhaps, understandable.⁹² Less controversially, simple entertainment and companionship could occupy and/ or soothe the dying even if they did little to relieve pain or discomfort. Florence Jones' mother requested that her bed be brought downstairs so that she could 'see what was going on'.⁹³ Conversely,

⁸⁸ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 21 September 1883.

⁸⁹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 20 September 1883.

⁹⁰ MOH Transcript, Florence Smith, Tape 962.

⁹¹ Florence Jones, *Memoirs of a Liverpool Stripper* (Liverpool, 1996), p. 88.

⁹² See Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, p. 58.

⁹³ Jones, *Memoirs*, p. 88.

Kathleen Woodward told stories to the dying Jessica Mourn. Acutely aware of her inadequacies as a storyteller, Woodward prioritised an obedience to Jessica's 'least desire' in a bid to ease the path to death.⁹⁴ Prior to her own demise, the Dickensian named Jessica Mourn had been a frequent visitor to the homes of the sick, the dying and the bereaved. A firm believer in the palliative properties of religion, Mourn had placed great store by comforting the dying with thoughts of heaven and reassurances about the love of God.⁹⁵ This may not have echoed the spiritual beliefs of the sick, yet the Christian language of hope, forgiveness and peace could, nevertheless, be heard as words of comfort.

Murmuring soothing last words could adopt supreme importance, if not for the dying, at least for the bereaved. This perhaps finds its most poignant expression in the journeys undertaken during the Great War by families fortunate enough to make contact with fatally wounded soldiers.⁹⁶ For instance, one Rochdale woman recalled that her mother was 'anxious and petrified' at the thought of travelling to France, yet the need to speak final words to her dying son was such that she overcame her fear.⁹⁷ Slow deaths offered opportunities for both the dying and the bereaved to reconcile differences and confront fear. Gissing emphasised this idea in The Nether World when his heroine Jane clings to 'one thought of consolation' at the death of her grandfather: that she had restored his faith in her and that in death, his inanimate features 'were unreproachful'.⁹⁸ Conversely, the inability to find words of comfort or solace could exacerbate grief and despair. Lewis Jones explored this in Cwmardy with the portrayal of a miner crushed by a falling pit roof. He is nursed by a workmate who tries to offer comfort by reassuring him that he will be all right. His words ring false, however, and the other men present stand silent and helpless, 'their faces full of grief and sadness'.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Woodward, Jipping Street, pp. 144-6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.132.

⁹⁶ Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History (Cambridge, 1995), p. 32. As Winter notes, this was exceptional as the majority of families received partial information as to the location and condition of their relatives.

⁹⁷ Jeremy Seabrook (ed.), Working-Class Childhood (London, 1982), pp. 25-6.

⁹⁸ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 348.

⁹⁹ Lewis Jones, Cwmardy: The Story of a Welsh Mining Valley (London, [1937] 1991), p. 139.

Those who were terminally ill occupied an unusual status in being neither fully alive in a social sense nor completely dead.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, this problematic state of being illustrates the complex relationship between attitudes towards the terminally ill and towards death itself: tender care and a reluctance to accept personal loss often fused with an implicit desire for death to make haste. This may have been linked to material circumstances and the wish to relieve the living from the financial burden of supporting the economically unproductive.¹⁰¹ However, I would contend that the wish to hasten death was motivated by physical and emotional exhaustion and a desire to curtail the suffering of the sick. Pat O'Mara, writing of his early life as a 'Liverpool Slummy', recalled how his aunt Lizzie 'died gradually' of syphilis, turning from a beautiful woman into a 'horrible-looking, boneless hulk'.¹⁰² Woodward characterised the prolonged death of Jessica Mourn as 'Slow-moving days, heavy with sadness; we seemed to live in an unchanging twilight'.¹⁰³ Jessica would appear to lose strength only to rally round in a cycle of 'unending nights', forever in a state between sleep and wakefulness. Such accounts suggest an implicit desire for death to complete its task whilst highlighting the strain wrought on those who watched loved ones deteriorate and suffer.

The emotional conflicts engendered by witnessing slow and painful deaths could manifest themselves in notions of the loving family prolonging the dying process. Thus, Florence Jones and her siblings were faced with a dilemma by their mother's lapse into protracted unconsciousness. Florence's brother suggested that constant surveillance was actually stalling death: 'By going in [to see Mother] all the time, we're keeping her back, keeping her with us.'¹⁰⁴ The family subsequently resolved to maintain their vigil around the kitchen table, with two siblings taking turns to sit with their mother. The gesture was understood as a tacit agreement to

¹⁰⁰ For exploration of intermediate state between being socially active and death as 'social death' see Michael Mulkay, 'Social Death in Britain' in Clark, *The Sociology of Death*, pp. 31-49.

¹⁰¹ Andrew Scull makes a similar point with reference to families committing the economically unproductive insane to the asylum. Andrew Scull, *Museums of Madness: The Social Organisation of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1979), p. 18ff.

¹⁰² Pat O'Mara, *The Autobiography of a Liverpool [Irish] Slummy* (Liverpool, [1934] 1994), p. 18.

¹⁰³ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, *Memoirs*, pp. 88-9.

'let go' and permit their mother to die. The force of love in delaying death also permeates Kathleen Woodward's account of her father's illness and the efforts of her mother, a proud, obstinate and fearless woman, to nurse him:

I know that [father] is holding on tightly to her as though to save himself from slipping into the arms of Death; and it is very easy to understand that Death itself might be intimidated by mother, who looks unswervingly ahead, with a shut mouth and hard lines in her face; and divides her days between holding father back from the grave - and the wash tub - and the scrubbing brush and occasional excursions...¹⁰⁵

Conversely, attentive nursing which failed to avert or ease the path to death could easily invoke bitterness. In Cwmardy, Lewis Jones portrays a mother's sobbing despair and self-recrimination at the imminent death of her adult daughter: 'O God, what have I done that you should make my little gel suffer?'¹⁰⁶ When her daughter dies, the mother can only chide God: 'And now all her pain have been for nothing.'¹⁰⁷

Of course, some relatives and friends exercised better care and/ or concern than others. Whilst the differences in degrees of care are difficult to discern within and between families, it is significant that accounts of indifference to the dying tend to be tied to negative stereotypes of the poor. For instance, in 1883 the Liverpool Daily Post asserted that slumdweller in the docklands were averse to the formation of close friendships: a widow could sicken and die in complete solitude. If any neighbours learned of her illness, they would be too fearful for their own health to offer her any assistance.¹⁰⁸ More mercenary portrayals of indifference to death suggested that the prospect of a minor windfall, usually in the form of a burial club payment, would eclipse concern for the sick.¹⁰⁹ As Gissing illustrated, such negative portrayals of the working classes could be used as a literary device.

¹⁰⁵ Woodward, Jipping Street, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, Cwmardy, p. 56.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁰⁸ Liverpool Daily Post, 6 November 1883, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ See pp. 95-100 below. This theme is also explored in chapter seven below with reference to infant mortality.

Thus, Mrs. Peckover and her daughter Clem are thrown into ‘profound delight’ at the death of Mrs. Peckover’s mother-in-law:

partly because they were relieved at length from making a pretence of humanity to a bed-ridden old woman, partly owing to the fact that the deceased had left behind her a sum of seventy-five pounds, exclusive of moneys due from a burial club.¹¹⁰

Throughout the novel the Peckovers are portrayed as calculating, greedy and cruel characters who act as foils to the kind and benevolent personalities of Gissing’s hero and heroine. Hence, their lack of feeling in relation to the death of old Mrs. Peckover serves to illustrate their place in an immoral, shallow culture typical only of *some* of the working classes. The application of such images to the working class as a whole is, therefore, more indicative of a middle-class stereotype of inhumanity borne from poverty rather than an accurate estimate of attitudes towards the sick and the dying.

The difficulties of reading representations of working-class responses to illness and death is further illustrated in the observations of Edward Hope in his capacity as a medical officer and his definition of ‘neglect’. For instance, despite noting that the corpse of Richard Hines (aged thirteen) was ‘fairly nourished’, Hope concluded that he had ‘doubtless’ been neglected: ‘the house and inmates were filthy, the mother drunk...[and] the dispensary doctor had attended once only.’¹¹¹ Given that the boy had clearly been fed and was reported to have been ill for only three days, the definition of neglect in this case appears to rest on a moral evaluation of lifestyle rather than any discernible sign of mistreatment. Similarly, the Liverpool Daily Post’s articles on ‘Squalid Liverpool’ noted that in the Scotland Road area, fever and disease were rife and the people ‘more dangerous, more ignorant and more drunken than any to be found elsewhere.’¹¹² Implicit in this damning verdict was a belief that fever was fostered by a lifestyle (as opposed

¹¹⁰ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 5.

¹¹¹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 29 December 1885.

¹¹² Liverpool Daily Post, 8 November 1883, p. 5.

to environment) and that the sick were left by callous relations to die in a pit of their own making.

Clearly, some caution needs to be exercised in applying categories of neglect and indifference to those considered responsible for the sick. On a pragmatic level, caring for the sick could severely interfere with the household economy. For instance, in October 1886 Hope visited Ian Begley, aged eleven, who was sick with scarlatina. The house in which he lived was a 'washing and mangling place'. His mother had suspended work whilst the boy was sick but was anxious that he be removed to hospital so that she could resume her work.¹¹³ This was not callousness but the adoption of a strategy for survival: a suspension in earnings, however brief, would neither aid recovery from illness nor maintain the nourishment of the healthy.

In addition, the idea that the working classes were familiar with mortality should not eclipse the fact that disease and death could be frightening. One elderly woman recalled that as a child she had feared her pale, consumptive mother who lay on a horsehair sofa coughing and slowly dying: 'I used to avoid her'.¹¹⁴ Hope's report on J. R. Gibbon, a man of twenty-four, who had contracted smallpox in November 1885 highlights the discrepancy between notions of care and neglect. Hope observed that Gibbon's mother and sister were in attendance but that 'the condition of the patient frightens them and they neglect him'. Given the disfigurement occasioned by smallpox, this fear seems understandable. At the time of Hope's visit, both women had, for the previous twelve hours, believed that Gibbon was dying. There was no food in the house, Gibbon had received no nourishment and a number of his relatives were seated in the next room waiting for him to expire. With care, nourishment and the vaccination of the two women, however, Hope thought the prognosis for Gibbon's recovery was good.¹¹⁵ That Gibbon had been left to die appalled Hope. The withdrawal of nourishment might support the charge that Gibbon had been neglected. Yet superficial neglect

¹¹³ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 14 October 1886.

¹¹⁴ Seabrook, *Working-Class Childhood*, pp. 62-3.

¹¹⁵ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 18 November 1885.

concealed fear and a degree of trauma on behalf of the man's carers. The belief that death was inevitable suggests a pessimism about recovery from debilitating illness whilst Gibbon himself seems to have acquired the status of 'proto-corpse'. In this light, withholding food could be construed as a rational economic decision. In addition, the assembly of Gibbon's relatives in expectation of death suggests both a network of communication and an importance attached to familial support at times of bereavement. Thus, material circumstances and apparent fatalism need not negate or circumscribe a sense of loss. Rather, poverty forced families to deal with death and dying with pragmatism. Indeed, an analysis of attitudes towards the cadaver in the immediate aftermath of death suggests neither indifference to the dead nor superficial displays of grief but illustrates instead the significance of the corpse to customs which allowed the bereaved to express grief and accept the finality of death.

The Corpse

The idea that death has become taboo in the twentieth century derives partly from the growth of a culture of sanitised death which has diminished contact with the corpse. Indeed, Lindsey Prior has suggested that the corpse in late twentieth-century culture is most often treated as a thing and referred to in terms of 'it' rather than a personal name.¹¹⁶ For the late Victorian and Edwardian working classes, however, death and the cadaver were inseparable from domestic living space. Such proximity to the corpse horrified medical practitioners and public health reformers who perceived the putrefying body as a source of contagion. By the 1880s, most working-class families buried their dead within four days of expiration.¹¹⁷ Yet attempts to induce the poor to part with the corpse immediately after death were often resisted. Similarly, working-class families frequently objected to the post-mortem examination of their deceased. Such conflicts suggest a solicitude for the corpse and a desire to own the remains of the dead.

¹¹⁶ Prior, *The Social Organisation*, p. 158.

¹¹⁷ See for instance, *Lancet* October 12 1895, p. 931. The public health scandals of the mid-century concerning the retention of bodies in houses for a week or more had largely subsided with the boom in burial insurance and the increased powers of public health officials.

As Rowntree highlighted, a significant minority of the working classes lived in overcrowded conditions (defined as two or more persons sharing one room).¹¹⁸ That the majority of families in overcrowded dwellings would, at some point, also have a dead body on the premises suggests the sheer proximity between the living and the dead. The putrefaction of the body begins at the moment of death, soft organs such as the brain, stomach and intestines first succumbing to decay and maggots, a process which accelerates in warm temperatures. Indeed, 'if you get a piece of meat out of the fridge and leave it sitting it's going to smell. Bodies go off just like that!'.¹¹⁹ Embalming at this time was the preserve of a wealthy minority. Thus, the retention of the corpse in the working-class home gave rise to pungent odours and visible signs of decay. Warm weather and domestic fires hastened decomposition. In 1895 the Lancet estimated that during summer, a fresh corpse would cause discomfort for its co-habitants within twelve hours of death.¹²⁰ A decade earlier, the Lancet had lamented that even in mortuaries, cadavers were liable to speedy decay in summer heat, emitting putrid smells to nearby houses and buildings.¹²¹ The stench of rotting flesh and the sight of flies and bluebottles feasting on the dead were repugnant. Yet as Elise Oman noted, for those who could not afford the luxury of a separate room in which to house the corpse, proximity to the stench and sight of decay accentuated the discomfort of the bereaved.¹²²

Jack London argued that the sanitary implications of keeping corpses in the home were grim:

¹¹⁸ In 1891, 19 percent of the London population lived in such conditions, whilst Liverpool and Manchester had percentages of ten and eight respectively. Rowntree, Poverty, p. 207.

¹¹⁹ Embalmer Mandy Walker interviewed by Sally Cline on subject of women who work in late twentieth-century funeral establishments. Cline, Lifting the Taboo, p. 133.

¹²⁰ Lancet, 12 October 1895, p. 931.

¹²¹ Lancet, 31 January 1885, pp. 226-7.

¹²² See Elsie Oman, Salford Stepping Stones (Manchester, c.1980), p. 9.

During the day [the corpse] lies on the bed; during the night, when the living take the bed, the dead occupies the table, from which, in the morning, when the dead is put back into bed, they eat their breakfast.¹²³

In a one-roomed home in outcast London, Andrew Mearns came upon a widow and three children living with the decaying remains of a child who had died thirteen days previously.¹²⁴ The records of Edward Hope also provide snapshots of the conditions in which some bereaved families housed their dead. In February 1884, Mary Harley, aged seven, lay ill in bed with scarlatina alongside the dead body of her five-year-old sibling.¹²⁵ On 9 April 1885, Hope visited a court dwelling where two girls, aged sixteen and twelve, were sick with typhus. For two days they had been living with the corpse of their mother who had died from the disease.¹²⁶ At a house in Lauds Place, three children, two of whom were ill with a malignant form of measles, lay in a room with their dead brother.¹²⁷ At an eating house on Sefton Street, Liverpool, seven children lived alongside a child in an advanced state of debility and the cadavers of two other children who had died from scarlet fever. A 'dirty old woman', employed as a nurse, regularly moved between the rooms housing the sick and the dead and the busy shop.¹²⁸

The consequences of such arrangements for health and hygiene were dire. As Mearns noted, the air shared by the sick, the healthy and the dead was inevitably 'poisoned'. That post-mortems sometimes had to be carried out in the homes of the poor because the parish failed to provide adequate mortuary provision exacerbated the threats from foul atmosphere and contagion.¹²⁹ At a more abstract level, the retention of a body in a house could simply be depressing. Kathleen Woodward suggested the gloom of death in the bedroom where the remains of her friend's baby lay:

¹²³ London, *The People*, pp. 304-5.

¹²⁴ Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (Leicester, [1883] 1970), p. 7.

¹²⁵ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 1 February 1884.

¹²⁶ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 9 April 1885.

¹²⁷ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 10 May 1887.

¹²⁸ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 4 January 1887.

¹²⁹ Mearns, *The Bitter Cry*, p. 15.

It was hot, swooning hot in the bedroom, as if every breath of air was oppressed by the coming of death, and suddenly a great change seemed to come over all the room... The room took on a sordidness that sent a shiver through my soul.¹³⁰

In 1890, the Lancet observed that the removal of corpses to undertakers' premises was a convenient 'privilege' rarely exercised.¹³¹ Indeed, this convenience only became popular in the 1930s with the widespread introduction of 'chapels of rest'.¹³² Contributors to the Lancet frequently bemoaned the lack of adequate public mortuary facilities in towns and cities, particularly problematic for inhabitants of tenement buildings and common-lodging houses. One elderly woman who died in a lodging house on London's Chancery Lane lay dead amidst other lodgers for five days.¹³³ A correspondent to The Times went so far as to advocate direct intervention in the burial customs of the working classes in a bid to prevent this practice. It was, the author argued, in the interests of self-preservation to stamp out insanitary customs. Moreover, the removal of the corpse would alleviate a 'grievous and unnecessary addition' to the 'burden of sorrow and want' experienced by the poor.¹³⁴ Explicit in this correspondence was the perception of the cadaver as a source of contagion. Yet it seems unlikely that bereaved families looked upon the remains of their dead as an impersonal source of disease. Furthermore, the idea that proximity to the corpse was a burden sits uneasily alongside the significance attached to laying-out the dead and a general reluctance among the working classes to surrender the remains of the dead to external authorities.

Richardson has suggested that during the early nineteenth century, working-class concepts of death and resurrection tended to equate the corpse with the personality of the dead. Yet definitions of death and the soul were ambiguous,

¹³⁰ Woodward, Jipping Street, pp. 78-9.

¹³¹ Lancet, 31 May 1890, p. 1191.

¹³² Adams, 'A Gendered History', p. 164.

¹³³ Lancet, 15 July 1882, p. 73.

¹³⁴ The Times, 7 July 1881, p. 12.

leaving scope for vague and fluid interpretations of the afterlife. Richardson also points to popular notions, such as sin-eating (whereby the bereaved ate cakes symbolising the wrongdoing of the dead, thus transferring guilt for sin), which cultivated ideas concerning responsibility for the soul in the immediate aftermath of death. Hence, she argues, the object of most customs associated with the corpse was to protect the body and soul of the dead from evil and/ or danger.¹³⁵ As outlined above in chapter one, however, it is difficult to measure religious belief and the tenacity of notions relating to the afterlife. Moreover, I would suggest that the association of the corpse with the personality of the deceased need not be rooted in spiritual beliefs: concepts relating to the possession and treatment of the cadaver were inseparable from notions of memory and, significantly, issues of decency, dignity and respect.

Some medical practitioners and sanitary reformers acknowledged that the working classes attached sentimental significance to the corpse, yet tended to devalue such feelings as testimony to the ignorance of the poor.¹³⁶ In January 1906, the Lancet published the results of a survey into permission for post-mortem examination, concluding that appreciation of the value of the post-mortem was restricted to an educated minority. From 250 requests for post-mortem in a lunatic asylum, seventy-six families had consented, twenty-eight families had refused, whilst 146 families gave either no or an indefinite reply. The commentary accompanying the results suggested that those who allowed the pathological examination of their kin were prompted to do so by the belief that scientific research would benefit others. Omitting to identify the criteria on which estimates of intelligence were measured, the article concluded that those who consented to post-mortem were more intelligent and better educated individuals. Speculating on reasons for refusal, the article conjectured that a minority of families thought some mischief was afoot but that the majority of refusals were made for sentimental reasons. The article failed to elaborate on the character of this sentimentality but the juxtaposition of those who refused permission for post-

¹³⁵ Richardson, Death, Dissection, pp. 7-17.

¹³⁶ See for instance Lancet, 24 November 1877, p. 784.

mortem with those who acquiesced implied that emotional attachment to the corpse was, self-evidently, unintelligent.¹³⁷

It is difficult to gauge the character of abstract notions such as sentimentality. An article in the Lancet in 1896 suggested that many of the working classes perceived the post-mortem as an ‘assault on the body’.¹³⁸ This may have been linked to spiritual associations between the physical integrity of the corpse and resurrection, yet it is also possible that the conduct of some high-handed professionals in dealing with the bereaved created ill-feeling towards institutional medicine and raised serious questions over the degree to which the dead would be treated with respect. For instance, a row erupted amongst poor law guardians in Chorlton, Manchester, in 1909 concerning the intimidation of a widow by the workhouse doctor into ‘consenting’ to a post-mortem on the body of her husband. At the inquest into the death, the coroner censured the doctor’s ‘indiscreet’ and ‘improper’ behaviour.¹³⁹ A meeting of the West Derby Board of Guardians, near Liverpool, in 1909 also highlighted the execution of a post-mortem on the body of a girl at Mill Road Infirmary against the wishes of her family.¹⁴⁰ On collecting the girl’s death certificate, her father had been asked to sign a card consenting to an examination being made of the body. The man signed the card without ‘having the slightest idea what it meant’. As one guardian, Mr. Cleaver, pointed out, the word ‘examination’ was misleading and, clearly, very different in meaning to the phrase ‘post-mortem’. Moreover, this case was not the first to come to the attention of the Board and the Infirmary were instructed to alter the wording of consent forms.¹⁴¹

Where the integrity of the cadaver did feature as an issue for families objecting to post-mortem, it was inextricable from concerns with respect for the corpse. In July 1880, a Gloucestershire labourer named Cuff sued the house-surgeon at the county infirmary for a sum of two pounds on account of a post-mortem

¹³⁷ Lancet, 13 January 1906, p. 109.

¹³⁸ Lancet, 30 May 1896, p. 1539.

¹³⁹ Lancet, 19 June 1909 p. 1786 and Lancet, 24 July 1909, p. 260.

¹⁴⁰ Ormskirk Advertiser, 7 January 1909 in LVRO 353 WES 10/1.

¹⁴¹ Also reported in Liverpool Daily Courier, 21 January 1909 in LVRO 353 WES 10/1.

examination being made of his wife's body without his consent. He acknowledged that he had not suffered any pecuniary loss from the examination but claimed that portions of the body had been removed and that the affair had injured his feelings.¹⁴² The Lancet concluded that the case highlighted the 'dense ignorance' of some of the working classes and called for public ministers, magistrates and municipal officials to illustrate the important distinction between post-mortem examination conducted for medical research and that for pathological purposes.¹⁴³ Over three decades later, a similar case came before Scottish magistrates when a Mrs Hughes brought an action for damages against a surgeon who conducted a post-mortem examination on the remains of her husband, a miner, without her consent. She further alleged that pieces of the corpse had not been replaced for burial. Although the magistrate supported the doctor, he acknowledged that unauthorised post-mortems caused distress to relatives who were within their rights to seek redress for injury to their feelings.¹⁴⁴

According to middle-class observers, there was some discrepancy between post-mortems made in the interests of scientific research and those for pathological diagnosis of the cause of death. This seems a false evaluation with reference to working-class concern. Post-mortems conducted in order to determine the cause of death were a legal requirement if the cause was obscure. In such circumstances, families had little option but to yield possession of the corpse to the relevant authorities. Indeed, the enforced removal of the cadaver no doubt exacerbated antipathy to the mortuary and post-mortem. It seems plausible to suggest that objection to interference with the cadaver stemmed not just from concerns for the soul but from a desire to care for the dead and ensure the fulfilment of customary obligations to the corpse. Post-mortem removed the deceased to the impersonal hospital or mortuary and either curtailed or obliterated rituals of laying-out.

Of paramount importance, therefore, was the accordance of dignity and respect to the corpse and the use of laying-out customs as a site for the symbolic expression

¹⁴² The Times, 21 July 1880, p. 7. The judge ruled in favour of the house-surgeon.

¹⁴³ Lancet, 24 July 1880, p. 143.

¹⁴⁴ Lancet, 10 January 1914, pp. 131-2.

of loss and condolence. As an inquest in Liverpool in 1891 highlighted, the removal of the body for post-mortem not only denied the bereaved the opportunity to fulfil their obligations to the deceased, it could be perceived as a deliberate assault on working-class customs of death and disposal. In April, Caroline Benham had been knocked over and killed by a van whilst crossing a road. At the coroner's inquest into the accident, the local priest, Reverend Davis, spoke on behalf of the Benham family. According to Davis, the bereaved had approached him in 'great distress' following the order for removal of Caroline's corpse from the family home and her subsequent post-mortem 'greatly against the wish of her relations and friends'.¹⁴⁵ Davis concurred with the Benhams in believing the coroner's orders to be a discrimination against poor families. Taking great exception to Davis's interference, the coroner asserted that no distinctions were made between rich and poor in matters of public health and that post-mortems were a legal requirement in cases of death resulting from road accidents. Admittedly, Davis was unaware of the legality of the coroner's actions. Yet the case illustrates the significance attached to ownership of the corpse, whilst the idea that officials discriminated against the remains of the poor highlights a general distrust of institutions associated with handling the dead.

That medical and public health authorities deliberately began to cast their campaigns for acceptance of post-mortem and mortuary facilities in a language of respect for the dead further indicates an awareness of associations between irreverence and the dispossession of the corpse. A feature in the Lancet in 1876 urged public health officials to replace colloquial references to the mortuary as the 'deadhouse' with something which conferred more familiar, personalised and reverent associations.¹⁴⁶ Promoting the use and provision of mortuaries in 1896, the Lancet noted that post-mortems which were held in public houses or in the homes of the dead implied a 'total absence of reverence to the dead' and hurt the feelings of the bereaved, especially when burial had to be indefinitely postponed.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, it is worth noting that guidelines issued to hospital staff in

¹⁴⁵ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 4 April 1891, p. 1.

¹⁴⁶ Lancet, 15 January 1876, p. 116.

¹⁴⁷ Lancet, 4 July 1896, pp. 38-9.

the 1880s on how to broach the issue of post-mortem emphasised the importance of permitting the bereaved to view the corpse prior to the examination, of treating the dead and their friends with respect, and of returning the corpse to mourners in a decent condition.¹⁴⁸ Public feeling with reference to post-mortem remained fraught almost twenty years later. In 1909 the *Lancet* was still urging practitioners to treat the bereaved with ‘tact and good feeling’.¹⁴⁹

In one sense, the poorer members of the working classes were discriminated against with reference to the removal of the body for it was the retention of the corpse in overcrowded and depressed conditions which posed the most serious threats to public health. In this light, public health propaganda which utilised a language of respect for the dead, a feeling ‘shared by all, from the highest to the lowest’, tapped into working-class attitudes towards the corpse but ultimately rang hollow.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, sanitary reformers may have ostensibly recognised that the rituals associated with death and burial were significant to a culture of bereavement but they rarely explored the meanings invested in this culture. In particular, the laying-out of the dead was castigated as repugnant and, for many reformers, incomprehensible. An analysis of the treatment of the corpse in the immediate aftermath of death suggests, however, that the laying-out of the dead was imbued with emotional significance for the bereaved and those who sympathised with their loss.

Laying-out the Dead

On a practical level, the laying-out of the dead minimised the unpleasant effects of putrefaction. The relaxation of the bladder and rectal muscle at the moment of death encouraged families to wash the corpse whilst plugging the orifices (especially with herbs) helped mask the stench of decay. Pennies were placed on the eyelids, limbs were straightened and held in place with string, whilst a bandage tied underneath the jaw held the mouth closed. Men were usually shaved, hair was

¹⁴⁸ *Lancet*, 25 March 1882, p. 493.

¹⁴⁹ *Lancet*, 18 August 1906, p. 464.

¹⁵⁰ *Lancet*, 27 October 1888, pp. 829-30.

brushed and combed, and fingernails cleaned before the corpse was dressed for burial, usually in a night-gown or a simple shroud.¹⁵¹ As Richardson states, laying-out was not essential for the disposal of the corpse but was 'crucially important for the correct observance of other funeral customs', such as viewing the body and preventing seepage in the coffin, especially en route to the cemetery. Such tasks were usually performed with compassion, and perceived as displays of love and respect for the dead.¹⁵²

Despite the advantages of laying-out, the custom was widely condemned, especially as it kept the living in close proximity to the dead. Much criticism hinged on the popular image of the layer-out as a local 'handywoman' who attended births and deaths and was typified by Dickens' character, Sarah Gamp.¹⁵³ A filthy, drunken old woman, Mrs. Gamp moved in a twilight world of botched births and disease-ridden deathbeds, treating hygiene with disdain and spreading infection all the while. That childbirth and laying-out the dead were frequently performed by the same individuals indicates the overwhelmingly tendency for women to perform tasks at crucial points in the life-cycle.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the inclusion of a clause in the Midwives Act (1902) prohibiting midwives from laying-out the dead points to an awareness and concern about the dual role carried out by untrained handywomen.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, it has been suggested that sanitary objections to the laying-out of the dead by women within the home originated from a male medical imperative to professionalise the care of the body, both in life and death.¹⁵⁶ Yet an analysis of the relationship between the layer-out, the dead, and the bereaved also illustrates the importance of *neighbourhood*

¹⁵¹ See Adams, 'A Gendered History', pp. 159-60 and Chamberlain and Richardson, 'Life and Death', pp. 37-8. For account of modern embalming techniques see Mitford, The American Way, pp. 43-9.

¹⁵² Chamberlain and Richardson, 'Life and Death', p. 38.

¹⁵³ Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit, pp. 299ff. See also Morley, Death, Heaven, pp. 24-5.

¹⁵⁴ Chamberlain and Richardson, 'Life and Death', Elizabeth Roberts, A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940 (Oxford, 1984), and Ross, Love and Toil, pp. 240-1.

¹⁵⁵ See Adams, 'A Gendered History', p. 152. As Adams notes, the rules in the Midwives Act were altered in 1907 to permit 'under specified circumstances' with the permission of the Supervising Authority to lay out the dead.

¹⁵⁶ See Adams, 'A Gendered History', Chamberlain and Richardson, 'Life and Death', and Cline, Lifting the Taboo, p. 44.

networks of mutual aid which were usually organised and utilised by women whilst enabling a reading of laying-out as a symbolic gesture of loss and condolence.

Frederick Lowndes, an active public-health reformer in late-Victorian Liverpool, suggested that the status of laying-out was dependent on the individual who discharged the task. When executed by the immediately bereaved, laying-out could, he argued, be perceived as a gesture of affection and a desire to pay one's last respects to the dead. Performed by someone extra to the family circle, however, the practice was condemned as 'repulsive'.¹⁵⁷ This is an interesting distinction. It highlights an appreciation of laying-out as an act of grief and remembrance which was significant to the bereaved as opposed to a task performed by the much maligned local 'handywoman' for payment. Yet whilst Lowndes offered a more nuanced reading of laying-out than many of his contemporaries, I would suggest that he over-simplified the meanings attached to the paid layer-out.

The identity and role of the layer-out varied greatly. In *Jipping Street*, 'everyone' sent for Jessica Mourn for whom such 'melancholy tasks were her daily portion'.¹⁵⁸ William Blackburn, whose parents both died in Bolton in 1911, recalled the local layer-out as 'generally someone in the neighbourhood' who attended the dead 'for a shilling or two'.¹⁵⁹ One woman from Farnworth, near Bolton, born in 1905, asserted that her grandmother used to lay people out and was paid 'about a shilling' for her services.¹⁶⁰ On a more formal footing, Sam Hills, born 1907, claimed that the local undertaker used to commission a woman from the neighbourhood to lay-out the dead for a small fee.¹⁶¹ Sheila Adams has suggested that the variation in accounts of the layer-out may be explained by the encroachment of a professional medical structure on her services. Yet the flexibility of her role also facilitated diverse relations with clients. The localised

¹⁵⁷ *Lancet*, 6 November 1886, p. 878.

¹⁵⁸ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp. 43-4.

¹⁵⁹ MOH Transcript, William Blackburn, Tape 588.

¹⁶⁰ BOHT, Tape 60b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/003.

¹⁶¹ Stalybridge Oral History Transcript, Samuel Hills, Uncatalogued.

layer-out rarely acquired formal training but was renowned within the neighbourhood for her cleanliness, efficiency and experience. Her role was not routinised and, within the culture of the street, she probably shared the same socio-economic conditions and networks as the bereaved. Hence, her relations with the bereaved were characterised by familiarity and she either refused a fee or accepted payment in kind. Conversely, tasks undertaken on behalf of undertakers or for families unknown to her adopted the form of a business transaction with the layer-out acting in the capacity of a skilled worker and expecting payment for her services.¹⁶²

Adams overlooks, however, the more intimate relationship between the bereaved and layer-out where treatment of the corpse was offered as a gesture of condolence. Mary Lester, born in 1910, recalled that her mother frequently attended to the toilet of the dead for her neighbours. Her underlying role, however, was to 'look after that woman' (the principal bereaved female).¹⁶³ Mrs Seal, born in 1912, noted that her mother and neighbours all helped each other with tasks and crises associated with the life cycle.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, a textile worker, born in 1898, noted that the women in her mother's locality 'helped one another' with the practicalities of birth and death.¹⁶⁵ Another woman, born in Burnley in 1908, recalled her mother helping to lay the dead out, 'although there were other people like me mother, they'd help one another'. Her mother always kept a 'laying-out bag' (a pillow slip) ready: it contained a white night-dress, white socks and 'everything for laying somebody out'.¹⁶⁶ Thus, assistance with laying-out the corpse was frequently inextricable from a wider culture of mutual aid where practical support not only alleviated practical tasks but could also be construed as providing emotional succour. It might also be perceived as paying one's respects to the dead. One Bolton man, born in 1903, recalled that female neighbours used to visit the home of the dead in order to admire and wash the corpse.¹⁶⁷ In this

¹⁶² Adams, 'A Gendered History', pp. 156-7.

¹⁶³ MOH Transcript, Mary Lester, Tape 272.

¹⁶⁴ MOH Transcript, Mrs. Seal, Tape 50b.

¹⁶⁵ BOHT, Tape 23c, Reference: AL/MS/A/016.

¹⁶⁶ BOHT, Tape 34a, Reference: JP/SS/1B/008. One assumes that her mother would have retrieved the garments once the body was dressed in a shroud and placed in a coffin.

¹⁶⁷ BOHT, Tape 71b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/006.

sense, laying-out adopted a much looser definition, signifying a communal act of remembrance as well as a pragmatic function.

The meanings attached to laying-out the dead were, therefore, inseparable from a female-centred language of grief and condolence. Lewis Jones implied the multifaceted role of the layer-out in his fictional account of Jane's death in Cwmardy. Mrs. Thomas, a neighbour present throughout Jane's death-throes, immediately assumes control of washing and dressing the corpse. Indeed, between Jane's death and her funeral, Mrs. Thomas 'seemed to be in complete charge of the household'.¹⁶⁸ Her offer to 'put things in order' for Jane's mother, Shane, implies a desire to alleviate Shane's grief by removing the burden of practical tasks.¹⁶⁹ The recollections of Mrs. McIver, born in turn-of-the-century Wigan, reiterate this point. Neighbours invariably relied on her mother at times of confinement or death: 'They always knew they had nothing to worry about if my mother was there.'¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Mr. Brown, from Ancoats in Manchester, noted that everyone in his street depended on one woman, Mrs. Chadwick, 'for all trouble and strife'.¹⁷¹ An elderly woman, she attended pregnancies and births and would 'do for' bereavements, her tasks ranging from laying-out the dead to catering for funeral teas. Although Brown assumed she never accepted payment for her services, he thought that families might 'treat her', perhaps to the pick of the ham or the pickle.¹⁷² Mrs. Chadwick's services catered for a community rather than a personal friend, yet her role appears analogous to that of Mrs. Thomas in that she took control of the practicalities of death. On one level, this may have enabled the bereaved to maintain work patterns or prioritise other concerns, yet it could also be interpreted as a desire to ease the emotional burden of grief.

For those who washed their dead themselves, however, the task reinforced the finality of death and facilitated the negotiation of new identities. In D. H. Lawrence's 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', Lizzie Bates and her mother-in-law

¹⁶⁸ Jones, Cwmardy, p. 59.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁷⁰ Seabrook, Working-Class Childhood, p. 69.

¹⁷¹ MOH Transcript, Mr. Brown, Tape 133.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

wash the body of Walt Bates.¹⁷³ Although the ritual symbolises a struggle between the two women (the mother is jealous of her daughter-in-law), Lawrence imagines that the touch of the dead man also stirs strange, powerful emotions in each woman. Walt's mother weeps and cries in the 'sibilant ecstasy of fear and mother love' as she recalls fond memories of Walt's childhood. His wife feels only the 'utter isolation of the human soul'.¹⁷⁴ She is struck by the inviolability of the dead, along with the realisation that her husband is a stranger in death, as he had been in life. For Lizzie, the heavy and inert corpse of her husband brings a degree of horror and knowledge, for which she is ultimately grateful: it affirms her own sense of life although she remains fearful of death itself.¹⁷⁵

Thus, the laying-out of the dead not only confronted the bereaved with the reality of death and decay, it encouraged them to re-assess their relationships with the deceased. When Alice Foley's destructive and selfish father died, his family expressed relief rather than any sense of 'intimate loss' or 'personal grief'. Examining the coffined face of her father, however, Alice perceived a 'strange dignity' in his 'marble countenance' that moved her. Although she refrains from elaborating on this feeling, Alice conveys a sense of grief prompted by the act of kissing and reflecting on the form of her father's cadaver.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, laying-out the corpse helped minimise the ravishes of death, a fact reflected in frequent references to the peaceful appearance of remains and comparisons with sleep. Florence Jones' initial impression on seeing her mother's remains was one of shock. With a bandage around her jaw and a penny on each eyelid, Florence's mother was barely recognisable. When the paraphernalia of death had been removed, however, the corpse looked peaceful.¹⁷⁷ The appearance of peace, usually effected by the relaxation of the facial muscles at death, was of particular comfort in cases of violent death, or death after a lingering and painful illness. Tressell emphasised this point in his portrayal of Philpot's death from falling off a

¹⁷³ D. H. Lawrence, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums' in John Worthen (ed.), The Prussian Officer, and Other Stories by D. H. Lawrence, (Cambridge, [1911]1983), pp. 268-85.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 284-5.

¹⁷⁶ Foley, A Bolton Childhood, p. 67.

¹⁷⁷ Jones, Memoirs, p. 89.

ladder in The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists. The damage effected from the fall is 'softened down by the pallor of death' whilst a 'placid, peaceful expression pervaded his features'. Furthermore, the costumery of death and the coffin lent him the aspect of one in a 'profound and tranquil sleep'.¹⁷⁸ That the shroud often resembled a night-dress no doubt reinforced the association of death with sleep.

It is doubtful whether the bereaved used notions of sleep and peace to literally deny death: even laid-out corpses smelt of decay and attained a waxy pallor. Yet by rendering the corpse as life-like as possible, the bereaved were able to associate the corpse with memory and the known personality of the deceased. Lewis Jones' vision of death in Cwmardy implies that images of sleep and familiarity were a balm to the bereaved. When Len looks on his sister Jane's laid-out corpse, he notes her smooth face which seems to smile benignly. Although frightened by the stillness and silence of the body, Len readily recognises Jane and recalls fond memories.¹⁷⁹ His next sighting of the corpse five days later is, however, bereft of images of comfort and peace: the corpse has shrivelled into an uncompromising vision of decay which fills the child with horror:

Jane's beautiful face was gone. In its place was a dirty yellow mask with snarling lips that curled back from shiny white teeth. A blackened penny grinned at him mockingly from each of her eyes... Dark blobs filled the places where her cheeks had been.¹⁸⁰

The acrid smell and the 'awful face' haunt Len in his sleep as he wrestles to regain the image of his sister in the prime of youthful beauty.¹⁸¹

In one sense, therefore, laying-out the dead could be perceived as a form of preserving the visual memory of the dead but also of sanitising death. By minimising the external signs of decay, the bereaved could assimilate the loss of a loved one whilst overlooking the inevitability of complete putrefaction. Yet the

¹⁷⁸ Tressell, The Ragged, p. 520.

¹⁷⁹ Jones, Cwmardy, p. 61.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

clean, peaceful corpse also confirmed that obligations to the dead had been fulfilled and due respect shown to the corpse. The few families who refrained from laying-out their dead tended to reject participation in the social rituals of death, especially displaying the corpse to neighbours and friends. On visiting a destitute family in their cellar dwelling in August 1883, Hope came upon the 'decomposing and fly-blown' corpse of a child. The flea-bitten body was covered with newspaper, the family having no money to purchase a shirt, and was still smeared with faecal dirt.¹⁸² The tone of Hope's report not only suggests the family's utter indigence but an atmosphere of sordidness, depression and apathy also. Their circumstances are a reminder of the awfulness of physical decay: indeed, Hope was sickened by the scene. Yet they also suggest that for a minority, the rituals of death were deemed irrelevant and insignificant. As Vincent might argue, death was just another facet of a miserable existence.¹⁸³ However, this family is conspicuous by its peculiarity. For the majority of families, death and dying evoked displays of love and expressions of grief which may have existed within the context of poverty but which were not eclipsed by it.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted that privation often forced the bereaved and those responsible for the care of the dying to approach death and bereavement with pragmatism. The recognition that material circumstances impacted upon responses to death is, however, far removed from the assumption that poverty blunted sensibility. The language of fatalism and reconciliation which many middle-class observers assumed was typical of working-class responses to bereavement represents only one facet of a multidimensional culture. Death and illness provoked a kaleidoscope of feeling: despair, relief, sorrow, pecuniary anxiety, horror, hope, incomprehension and love. In addition, the dying process could be characterised by harrowing fear, agonising pain, reconciliation, humiliation and bitterness.

¹⁸² LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 29 August 1883. Hope removed the body to a mortuary and the family were taken to the workhouse.

¹⁸³ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 39-61.

The visibility of fatalism, endurance and familiarity was, perhaps, inevitable. It seems unlikely that the riot of emotion invoked by death and grief would find coherent expression in communication with external officials. Many of those who surveyed the working classes approached their subject from the preconceived notion that poverty and high mortality rates dulled humanity and that the expression of loss was rooted in the purchase of a respectable funeral. The notion that grief found expression through material culture is, however, largely redundant with reference to the care of the sick and the treatment of the corpse. Rituals such as laying-out were typified by a lack of expenditure. Rather, they were simple, unextravagant expressions of loss and condolence. Moreover, the significance attached to the care of the corpse suggests that concepts of dignity and ownership took precedence over concerns with 'respectability' in a material sense. Indeed, I would argue that it was 'respect' rather than respectability that defined attitudes towards the corpse.

Chapter Three

The Funeral: Respectability, Expense and Decency

As an organised and identifiable set of customs centred around the disposal of the corpse, the funeral has featured prominently in analyses concerning attitudes towards death. The Victorian funeral has attracted particular interest by its sheer scale and opulence. Indeed, the meanings invested in the Victorian funeral have been explored almost entirely in terms of extravagance. With mutes, plumes, Belgian horses, carriages, yards of black crape and coffins ‘ablaze with flowers’, the Victorian funeral procession was ‘an extraordinary sight’ to behold.¹ According to Curl, such displays were typical: the ‘panoply which once had been the privilege of the aristocracy alone’ had filtered down into the burial customs of the middle and working classes.² The expenditure necessitated by such displays has been equated with respect and affection for the deceased: ‘a cheap funeral with no flowers and a plain box for a coffin would have made it clear to the world that the corpse went unloved and unhonoured to the grave.’³ For the working classes, however, pursuit of such customs often left them in financial ruin. As one Bolton woman recalled: ‘you did the best you possibly could, even to the extent of leaving yourself slightly broke, it was supposed to be respect for the dead, but I think a little bit was to save the neighbours from talking after as well’.⁴

Herein lies what contemporaries and historians alike have perceived as the crux of the working-class culture of death: the blurred distinction between respect for the dead and respectability. At its most sympathetic, this interpretation has rooted the working-class culture of extravagance in antipathy to the pauper grave and the desire to distance oneself from the stigma of the workhouse.⁵ However, the ‘respectable

¹ Curl, *The Victorian Celebration*, p. 2.

² *Ibid.* p. 21.

³ *Ibid.* p. 20.

⁴ BOHT, Tape 115, Reference: AL/CG/116.

⁵ See pp. 13-17 above.

burial' has also been used as a tool in portraying the working classes as riven with snobbery. As Morley notes, Dickens encapsulated both the 'sordid and the ludicrous' aspects of this culture where funeral arrangements were closely observed by the 'jealous eyes of neighbours', keen to judge the bereaved's position within a localised social hierarchy.⁶ Arthur Morrison's story, 'All That Messuage', portrayed the expensive funeral as the goal of the socially ambitious.⁷ In celebration of their promotion within a local hierarchy, a new landlord and his wife pledge to inter each other in expensive, polished oak coffins replete with brass fittings. As the pair descend into poverty, saddled with a house where the tenants refuse to pay the rent, the ultimate symbol of their degradation is that, as workhouse inmates, each will be buried in a 'common caufin' of plain deal.⁸ Caricatures by Morrison and Dickens illustrate the tendency for contemporary critics to portray the 'respectable' funeral in a one-dimensional framework. However, such images are echoed in historical accounts of the working-class culture of death which hinge on a preoccupation with respectability.

This chapter challenges the assumptions inherent in the literature concerning the working-class culture of death and disposal. Not only have accounts of extravagance been mythologised, the idea of defining working-class customs of death and burial in terms of social status alone is crude and reductive. Firstly, it negates the possibility that burial rituals were cathartic. Furthermore, it nullifies the independence of the working classes to invest custom with multiple and individual meanings. This is not to dismiss notions of respectability from an analysis of burial customs, but to recognise that the meanings invested in them were not confined to issues of status. In addition, this chapter will develop further the critique of David Vincent's assertion that the material circumstances of the working classes removed them from experiences of 'pure grief'.⁹ Indeed, an exploration of working-class funeral rites suggests that

⁶ Morley, *Death, Heaven*, pp. 21-2.

⁷ Morrison, 'All that Messuage' in *Tales of Mean Streets*, pp. 224-51.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 251.

⁹ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 39.

attitudes towards death and disposal were typified by complex, diverse and individual expressions of loss and bereavement. Moreover, by approaching the funeral as a series of rituals which rendered private loss a public rite, it is also possible to perceive components of burial custom as communal sites for the creation and expression of condolence and consolation. Ostensibly, the corpse was the focal point of burial ritual, not least because mourners were defined in relation to it. Yet to a point, the significance of burial rituals was rooted in the social interaction that centred *around* the corpse. For instance, the custom of ‘viewing the body’ was, superficially, rooted in a desire to see the remains of the dead and, perhaps, ensure that death really had taken place.¹⁰ Yet the custom was far more significant as a forum for expressing grief and sympathy with the bereaved, whilst re-affirming a sense of social inclusion. Likewise, street collections, closing one’s blinds and curtains and participating in the funeral tea could all enable the bereaved, and those who sympathised with them, to express sorrow and loss. Thus, by shifting the discussion of death and disposal beyond the historiographical preoccupation with respectability and funeral extravagance, it is possible to explore a wider culture of death and dying in the context of grief.

Viewing the body

In the interim between death and burial, the corpse was the focus for expressions of loss, grief and sympathy. In the same way that laying-out the dead could facilitate gestures of condolence, the custom of viewing the corpse drew upon notions of communal sympathy. As one woman (born in 1905) recalled, the bereaved: ‘invited everybody to go and look at [the dead], not just keeping them for their own private thing... they didn’t turn anybody away.’¹¹ Similarly, a bleacher from Bolton asserted that ‘everybody used to go and look at dead people’ at the turn of the twentieth

¹⁰ For fear of premature burial see Curl, *The Victorian Celebration*, pp. 177-9 and Litten, *The English Way*, pp. 166-8.

¹¹ BOHT, Tape 103, Reference: JP/SP/1/024.

century.¹² This hospitality enabled the bereaved to come to terms with loss whilst creating a forum for neighbours and kin to articulate their sympathy and share memories of the deceased. Simply expressing a desire to view the corpse may well have been interpreted as a gesture of condolence. As a small child, A. S. Jasper accompanied his father to donate a collection of money to a workmate whose infant had died. Accepting the gift, the colleague invited Jasper's father to look upon the corpse. As he drew back the lid of the coffin, the bereft man asked Jasper's father what he thought of the child. This was not an unexpected invitation: 'it was the thing everyone did in those days'. Yet in soliciting an opinion on the appearance of the child, the father was possibly seeking some confirmation of the beauty of the corpse, and consequently, the extent of loss.¹³

In cases where the dead were disfigured, the family might choose to forego customs of viewing the corpse. This may have been rooted in notions of viewing the dead at 'peace': contorted limbs or mutilated features would rarely have comforted the bereaved. Mrs Peters, born in Lancaster in 1898, described the harrowing experience of seeing the corpse of her sister who, in the agonising throes of death, had 'torn at her little face': 'I only had one look and I thought well it's not my sister'.¹⁴ Alternatively, the rapid decay of mutilated corpses could render them unpalatable to the senses of mourners. Cadavers which were repulsive to sight and smell, such as the 'inflated, flame-seared mass of rotten flesh' of pit explosion victims, might be consigned to an 'odour proof shell'.¹⁵ Lewis Jones' portrayal of the curtailment of customs in such circumstances highlights, however, the malleable meanings attached to the corpse. Despite the horrific sight of the dead, Jones imagines that the bereaved needed to house their dead before burial. The possession of the corpse ensured its

¹² BOHT, Tape 89b, Reference: AL/SP/1/015.

¹³ A. S. Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood* (London, 1969), p. 14.

¹⁴ Mrs PIL in Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁵ Jones, *Cwmardy*, p. 101.

dignified treatment and cemented a sense of identity whilst providing a focus, however unfamiliar, for the projection of grief.¹⁶

Viewing the remains of the dead stimulated memory. Florence Jones remarked that when her mother died, neighbours 'kept coming' to see the corpse, offering their condolences and shared memories.¹⁷ Stories relating to the personality of the deceased may have reinforced a sense of loss, but remembering the dead in a communal context confirmed and legitimised grief. The custom of viewing the corpse was also a forum for paying one's last respects to the dead, much like making a donation for a floral tribute.¹⁸ Yet for some, the custom was also associated with vague superstitious beliefs. Anne Tibble recollected her mother's maxim that touching the corpse 'will prevent you being haunted'.¹⁹ Similarly, Florence Jones was told that 'touching a dead person stopped you dreaming about them'.²⁰ This illustrates the degree to which popular belief fused Christian precepts of an afterlife with superstition. Yet such beliefs may tell us more concerning perceptions of bereavement than notions of the paranormal. In particular, they suggest a desire for the dead to rest in peace thereby allowing the bereaved to grieve in peace.

That the custom of viewing the dead extended to include children would also imply that the corpse was perceived as a healthy medium for acquainting the young with death. As a schoolgirl at the turn of the twentieth century, Alice Foley could recall 'troop[ing] into the house of mourning' in order to gaze at the remains of dead schoolfriends. This was a routine which accompanied death, much like praying for the soul of the dead and receiving a piece of funeral currant-bread after the burial.²¹ For some children, viewing the corpse was a source of entertainment and bravado:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jones, *Memoirs*, p. 89.

¹⁸ BOHT, Tape 34a, Reference: JP/SS/1B/008.

¹⁹ Anne Tibble, *Greenhorn: A Twentieth Century Childhood* (London, 1973), pp. 35-6.

²⁰ Jones, *Memoirs*, p. 2.

²¹ Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 38.

As children we would go round looking at all these dead children, we thought it were something. When we knew they'd died we used to knock on the door and say - can we have a look at your such-a-body who'd died.²²

Robert Roberts recalled how it was a 'common habit' for children to visit the homes of the bereaved to ask 'reverently' to view the corpse. One friend could even boast of having seen thirty-seven.²³

Yet the image of the dead could make a deep impression on the mind of a child. One millworker from Bolton recalled her horror at being taken, in the early 1900s, to view a corpse.²⁴ Margaret Penn's childhood image of her dead grandmother remained vivid years later when writing her autobiography. She had been 'both terrified and astonished' to see the body of her grandmother 'lying so big and so still in her coffin'. She recoiled from kissing the corpse, which seemed neither young nor old, and shivered at the 'icy coldness' of the body.²⁵ Likewise, Anne Tibble shied away from touching the cheek of her dead classmate, her mother eventually having to hold her 'reluctant fingers' to the skin of the corpse. Like Margaret Penn, Anne infused the memory with meditation upon the meaning of death to the child: 'Not to be alive seemed too dismal to contemplate. And no imagined Better Land [heaven] could possibly come up to this one.'²⁶ Gissing also imagined that the presence of a corpse would hold a degree of horror for a sensitive child. The cadaver in the parlour at the Peckovers' house becomes 'a ceaseless occasion of dread and misery' to Gissing's heroine, Jane, filling her with a 'sickness of horror'.²⁷ The incomprehension and revulsion of the child reminds us again that familiarity with death cannot be equated with an indifference to it. Mrs Peters, born in Lancaster in 1898, recalled the death of her younger sister whilst both were still in childhood. Not only did she describe the

²² Anne Bromilow and Jim Power (eds.) Looking Back: Photographs and Memories of Life in Bolton 1890 - 1939 (Bolton, 1985), p. 35.

²³ Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 124.

²⁴ BOHT, Tape 27b, Reference: AB/CG/2/043.

²⁵ Penn, Manchester, p. 35.

²⁶ Tibble, Greenhorn, p. 35.

²⁷ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 7.

bereavement as a 'dreadful time', she was also 'scared stiff' of the corpse in the front room. Following the strictures of her grandmother, she placed her hand on her sister's forehead. Yet the 'stone cold' corpse of her sibling made her 'shudder'.²⁸

It is possible that customs associated with dealing directly with the corpse have become stigmatised through the subsequent privatisation of death. Retrospective accounts of viewing the corpse tend to express elements of bemusement and/or revulsion. Florence Smith, born at the turn of the twentieth century, expressed bewilderment at the custom: 'there was nothing to look at, he was dead... but see they did those things in those days'.²⁹ Amy Sharples, born in 1887, thought it 'terrible' that children were made to view dead bodies. The only rationale she could find for this was that it acquainted young minds with 'the facts of life', even if it was a terrifying prospect for some of the children concerned.³⁰ Similarly, a Bolton woman (born in 1916) was incredulous that 'even' children were allowed to view corpses.³¹ The fact that her mother had never permitted her to partake in the custom is, perhaps, indicative that it was slowly becoming obsolete as people increasingly died away from home. Nevertheless, Elizabeth Roberts estimates that the custom remained relatively common until the 1940s.³²

Admittedly, visiting the corpse provided neighbours with an excellent excuse for gossip and gauging where families ranked in a social and economic hierarchy. Gissing drew upon this idea when describing the pre-funeral gathering at the Peckover household in The Nether World. Mrs Peckover would have cared little if the corpse were buried in an orange crate, but, 'with neighbours and relatives to consider', she purchased an expensive coffin which would be the talk of the neighbourhood for weeks to come.³³ In such portrayals, grief was peripheral to the financial cost (and

²⁸ Mrs PIL in Roberts, A Woman's Place, pp. 19-20.

²⁹ MOH Transcript, Florence Smith, Tape 962.

³⁰ MOH Transcript, Amy Sharples, Tape 487.

³¹ BOHT, Tape 115, Reference: AL/CG/116.

³² Roberts, A Woman's Place, p. 20.

³³ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 41.

‘respectability’) of funeral rites. This cynical perception overlooks the notion that viewing the corpse was a ritual which rendered private loss a communal rite of participation. This may indeed have been rooted in curiosity, yet it also facilitated expressions of condolence whilst reinforcing a sense of social inclusion. Moreover, save for the coffin, there was very little to see. As far as gestures of display go, viewing the corpse gave neighbours access to the home of the bereaved. This was far more likely to reveal their long-term financial and domestic circumstances than any funeral procession or expensive casket. Nevertheless, neighbourhood rituals centred on viewing the corpse attracted criticism from funeral reformers, not least because of its association with poor sanitation and a culture of improvidence.

The custom of filling a room with healthy people when a mass of decaying flesh, with or without the possibility of infectious disease, lay in the same vicinity filled most public health reformers with horror. In June 1883, Edward Hope, in his capacity as the assistant medical officer of health at Liverpool, reported that the body of William Holmes, aged thirty-two, was laid-out in a room ‘presently occupied by several women and children - visitors and friends’.³⁴ In July 1884, he visited a house where the foul smelling corpse of a man, dead from fever, was surrounded by women.³⁵ Yet fears for public health often merged with accusations of drunkenness and ignorance. For instance, on visiting the home of the Pattison family, he noted that the house was ‘*crowded* with neighbours’ [his emphasis] owing to the presence of the corpse of a child, who had died from typhus, and that of his father, who broke his neck falling over the banister whilst drunk. The whole court area had ‘the appearance of squalid festivity and is crowded with filthy women and children’.³⁶ Similarly, a ‘gang of women in a shocking state of drunkenness and filth’ were ‘crowding about the house’ where a man had died of smallpox.³⁷

³⁴ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 20 June 1883.

³⁵ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 16 July 1884.

³⁶ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 29 November 1883.

³⁷ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 2 July 1884.

Yet much of this criticism also lay in the loose associations between visiting the dead and the custom of holding a wake over the corpse, largely associated with Irish immigrant communities. The distinguishing feature of the Irish wake, according to critics at least, was the excessive consumption of alcohol and general revelry in the presence of the corpse. As Hope noted, the 'plentiful supply of whisky' by the corpse along with the 'tremor of drink' amongst mourners left no doubt that a wake was in progress.³⁸ Such was the equation between the wake and alcohol that fatalities and accidents at wakes were automatically attributed to drunkenness. When an inquest was held following a fatal fight at a wake in Liverpool, the image of debauchery was cast as typical: those who sat with the corpse were, 'as usual', drinking. Furthermore, it was 'extremely improbable' to imagine that the injured party in the fight had not also been drunk, despite claims from witnesses that she was not.³⁹ The coroner overseeing the case concluded that drinking alcohol over the remains of the dead was 'a nasty, drunken, beastly habit' whilst the Lancet used the incident to rail against the 'revolting practices' referred to as 'wakes' which were really little more 'drunken revels by the side of the corpse'.⁴⁰

Undoubtedly, some wakes were accompanied by considerable rabble-rousing and effected health risks. At Westminster police court in 1891, Nelly Walsh was charged with assaulting Annie Shea whilst attending a wake over the body of an eleven-month-old child.⁴¹ Thomas Morgan recalled attending a wake as a child where a guest had inadvertently thrown a lighted cigarette into the coffin and set the corpse on fire.⁴² In March 1884, Hope obtained an order for the removal of a corpse from the Dverthin home on 24 March 1884 as 'a gang of filthy women and a few men are preparing for the wake'.⁴³ Inspecting a house in February 1885, he noted that both 'house and inmates are very dirty' and seven people were still drunk 'having been

³⁸ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 7 August 1883.

³⁹ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 7 July 1888, p. 7 and 14 July 1888, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* and Lancet, 14 July 1888, p. 89.

⁴¹ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 4 April 1891, p.1.

⁴² Thea Thompson (ed.), Edwardian Childhoods (London, 1981), pp. 13-35 (p. 24).

⁴³ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 24 March 1884.

revelling last night at the wake'. As another wake was planned for that night, Hope obtained a magistrates order for the removal of the body.⁴⁴ A visit to the Kerran home on 13 July 1887 revealed a 'dirty and disorderly' place, containing the corpses of two women, Ann and Ellen Kerran, dead from typhus, alongside eight or nine 'half drunken and dirty' men and women. In another room, a sick nine-year-old boy lay in bed 'dirty and helpless', alongside Thomas Patten, a drunken adult. The two corpses were immediately removed to the mortuary whilst the child was taken to hospital.⁴⁵ Hope also removed the body from the premises if a wake was in progress, as in the case of the Thornlow household on 31 August 1885 when eleven adults and seven children were found to be holding a wake over the body of a child.⁴⁶

The risks of contagion from the corpse further cemented tirades against the 'evils' of this 'disastrous and stupid custom practised by the Irish'.⁴⁷ During the 1870s, some medical officers had gone so far as to suggest that those who exposed the bodies of deceased relatives who had died from an infectious disease should be subject to penal measures.⁴⁸ Similarly, public health officials were keen to draw attention to cases where guests at a wake had subsequently fallen ill. For instance, Edward Hope reported a case in 1887 where fourteen women had attended the same wake in May and subsequently been struck by typhus.⁴⁹

Yet critics gave little consideration to the meanings attributed to the wake. For instance, even in cases where the body of the corpse was absent, a 'wake' might still be held. Visiting one house in October 1883, Hope observed 'all the paraphernalia but without the corpse'.⁵⁰ Ostensibly, this bolstered images of the wake as an excuse for a party. I would argue that, in such circumstances, the absence of the corpse

⁴⁴ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 19 February 1885.

⁴⁵ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 13 July 1887.

⁴⁶ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 31 August 1885.

⁴⁷ Lancet, 3 July 1875, p. 41 and Lancet, 21 August 1875, p. 298.

⁴⁸ Lancet, 28 October 1876, pp. 618-9.

⁴⁹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 22 July 1887.

⁵⁰ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 29 October 1883.

could be overlooked: the locus of meaning lying in the communal gathering to commemorate the dead. Moreover, as Hope noted, wakes were not exclusive to drunken or filthy families, but were also held by those he considered 'fairly respectable'.⁵¹ That the 'respectable' represented a minority of his cases may be explained by the fact that such families were keen to keep their revelry low key and private or that his work was concentrated on specific stereotyped families. Hope's observations on rituals associated with death were clearly loaded with prejudice against dirt, drink and the Irish.

It is possible that the wake was used and defined in a variety of ways. At one level, the persistence of the wake within Irish immigrant families and communities suggests that it represented an expression of cultural and religious identity. Furthermore, the practice was rooted in a series of traditional beliefs relating to death, the corpse and the soul, a fact reflected in the urgency with which priests sought to reform the practice.⁵² The practice of 'waking' the dead was rooted in a desire to protect the corpse from evil spirits, hence the constant attendance upon the corpse and the practice of lighting candles around the body.⁵³ One woman's recollections of the wakes in her family stressed the importance of 'always having somebody in there with [the cadaver]'. Drinking whisky was a tangential gesture of hospitality offered to relatives who partook in watching the corpse.⁵⁴ Indeed, Sean O'Suilleabhain has argued that the 'horse-play' which characterised so many wakes was, to some extent, instigated to keep mourners awake and help pass the night away.⁵⁵ Yet like the less sensational custom of visiting the corpse, the wake could also be used to express sympathy and loss. In the 1890s, Charles Booth described the death of a five-year-old boy in his mother's arms. Despite their utter destitution, the boy's family (Irish Catholics) 'borrowed sufficient for the wax candles to burn near the body and light

⁵¹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 10 August 1886.

⁵² As one reporter noted, priests in Liverpool had for some time channelled considerable effort into deterring families from holding wakes over the dead. *Lancet*, 14 July 1888, p. 89.

⁵³ Sean O' Suilleabhain, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork and Dublin, [1961] 1997), pp. 166-74.

⁵⁴ BOHT, Tape 60b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/003.

⁵⁵ O' Suilleabhain, *Irish Wakes*, pp. 166-7.

the poor little soul to paradise.’⁵⁶ Thus, families could select elements from the ‘wake’ and apply them to the treatment of their deceased in accordance with their own priorities and/ or resources.

A rare sympathetic account of a wake in Kilrush, Ireland, in the Liverpool Weekly Courier, in 1888, highlighted the value of the wake as a forum for grief.⁵⁷ The author described how a corpse, surrounded by candles, was laid out on one side of the room. Two aged women sat, rocking and moaning quietly, whilst around twenty others sat motionless, speaking only in whispers. In accordance with ‘time-honoured custom’, whisky was distributed among the guests, but tea given to those who preferred it. All the while, women came and went from the house to view the corpse and say prayers over the dead. In this instance, the wake was a gathering of friends who wished to share memories of the dead and express a sense of condolence. The partaking in whisky was not indulgence but a form of hospitality and toasting the dead. The gap in understandings of such customs indicates not only the fluidity of cultures of death across class, ethnicity and community but the potential to move analyses of the culture of death beyond the narrow concerns of nineteenth-century funeral reformers and a blinkered historiography.

Expense

Although funeral extravagance was thought to be in steady decline from the 1880s onwards, claims that it was ‘almost as extinct as the dodo’ seem premature in the light of sustained funeral reform propaganda.⁵⁸ From the mid-years of Victoria’s reign, undertakers had been identified as the driving force behind the ‘very ugly, dismal and expensive mockeries’ associated with the funeral customs of both rich and poor.⁵⁹ In the 1880s the sanitary reformer, Frederick Lowndes, argued that

⁵⁶ Booth, Labour and Life, Vol. II, p. 49.

⁵⁷ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 25 August 1888, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Lancet, 20 January 1894, pp. 165-6.

⁵⁹ Lancet, 16 October 1875, pp. 571-2.

undertakers exploited their 'monopoly' on burial custom to actively retard economical and wholesome burial practice to further their own interests.⁶⁰ However, as an article in the Lancet asserted in 1893, the undertaker was what the public made him.⁶¹ Yet reformers tended to perceive 'the public' as an undifferentiated mass who slavishly followed the fashions of the upper classes, spending on funerals that 'which would be much more wisely expended in providing additional comforts and even necessities for the living.'⁶² Thus, most reformers called upon the wealthy to adopt frugal burial customs in a bid to stamp out extravagance across society. Notably, the Duke of Clarence's funeral, in January 1892, was criticised as a 'high carnival' and 'pomp of obsequies' which set a poor example to the working classes and highlighted a national 'weakness for display'.⁶³

The ability to pay for a 'decent' funeral was, undoubtedly, a source of great anxiety among the poor. Indeed, if customs of laying-out the body were female-centred, the ability to finance a funeral provided a practical channel for the grief of a male breadwinner.⁶⁴ As no credit facilities were available for burial, many families would 'have to go into debt' to pay for a funeral.⁶⁵ Perhaps the most immediate way of raising ready money was to use the pawnshop. Florence Bell related the story of one family who pawned their clock, 'the only thing available left in their bare little house', in order to pay for the funeral of their child.⁶⁶ William Blackburn, born in Bolton in 1895, estimated that at the turn of the twentieth century 'seventy-five percent of the families that had a bereavement went into debt'. Furthermore, 'by the time you'd straightened up for one funeral, probably there was another one shortly after'.⁶⁷ However, the most common means of financing a funeral was subscription to a burial

⁶⁰ Lancet, 12 June 1886, pp. 1141-2.

⁶¹ Lancet, 24 June 1893, p. 1529.

⁶² *Ibid.* See also the Lancet, 29 May 1886, p. 1033, Lancet, 12 March 1887, p. 539.

⁶³ Liverpool Weekly Mercury, 30 January 1892, p. 4.

⁶⁴ This was, of course, double-edged: the inability to fund a 'decent' burial could prove a formidable source of guilt.

⁶⁵ BOHT, Tape 32a, Reference: AL/KP/1c/013. See also Bell, At the Works, pp. 76 - 77, and Reeves, Round About a Pound, pp. 69-71.

⁶⁶ Bell, At the Works, p. 83.

⁶⁷ MOH Transcript, William Blackburn, Tape 588.

club.⁶⁸ A cursory glance at the tables of expenditure compiled by Reeves in her study of working-class domestic economy highlights a persistent trend among families to subscribe to burial insurance schemes.⁶⁹ Similarly, Seebohm Rowntree drew attention to the widespread habit of making weekly donations to burial insurance schemes, often from meagre earnings.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, funeral insurance was a gamble. As Reeves noted, one missed payment during a period of illness or unemployment could render years of regular subscription obsolete.⁷¹ Furthermore, societies were often unregistered with the government, badly organised, and susceptible to collapse.⁷² In The Nether World, Gissing illustrates the disastrous consequences of mismanagement when a combination of carelessness and fraud bring about the collapse of a fifteen-year-old burial club. For John Hewett, whose wife lies on the brink of death, the loss of this single ‘stronghold against fate’ is terrible.⁷³ In spite of extreme poverty, Hewett had always contrived to maintain payment for his family’s individual burial policies. In Gissing’s vision, this small miracle was not motivated by a desire for lavish funerals but by the need to insure against the degradation of a pauper burial.

In this light, it is perhaps surprising that ‘so many social observers could so wholeheartedly condemn the working classes for improvidence and fecklessness.’⁷⁴ Yet not only were a large number of societies run inefficiently, payments from clubs were thought to encourage extravagance and, in some cases at least, fraud and a fatalistic acceptance of death. A sketch of ‘Liverpool in the Rough’, published in The Porcupine in 1880, outlined the uses of burial insurance to both the reprobate and the respectable working classes.⁷⁵ Poorer families were inclined, the author suggested, to

⁶⁸ Johnson, Saving and Spending, pp. 11-47.

⁶⁹ Reeves, Round About a Pound, p. 55-93.

⁷⁰ Rowntree, Poverty, p. 291, 423.

⁷¹ Reeves, Round About a Pound, p. 70.

⁷² Johnson, Saving and Spending, p. 15.

⁷³ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 185.

⁷⁴ Johnson, Saving and Spending, p. 25.

⁷⁵ The Porcupine, 7 August 1880, p. 294.

insure their elderly kin in a number of burial clubs.⁷⁶ At death, the multiple policies were cashed to fund drinking sprees whilst the dead were buried as cheaply as possible. For those of ‘the really honest poor’, however, burial insurance permitted reverential interment of the dead. This acted as ‘a balm’ to grief for ‘the “little bit of black” they are able to get “out of respect” - and love - goes a long way to make their sorrow bearable.’⁷⁷ Although aiming to illustrate the pitfalls of burial insurance, the subtext to the sketch highlighted the superficiality of working-class notions of decent burial. Not only did such customs occasion a waste of money, the whole concept of respectable burial was drawn from the working-class imagination. The bereaved invited ‘all their friends - at least, as many of them as can raise “black” to the ceremony and the subsequent funeral tea to ‘talk over the good deeds of the past and the bad ones of the present’.⁷⁸ This was, the sketch continued, a natural inclination and most participants in such occasions meant no harm, even though tempers often got the better of them. The observation that the bereaved had waited patiently for club money, and been ‘so poor and hard put to the while’ was a familiar justification for indulgence at times of death. Yet it also illustrated that the so-called ‘respectable’ funeral was little more than an excuse, subconsciously perhaps, for a ‘spree’ under the guise of grief and ‘decency’.⁷⁹

The extent to which such portrayals were representative of the working-class funeral is, however, questionable. Funerals were indeed perceived as a ‘luxury’.⁸⁰ Yet definitions of extravagance and decency were also highly subjective. On balance, the respectable burial was defined in opposition to the pauper burial. This was not, however, restricted to the purchase of a private grave but related to a desire on the part of the bereaved to assert the identity of, and claim dignity for, the dead. As

⁷⁶ This was possible because companies generally made no effort to establish whether the insurer was the person liable for funeral expenses. As Johnson highlights, this enabled a dozen grandchildren to insure one parent. The policies were, therefore, a financial gamble rather than a means of securing a private grave. Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, p. 21.

⁷⁷ *The Porcupine*, 7 August 1880, p. 294.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ MOH Transcript, Mr. Brown, Tape 133.

Thomas Laqueur notes, even the meanest of funerals tended to have the ‘extra’ of the coffinplate with the name of the deceased inscribed upon it.⁸¹ Similarly, when Reeves examined the bill for the funeral of a six-month-old child in a common grave, the inclusion of sixpence for flowers and one shilling for the purchase of a black tie for the father did not conflict with her assertion that there was ‘no display and no extravagance’ evident in the bill. Indeed, the parents were ‘unusually careful people’.⁸² Thus, it is difficult to determine the subjective criteria individuals used to discriminate between excess and decency. It was easy to assert that financial expenditure on extras flew in the face of thrift yet, as Paul Johnson notes, monetary ‘common sense’ advocated by the likes of Samuel Smiles was ‘never applicable to the economic life of mean streets.’⁸³

Against the drab routine of life, even meagre displays captured the imagination of local people: ‘it was really an occasion the funeral, it was like all the street would come out and watch it.’⁸⁴ They were not, however, comparable with the funerals of the ‘pretty affluent’ who indulged in hearses, coaches and horses with plumes.⁸⁵ As Reeves noted, burial insurance did not always cover the funeral costs.⁸⁶ Moreover, recollections of grand funerals tend to pertain to the exceptional. Kathleen Woodward, for instance, noted that lavish funerals ‘composed the one interest strongly binding’ the inhabitants of Kent Street.⁸⁷ A funeral for one of the Roper family, notorious in the neighbourhood, was bound to draw crowds of spectators who gasped at the numbers of wreaths and muttered numerous ‘blimeys’. Yet exceptional extravagance was not necessarily equated with respectability. As Woodward’s friend observed, if floral tributes helped the dead on their way to heaven, a Roper would need Covent Garden on their coffin.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Laqueur, ‘Bodies, Death’, p. 114.

⁸² Reeves, *Round About a Pound*, p. 71.

⁸³ Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, p. 47.

⁸⁴ BOHT, Tape 32a, Reference: AL/KP/1c/013.

⁸⁵ MOH Transcript, Mr. Brown, Tape 133.

⁸⁶ Reeves, *Round About a Pound*, p. 69.

⁸⁷ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p. 38.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

On balance, therefore, the element of display inherent in the idea that ‘all might be equal before the Lord... but there was nothing to be gained in going shabby’ must be placed in perspective.⁸⁹ Even amongst the middle and upper classes, the extravagant funeral has been somewhat mythologised: stories of excess tended to hinge on the sensational funerals of a minority.⁹⁰ Fantastic funerals may have formed part of a cultural landscape but the poor themselves ‘didn’t have fancy funerals like that, they couldn’t afford it, they just didn’t have them’.⁹¹ In the ‘Tripe Colony’ in Miles Platting, a working-class district in Manchester, at the beginning of the century, funeral processions were typified by the mourners not only walking the distance to the cemetery, but carrying the coffin there too.⁹² Overall, therefore, generalisations about funeral extravagance need to be analysed within a localised economic context. Furthermore, an examination of the customary components of the funeral suggests that the working-class culture of burial was imbued not just with concerns for status but also with gestures of loss, sympathy, and community.

The Burial Service

The preoccupation with respectability and extravagance has encouraged a tendency for contemporary and historical commentaries on the funeral to focus exclusively on secular rituals of mourning as opposed to the burial service and the spiritual beliefs invested in the disposal of the dead. That the format of burial services was standardised according to denomination may have encouraged a belief that the religious rites associated with interment were unlikely to be appropriated by individuals. Moreover, as Elizabeth Roberts has noted, mourners tend to recall the funeral’s secular rituals rather than the burial service, the vicar or the church where

⁸⁹ Robert Roberts, *A Ragged Schooling: Growing Up in the Classic Slum* (Manchester, 1976), p. 133.

⁹⁰ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 196.

⁹¹ BOHT, Tape 60b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/003.

⁹² MOH Transcript, Miles Platting, Tape 153.

disposal took place.⁹³ With reference to elite families, Jalland has illustrated that the spiritual language of the burial service often soothed grief, not least by reaffirming beliefs concerning heavenly reunion. Conversely, the exclusivity of Christian doctrine could exacerbate grief, especially for agnostic mourners and Christians who grieved for an agnostic.⁹⁴ The obscurity which surrounds the religious beliefs of the working classes renders analysis of the spiritual significance of the burial service problematic. As with the secular rituals of mourning, however, the public discourse of religion could be appropriated by the individual and invested with private meaning. Furthermore, the spiritual rites of burial were inextricable from perceptions of secular custom and the dignity of the dead. In this light, the spiritual meaning of interment cannot be explored in isolation.

As with birth and marriage, most families turned to the church at times of death.⁹⁵ Indeed, it is doubtful whether burial without the inclusion of the church would have been perceived as a viable option by many working-class families. As advocates of cremation were apt to note, cultural habits were slow to change in the best of circumstances. During times of bereavement, however, the disinclination to 'depart from ordinary routine or custom' was intensified.⁹⁶ Moreover, poorer inhabitants in rural areas had little option but to turn to the churchyard in the absence of a municipal cemetery.⁹⁷ For those who regularly attended a place of worship, familiarity with the clergyman and the formal language of religion would, perhaps, enable the bereaved to impart some personal significance on the burial service, maybe by requesting favourite hymns, readings or, relating memories of the deceased.⁹⁸

⁹³ Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way', p. 201.

⁹⁴ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 216-22. See also Garland, 'Victorian Unbelief', pp. 156-61.

⁹⁵ See Gorer, *Death, Grief*, pp. 30-42.

⁹⁶ *The Times*, 31 October 1887, p. 4.

⁹⁷ Those who could afford it could, of course, pay for the funeral to proceed from the home to the nearest town. At a time when many poor families still carried their coffins, this would have been too expensive.

⁹⁸ In late twentieth-century funerals, many clerics perceive this as vital for the 'good grief' of those attending the burial service: it becomes a personal rite as opposed to a formal structure. See Hockey, 'The Acceptable Face', pp. 129-48.

Families who attended church sporadically might also take some comfort from the spiritual service. As an article in The Nineteenth Century in 1897 noted, the Roman catholic doctrine of purgatory assuaged grief by promoting the belief that the prayers of mourners could speed the soul of the dead on its way to heaven.⁹⁹ The Anglican service was, perhaps, more democratic in soothing grief: it afforded men and women of 'no special piety' immediate entry into heaven, a notion supported by the 'nauseous hymns, so commonly sung, proclaiming that the trials and troubles of the deceased are at an end.'¹⁰⁰ Yet doctrinal precepts could also aggravate grief. Alice Foley recalled how the 'kind and sympathetic' nuns at her school shook their heads in dismay to learn that her brother had not received mass before his death. The 'ominous implication' of this omission for her brother's soul exacerbated Alice's 'overwrought sensitivity' and she lay sick for weeks.¹⁰¹

As Michael Wheeler has noted, eschatology became increasingly popular among academics during the late Victorian period.¹⁰² Whilst the relevance of theological debate to working-class notions of the afterlife is doubtful, it seems unlikely that many people would have gone through life untouched by religion.¹⁰³ Furthermore, religious belief was flexible: it could operate in tandem with superstition and be invoked on a selective criteria. As Kathleen Woodward noted, images of hell and retribution could be overlooked in favour of the all-encompassing missionary statement: 'God is Love'.¹⁰⁴ Yet Christian notions of the afterlife also represented a language of hope against a life of poverty. Tressell explored the allure of a belief in Heaven in The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists. Vehemently anti-clerical, Tressell conceded that Christianity was a clever (if absurd) device in that it detracted the poor from the horror of their lives by promising them eternal joy in the aftermath of death.

⁹⁹ The Nineteenth Century, January 1897, pp. 38-55.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 49.

¹⁰¹ Foley, A Bolton Childhood, p. 38.

¹⁰² Wheeler examines the impact of Darwinism and sophisticated scientific paradigms on Christianity and notions of heaven and hell. Wheeler, Heaven, Hell, pp. 1-27.

¹⁰³ See for instance, Meacham, 'The Church', pp. 359-78.

¹⁰⁴ Woodward, Jipping Street, pp. 128-30.

Thus, even the radical Owen ‘could not help longing for something to believe, for some hope for the future; something to compensate for the unhappiness of the present.’¹⁰⁵ Tressell counters such romantic sentiments with diatribes against a hypocritical clergy and through Owen’s despair with workers who cling to the promises of Christianity despite knowing ‘practically nothing about it!’¹⁰⁶

Tressell’s contemptuous treatment of the ‘Christian’ working classes suggests his perception that a significant number of the working classes held some concept of Heaven, even if they chose to dispense with notions of Hell. As Sarah Williams highlights, middle-class Christians and clerics despaired that this concept was often vague, inadequate or wholly inaccurate. Yet Williams contests the notion that working-class religious belief retained no concept of atonement: popular belief perpetuated a clear set of moral expectations which were neither arbitrary nor divorced from church-based religion. Thus, the fulfilment of a subjective moral and ethical criteria was perceived as sufficient to secure entry into the afterlife. In particular, notions of ‘sin’ and ‘goodness’ were dependent on points of ‘neighbourliness’ and ‘brotherliness’ rather than doctrinal strictures or church attendance.¹⁰⁷ In this sense, the bereaved could find comfort in the burial service as a confirmation of the social worth of the dead in conjunction with the tacit understanding that it signified the right of the deceased to an afterlife.

Herein lies the significance of the religious burial service. As an ingrained component of funeral ritual, the burial service was inseparable from the secular customs of death which attributed dignity to the dead and testified to the grief of mourners. Moreover, the service was integral to notions of the funeral as an act of closure: it separated the dead from the bereaved, propelled them towards an afterlife whilst sanctioning the return of the bereaved to the world of the living, and it incorporated both the

¹⁰⁵ Tressell, *The Ragged*, pp. 229-30. In the preface to the book, Tressell maintained that it was religious hypocrisy rather than sincere religion itself that he despised.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 145-6.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Religious Belief*, pp. 116-7.

deceased and the mourner in their respective domain.¹⁰⁸ To omit or deny a fundamental component of burial customs thus ruptured the cathartic function of the funeral.¹⁰⁹

A burial scandal in Stoke, near Coventry, in August 1878, highlights the distress caused when a family were prohibited from interring the dead in their chosen manner. The parents of an unbaptised baby had approached the Anglican minister of their parish, the Reverend Arrowsmith, to read the burial service at the funeral of their child. Arrowsmith refused and informed the family that no other Anglican clergyman was permitted to read the burial service over the grave. Having no money to travel to the municipal cemetery in Coventry, the distressed parents sought the advice of a local 'gentleman'. On his advice, they approached a Nonconformist minister who agreed to assist them in conducting an improvised service: the funeral began in the Stoke Independent Chapel, moved to the turnpike near the graveyard wall, and ended with the interment of the coffin in the Anglican Churchyard.¹¹⁰ That the family chose to improvise rather than omit a burial service suggests the significance they attached to their right to inter the dead with appropriate spiritual rites. Moreover, the decision to overlook the implications of a fundamental doctrinal regulation which withheld access to the burial service illustrates a loose, malleable notion of spiritual authority. That Arrowsmith received death threats and hate mail following the publication of this story in The Times also points to the existence of an indignant minority who objected to the clergy's right to interfere with the disposal of the dead.¹¹¹

Indeed, the religious service of burial may well be interpreted more as a secular 'right' than a spiritual 'rite', the denial of which was interpreted as a denial of dignity

¹⁰⁸ See Jane Littlewood, 'The Denial of Death and Rites of Passage in Contemporary Societies' in Clark, The Sociology of Death, pp. 69-84.

¹⁰⁹ See also Kselman, 'Funeral Conflicts', pp. 312-32.

¹¹⁰ The Times, 9 August 1878, p. 7.

¹¹¹ The Times, 15 August 1878, p. 12. Arrowsmith wrote to the newspaper asserting that his refusal was in accordance with Anglican doctrine and censuring the editor for sensational publication of the issue.

and respect. Anne Tibble described her mother's horror when told she could not expect to see the soul of her unbaptised baby in heaven. Added to this blow, the child's corpse was to be consigned to the back of the church, underneath the rubbish heap, along with the other 'ungiven'. Despite attempts to quell the grief of his wife with reassurances that 'Holy folk can often be grudgers', Anne's father clearly harboured a deep resentment and never returned to church.¹¹² In this sense, a knowledge of 'limbo' (the denial of unbaptised infants into heaven) was inextricable from the prohibition of traditional burial rites. Kate Taylor, born in 1891, recalled that her sister's death from infectious disease meant that the coffin was prohibited entry into church. Kate's mother, consumed by bitterness, overcame her usual reticence to chide the vicar: 'You have kept her out of church; you can't keep her out of heaven.'¹¹³

The conduct of some clerics could also be construed as a denial of dignity. Tressell's portrayal of a funeral elaborates this point. The cleric overseeing the funeral of Philpot is 'contemptuously indifferent' to the dead and the bereaved: he 'gabbles' the funeral service in a 'rapid and wholly unintelligible manner' which would have 'compelled laughter' in a less morbid context.¹¹⁴ Although a device for railing against the hypocrisy of the clergy, this vision of the Christian funeral as a 'miserable mockery' highlights the potential for the bereaved to feel that their dignity, and that of the corpse, had been slurred. Clearly, some clergy were indifferent to and/ or high-handed with the working classes. For instance, in 1906 Bolton Burial Board had to admonish Anglican and Nonconformist ministers for persistent unpunctuality at funeral services.¹¹⁵ Yet the potential for antagonism between clerics and mourners should not eclipse the possibility that many bereaved families found comfort in the burial service, however they chose to interpret it. As the chaplain for Walton workhouse noted in his log book, some families 'thanked me very much' for the

¹¹² Tibble, *Greenhorn*, pp. 63, 98.

¹¹³ Burnett, *Destiny Obscure*, p. 292.

¹¹⁴ Tressell, *The Ragged*, p. 524.

¹¹⁵ BRO ABCF 15/16.

consideration showed them, for the attention he paid to the dead, and for his ministry.¹¹⁶

Overall, perceptions of the burial service were inextricable from concepts of the funeral as a whole. In particular, the interment of the dead with religious rites was read as a sign that due dignity had been attributed to the dead. In this sense, attendance at the graveside not only engendered a sense of finality, it provided a forum for final goodbyes and notions of paying the very last respects to the dead. For instance, one textile worker, born in Bolton in 1895, recalled that when her grandmother died, the ruling by the male head of the family that men only were to attend the funeral service was over-turned by his female siblings.¹¹⁷ In this instance, witnessing the interment took precedence over subjective notions of propriety. Such was the relationship between the religious service and secular funeral rites that it is impossible to analyse the burial service in isolation. Indeed, definitions of 'the funeral' tend to extend beyond the actual interment of the dead to include mourning paraphernalia and the rituals which flank the burial service. For instance, the attendance of women at the funeral service varied, as many stayed at home to prepare the funeral tea.¹¹⁸ Yet most women would probably have considered that they participated in the funeral without attending the ceremony of interment. Likewise, the procession from the home of the deceased to the cemetery tended to be marked by the presence of neighbours at their doors. These neighbours would possibly also have visited the corpse prior to the funeral and might participate in the funeral feast, therefore being included in funeral ritual without following the coffin to the grave. This not only suggests that secular custom could offer similar mechanisms of support and consolation to those perpetuated by religious belief, but that secular customs held meanings beyond a concern for status and display.

¹¹⁶ LVRO 353 WES 14/3. See for instance, entries for 12, 14, 23 June 1882.

¹¹⁷ BOHT, Tape 149, Reference: AL/KP/1c/007.

¹¹⁸ Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way', p. 194. See also Cline, *Lifting the Taboo*, pp. 42-4 and Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 39-40. Jalland estimates that the funeral feast had declined among elite families by the 1860s. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 223.

Mourning

In Death in the Victorian Family, Pat Jalland illustrates how the customs of mourning used by elite families helped to assuage grief: rituals symbolised and reinforced the finality of loss whilst offering consolation to the bereaved through an affirmation in religious belief, articulation of private and social memory, and familial displays of sympathy.¹¹⁹ Overall, the funeral week ‘began the process of working through grief with the help of a supportive structure of public mourning rituals and family unity.’¹²⁰ Whilst participation in funeral rituals may have united elite families in sorrow and mutual aid, David Vincent has argued that the inter-relation between the emotional and the material denied the working classes the luxury of ‘pure grief’.¹²¹ Yet in searching for linguistic accounts of profound bereavement, Vincent has overlooked the symbolic significance of public rituals of burial, however improvised or lavish, as sites for the creation and expression of stories of love and loss.

One of the principal means of identifying the bereaved was by their black clothes, or in the case of widows, their ‘weeds’. The custom of dressing in mourning mushroomed during the mid-nineteenth century spawning a whole new clothing industry specifically related to the production of black crape and jet jewellery.¹²² Morley has argued that wearing black was so crucial to a strict and intricate code of mourning etiquette that any attempts to curtail the custom were fervently resisted, inviting charges of ‘indelicacy or worse’.¹²³ Curl, meanwhile, has located the origins of this fashion in a ‘deeply-rooted fear’ of the dead returning (when veiled and cloaked in black, mourners were thought to be invisible to the dead).¹²⁴ It is doubtful how far, by the turn of the twentieth century at least, people subscribed to or were

¹¹⁹ Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, pp. 210-29,

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹²¹ Vincent, Bread, Knowledge and Freedom, p. 39.

¹²² Litten refers to this as ‘shroud couture’. Litten, The English Way, pp. 81-4.

¹²³ Morley, Death, Heaven, pp. 63-79.

¹²⁴ Curl, The Victorian Celebration, p. 9.

aware of this belief. Rather, as Jalland has argued, mourning clothes helped others to identify the recently bereaved. Moreover, black reflected the sombre mood of bereavement whilst being read as a sign of respect for the dead.¹²⁵

Among the working classes, the purchase of mourning wear may have been perceived as a sign of comparative affluence. If neighbours watched the funeral proceedings to gauge the inter-relation between cost and respectability, clothes were one of the most tangible means of estimating expenditure. For instance, one Bolton woman, born in 1905, suggested that neighbours watched funeral processions in order to pay their respects to the dead and to see what the bereaved were wearing.¹²⁶ The two impulses did not necessarily conflict: nosiness simply compounded a desire to participate in communal acts of condolence. Considered of little therapeutic value, however, the element of conspicuous consumption inherent in mourning dress rendered it a prime target for critics of funeral extravagance.¹²⁷ As Curl notes, ‘impossible though it might seem’, poorer families always appeared in new black clothing immediately after death.¹²⁸ Florence Bell was horrified to learn of a widow who had spent a charitable donation on the ‘mourning weeds of the stage, including a long black skirt, a deep crape flounce and everything complete.’¹²⁹ However, her observation that such clothing belonged to the stage suggests that it was an unusual spectacle in the streets. Indeed, Curl’s generalisations regarding new clothing are hard to sustain when the culture of wearing black is explored in any detail.

Black clothing at funerals appears to have been de rigueur until the early part of the twentieth century.¹³⁰ Amy Pownall, an assistant in a pawnbrokers, recalled that ‘however poor’ the bereaved were, ‘you were always sure of a good funeral order’ as

¹²⁵ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 301-2.

¹²⁶ BOHT, Tape 60b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/003.

¹²⁷ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 300.

¹²⁸ Curl, *The Victorian Celebration*, p. 9.

¹²⁹ Bell, *At the Works*, p. 78.

¹³⁰ Roberts, ‘The Lancashire Way’, p. 202.

they would invariably want to ‘rig’ the entire family up in black clothing.¹³¹ Even in cases where the dead were interred in pauper graves, families would strive to acquire suitable mourning garb. Jack Lannigan’s mother bought both he and his brother new suits and caps for their father’s burial in a pauper grave. The suits, purchased ‘on tick’, were pawned immediately following the funeral and the boys never saw them again.¹³² Alice Foley recalled that her brothers’ suits would be regularly loaned to neighbours for weddings or funerals.¹³³ Andie Clerk described the pauper funerals he saw in Liverpool during the early 1900s. Despite the poverty of bereaved families, ‘A brave effort would be made to wear something black, jackets or skirts being got from the pawnbrokers’.¹³⁴

It must be noted, however, that definitions of ‘black’ fluctuated wildly according to the circumstances of the bereaved. The expense of crape and jet placed them beyond the reach of many working-class families. Indeed, Jalland argues that such extravagances were not automatically part of wealthy families’ funeral customs, many preferring to adopt more modest and economical forms of clothing.¹³⁵ The working classes may have aspired to wearing black but many had to combine an element of compromise with a pragmatic ingenuity in order to obtain mourning clothes. For instance, Margaret Penn described a local funeral where:

The boys wore their Sunday best with black ties - some bought specially for the occasion, some borrowed, some, on the very poorest children, [ties] merely lengths of broad black tape.¹³⁶

A. S. Jasper recalled one family funeral where the bereaved ‘bought what *black they could afford*’ and, with varying degrees of success, dyed their everyday clothes.¹³⁷

¹³¹ MOH Transcript, Amy Pownall, Tape 800.

¹³² Burnett, *Destiny Obscure*, p. 97.

¹³³ Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 15.

¹³⁴ Andie Clerk, *The Autobiography of an Early Century Street Arab* (Liverpool, 1973), p. 11.

¹³⁵ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 300-7.

¹³⁶ Penn, *Manchester*, p. 162.

¹³⁷ Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, p. 121.

Likewise, Robert Tressell portrayed a funeral where the four bearers of a coffin, all nominally dressed in black, bore a 'remarkable dissimilarity' in appearance, their 'black' garments ranging from 'rusty brown to dark blue'.¹³⁸

The shoddiness of such clothes must have been apparent to all. What took precedence was the colour. In this sense, mourning wear might easily be perceived as a display of comparative affluence for those who could afford to buy new clothing. Yet it seems plausible to suggest that the principal purpose of wearing black was to signify loss and respect for the dead. As a Bolton woman, born in 1899, noted: 'Oh they respected the dead in them days and everybody wore black, you would never dream of going to a funeral with anything but black on.'¹³⁹ Indeed, the custom of wearing black was so ingrained in the culture of death that to overlook it was to invite speculation on the gravity of loss. As one textile worker, born in 1893, recalled: neighbours would 'talk about you if you had a colour on'.¹⁴⁰ Thus, the significance attached to mourning dress was invested in symbols of grief rather than material circumstance. Likewise, Elizabeth Roberts has argued that cost was not the over-riding issue at funerals: most rituals either cost very little or were improvised whilst retaining supreme significance.¹⁴¹

Mourning clothes acted as a symbol of loss by visually setting apart the bereaved. Likewise, closing the curtains at the house of the deceased was a simple but direct means of announcing to the street that a death had taken place.¹⁴² In some instances, the custom even notified the immediate kin of the dead before they arrived at the scene. For instance, The Porcupine's portrayal of the death of 'A Sailors Wife' in 1880 observed that the presence of neighbours at the house and a drawn blind at the window acquaint the approaching children with the death of their mother.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Tressell, The Ragged, p. 523.

¹³⁹ BOHT, Tape 74, Reference: JP/SP/1/028.

¹⁴⁰ BOHT, Tape 155b, Reference: AB/SS/1b/005.

¹⁴¹ Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way', p. 191.

¹⁴² See for instance, BOHT, Tape 71b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/006.

¹⁴³ The Porcupine, 5 June 1880, pp. 150-1.

Moreover, once the knowledge of death was disseminated along the street, neighbours would also close their curtains. In Cwmardy, Jones illustrates how the ‘drawn blinds in every house in the street’ inform a man of his daughter’s death before he reaches his own home.¹⁴⁴ This simple act permitted neighbours and friends to articulate a sense of sympathy with the bereaved whilst symbolically expressing respect for the dead:

...if there was a death in the house the blinds were always drawn, very often, the neighbours on each side and anyone who had been friendly would also draw theirs for the entire time between the death and the funeral. On the day of the funeral all the blinds in the street would be drawn, men when the funeral was passing always took their hats off, women would stop and bend their heads...¹⁴⁵

Similarly, participation in a funeral procession represented a non-verbal means of offering condolences to the bereaved and paying respects to the dead. For instance, a textile worker, born in 1898, asserted that neighbours were motivated to follow coffins to the cemetery from a desire to demonstrate their sympathy with the bereaved.¹⁴⁶ At Jane’s funeral in Cwmardy, the departure to the cemetery is marked by a crowd of her father’s mates gathered outside the house.¹⁴⁷ As the cortege edges its way through the village, miners returning from work stop and doff their caps as the coffin passes.¹⁴⁸ That Jones used this scene to emphasise the close knit nature of the mining community, reinforces the sense that in so far as the funeral was a ‘display’, it was one which drew upon gestures of communal support rather than a carnival of extravagance.

¹⁴⁴ Jones, Cwmardy, p. 57.

¹⁴⁵ Bromilow and Power, Looking Back, p. 35.

¹⁴⁶ BOHT, Tape 23c, Reference: AL/MS/1a/016.

¹⁴⁷ Jones, Cwmardy, p. 63.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Of course, the funeral procession could be construed as something of a show, both for the locality and for extended kin 'you'd never seen' who turned up to watch, and no doubt judge, the event.¹⁴⁹ Alternatively, participation in the funeral procession might adopt vague spiritual significance. For instance, the number of participants in a funeral cortege could be seen as helping the deceased on their way to heaven.¹⁵⁰ The culture of neighbours spilling out into the street to watch a funeral procession also illustrates the relationship between burial customs and notions of social inclusion.¹⁵¹ Moreover, the length of a cortege could signify the popularity of the deceased and/or denote their position within the community.¹⁵² Laqueur has suggested that the 'respectable' burial was rooted not in expense alone; the ability to bury the dead decently also drew on notions of community membership. Thus, the funeral as a consumer good signified the value of an individual's life and their relationship with society. In contrast, the indecent funeral - notably the pauper burial - denoted failure and social *exclusion*.¹⁵³ This perception persists in relation to late twentieth-century burial: the funeral is 'the finished picture of a person', one which reveals the individual's social relations with the wider community.¹⁵⁴ In this sense, neighbours who came to watch funeral processions were not simply indulging their curiosity, they were expressing sympathy and (re)forging a sense of communal identity.

The importance of gestures of communal support finds resonance in the culture of mutual aid associated with funerals. Street and workplace collections in the event of a local death were used to help defray the expense of a burial (especially for families with no burial insurance) or to purchase a wreath.¹⁵⁵ As with mourning wear, floral tributes were targeted by funeral reformers as superfluous expense. The *Lancet* argued that they encouraged equations between the corpse and the personality of the

¹⁴⁹ BOHT, Tape 166, Reference: AL/LSS/A/007.

¹⁵⁰ BOHT, Tape 60b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/003.

¹⁵¹ MOH Transcript, William Blackburn, Tape 588.

¹⁵² BOHT, Tape 60b, Reference: AL/JW/1a/003 and MOH Transcript, Florence Smith, Tape 962.

¹⁵³ Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death', pp. 115-26.

¹⁵⁴ Drakeford, 'Last Rights?', p. 522.

¹⁵⁵ See for instance, Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, pp. 13-4.

dead.¹⁵⁶ More importantly, they were a waste of money. Walter Greenwood recalled a neighbour, Annie Boarder, condemning collections for flowers in the same breath that she made requests for donations: floral tributes may have demonstrated the sympathy of the community but they would not feed a widow and her children.¹⁵⁷ Margaret Penn recalled that when her school opened a subscription to purchase a wreath for a boy who had died, each child donated 'the utmost its parents could afford.'¹⁵⁸ Some donations to such collections may have been contributed from a desire to avoid charges of parsimony. Yet as Margaret Penn noted, funeral flowers were 'beautiful', the inscription sent with them a sincere expression of sympathy, and the act of taking the tribute to the house of the bereaved an 'honour'.¹⁵⁹ Booth also noted the significance of floral tributes, even amidst the 'drunkenness and dirt and bad language' of an Irish Catholic slum in London in the 1890s. When one pious young woman died, neighbours 'showed their respect by covering the coffin and almost filling the one room in which these women lived with costly wreaths and quantities of beautiful flowers.'¹⁶⁰ It may have been the piety of the woman that singled her out for such lavish commemoration, yet the display highlights that slumdweller were familiar with, and attached similar importance to, customs of condolence as did their more respectable counterparts. The suggestion that there was a conflict between a wish to give flowers and the desire to adopt more pragmatic forms of assistance suggests that floral tributes were an important symbol of sympathy and respect for the dead that went beyond a concern for display. As one bleacher from Bolton (born in 1899) noted, 'they used to always go around collecting and trying to provide well to buy flowers for them and that. Oh they respected the dead in them days.'¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Lancet, 14 April 1894, p. 979.

¹⁵⁷ Walter Greenwood, There Was a Time (London, 1967), pp. 16-17.

¹⁵⁸ Penn, Manchester, p. 161.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Booth, Labour and Life, Vol. II, pp. 53-4.

¹⁶¹ BOHT, Tape 74, Reference: JP/SP/1/028.

Pecuniary assistance with burial costs was, perhaps, a more practical means of offering condolence. Yet like the floral tribute, this was rooted in a culture of expressing sympathy through symbolic rather than verbal tributes. Moreover, making donations to subscriptions for flowers or expenses drew on the same networks of mutual aid which were utilised when caring for the sick and laying out the dead. As a sketch in The Porcupine in 1880 noted, the poor 'have a system of mutual assistance, a habit of helping each other, which prevents many of them from ever becoming rich in anything but nobleness of character.'¹⁶² For Florence Bell, the street or workplace collection was symbolic of a wider culture of 'self-sacrificing kindness'.¹⁶³

As Ellen Ross has noted, 'gifts create obligations' and the defining principle of mutual aid was reciprocity.¹⁶⁴ Thus, donations to funeral expenses may not have been categorised as charity but as part of an informal system of collective assistance, which the bereaved would return at some point in the future. Furthermore, the language of respect for the dead could be used to mask any notion of charity, therefore averting the need to apply to the parish whilst saving the pride of the bereaved. Indeed, some commentators suggested that it was the shared antipathy to pauper burial among the working classes that motivated such acts of generosity. For instance, Reeves argued that neighbours contributed towards funeral expenses from an unwillingness to see one of themselves pauperised.¹⁶⁵ Likewise, a sketch in The Porcupine in 1880 described a local collection to bury a sailor's wife 'decently':

There is no money, no club; but among most poor people there is feeling...
They go round from house to house and from shop to shop all over the
neighbourhood until they raise the money to bury the sailors wife.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² The Porcupine, 29 May 1880, p. 138.

¹⁶³ Bell, At the Works, p. 76.

¹⁶⁴ Ross, 'Survival Networks', pp. 4-27. See also Chinn, They Worked, pp. 34-7.

¹⁶⁵ Reeves, Round About a Pound, p. 68.

¹⁶⁶ The Porcupine, 5 June 1880, pp. 150-1.

The donations for this burial were prompted by the desire that it should never 'be thrown at those children' that their mother had a pauper burial. Such motivation could be related to a communal sense of respectability: pauper burial not only disgraced the family but the immediate locality of the bereaved also. However, it seems equally likely that assistance with burial costs derived from sympathy with the bereaved: both in terms of their loss and the financial burden of burial. Moreover, that no offence appears to have been taken at receiving donations towards expenses suggests that definitions of the respectable funeral were fluid: in this sense, respectability hung on the rituals of burial rather than the economic affluence of the bereaved.

The participation of the community in funeral ritual is, perhaps, most evident in the funeral tea, typified by ham (for those who could afford it) and 'the old currant bread'.¹⁶⁷ So ingrained was the culture of the post-burial tea that funerals were sometimes referred to as 'currant bread and slow walking'¹⁶⁸ whilst, as Robert Roberts notes, being "'buried with 'am" became a comic's cliché'.¹⁶⁹ However, the middle-class perception of funeral feasts often merged with that of wakes, leading to accusations of drunkenness, indulgent excess and unseemly behaviour. According to Porcupine, some of the working classes anticipated the 'wakes tea' as the highpoint of a death.¹⁷⁰ Gissing also portrayed this notion in The Nether World by describing a funeral tea as 'noisily hilarious' and populated by drunks.¹⁷¹ Many funeral teas did adopt the aspect of a great social occasion: 'they would have a party after, a great big spread of food and all the relatives and neighbours would join in.'¹⁷² Indeed, the scale of some gatherings can be gauged from families borrowing seats from pubs and cups

¹⁶⁷ MOH Transcript, William Blackburn, Tape 588. See also BOHT, Tape 23c, Reference: AL/MS/1a/016.

¹⁶⁸ BOHT, Tape 166, Reference: AL/LSS/A/007.

¹⁶⁹ Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 104.

¹⁷⁰ The Porcupine, 7 August 1880, p. 294.

¹⁷¹ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 44.

¹⁷² BOHT, Tape 32a, Reference: AL/KP/1c/013.

from neighbours.¹⁷³ Some undertakers went so far as to hire out cups and saucers along with tea urns.¹⁷⁴

Not all critics, however, issued a blanket condemnation of the practice. Florence Bell despaired at the expense involved but conceded that: 'A funeral is, indeed, one of the principal social opportunities in the class we are describing'.¹⁷⁵ They were especially exciting for children. As a child, Clifford Hills (born in 1904) associated death with ginger cakes, jam sandwiches and home-made wine, asserting that he 'enjoyed people dying'.¹⁷⁶ Following the death of a younger sister, Annie Wilson (born in 1898) asked her mother if they could have another funeral so that she might have more cake.¹⁷⁷ As Bell was quick to note, the funeral tea offered a rare opportunity for adults to indulge: crowding the house with guests and having an 'open house' party for a day was 'a stimulus and a pleasure', undoubtedly 'tinged with the excitement and anticipation of the entertainer'.¹⁷⁸ Bell also lamented that 'these wild outbursts of expenditure generally take place in a crisis of emotion', rendering it difficult 'to preach against them'.¹⁷⁹ In this observation lay an implicit acknowledgement that the funeral tea formed part of a larger set of rituals related to grief: funerals were not simply shows of respectability or excuses for indulgence, they provided an outlet for feelings in a supportive, communal context. This was not necessarily at odds with the suggestion that funerals were a party, but an indication of the multi-layered meanings attributed to such occasions.

On a practical level, funeral teas could be used as a forum for making decisions about the future, whether this be in terms of economic survival, care for widowed and/ or

¹⁷³ MOH Transcript, Mr. Brown, Tape 133.

¹⁷⁴ MOH Transcript, Alfred Warhurst, Tape 81. See also Stalybridge Oral History Transcript, Mr. Gill, Uncatalogued.

¹⁷⁵ Bell, *At the Works*, p. 77.

¹⁷⁶ Thompson, *Edwardian Childhoods*, p. 50.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁷⁸ Bell, *At the Works*, p. 77.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

elderly spouses,¹⁸⁰ or childcare for orphans.¹⁸¹ Conversely, the funeral afforded an opportunity for old antagonisms to erupt.¹⁸² Yet the tea could also represent a ‘thanksgiving’ and, poor as the family might be, a gesture of thanks to neighbours and friends for their support.¹⁸³ The social aspect of the gathering also gave the bereaved an opportunity to reminisce about the deceased and share memories.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, the familiar format of funeral rituals stimulated memories of past funerals.¹⁸⁵ More importantly, the funeral tea marked the closure of public mourning customs and a significant point in the psychology of bereavement: the corpse had been laid to rest, the rituals associated with death were complete, and the bereaved were finally left to resume their daily routines. Lewis Jones illustrated the symbolic role of the funeral tea in *Cwmardy*. Following the burial of Jane, neighbours and friends retire to the home of the bereaved, creating a diversion from solitary dwelling on melancholic thoughts in the immediate aftermath of the burial. As the guests depart from the house, they whisper their condolences leaving the bereaved family ‘alone with their thoughts and their memories.’¹⁸⁶ From this point onwards, grief became a private experience.

Conclusion

As will be argued in chapter five, a degree of ambivalence characterised long-term attitudes towards the resting place of the dead which seems at odds with the importance attached to rituals of interment. This may appear to confirm accounts of the working-class funeral as an elaborate exercise in revelry. I would suggest, however, that funeral customs provided a shared language of grief, loss and condolence, whilst creating a forum in which that language could be expressed,

¹⁸⁰ Penn, *Manchester*, p. 36

¹⁸¹ See for instance, MOH Transcript, Edna Sherran, Tape 1125.

¹⁸² Florence Atherton, born 1898, in Thompson, *Edwardian Childhoods*, p. 115.

¹⁸³ MOH Tape, Mr. Brown, Tape 133.

¹⁸⁴ Roberts, ‘The Lancashire Way’, pp. 193, 205.

¹⁸⁵ See for instance Lewis Jones’ portrayal of remembering one’s own dead through the funerals of others. Jones, *Cwmardy*, p. 103.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

factors which the solitary grave could not sustain. Indeed, some families chose to forego the purchase of a private grave in favour of funding the rites accompanying burial.¹⁸⁷ Again, this demonstrates that concepts of the 'respectable' burial were not straitjacketed by expenditure and ownership of grave deeds. Rather, it was 'respect' for the dead that defined the use and perpetuation of secular and spiritual burial custom. Moreover, expressions of grief and condolence were considerably more sophisticated than correlations with material culture alone allow. Burial rites were a public means of negotiating private feelings of loss and sympathy. Thus, it was not the cost of a coffin and attendant mourning paraphernalia but the fulfilment of obligations to the dead which related detailed stories of love, grief, dignity and condolence. As Drakeford argues, the funeral ceremony holds a significance which extends beyond economic or psychological value: monetary expenditure simply represents the most tangible means of expressing the sentiments of the bereaved for the deceased, reaffirming for the bereaved the meaning and purpose of a life.¹⁸⁸ In this context, it is possible to reconcile a funeral culture where rituals of display inter-relate with expressions of grief and loss. The two factors were (and are) not mutually exclusive.

¹⁸⁷ See pp. 143-9 below.

¹⁸⁸ Drakeford, 'Last Rights?', pp. 521-3.

Chapter Four

Only a Pauper Whom Nobody Owns : Reassessing the Pauper Burial

The previous two chapters have argued that the rites of caring for, and disposing of, the corpse provided forums for the expression of feeling in the immediate aftermath of death. This chapter explores the implications of burial where those rites were prohibited or curtailed; namely, the pauper burial. Antipathy to the pauper grave (also known as the public or common grave) is well documented. Indeed, Anne Crowther suggests that pauper burial was the most ‘familiar’ aspect of hostility to the workhouse: it signified abject poverty and stigmatised both the deceased and the bereaved.¹ Ruth Richardson has argued that aversion to pauper burial stemmed from fears relating to the dissection of the corpse.² Yet by the close of the nineteenth century, the risk of anatomisation had decreased and parochial interment became repugnant, according to Richardson, chiefly because it was the antithesis of the ‘respectable’ funeral.³ Stripped of mourning paraphernalia, the pauper coffin was dropped into a hole alongside the remains of other unfortunates to rot in obscurity.

This chapter contests the neat dichotomy between the pauper and the respectable burial. Undeniably, the pauper grave conferred a degree of shame on the dead and those who mourned for them. However, I argue that this was not tied to issues of social and economic status alone. Rather, hostility to pauper burial derived from the anonymity of the grave, the inability to claim ownership of the dead and the denial of mourning rites which provided landscapes for grief. Hence, the significance attached to burial insurance was not simply related to a desire for display but rooted in an impulse to fulfil obligations to the dead and claim the rites associated with the decent

¹ Crowther, The Workhouse, p. 241.

² Richardson, Death, Dissection.

³ *Ibid.* p. 241, 271. For examples of debates relating to the increasing numbers of guardians who refused to forward pauper corpses to anatomy schools see Lancet, 28 August 1886, p.427, Lancet, 8 July 1911, p. 93 and Lancet, 10 February 1912, p. 388 and p. 408.

disposal of the corpse. Likewise, some families interred the dead in a common grave and subsequently applied for the exhumation of the corpse once they had accumulated sufficient finance to purchase a grave. This would hardly cancel the initial stigma of the pauper burial, especially as the re-interment of coffins took place in the dead of night. I suggest, therefore, that applications for re-burial were motivated by the desire to claim the ownership and identity of the dead.

An overview of the indignities inflicted on the pauper corpse illustrates the extent to which mourning rites were circumscribed by parish guardians (and some clerics too). This necessarily compromised the use of burial custom as a language of loss. Thus, I re-read the pauper burial as the contested site for notions of *respectful* burial. Despite a comprehensive historiography concerning the fluidity of respectability as an identity, analyses of respectable burial have concentrated almost exclusively on the purchase of a private grave.⁴ I do not wish to suggest that respectability is redundant as a tool for exploring attitudes towards burial. Rather, I invest the concept of respectability with meaning beyond status, defining it as a fluid notion relating to the dignity of the dead. A pragmatic response to material privation need not annul grief or invalidate a respectable burial, it simply necessitated a degree of flexibility in perceptions of paying one's respects to the dead. Thus, a family forced to inter the cadaver in a pauper grave could still inscribe rudimentary and/ or private gestures of loss with personal sorrow and, in doing so, facilitate their own understandings of respectable burial.

The Stigma of Pauperism

Perceptions of the private and public grave represent binary opposites in the cultural landscape of late-Victorian and Edwardian England. Stripped of mourning and commemorative paraphernalia, the common grave carried the lowly taint of pauperism and suggested insufficient grief. In more concrete terms, it cast aspersions

⁴ For critique of historical analyses of the 'respectable' burial see pp. 13-17 above.

on the financial management of the bereaved to the extent that credit facilities with local shopkeepers might be jeopardised.⁵ Conversely, the purchase of a private grave permitted the bereaved to bury the dead in their chosen manner with all the trappings of mourning. As F. M. L. Thompson notes, the ability to finance this kind of funeral also testified to thriftiness and, therefore, assured a family's respectable status within the community:

The ultimate disgrace for a Victorian worker's family was a pauper burial. Having the means to avoid it and provide for a decent funeral that would preserve the family's standing in the community was the measure of basic respectability...⁶

Thomas Laqueur has developed this theme, suggesting that the private grave also signified cultural membership: the procession to the cemetery, the occupation of public space and the participation of family, neighbours and colleagues operated as rituals of inclusion and testified to a community identity. In this sense, thrift was not valued in isolation but 'became the locus of enormous anxiety' because the economy of the pauper burial condemned the dead to 'dying bereft of the final signs of communal membership.'⁷

The meagreness of the pauper burial was consistent with the treatment of those who claimed indoor and outdoor relief. Families were forced to sell anything of value before they qualified for outdoor assistance whilst those who sought admission to the workhouse had to surrender all independence: married couples were separated, children were removed from the care of their parents, and all were forced to adhere to an institutional routine of life.⁸ That many families strove to avoid applying for

⁵ Ross, 'Not the Sort', p. 46.

⁶ Thompson, *The Rise*, p. 200.

⁷ Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death', p. 117.

⁸ Crowther, *The Workhouse*, pp. 193-221. See also Chinn, *Poverty Amidst Prosperity*, pp. 102-25, and Anne Digby, *The Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, [1982] 1989), pp. 14-8.

relief, to the point of near starvation, is undoubted.⁹ Indeed, Jack London suggested that those who committed suicide rather than enter the workhouse were not temporarily insane, as coroners' juries tended to rule, but had assessed the grim alternatives between starvation, the 'spike' (workhouse), and death, and made a 'very rational and level-headed' choice.¹⁰ London's observation may seem extreme. As a literary device, however, it illustrates the extent to which 'the union' was - in every sense - a last resort.

The degradation inherent in pauperism was tied to the punitive philosophy which informed and shaped the New Poor Law. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the status of the poor was changing.¹¹ Increasingly, calls were voiced for the classification of paupers into categories according to moral worth, thus enabling union authorities to distinguish 'the moral and well-disposed' pauper from those of 'indifferent or vicious character'.¹² For instance, an article in the Liverpool Mercury in 1892 distinguished the pauper 'born and bred' (the 'vicious, the incurably lazy, the habitual beggar, the thoroughly degraded') from those who had fallen upon hard times through no fault of their own.¹³ William Grisewood, organiser of a survey into the poor of Liverpool by the Liverpool Central Relief Committee and the Charity Organisation Society, commented in 1899 that:

...there are many most worthy people amongst the very poorest who are none the less upright, self-respecting, and even happy for being poor; but on the other hand, it is equally a mistake to class others as 'the poor' when their proper classification is 'the indolent', 'the vicious', and even 'the criminal'; persons who are frequently not only destroying every noble quality in

⁹ Chinn, Poverty Amidst Prosperity, pp. 102-4.

¹⁰ London, The People, p.267. For discussion of coroners' verdicts and attitudes towards suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England see Anderson, Suicide, pp. 191-262.

¹¹ Crowther, The Workhouse, pp. 54-87.

¹² Classificatory categories taken from a Local Government Circular distributed in August 1896. LVRO 353 SEL 10/14.

¹³ Liverpool Mercury, 9 April 1892, p. 4.

themselves, but are bringing up the young family dependant on them a heritage of penury, sin and shame.¹⁴

Likewise, it is unlikely that 'the poor' perceived themselves as a monolith. As Crowther notes, much of the stigma attached to the workhouse from the 1880s onwards stemmed not from the public acknowledgement of impoverishment but from being confined with the 'riff-raff' who had been denied outdoor relief.¹⁵ This stigma was, continues Crowther, far more acute for those who had managed to distance themselves from extreme poverty. In contrast, slumdwellers were consistently faced with the threat of the workhouse and could not, therefore, 'afford to be too mindful of social disgrace'.¹⁶ The pauper burial, however, made little allowance for fine distinctions between moral character.

Claiming the Dead

In the same way that admission to the workhouse deprived the poor of their autonomy, parochial burial was, almost without exception, an undignified interment. Given the significance attached to the 'decent' funeral, it is not surprising that investment in burial insurance was so widespread. For those without the buffer of a burial policy, the pawnbroker and/ or sympathetic friends might provide the necessary finance to purchase a grave.¹⁷ Burial authorities themselves were aware of the antipathy to the pauper grave whilst retaining an acute sense of the financial straits of many families. Toxteth burial board in Liverpool, for instance, initiated a scheme whereby a grave could be obtained on hire-purchase, an initial payment of half the cost securing the grave for use.¹⁸ Similarly, Ramsbottom and Bacup burial boards 'allow[ed] poor people three months credit when buying graves, rather than have

¹⁴ William Grisewood, *The Poor of Liverpool*, p.6.

¹⁵ Crowther, *The Workhouse*, p. 240.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236ff.

¹⁷ For discussion of pawnbroking see Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet*.

¹⁸ LVRO TOX 354/21/2, 14 October 1875. In the event of defaulting on payment, ownership of the grave reverted back to the Burial board.

public graves.¹⁹ At St. James' Cemetery, Liverpool, graves were available for lease (for fourteen years) after which they reverted to the trustees of the cemetery for use as public graves.²⁰ This permitted families to claim autonomy at the time of burial without necessitating the full expense of a private grave.

A more unorthodox approach to securing burial in a private grave was to inter the corpse in a common grave immediately following expiration whilst family and friends rallied to accumulate resources. Once the necessary finance had been raised, the bereaved could apply to have the cadaver exhumed from the common grave to be re-interred in a newly purchased private grave. Initially, the family would petition the relevant burial board for the removal of the cadaver from the parochial grave.²¹ If the board agreed to the exhumation, they would assist the next of kin in making a formal application to the Home Office for permission to disturb the dead.²² As Joseph Makin, a labourer, explained to Bolton burial board in 1886:

I Joseph Makin not being in circumstances when we buried my son Robert Makin to purches [sic] a new grave but having purched [sic] one since hopes that it lies in your power to get Him removed from common grave to purched [sic] grave... we will be very thankfull [sic] for your kindness.²³

Similarly, in October 1899 George Argill requested permission from Bolton burial board to move his three children, who had all died within one week, from a common to a private grave. Explaining to the board that 'at the time of the funerals I was sick

¹⁹ LRO UDCI 60/1, 26 November 1886.

²⁰ Retrospective on the cemetery in view of closure, 1932, LVRO 352 CEM 3/17/5.

²¹ Some families approached undertakers or monumental masons who then referred them back to the burial board or to the Home Secretary. See for instance, PRO HO45/10311/123811.

²² The Secretary of State dealt primarily with applications for re-interment where one or both of the graves in question lay in unconsecrated ground. If the body was to be removed from one consecrated grave to another in the same ground, relatives could, alternatively, approach the Bishop of the diocese for a 'faculty' to exhume the body. The Home Office respected the prerogatives of the established church but could override a Bishop's decision if necessary. However, as Toxteth burial board noted in 1895, a faculty from the Bishop cost five pounds whereas the Secretary of State's license for removal cost only 1d. PRO HO45/9768/B1065, November 1895.

²³ BRO ABZ 3/1, 4 December 1886.

myself and unable to buy a grave', George had since saved enough money to purchase a private plot.²⁴ These letters are unusual: for the many cases where relatives applied to have a body exhumed in Bolton cemeteries, only the corporation's copy of the Home Office application form has survived.²⁵ Yet both letters are also significant in that they articulate the hopes, in a very literal sense, of people generally consigned to historical silence.

The language employed in the letters is quite formal, both in terminology and their apparent conformity to notions of responsibility. Joseph Makin's letter began with an assertion of himself, one that implied his accountability for the accumulation of funds to purchase a grave. George Argill's application was, perhaps, more explicit in its attempt to utilise the language of the burial board officials: 'Sir I beg to make application to your committee for permission...', and, 'I remain your obedient servant'.²⁶ In addition, both fathers were tentative in expressing hopes for their requests being granted. This not only suggests an awareness of a language separate from the colloquial, it also highlights a willingness to show deference in order to regain ownership of the dead. It is possible that the poor were aware that they were *expected* to articulate humiliation and shame in relation to the pauper grave if they were to be classed amongst the deserving poor. Thus, 'respectability' provided a common language through which the poor could interact with municipal officials.

A family had to move swiftly if an application for disinterment was to be successful. Once another body had been interred over the deceased, permission for exhumation would not be granted unless the kin of more recent interment(s) agreed to the disturbance of their dead. Given that common graves frequently held around ten

²⁴ BRO ABZ 3/1, October 1889.

²⁵ The other burial board records consulted in this research only made reference in minute books to applications for exhumation being made and granted/ refused. Similarly, the Home Office files held at the PRO contain little relating to applications for exhumation and *reburial of pauper corpses*. This may well explain why this unconventional mode of interment has been entirely overlooked in analyses of the working-class culture of burial.

²⁶ BRO ABZ 3/1, October 1889.

bodies, the more coffins that were interred, the less likely it seemed that all families would grant permission for disinterment. Hence, most families wishing to exhume their dead applied to the corporation within days of the original burial. For instance, Elizabeth Jones died of influenza on 5 March 1906 and was interred three days later in a common grave in Heaton Cemetery in Bolton. By 13 March, her sister had written to the town clerk requesting permission to have the body removed to a private grave:

Sir, my Father wishes to have my sisters [sic] body removed to a new grave in the same cemereatry [sic] as she as [sic] already been laid to rest but we want it so as we can have a headstone and then we can claim our own grave and have it to look upon as our own... we want it removed as soon as possiable [sic].²⁷

Jones and her father, Isaac, trusted that their application would be brought forward for consideration 'at once without delay'. The sense of urgency in their application suggests that the pauper grave had only ever been perceived as a short term measure. The licence for removal of the body was finally granted on 6 April.²⁸

The Matot family were not so fortunate. Josephin and Joseph Matot had died at the beginning of 1915 and were interred in a common grave 'to curtail the funeral charges, the parents having no money to defray the expenses.' In the period between burial and application for removal, however, eighteen more coffins had been placed over the two children. Thirteen of the nearest relatives of those interred subsequent to the Matots objected to the disturbance of their dead.²⁹ Some decades earlier, Anfield (Liverpool) burial board had resolved to offer bereaved families the opportunity of buying the remaining space in the pauper grave, or the grave immediately next to it, when applications for disinterment were refused on account of subsequent burials.

²⁷ Correspondence between family, board and Home Office in BRO ABCF 15/18, 13 March 1906.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Correspondence in BRO ABCF 15/28, February 1915.

That the resolution appeared to make no impact suggests that the board had, to a degree, missed the point: partial ownership of a pauper grave (replete with other unidentified paupers) was not the same as claiming the identity and dignity conferred by the *family* grave.³⁰

In Bolton, applications for exhumation and reburial were made for cadavers of all ages, including very young children, and both immediate and distant relatives. Richard Jackson applied to have his children, Rosanna (died aged fifteen months) and Maud (died aged two years), exhumed for re-interment.³¹ Similarly, Sarah Ann Holt applied to Bolton burial board to have the remains of her twin grandsons, Francis and Edward Grundy, removed from a common grave: both babies had survived only sixteen hours before dying from congenital debility.³² Elizabeth Hardacre removed her nephew from a common grave whilst James Hilcroft requested permission to disinter his friend, Arthur Warden.³³ Joannah Whittle, a spinster, requested that her 'intended husband' be re-buried in a private grave as she did 'not like the idea of the body being interred [sic] in a common grave'.³⁴ Such concerns were not exclusive to the residents of Bolton. A young couple from East Farleigh, near Maidstone, applied in 1879 to exhume the body of their uncle, Samuel Mills (died aged eighty-six), from the workhouse grounds to a grave in their local churchyard. Before the man's death, they had promised to secure his interment by the side of his wife. The Secretary of State's observation that refusal of this application 'would be very hard, if not a mockery, to both these poor people' implies an appreciation of the reluctance to leave the dead to rot ignominiously.³⁵

³⁰ LVRO 353 PAR 6/2/4, 17 January 1878. There was no indication that the families of those already interred in the public grave would be notified of this transaction.

³¹ BRO ABZ 3/1/4, 12 November 1892.

³² BRO ABCF 15/28, 27 January 1914.

³³ BRO ABZ 3/1/4, 19 December 1889 and ABZ 3/1/4, 14 April 1892.

³⁴ BRO ABZ 3/1/9, 8 May 1902.

³⁵ PRO HO45/9577/82750, April 1879.

Manoeuvring between graves should not, however, be seen as a viable option for the poor en masse. Applications for disinterment tended to be refused or deferred for a minimum of nine months in circumstances where the deceased had died from an infectious disease.³⁶ Thus, when Elizabeth Williams sought permission to remove her husband and child from a common grave in December 1905, the Medical Officer of Health for Bolton deemed removal of the bodies 'inadvisable' as both had died of typhoid fever.³⁷ More significantly, perhaps, many families and friends found the cost of the purchased grave beyond their means, even with delaying tactics. It is worth noting that many of the families who approached the Home Office for the exhumation of a body had not actually purchased the grave at the time of their application. Rather, they claimed to have saved enough money to do so, and would purchase the grave if and when permission for exhumation was granted.³⁸ Thus, Ann Dickens applied to Hampstead burial board in June 1885 for the exhumation of her husband Timothy as she was 'about buying a grave'. Timothy had been interred the week before when she was 'much grieved' and 'could not know what was best'.³⁹ It seems plausible to suggest that, moved by a sense of urgency, some families made an application for removal whilst still accumulating finances. Moreover, for those with scant resources, the expense of a grave was a luxury which only featured in financial calculations if there was a cadaver to place in it. If permission for exhumation were refused, any money saved for the purpose could be used for alternative, equally pressing purposes.

³⁶ Germ theory had replaced 'miasmatic' theory (the spread of disease through noxious smells) as the dominant paradigm in medicine and public health. Presumably, contact with the decaying remains of a corpse - dead from infectious disease - was perceived as a huge health risk to those exhuming and reintering the body. See Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, pp. 86-116 for discussion of germ theory in relation to public health.

³⁷ BRO ABCF 15/18, correspondence during December 1905.

³⁸ George Argill is a typical example, claiming 'I intend to purchase [a private grave] if you can grant this request'. BRO ABZ 3/1/4.

³⁹ PRO HO45/9654/A40146, June 1885.

Somewhat ironically, application for exhumation and re-interment not only protracted the process of laying the dead to *rest*, it also proved more expensive.⁴⁰ Yet burial boards appear to have accepted applications for exhumations as normative. Correspondence between the chair and clerk of Clayton-le-Moors burial board in December 1896 concluded that such applications were ‘purely formal’ and that they could consent to exhumations without calling special meetings of the board.⁴¹ Similarly, members of Toxteth burial board agreed in 1895 that they were ‘sympathetic’ to the relatives who ‘frequently’ approached them with questions concerning the exhumation of their dead.⁴² That the Home Office printed a standardised form of application for the removal of bodies from common graves also suggests that such requests were *expected*.

Evidence from several burial authorities in the North-west suggests that this somewhat unorthodox approach to (re)burial was widely used and, more often than not, successful.⁴³ This is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it suggests a resourcefulness and a network of knowledge relating to the potential for the disinterment of cadavers. It also testifies to a desire to reclaim ownership of the corpse. More importantly, however, it is unclear how the re-interment of the dead in a private grave would reinstate respectability. The initial interment in a common grave had advertised to the community the family’s lack of finance at the time of burial. They would, therefore, already have suffered the stigma associated with the pauper grave. In terms of repairing the damage to their reputation, Home Office regulations stipulated that exhumation and re-interment of the corpse had to be executed ‘with due care and attention to decency’.⁴⁴ This necessitated covering the

⁴⁰ The burial board charged a fee for application and exhumation in addition to standard burial fees. See for instance, BRO ABZ 3/1/4, memo dated 8 July 1904.

⁴¹ LRO UDCL7/5, 7 December 1896. That burial boards usually profited from the exhumation and reinterment of corpses no doubt encouraged the rapid turnover of applications.

⁴² PRO HO45/9768/B1065, November 1895.

⁴³ Applications failed when relatives of other cadavers refused the disturbance of their dead or because the cause of death was an infectious disease.

⁴⁴ BRO ABCF 15/28. Standardised Home Office regulations attached to licence for exhumation throughout the period of study.

exhumed coffin ('and any other matter that may be offensive') with ground lime or 'McDougall's Disinfecting Powder'.⁴⁵ Moreover, the exhumation had to take place either at night or very early in the morning with no public witnesses, a stipulation introduced for public health reasons and, perhaps, to prevent ghoulish interest.⁴⁶ This measure redefined the pauper corpse exclusively in terms of contagion. Yet the ruling also meant that re-interment could not be accompanied by any secular or religious ritual: the bereaved were simply informed that re-burial had taken place. Thus, if 'respectability' was reinstated by this process, it was done so very quietly.

I would suggest that in undertaking to pay extra costs for re-burial and prolonging the process of laying the dead to rest, families were articulating a desire to reclaim the corpse as their own. The application made to Bolton burial board for the exhumation of Elizabeth Jones explicitly stated a wish to 'claim our own grave'.⁴⁷ In one sense, this suggests a wish to assert kinship beyond death. Indeed, the language of the 'private' or 'family' grave is loaded with connotations of familiarity, identity and spiritual reunion. In contrast, the terminology of the common/ pauper grave drew on notions of anonymity, poverty and bodies whom 'nobody owned' (and by implication, loved).⁴⁸ Yet in claiming kinship, the bereaved were also affirming the ownership and identity of the dead and ensuring that the cadaver lay in a recognised social space.

The Pauper Burial

The exhumation of corpses carries ghoulish connotations, not least because of associations with graverobbery and the gothic novel.⁴⁹ Moreover, as the Secretary of State noted in 1888, the disturbance of several coffins for the removal of one body

⁴⁵ BRO ABCF 15/28 and PRO HO45/9768/B1065, February 1887.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ BRO ABCF 15/18, correspondence from March and April 1906.

⁴⁸ See p. i. See also chapter five below for discussion of 'family' graves.

⁴⁹ For detailed discussion of illicit traffic in corpses at beginning of the nineteenth century see, Richardson, *Death, Dissection*, pp. 52-72. For examples of the gothic novel where the dead do not rest in peace see Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, [1818] 1985) and Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Oxford University Press, Oxford [1897] 1996).

was generally unpleasant; it created sanitary problems and was, no doubt, an ‘annoyance’ to the relatives of those corpses obstructing exhumation.⁵⁰ Indeed, familial consent to the disturbance of the dead for the removal of another corpse is surprising given the sensitivity which surrounded charges concerning the ‘desecration’ of pauper graves by cemetery authorities. I would suggest, however, that the sentiments which motivated families to permit the disturbance of their dead were far removed from the outrage occasioned by unsolicited interference with the corpse. The desecration of graves, a phrase loaded with negative connotations, evoked disgust whilst emphasising the powerlessness of the poor. Conversely, those who permitted (*and* refused) the temporary removal of their corpse were exercising a right under common law to claim some authority over the body.⁵¹ Likewise, families who initiated the exhumation of their deceased were acting within a conceptual framework which sanctioned the apparently *undignified* disturbance of the dead for the purpose of re-interment in a *dignified* grave. Only then, once the identity and dignity of the corpse had been established, could the deceased (and the bereaved) rest in peace.

A series of articles in the Liverpool magazine The Porcupine in April 1892, headlined ‘Desecration of the Dead’ at Anfield Cemetery, highlighted both the vulnerability of the pauper corpse and the shoddy manner in which it was interred.⁵² The first article made revelations ‘so incredible’, the author speculated, that readers would be forgiven for thinking them a ‘ghastly invention’.⁵³ The demand for public graves at Anfield Cemetery had outstripped supply. Despite the availability of an area of uncultivated land, however, cemetery employees (‘graveyard churls’) had re-opened old public graves and ‘broken up and trampled down’ the coffins in them and

⁵⁰ PRO HO45/9955/V8622, March 1888.

⁵¹ For discussion of removal of body without license or permission as an indictable offence see for instance, a case before the Home Office in February 1887 where three bodies had been removed from their graves during the closure of a graveyard in Devon. PRO HO45/9768/B1065, February 1887.

⁵² The Porcupine, 9 April 1892, p. 8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

deposited remnants of bones in a basket.⁵⁴ Many of the exhumed coffins were intact; one exposed a woman's head 'with the flesh of the face and long hair attached'.⁵⁵ Conceding that 'it makes no difference to the dead' what atrocities were committed to their graves, the author maintained that such 'ghastly treatment' of the dead was deeply offensive to working-class people and made a mockery of the grave as a 'last resting place'.⁵⁶ A second article, published the following week, acknowledged that the burial board were within their rights to re-use public graves after a minimum of fourteen years.⁵⁷ This did little, however, to assuage the horror of desecration for bereaved families, especially when coffins and bones had to be smashed in order to accommodate new interments. Moreover, the author continued, the very character of the pauper burial was 'simply a scandal to any community pretending respect for the dead': in 'frail deal boxes' pauper corpses were 'packed like sardines'.⁵⁸ The common graves in Anfield resembled a 'sand pit' without the 'slightest sign' of cultivation or care; the land was a 'mere waste, an open chasm, in fact, where it would be very appropriate to place a notice to the effect that "Rubbish may be shot here"'.⁵⁹

The damning and sensational allegations in the articles drew upon the sensitivity of the poor to the burial of their dead, a device which did not escape the notice of the superintendent of Anfield Cemetery, William Wortley, who suspected he was being held up for 'public odium and contempt'.⁶⁰ Indeed, he 'felt deeply' that the articles accused him of 'a shameful neglect of duty and a callous disregard of the feelings and circumstances of the poor'.⁶¹ On the contrary, Wortley urged, the poor were treated

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ The Porcupine, 16 April 1892, pp. 8-9. These graves were twenty-eight years old.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Letter from Wortley's solicitors, 20 April 1892, cited in The Porcupine, 23 April 1892, pp. 8-9. Wortley's solicitors first wrote to the editor on 13 April 1892 offering him the opportunity to retract the allegations made before Wortley sued for gross libel. Also reprinted in The Porcupine, 23 April 1892, pp. 8-9.

⁶¹ Taken from Wortley's logbook, read at the burial board's monthly meetings. LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/11, 28 April 1892.

with as much ‘tender regard’, reverence and sympathy as ‘those in better circumstances.’⁶² Undeniably, the public graves in Anfield Cemetery were being re-used. They were, however, old graves and, where remains had been found, they were reburied with due respect.⁶³ The Porcupine had, Wortley argued, not only exaggerated and distorted the procedure in ‘ghastly sensational assertions’, they had caused ‘quite unnecessarily, great pain to poor people.’⁶⁴

As the editors at The Porcupine were quick to note, Wortley’s defensiveness and his attempts to align himself with the feelings of the poor missed the point. That the desecration of graves was ‘legal’ rendered it no less distressing to the poor.⁶⁵ Moreover, Wortley’s acknowledgement that such work was ‘disagreeable but necessary’ implied that he himself found the re-opening of graves and the removal of bones distasteful.⁶⁶ That he glossed over the *general* manner in which paupers were interred further suggested the potential disparity between his egalitarian rhetoric and the undignified burial of the pauper corpse which rested only in *temporary* peace.

The Porcupine’s comparison of common graves in Anfield Cemetery with rubbish sites was a useful metaphor for the disposal of the pauper corpse. Often situated in obscure locations (notably by cemetery waste sites or behind ‘back boundary walls’) and deprived of memorial paraphernalia, the pauper grave signified the marginalisation of the poor.⁶⁷ In 1885 the registrar at Wigan Cemetery objected to the use of the ‘best ground’ for common graves. A piece of land which had recently been drained and was of little value was, he thought, more appropriate for the interment of paupers.⁶⁸ In October 1895 Joseph Moss, a member of the Liverpool

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Logbook and letter from Wortley’s solicitors to the editor, 20 April 1892, reprinted in The Porcupine, 23 April 1892.

⁶⁴ LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/11, 26 May 1892.

⁶⁵ The Porcupine, 23 April 1892, pp. 8-9.

⁶⁶ Letter from Wortley’s solicitors, 20 April 1892, cited in The Porcupine, 23 April 1892.

⁶⁷ The location of pauper graves in Church and Clayton-le-Moors Cemetery. LRO UDCI 58/1, 18 January 1889.

⁶⁸ WRO A 10/1/Z, 19 February 1885.

Select Vestry, confronted his fellow guardians concerning the interment of Catholic paupers in a stone quarry at the end of Anfield Cemetery. Noting that Protestant paupers were interred in the parish cemetery at Walton, Moss considered the Catholic resting place 'inhuman' and loaded with 'unnecessary degradation'.⁶⁹ In 1906 a deputation of Anglican, Catholic and Nonconformist ministers petitioned Bolton burial board to curtail their shoddy treatment of the pauper cadaver. In particular, they called for an end to the desecration of common graves by the laying of pathways over them.⁷⁰ As late as 1925 the Vicar of Bolton protested that placing pathways over public graves, 'where anyone can walk over them', was tantamount to desecration.⁷¹ Thus, the very denial of space implied a perception of the pauper grave as a dumping ground for those at the margins of society.

As if to compound the humiliation of interment in wasteland, the byelaws for cemeteries in the North-west generally prohibited the installation of a headstone on the pauper grave.⁷² Indeed, Stretford burial board advised those friends of the pauper corpse who wished to establish a memorial to re-inter the body in a private grave.⁷³ As one Bolton woman (born in 1906) noted, the knowledge that 'no-one would know there was a grave there' reinforced the anonymity and indignity of parochial interment.⁷⁴ Moreover, the prohibition of a headstone limited opportunities for commemoration and, therefore, excluded the bereaved from a culture of mourning which utilised the gravespace as a site for the remembrance of the dead.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Liverpool Daily Post, 4 October 1895, p. 3. Also reported in Liverpool Mercury, 4 October 1895, p. 5. The scandal is also discussed in the following chapter. Moss's concerns were initially dismissed as unnecessary and, ironically, an insult to the Catholic population's choice of burial ground.

⁷⁰ BRO AB 13/1/11, 1 March 1906.

⁷¹ BRO ABCF 15/39, 19 March 1925.

⁷² See for instance, table of fees for Haslingden cemetery 1901, LRO MBH 42/1 and regulations for Chorley Cemetery 1913, LRO MBCh 42/48.

⁷³ LRO MBS 2/20, 8 September 1903.

⁷⁴ BOHT Tape 32a, Ref: AL/KP/1c/013.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Roberts also cites the case of a woman whose mother had been interred in a pauper grave. That the family were unable to visit the grave caused deep distress for years after the burial. Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way', p. 191.

As attitudes towards poverty slowly changed, burial boards began to make concessions to the memorialisation of pauper graves. In 1910 Stretford burial board invited tenders for the erection of headstones over public graves whereby the family of the deceased could pay (9d per dozen letters in 1913) to have the name of the dead inscribed on a communal stone.⁷⁶ The stone remained the property of the cemetery.⁷⁷ By 1903, Bolton burial board permitted mourners to inscribe the name and age of the dead and the date of death on a flatstone which lay over the grave.⁷⁸ It is interesting to note, however, that in 1917 the board reviewed this resolution, concluding that ‘due to lack of interest’ inscriptions on public graves would only be available in one of the corporation’s three cemeteries.⁷⁹ Of 542 interments in pauper graves in 1920, only four families chose to inscribe the details of the dead on a flatstone.⁸⁰ Of course, many families who interred their dead in a pauper grave would probably have found the cost of an inscription too expensive. None the less, having access to this form of memorialisation was important in itself as the *prohibition* of public remembrance on graves perpetuated the indignity of the pauper funeral even after burial had taken place.

Even the smallest gesture of commemoration could meet with *hostility from the union* authorities. An article in The Times in 1878 chided guardians who moved pauper corpses from coffins provided by their families to parochial boxes of ‘inferior value’ and substituted tin name-plates with ‘a piece of paper with a name and number’.⁸¹ Similarly, an article in the Lancet in 1884 attacked the ‘petty tyranny’ of the Cambridge guardians who, it revealed, *removed all name-plates and small ornaments* attached to parish coffins by the friends of the deceased. As the author noted:

⁷⁶ LRO MBH 2/20, 8 February 1910.

⁷⁷ LRO MBS 2/21, 8 July 1913. A similar arrangement was in operation at St. James cemetery in Liverpool. LVRO 352 CEM 3/17/5.

⁷⁸ BRO ABCF 15/30, Rules and Regulations and Tables of Fees for Bolton Cemeteries 1903.

⁷⁹ BRO ABCF 15/39, taken from a table of ‘Total Number of Interments in the Corporation’s Three Cemeteries Over Five Years’.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ The Times, 28 November 1878, p. 12.

All those who have worked among the poor know the feelings with which they regard their dead, and how even the very poorest will strive to secure the means sufficient for a decent burial.⁸²

For this author, then, even modest gestures of mourning and identity salvaged some decency for the pauper corpse. In denying such simple rites, the guardians exceeded the bounds of known misery and betrayed a lack of humanity.⁸³

In a similar vein, most guardians prohibited the use of coffins purchased by the friends of the dead. That parochial coffins tended to be cheap and ineffectual can only have exacerbated the humiliation inherent in surrendering the ownership of the corpse to the union. As Robert Roberts noted, guardians were notorious for commissioning the cheapest coffins available on the undertaker's sliding scale:

The *Esk* casket, last on the list, was just the job for paupers and those amongst our poor who had foolishly backslid on their burial premiums. Fashioned in elm, it tended, like the cheap Macintoshes of the time, to split and let in water.⁸⁴

In 1895, one Salford guardian described the pauper coffins commissioned by the union as a 'perfect disgrace':

Their quality was so poor that they cracked when a nail was driven in, and unless bodies are carefully handled, they fall out of them.⁸⁵

Liverpool Select Vestry had a history of contracting pauper coffins which were little more than 'rough boxes without handles' with the names of the dead 'written in chalk

⁸² Lancet, 3 May 1884, pp. 812-3.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Roberts, A Ragged Schooling, pp. 134-5.

⁸⁵ Liverpool Echo, 25 August 1895, p. 4 .

abject poor. When the guardians of Preston union accepted a tender for the supply of cheap but (allegedly) good quality coffins in 1897, the Lancet suggested that the pecuniary difference could be expended on upgrading the pauper burial itself:

The Preston Guardians will, we hope, now that a coffin can be purchased for a penny, make the funeral of a pauper somewhat less of a perfunctory ceremony than it is at present and take some care to show that a body should not be huddled into the ground at the cheapest rate and in the most careless manner.⁹³

Yet the ‘huddling’ of paupers into their graves went beyond a question of financial expenditure. Whilst the Christian burial service articulated egalitarianism in death (at least for the believer), entry into cemetery chapels was often barred to both the pauper corpse and mourners prior to interment. In 1891 Canon Carr, the Roman Catholic priest for Anfield Cemetery, complained to the Liverpool burial board that prohibiting admission to the chapel was an unjust practice. He qualified his appeal, however, by adding that access should only be encouraged for those paupers ‘that were fit - not disagreeable or dangerous’.⁹⁴ At Walton workhouse cemetery, paupers were permitted into the cemetery chapel by ‘special arrangement’ and the payment of a small fee. Again, this only applied to those who displayed no ‘unpleasant’ or ‘dangerous’ characteristics.⁹⁵ Such language is richly suggestive: it points to a vision of the abject poor as unpredictable and perilous guests in the house of God. Moreover, whilst fears concerning the behaviour of paupers were no doubt justified in some cases, the policing of the church served only to reinforce the abasement of the common grave, especially for those who considered themselves ‘respectable’.

The acting chaplain of Walton workhouse in the early 1880s, Hywel Smith, took a keen interest in mourners who attended parish burials, distinguishing between the

⁹³ Lancet, 9 October 1897, p. 930.

⁹⁴ LVRO PAR 6/5/1, 15 October 1891.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

in a very illegible manner'.⁸⁶ In 1884 one guardian remonstrated that coffins with holes large enough to poke an umbrella through were unseemly, not least because they exposed the corpse to view. Indeed, there was not one member of the vestry who would 'care to bury his dog in one of them'.⁸⁷ In 1891, another guardian, Mr. Brooks, called for more 'liberality' with regard to expenditure on coffins. As it was, pauper coffins were made from flimsy wood whilst their uniform size meant that larger corpses were 'indecently' crammed in them.⁸⁸ Cracks and holes in the coffin were not only a danger to public health, they did little to assist the grieving process. Recalling one pauper burial, the guardian Mr. Roberts described a coffin which had cracked to a width of over one inch. The effect was distressing:

A poor creature put her finger through the crack and felt the body, and the result was a lamentation that was terrible to listen to.⁸⁹

Such poor quality was particularly disappointing as only one month earlier, tenders had been invited for a new contractor on account of the shoddy quality of coffins then in use.⁹⁰ Indeed, a high turnover of contracts for coffins implies that the 'general character' of those supplied to the workhouse was unsatisfactory.⁹¹ Moreover, such was the flimsiness of the parish coffin that suppliers were usually unable to sell them to anyone else. This not only points to their appalling quality, it implies that - like the workhouse uniform - they were readily identified as belonging to the parish.⁹²

Increasingly, however, the meanness of pauper interments was perceived as indicative of outdated attitudes towards poverty rather than as an acceptable way of treating the

⁸⁶ Liverpool Daily Post, 9 October 1895, p. 3.

⁸⁷ [Liverpool] Express, 7 October 1884 in LVRO 353 SEL 14/5.

⁸⁸ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 12 September 1891, p.3 and Liverpool Daily Post, 9 September 1891, p. 3.

⁸⁹ Liverpool Daily Post, 9 October 1895, p. 3.

⁹⁰ LVRO 353 SEL 10/14, 19 September 1895.

⁹¹ BRO GBO 12/13, 8 July 1908.

⁹² One firm of joiners complained to the Liverpool Workhouse Committee on losing their contract for coffins that no-one else would purchase the coffins already made for the workhouse. LVRO 353 SEL 10/16, 19 November 1903.

reprobate poor and ‘respectable’ and ‘decent folks’, some of whom were ratepayers.⁹⁶ Friends and relatives who thanked him for his ministry, articulated a degree of shame at the manner of interment and/ or expressed anxiety for the soul of the departed all ranked highly in Smith’s estimation. That he recorded these positive exchanges in his daily logbook suggests, however, that they were the exception rather than the rule. None the less, those mourners who approached the chaplain in humility were actively distinguishing themselves from ‘rough’ and ‘dangerous’ paupers and, inadvertently perhaps, demonstrating their right of access to spiritual rites.

Issues of access to the chapel were not, therefore, confined to a desire for spiritual solace. As noted in previous chapters, the spiritual meanings attached to religious rituals were inextricable from secular rights.⁹⁷ Thus, exclusion from church was offensive to the poor as much on account of the distinctions drawn between the pauper and non-pauper as from injured spiritual sentiments. For those who did seek spiritual balm in religious rites, some comfort could be taken from the reading of the burial service as the corpse was lowered into the grave. Yet even this concession to decency could appear slapdash and half-hearted. Scandals concerning failure or reluctance to read the burial service at paupers’ funerals indicate a degree of clerical ambivalence towards the corpse, especially when no mourners were present. As the Local Government Chronicle and Knight’s Advertiser noted in 1885, some members of the clergy seemed reluctant to perform the burial service over the bodies of paupers who had died in the workhouse but whose ‘home’ parish could not be traced.⁹⁸ When Stretford burial board refused consecratory status for the Anglican portion of the cemetery, the Bishop of Manchester expressed concern that he would be unable to ‘compel’ the rector of the parish to officiate at the burials of the parish poor.⁹⁹ In 1882, the governor of Wigan Workhouse, Mr. Lowe, issued a report

⁹⁶ LVRO 353 WES 14/3. Smith acted as chaplain at the workhouse on a temporary basis during the 1880s whenever the regular chaplain, Reverend Leslie, was ill.

⁹⁷ See pp. 100-6 above.

⁹⁸ LRO UDCI 60/1. The Chronicle was distributed to boards of guardians and sanitary authorities every Saturday.

⁹⁹ LRO MBS 2/18, circa July 1885.

criticising ministers for non-attendance at pauper funerals noting that ‘things like that are occurring pretty often here lately’.¹⁰⁰ In the space of one week, two bodies from the workhouse had been interred without the appropriate clergy. The body of Julia Bray, a Roman Catholic pauper, was interred on a Monday afternoon, yet no burial service was performed until two days after.¹⁰¹ Later that week, the corpse of Edward Edwards was also taken for burial in the workhouse cemetery. When no minister arrived to officiate at the interment, the sexton (the caretaker of the cemetery) read the burial service himself, despite having no authority to do so. Possibly doubting the wisdom of his actions, he then abandoned the coffin in the chapel for the duration of the night.¹⁰²

The flippancy of the clergy towards the pauper corpse provided an opportunity for guardians to deflect criticism from themselves. On a visit to Walton workhouse cemetery in June 1883, Mr. Beesley, a member of the West Derby Guardians, near Liverpool, witnessed the interment of a pauper in the absence of the chaplain, Reverend Leslie.¹⁰³ Reporting this ‘defect’ to his fellow guardians, Beesley called for Leslie to be reprimanded. In his defence, Leslie argued that the coffin in question had arrived at the cemetery after the appointed hour for the burial service. He had sanctioned immediate interment for sanitary reasons: the corpse had been found drowned which had necessitated a post-mortem. In any case, continued Leslie, he read the burial service over the grave two days following the interment.¹⁰⁴

This rather missed the point. The board requested that, forthwith, Leslie contrive to remain at the cemetery one extra hour each day in order to conduct the burial service over any late arrivals. Leslie refused but, as a gesture of goodwill to the board, offered to read the burial service the day following the interment of any ‘casuals’.

¹⁰⁰ WRO A10/1/Z, 27 May 1882.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ LVRO 353 WES 14/3, 15 June 1883.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Leslie argued that Home Office regulations demanded safe and speedy burial for bodies ‘in all stages of decomposition’.

This concession would, however, occasion 'personal hardship' and was, he considered, 'quite unnecessary'.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, he suggested that the board remember that his salary had remained static since 1869, despite the steady increase in his workload, much of which was done 'voluntarily and unsolicited'.¹⁰⁶ Leslie's lackadaisical approach towards the burial of 'casuals' encapsulated the humiliation attached to the 'pauper whom nobody owned'. Similarly, Beesley, the champion of the cause, concluded his admonishment of Leslie declaring he 'would not like one of his relatives to be put in a hole like a dog'.¹⁰⁷ Curiously, however, he found no such inhumanity in the pauper burial itself. Rather, the burial service conferred Christian status on the pauper grave and, therefore, distinguished it from an uncivilised and indecent interment. That even this could be postponed until the day following interment when confronted with an obstinate chaplain indicates that any concern for decency was tenuous and easily compromised.¹⁰⁸

It is impossible to determine the meanings invested in the burial service. It is plausible to surmise, however, that the nonchalance of clerics compounded the secular indignities of pauper burial. For instance, on Thursday 27 February 1908 a boy named Thomas Roberts died in the workhouse hospital on Brownlow Hill, Liverpool.¹⁰⁹ His father informed workhouse officials that he would make private arrangements for the burial of his son on the following Sunday. When he had not returned to the workhouse offices by Saturday morning, however, the clerk authorised the interment of the body in a pauper grave. When Roberts arrived at the hospital later that day to finalise arrangements for the collection of Thomas's body, he was deeply 'grieved':

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Leslie noted that when the workhouse opened in 1868, it catered for 800 inmates. During the past year, however, the population of the house had reached almost 2000. Following this confrontation with the Board Leslie received an increase in his annual salary of twenty-five pounds. See LVRO 353 WES, 12 July 1883. Beesley had opposed the increase. See LVRO 353 WES 14/3, 21 June 1883 and Liverpool Daily Post, 21 June 1883, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ LVRO 353 WES 14/3, 15 June 1883.

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Beesley retracted his charges of neglect of duty. See LVRO 353 WES, 28 June 1883.

¹⁰⁹ Liverpool Daily Courier, 6 March 1908, p. 3. See also LVRO 353 SEL 14/5.

not only had the burial already taken place, Thomas had been interred ‘without so much as a prayer’.¹¹⁰

Whether Roberts considered religious rites to be of spiritual significance is unclear. To a point, it was not the issue at stake. As Mr. Reay, the guardian responsible for calling the Select Vestry to account for the mistake, succinctly stated: ‘The boy should not have been taken away and buried like a dog, with no intimation being sent to his friends’.¹¹¹ Reay’s evocation of animal imagery referred to the unChristian nature of the burial, seemingly made worse by taking place in the absence of the bereaved. The censures issued in regard to the mistake hinged, however, on inefficiency and incompetence rather than the wretchedness of the pauper burial itself. Indeed, the governor of the workhouse could only complain about the workload of his staff: ‘...the clerks have as much work as they can get through. I am only surprised that there are not more bumbles than there are.’¹¹² The only concession to the feelings of the family was a grudging letter of apology.¹¹³

Bureaucratic mistakes and oversights inflamed charges that the poor law guardians were ‘mean-souled’ and a ‘board of bigots’.¹¹⁴ As The Porcupine had noted early in January 1881, ineptitude was, all too often, inseparable from indifference to the feelings of the poor.¹¹⁵ Reporting that a young girl Rebecca Scott had died in Liverpool workhouse hospital and was subsequently interred in a parochial grave without any notification of either being sent to her concerned mother, the journal concluded that:

The blunders, great and small of our local parish are becoming a byword, and until the contemptuous and unfeeling manner in which the poor are

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ See Liverpool Review, 3 January 1880, p.11 and The Liberal Review, 12 June 1880, p.6.

¹¹⁵ The Porcupine, 22 January 1881, p. 684.

treated is stopped with a firm hand, 'mistakes' and 'negligence', such as the above, will never cease.¹¹⁶

Blunders clearly exacerbated the distress of the pauper burial yet, as *The Porcupine* noted, bureaucratic ineptitude stemmed from a fundamental insensitivity to the feelings of those forced to turn to the parish. Again, this would suggest that antipathy to the pauper grave was rooted not so much in a preoccupation with economic status but in the concern to claim the ownership and dignity of the dead.

Contesting Respectability

If we are to use the notion of respectability with reference to the working-class culture of death and bereavement we must, therefore, posit a more fluid understanding of the 'respectable' funeral. The exhumation of pauper corpses for the purposes of re-interment indicates that dichotomies between stigma and respectability were not clear cut. Furthermore, I would suggest that families who interred the dead in pauper graves strove to retain, where possible, a degree of dignity in death. The cheap name-plates attached to pauper coffins (as cited above) is a prime example of the desire to claim a modicum of identity and respect for the dead. In this light, I contend that the fixation with the pauper/ private burial dichotomy has encouraged a tendency to overlook such gestures as components of loose and malleable definitions of 'respectability'.

One of the most well-known contemporary analyses of respectability and antipathy towards the pauper grave was Maud Pember Reeves' account of thrift and burial expense.¹¹⁷ Her conclusions challenged the notion that the money spent on funerals could, with prudence, be halved. This was, Reeves maintained, an 'erroneous idea'

¹¹⁶ Ibid. Rebecca's mother had supplied her address to the clerk at the hospital and called in the days following her daughter's admission to inquire about her progress. Two days prior to the death, hospital staff informed her that Rebecca was 'fine'.

¹¹⁷ Reeves, *Round About A Pound*, pp. 66-72.

based upon ignorance concerning the 'real circumstances' of the poor.¹¹⁸ Rather, the expense incurred by the 'decent' funeral was a rational form of expenditure when set against an appreciation of the aversion to the pauper funeral.¹¹⁹ Parochial burial not only lacked dignity and respect, it pauperised the entire family with all the 'consequent political and social degradation' attendant on that status.¹²⁰ Reeves was aware that antipathy to the common grave might be perceived as 'sheer prejudice'. Yet it was, she suggested, a prejudice 'even the most educated and highly born' of parents would share if their child were to be buried in the pauper grave.¹²¹ Reeves' study undoubtedly gestured towards an understanding of the working-class culture of death and values of thrift. This gesture was, however, strictly limited to the 'respectable, hard-working, independent' poor as defined by Reeves and her fellow surveyors.¹²² Moreover, Reeves' claim to know the 'real circumstances' of the working classes rested on twice weekly visits to families in Lambeth by members of the Fabian Women's Group between 1909 to 1913.¹²³ The study was hardly representative (only thirty families were involved) and Reeves glossed over the problems inherent in members of one social group interviewing another. As Ross McKibbin argues, external observers of working-class lives represented figures of authority who were unable to empathise with or rationalise the mentality of the poor.¹²⁴

None the less, Reeves' account posited a relatively nuanced perception of the working-class funeral. By setting the impulse for burial insurance against the aversion to the pauper grave, Reeves implied that interment in a private grave secured the 'decent' (and, therefore, respectable) burial. Decency in death was, however, flexible. For Reeves, *excess* expenditure compromised respectability as much as pauperism.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.67.

¹¹⁹ Reeves did, however, remain critical of the 'pomp and ceremony' which accompanied many adult burials.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.68.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹²³ *Ibid.* Introduction.

¹²⁴ McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class*, pp. 167-96.

Citing the bill for a child's funeral, she concluded that 'no display and no extravagance' were evident in paying for hearse attendants, a woman to lay the body out, flowers and a new black tie for the father of the deceased.¹²⁵ Rather, they represented modest and sincere expressions of loss. The child was interred in a common grave. Significantly, however, Reeves still defined the funeral as respectable. Thus, an appreciation of the social stigma attached to pauperism did not nullify the *respectability* of a funeral in terms of personal gestures of mourning. Between the ideal of the private grave and the shame of pauper burial, there was considerable scope for individuals to inscribe mourning rites, no matter how rudimentary, with profound meaning.

For some at least, therefore, interment in a common grave could be reconciled with notions of decent burial, especially if some autonomy could be exercised in the manner in which the dead were conveyed to the grave. Indeed, it was this recognition that prompted criticisms of guardians who adhered to Draconian interpretations of the punitive purpose of pauper burial. It is worth remembering that despite the boom in burial insurance, interments in common graves accounted for a significant number of burials in most cemeteries.¹²⁶ To suppose that the families of these corpses were either too 'rough' to care about decent interment (or their dead) or were in perpetual thrall to the stigma of pauperism seems simplistic, not least because it overlooks the potential to redefine decency. Indeed, the rudimentary effects of mourning could adopt *extra* significance as the locus for representations of loss when other rites were circumscribed. This did not cancel the indignity of witnessing the guardians' (and clergy's) shoddy treatment of the corpse. Rather, the ignoble elements of pauper

¹²⁵ Reeves, Round About A Pound, pp. 70-1. Example taken from the burial of a child who died in August 1911.

¹²⁶ As the scandal surrounding the re-use of public graves at Anfield in 1892 highlighted, the demand for common graves often outstripped a cemetery's initial calculations. A similar difficulty arose in the cemetery at Burton-on-Trent in 1896 when the board were forced to create 270 new common graves. PRO HO45/9921/B23268, correspondence and newspaper cuttings, 1896-1897. A survey of St James Cemetery in Liverpool in 1932 revealed that since the ground opened for interments in 1829, 5789 private graves (to hold five bodies) had been sold whilst 1728 common graves had been filled. Common graves held between seven and ten bodies. See LVRO 352 CEM 3/17/5.

burial could be ameliorated by autonomous displays of respect and grief. As the Liverpool workhouse committee noted in February 1884, bereaved families frequently removed bodies from the workhouse claiming their intention to bury them directly.¹²⁷ They then performed mourning customs and organised wakes before returning to the parish authorities to request parochial interment. That burial policies were often drawn but evidently not spent on the purchase of a grave was a ‘scandal’ which, the committee agreed, required immediate ‘suppression’. In future, bodies would only be released to families who undertook to buy a grave immediately.¹²⁸

The guardians were at a loss to understand this seemingly skewed sense of priority, especially when set against the supposed horror of the pauper grave. Yet such cases posed a persistent problem for union authorities. Moses Waddington died in the workhouse at Bolton on 21 October 1905 and was interred in the cemetery there three days later.¹²⁹ Yet the guardian’s inquiries revealed that Waddington’s son had drawn five pounds from one burial club whilst his brother-in-law withdrew eight pounds from a policy with Prudential Assurance. The small fortune had subsequently been spent on clothing for the family, to which several guardians cried ‘Shame’.¹³⁰ This ‘disgraceful (hear, hear)’ expenditure moved the guardians to propose strict measures which would necessitate an investigation into the private finances of any person committed to burial at the expense of the parish.¹³¹ If the family and friends of the deceased had money to fritter away on clothing, food, drink and a hearse or two, they had sufficient means to buy a grave. A similar case arose in 1908 when the family of a woman who had died in the workhouse removed her corpse for burial. They then applied for a parochial burial.¹³² On the day of the funeral, however, the

¹²⁷ LVRO 353 SEL 10/11, 7 February 1884.

¹²⁸ Ibid. See also Liverpool Mercury, 15 February 1884 in LVRO 353 SEL 14/3. The issue was raised again in 1887. See LVRO 353 SEL 10/12, 17 March 1887.

¹²⁹ The [Bolton] Daily Chronicle, 15 November 1905 in BRO GBO 12/13.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Bolton Evening Chronicle, 23 December 1908 in BRO GBO 12/13.

woman was 'conveyed to the cemetery in a hearse drawn by four horses, whilst there were three coaches, each drawn by two horses.'¹³³ Alderman Brooks was furious:

...if anyone went to the workhouse, getting everything at the expense of the ratepayer and yet money was spent so lavishly on the funeral without interring the body in *anything but a common grave*, surely there should be some recompense to the Guardians for what they had done for the woman [my emphasis].¹³⁴

It transpired that the woman's son had insured her for the sum of forty pounds and, after her extravagant transport to the grave, was 'drinking the rest of the money as fast as he possibly could.'¹³⁵

It may be that the relative extravagance of these burials induced the wrath of the board. Yet it is plausible to suggest that many families buried their dead with more modest mourning rites whilst still turning to the parish for a grave. The guardians' objections towards the squandering of burial money on mourning paraphernalia hinged partially on a desire to recoup money spent on those who evidently had no need to burden the ratepayer.¹³⁶ Yet there was also a reluctance among guardians to accept any rationale that permitted expenditure on the effects of mourning whilst committing the dead to the perceived disgrace of a parish grave. Moreover, guardians made no concession to the possibility that decisions concerning the distribution of burial finance necessitated protracted and potentially antagonistic family discussion. Likewise, the tirade against the 'tyrannical customs' of the poor revealed an absence of shared understandings concerning the meaning of burial ritual outside a fixed definition of 'respectability' which was rooted in antipathy to pauper burial.¹³⁷ As

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ At Liverpool, relatives could only claim the effects of those who died in the workhouse after the guardians had deducted the cost of the keep and interment of the deceased. See for instance, LVRO 353 SEL 10/14, 353 SEL 10/16, 353 SEL 10/17.

¹³⁷ The Times, 27 September 1892, p.9.

chapters two and three highlighted, giving the dead a 'good send off' and opening the house to neighbours and relatives expressed immediate grief in a language which, as the next chapter will demonstrate, the final rotting place of the dead failed to supply. It was, therefore, not 'respectability' as defined and understood by the guardians which was at issue for such families, but the articulation of 'respect' for the corpse and the ability to express loss through the familiar rituals of burial.

It must be noted, however, that the pauper grave did not command universal repulsion. Instances abound of individuals who died in the workhouse, were interred in a common grave and later found to have saved a small fortune in the bank.¹³⁸ The expense incurred by a 'respectable' burial was thought by some to be money foolishly spent. As Walter Greenwood's father suggested, far better to spend the money on the living:

A pauper grave wouldn't trouble me... Come to think of it you can let my burial insurance lapse here and now and let's be having the pennies every week. If I sup it away in beer it'll be one in the eye for those insurance robbers [and] the right man will have benefited.¹³⁹

On a more mercenary note, William Morris of Bridgeman Street in Bolton permitted the interment of his friend and distant relative, Jonathan Redford, in the grounds of the workhouse in the full knowledge that the dead man owned a gravespace in Tonge Cemetery. Following the burial, Morris applied to Bolton corporation to have Redford's grave deeds transferred to himself as his friend had given him his belongings prior to death and he was the only living relative of the dead man.¹⁴⁰

Crucially, some people were wholly unaware of the distinction between the private and public grave, despite the supposed 'horror' of parochial burial. Indeed, some

¹³⁸ See for instance, LVRO 353 SEL 10/16, 11 February 1904.

¹³⁹ Greenwood, *There was a Time*, p.23.

¹⁴⁰ BRO ABZ 3/1/1, 18 September 1886.

families interred their dead in common graves in ignorance that the plot would not belong to them. Thus, Elizabeth Wright applied to Bolton burial board in 1883 to have her husband disinterred from a common grave as she 'was not aware at the time she made arrangements with the undertaker that the grave would not belong to her'.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Emily Barley interred her son Frederick Henry in a parochial plot in 1912 on the advice of the undertaker. Two weeks later, however, she wrote to Bolton burial board explaining that this was a mistake and she wished Frederick to be re-interred in a private grave.¹⁴² Correspondence between Farnworth burial board and the Home Office in January 1909 further suggests that many relatives were unaware of the restrictions imposed upon pauper burial plots, giving rise to a significant number of bodies being interred (on the advice of undertakers) in public graves by 'mistake'.¹⁴³ Again, this would appear to suggest that it was the *implications* of the pauper grave for mourning and commemorative rites rather than a fear of social disgrace that motivated the impulse to claim one's own corpse/ grave. That people were oblivious to the ramifications of interment in the common grave also indicates that the stigma associated with pauper burial has, to some degree at least, been mythologised. In this light, the neatness of the pauper/ respectable burial dichotomy falters. It is only by recognising the fluidity of respectability that we can begin to appreciate attitudes towards the disposal of the dead.

Conclusion

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the 'pauper grave' remains a term loaded with connotations of social exclusion and anonymity.¹⁴⁴ That it has been renamed the 'social fund' grave is, perhaps, indicative of a wish to challenge the images associated with the Victorian and Edwardian terminology of impoverished death. The

¹⁴¹ BRO ABZ 3/1/4, 27 January 1914.

¹⁴² BRO ABZ 3/1/4, 17 December 1912.

¹⁴³ BRO AF 6/40, 19 January 1909. It was in the interests of the undertaker that the bereaved inter the dead in a pauper grave as this left more insurance money to be spent on coffins, shrouds, hearses and general mourning paraphernalia.

¹⁴⁴ See for instance, *The Guardian*, 15 February 1999, pp. 6-7.

employment of euphemism in an attempt to rob the pauper grave of its stigma is, however, nothing new. For instance, in 1891 Urmston burial board described its pauper graves as 'fourth class' burial plots whilst Chorley burial authority preferred the phrase 'unpurchased graves'.¹⁴⁵ A resolution by Bedwellty union in 1912 that 'in the opinion of this board, the time has arrived when the word "pauper" should not be used when speaking of the chargeable poor of this country' similarly indicates a move away from the early Victorian punitive philosophy of poverty.¹⁴⁶ On 5 March 1912 members of Liverpool Select Vestry voted to adopt the Bedwellty ruling, determining to use the phrase 'Person in receipt of parochial relief' in favour of 'pauper' in future.¹⁴⁷ As one guardian noted, the removal of the 'hateful word' from the language of the union signified steps towards 'spar[ing] the feelings of the people who sought their aid'.¹⁴⁸

Despite such changes, the implications of the pauper grave continued to be overwhelmingly negative. Cremation propaganda from the early decades of the twentieth century evoked the imagery of the 'pauper's pit' as a means of emphasising the egalitarianism of the crematorium.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, burial board records throughout the 1920s and 1930s highlight the persistence of applications for exhumation from families who 'were not in a position at the time' or who 'had not the means' to purchase a private grave in the immediate aftermath of death.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, it is possible to locate a persistent culture of active rejection of the pauper grave that still exists today.¹⁵¹ The pauper grave was - and is - invested with meaning beyond burial space: it condemned the dead to eternal anonymity and an ignoble funeral. The private grave represented the antithesis of this. The social aspirations of the poor may have found expression in the purchase of a grave yet, the private grave also represented the

¹⁴⁵ LRO UDUr 2/26, 10 July 1891 and MBCh 29/15, Borough of Chorley Regulations 1913.

¹⁴⁶ LVRO 353 SEL 1/14.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Liverpool Daily Courier, 6 March 1912 in LVRO 353 SEL 14/5.

¹⁴⁹ See for instance, The Cremation Society: Council Report 1933 in LVRO 942 BIC.

¹⁵⁰ BRO ABCF 15/28, 20 January 1919 and ABCF 15/40, 11 June 1923.

¹⁵¹ Drakeford, 'Last Rights?', pp. 507-24.

desire to exercise some control and dignity in life, even if - ironically - this be over the dead.

Chapter Five

Remembering the Dead: The Cemetery as a Landscape for Grief

Given the significance attached to mourning customs as forums for claiming the identity of the dead and for mediating grief, the grave adopted an importance beyond its practical function as a repository for the dead. Lowering the dead into the grave represented the climax of the funeral whilst sprinkling soil onto the lid of the coffin signified the finality of death and, crucially, burial rites. The subsequent installation of a headstone and/ or memorial provided the bereaved with a point of commemoration to which they could repeatedly return. More importantly, the headstone was a metaphor for loss.¹ As a representation of *personal* grief, however, the grave was located in the *public* space of the municipal cemetery.² This chapter explores the cemetery as a landscape for the expression of personal grief and the grave as a signifier of identity in tandem with an analysis of the municipal ideals of the sanctity of burial space.

To begin, I explore the cemetery as a sacred space. Sacrosanct ideals resonated with shared understandings of dignity in death and the ability to articulate the ownership and identity of the corpse. I suggest that the significance attached to the consecration or denominational affiliation of the ground was inextricable from the importance invested in secular rights of interment. In this sense, the denial or circumvention of religious interment rites (as in pauper burial) compromised the respect paid to the dead and, therefore, the decency of the funeral.

The regulation of the municipal cemetery as a public space was inseparable from the desire to protect the sanctity of the ground and to create a safe environment for the bereaved to visit and remember their dead. Thus, transgression of cemetery rules - for instance, the use of burial space as a convivial meeting place - tended to be construed as inimical to the tranquillity and melancholy of the

¹ Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration*, pp. 131-6.

² As Brooks notes, almost no private enterprise cemeteries were established after the Burial Acts of 1852 which made provision for public cemeteries. Brooks, *Mortal Remains*, p. 50.

ground. Yet the infringement of municipal rules could also signify alternative interpretations of sanctity. Notably, the abandonment of stillborn or deceased new-born babies in cemetery grounds violated byelaws and bypassed burial fees. The desire to deposit the corpse within the defined perimeters of the cemetery suggests, however, an overriding attachment to burial space as the *proper* place to dispose of the dead, even in the absence of a recognised gravespace.

Curiously, attitudes towards the grave after interment were often typified by ambivalence. The social role of ‘the mourner’ prescribed that the bereaved visit the dead, install memorials and care for their graves. Yet overgrown burial plots and absent or dilapidated memorials caused considerable consternation to burial board authorities across the North-west of England. Moreover, a significant number of graveowners sold or loaned the deeds to their grave in the aftermath of interment. Rejecting the implicit equation between the neglected grave and the forgotten dead, I argue that attitudes towards gravespace were typified by pragmatism. This did not negate the long-term remembrance of the dead. Rather, it testified to the importance vested in the cemetery within the immediate context of the decent funeral and the flexibility of memorialisation thereafter.

God's Acre: Affiliation and Identity

As chapter one highlighted, the Victorian cemetery was a mirror on the urban landscape: prestigious plots with expensive monuments echoed the affluent suburbs; cheap graves in restricted spaces were analogous to slum tenements. Yet the cemetery was also a ‘sacred space’, the design and purpose of which were intended to improve the ‘moral sentiments and general taste of all classes and more especially of the great masses of society’.³ The architecture of the cemetery chapel was comparable to that of the gothic church whilst the tombstone itself

³ Curl cites John Claudius Loudon as the genius behind early Victorian cemetery design. Curl, *The Victorian Celebration*, pp. 155-8 and James Steven Curl, *A Celebration of Death: An Introduction to Some of the Buildings, Monuments and Settings of Funerary Architecture in the Western European Tradition* (London, 1980), p. 245. See also Morley, *Death, Heaven*, p. 48.

carried symbolic associations which fostered a 'kind of sanctity'.⁴ Likewise, inscriptions on headstones made vague references to Christian concepts of immortality: graves housed those who were 'Asleep in Jesus' or 'With Christ which is better'.⁵ Most burial boards vetted the inscriptions made upon headstones and/ or distributed lists of 'approved' epitaphs.⁶ More arbitrarily, they also asserted the right to govern families' aesthetic taste as graveowners. Preston Cemetery went so far as to remove any flowers planted upon graves which they considered 'unsightly'.⁷ Such measures indicate a desire to regulate the appearance of the cemetery. However, they also suggest an impulse to inscribe more abstract meanings onto burial space.

Often referred to as 'garden cemeteries', Victorian burial grounds were carefully planned to accord with the melancholy of mourning.⁸ Likewise, byelaws regulating the conduct of visitors to the ground were intended to promote and preserve tranquillity. For instance, the rules for Haslingden Cemetery in 1901 stipulated that visitors were 'expected to observe perfect decorum in all respects'.⁹ A decade later, the regulations for Chorley Cemetery similarly aimed to police visitors to the ground: no person 'shall commit any nuisance', no person could smoke, drink, be 'improperly dressed' or bring orange peel or 'refuse of any kind' into the cemetery; there was to be no singing, no shouting, and no persons

⁴ Curl, The Victorian Celebration, p. 155. See also the review of cemetery design in the Northwest by Church and Clayton-le-Moors burial board in 1886. LRO UDCI 60/1.

⁵ Taken from the list of 'approved inscriptions' for Bolton municipal cemeteries, BRO ABZ 3/3, 19 October 1893.

⁶ For instance, Bolton burial board refused Isaac Edwards permission to inscribe lines from Tennyson's 'In Memmorium' on his headstone as it was not taken from their approved list or from scripture. BRO ABZ 3/1/5, 19 June 1901. See also Haslingden Cemetery Rules and Fees 1901, LRO MBH 42/1, Poulton burial board minute book, LRO MBMo 2/1, 23 March 1880, and Chorley Cemetery Regulations 1913, LRO MBCh 29/15.

⁷ Preston Cemetery Rules and Regulations 1915. The late date indicates that concern for the appearance of the cemetery stretched beyond the Victorian preoccupation with the aesthetics of burial space, BRO ABCF 15/28. Indeed, it persists today. In November 1986, a Plymouth widower was told by the authorities of Weston Mill Cemetery to remove the boxes of flowers he had placed on his wife's grave. His plea that she had 'loved flowers' failed to move the burial board. Brooks, Mortal Remains, p. 79.

⁸ Curl draws attention to the symbolism of trees within the cemetery. For instance, the roots of yew trees were thought to 'find and stop the mouths of the dead'. Weeping willows carried melancholic associations yet were also a symbol of resurrection. Likewise, ash and rowan trees were thought to protect against evil spirits. Curl, The Victorian Celebration, pp. 41-2.

⁹ LRO MBH 42/1.

who behaved in an ‘indecorous manner’.¹⁰ Admittedly, the supervision of conduct was a common feature of most municipal spaces.¹¹ In the cemetery, however, it adopted extra significance by virtue of associations with religion and respect for the dead.

Euphemistic references to the cemetery as ‘God’s acre’ epitomised the perceived sanctity of burial space, not least because they made reference to the presence of those who had, presumably, passed from a temporal to a celestial incarnation. The presence of ‘God’s house’ (the cemetery chapel) further reminded visitors of the Christian significance of death. Perhaps the most cogent expression of the hallowed character of the ground was the consecration or dedication of space to a specific denomination. For instance, the opening of Royton Cemetery in 1879 was marked by the consecration of the Anglican portion by the Bishop of Manchester following a procession to the cemetery from the town hall in which the inhabitants of Royton were invited to participate.¹² The Bishop also attended the opening of the unconsecrated Church and Clayton-le-Moors Cemetery, near Blackburn, in 1889.¹³ Immediately following the official opening ceremony at Haslingden Cemetery in 1902, the Free Church performed a service of dedication over their portion of the ground.¹⁴

It is doubtful how many people were aware of the consecratory status of their local cemetery.¹⁵ As Sylvia Barnard notes, even municipal burial boards tended to refer to ‘consecrated’ and ‘unconsecrated’ portions in more colloquial terms of ‘church’ and ‘chapel’.¹⁶ The division of ground into denominational portions was made visible through the segmentation of space, differences in memorial iconography and, in larger cemeteries, separate entrances and chapels for each

¹⁰ Chorley Cemetery Regulations 1913, LRO MBCh 29/15.

¹¹ For instance, the byelaws for Victorian Park in Haslingden, 1901, prohibited intoxication, profane language, gambling or ‘violent, disorderly, indecent, or insulting behaviour’. LRO MBH 42/1.

¹² LRO UDRo/3/2, 5 September 1879.

¹³ LRO UDCL 7/5, 27 June 1889.

¹⁴ LRO MBH 42/1, 30 April 1902.

¹⁵ Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Volume Two*, pp. 202-7.

¹⁶ Barnard, *To Prove*, p. 42.

denomination.¹⁷ Ostensibly, interment in denominational ground with the relevant burial service and minister intimated a religious identity which stretched beyond the immediacy of the funeral.¹⁸ As with the burial service, however, it is difficult to determine the extent to which consecrated or dedicated ground were imbued with spiritual significance. Understandings of Christian theology and doctrinal specificity may have been vague and confused but the working classes were far from heathen.¹⁹ As Sarah Williams notes, working-class patterns of belief were, in a scriptural sense, typified by 'undenominalisation'.²⁰ Yet this did not prevent the formation of loose affiliations with particular churches. Thus, an institution could be described as 'our church' on account of 'all my family's been married there'.²¹ Identification with a church might also derive from spatial ties, communal customs or a popular clergyman. Moreover, the administration of charitable relief and a 'kind' religious figure were likely to foster associations with the institution they represented.²² With reference to the interment of the dead, therefore, it is plausible to suggest that families turned to a specific church from similarly loose associations. Of course, most attachments to a denominational burial ground were genealogical, the very phrase 'family grave' suggesting a desire to inter the dead with, or near to, their ancestors.

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For some, however, the choice of burial ground represented a positive expression of spiritual identity and membership of a religious community. When John Kelly's Catholic mother died in Horwich in 1913, the nearest denominational cemetery lay in the next town. The cost of a hearse was beyond the Kellys' financial means. Rather than inter his wife in the local cemetery, however, Kelly asked his workmates (policemen) to assist in conveying the coffin to the distant grave. It is unlikely that his colleagues all shared Kelly's Catholicism and their compliance

¹⁷ A satirical review of Anfield Cemetery in 1878 depicted the Nonconformist section as typified by plain, flat slabs; the memorials in the Anglican section had fuller inscriptions, 'mock-sentiment' and 'tawdry symbolism'; Catholic headstones were characterised by crosses and an invitation to pray for the dead. *The Porcupine*, 1 June 1878, p. 134.

¹⁸ Of course, the size and location of the grave implied an economic and social identity, especially - as chapter four illustrated - with reference to the pauper grave.

¹⁹ Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, p. 333.

²⁰ Williams, *Religious Belief*, pp. 139-42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 97-100.

with the request suggests compassion and sympathy with his loss. It also implies that they respected the importance Kelly invested in a denominational funeral.²³ Fulfilling obligations to the identity of the deceased was significant for the bereaved as it confirmed that the dead had been buried with dignity. Mrs Bruce, a Catholic, died in 1887 whilst her husband, a Protestant sailor, was away at sea. On account of her religious persuasion, however, Mrs Bruce's in-laws refused to pay for her funeral and she was buried in a pauper grave in the Catholic Ford Cemetery at Liverpool. On returning home, her husband applied to the cemetery authorities to have her body exhumed and re-interred in a private grave in the same cemetery as he wished to 'pay credit' to his wife's memory and her religion.²⁴ Implicit in Bruce's reasoning was the notion that failure to honour the religion and dignity of his wife would compromise his memories of her and, moreover, prove a formidable source of self-recrimination.

Clearly, the significance attached to denominational burial ground could create acrimony between family members attached to different faiths. Florence Atherton, born in 1898, recalled that her father's funeral was marred by the re-ignition of family antagonism concerning his decision to marry a Catholic and convert to his wife's faith. When he died, his Protestant relations refused to assist with or attend his Catholic funeral.²⁵ Conversely, the desire to inter a relative or friend of a different religious persuasion in a denominational grave could inflame sensitivity to religious privilege. When Miss Burford, a Protestant, died in Barnstaple in March 1900 she was interred in a Catholic grave by her friend Miss Oatway. On discovering the religious affiliation of Miss Burford, the local Catholic priest protested to the burial board and the Home Office that the interments of non-Catholics were 'constantly taking place' in ground set aside for Catholics.²⁶ When a woman interred her Protestant husband in a Catholic grave in Kirkdale Cemetery in Liverpool in December 1900, Catholic cemetery officials similarly

²³ MOH Transcript, John Kelly, Tape 82.

²⁴ The license was refused on account of subsequent interments in the grave. PRO HO45/9955/V8622, correspondence between October 1887 and March 1888.

²⁵ Thompson, *Edwardian Childhood's*, p. 114.

²⁶ BRO AF 6/40, 8 May 1900.

complained to the Home Secretary.²⁷ Although it was not illegal to inter those of different religions in denominational ground, the Home Secretary advised, in both cases, that graves set aside for a particular religion ought to be preserved for members of that church in order to avoid acrimony.²⁸ Heaven may be open to the souls of all believers, but bodies must rot in keeping with denominational strictures.

As with other spiritual mourning rites, sensitivity to religious privilege was thrown into relief when threatened. Deliberate exclusion of the corpse from consecrated or denominational ground impinged upon the dignity of the dead and inferred that they were marginalised in life. For instance, the consignment of the hanged felon to an unconsecrated and quicklime grave emphasised the unChristian crime of the dead.²⁹ Likewise, the ignoble burial of suicide victims in unconsecrated ground until 1823 proclaimed the transgression of notions of social responsibility and the heathen nature of self-murder.³⁰ Similarly, the interment of a corpse in a pauper grave articulated a negative story about the dead whilst curtailing access to mourning rites for the bereaved.³¹

In a similar vein, perceived slights on denominational burial ground challenged the positive identity associated with interment in that space. For instance, when Joseph Moss, the elected representative for St. Peter's ward in Liverpool, called his fellow guardians and local Catholic priests to account for the undignified burial of Catholic paupers in a stone quarry, he unwittingly provoked cries of outrage (rather than gratitude) from his Catholic constituents.³² In the debates which ensued, the issue of *pauper* burial was almost entirely subsumed to the impropriety of Moss, a Jew, appointing himself the spokesman of the Catholic poor. As one guardian, Mr. Roberts, commented, 'Protestants, Jews and other

²⁷ As no Protestant ceremony had been held over the grave, the Secretary of State ruled that no violation of Catholic privilege had occurred. PRO HO45/9914/B21512A, December 1900.

²⁸ BRO AF 6/40, 22 May 1900 and PRO HO45/9914/B21512A.

²⁹ Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, p. 87.

³⁰ Anderson, *Suicide*, pp. 269-82.

³¹ See chapter four above.

³² *Liverpool Daily Post*, 4 October 1895, p. 3. Also reported in *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 October 1895, p.5. See also p. 134 above.

people' had no right to interfere with Catholic burial practice.³³ One letter to the editor of the Liverpool Daily Courier, signed somewhat remarkably 'St. Peter', declared that a burial ground 'adopted and approved by the respected priests of the Catholic community' would meet the approval of their flock.³⁴ It would, the letter continued, be 'Jew-dicious' of Moss to withdraw his 'untenable' charges of indignity and inhumanity. Moss was not only a false champion of Catholic rights (that his complaints coincided with a forthcoming election fostered claims he was merely seeking votes), a Jew had no right to adopt Catholic issues as his own.³⁵ The slight on his own religion did not escape Moss who construed it as a 'vindictive' and 'sneering' gesture which was 'beneath the contempt of every honest man'.³⁶

The Liverpool Select Vestry were keen to deflect charges of religious bigotry, not least because they had been countering criticisms of their treatment of Catholic paupers in the workhouse for some years.³⁷ Significantly, no-one canvassed the opinion of Catholic paupers themselves as to their preferred site of interment. Yet the scandal highlights the potential conflict between loyalty to the burial ground of one's church and the indignities of a grave in a stone quarry. As chapter four outlined, pauper burial circumvented the autonomy of the bereaved in articulating care for the dead. In this sense, the ability to inter the dead in a denominational grave, however unconventional or undignified, represented at least one facet of the deceased's identity. Indeed, access to a grave with a particular burial service and minister could adopt extra significance when other aspects of identity and autonomy were threatened.

³³ Liverpool Daily Post, 9 October 1895, p. 3.

³⁴ Liverpool Daily Courier, 5 October 1895, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Letter to Liverpool Daily Courier, 9 October 1895, p.6.

³⁷ The Vestry had, in the early 1880s, been charged with bigotry on account of their refusal to appoint a Catholic chaplain for the indoor poor. See for instance Liberal Review, 12 June 1880, p. 6 and Liberal Review, 3 July 1880, p. 9. Significantly, there was no Catholic member on the Select Vestry at the time of Moss's claims. Keen to deflect Moss's charges of intolerance, the Vestry pledged to appoint a Catholic member as soon as possible. Liverpool Daily Post, 9 October 1895, p. 3.

That many Catholics in Liverpool were of Irish origin also highlights the potential for the denominational burial ground to represent a forum for the expression and affirmation of an ethnic identity. Access to full burial rites, in denominational ground, for Roman Catholic Irish immigrants permitted the expression of religious and national (and political) identities, not only in the cemetery but in an English anti-Catholic environment also.³⁸ Likewise, Belgians in Bolton at the beginning of the First World War formed committees to provide gravespaces and/ or money towards private graves for fellow refugees.³⁹ Ostensibly, this represented a desire to facilitate 'decent' (as opposed to pauper) burial but it also suggested an impulse to affirm a community of nationality within a foreign landscape. Similarly, the burial of a Moslem from Cairo in the Liverpool Necropolis in 1891 with full Islamic interment rites (conducted by the Liverpool Moslem Congregation) signified an assertion of an ethnic cultural identity in addition to religious affiliation.⁴⁰ As Gerdian Jonker has suggested, traditional burial rites (secular and spiritual) adopt extra meaning in a migrant culture.⁴¹ In the act of remembering ethnic customs and recreating them in a new environment, identity is not only confirmed, it is perpetuated. Thus, the funeral teaches individuals how to deal with death and burial in a foreign landscape: 'Together, [migrants] might be able to conjure up a picture of the past which suits the present and enables the actors to shape the event.'⁴² Burial ground provides a shared space and a history through which individuals can reaffirm and recreate multiple identities. As Laqueur notes, these extend beyond signifiers of kinship and religion to include expressions of communal and occupational identity also.⁴³ Hence, when John Kelly's mother was carried to the cemetery by his father's colleagues, they implicitly asserted the

³⁸ See Joan Smith, 'Class, Skill and Sectarianism in Glasgow and Liverpool 1880-1914' in R. J. Morris (ed.), Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth Century Towns (Leicester, 1986), pp. 158-215.

³⁹ BRO ABCF 15/28, circa February 1915.

⁴⁰ Liverpool Weekly Mercury, 4 April 1891, p.6.

⁴¹ Gerdian Jonker, 'Death, Gender and Memory: Remembering Loss and Burial as a Migrant' in Field et al., Death, Gender, pp. 187-201.

⁴² Ibid. p.188. See also Marvin Sodipo (Educational Opportunities Initiative in Liverpool 8), Cultural Attitudes to Death and Burial (Liverpool, 1995).

⁴³ Laqueur, 'Cemeteries', p. 186.

community of their occupation: they were ‘a close knit body of men’ who ‘gathered round when you needed it.’⁴⁴

Public Space, Private Loss

Most cemetery authorities appreciated the desire to express multiple identities within the context of burial space. Nevertheless, such expressions were tied to the municipality’s definition of appropriate conduct within the cemetery. Thus, the funerals of Orangemen in Anfield Cemetery in the late 1870s sparked fears that large crowds and political speeches compromised the sanctity of the ground.⁴⁵ That the burial board continued to permit hymns and rites particular to the Orange order (such as bowing thrice over the grave) suggests, however, a willingness to accept that burial space was imbued with a variety of meanings.⁴⁶ In reaching a compromise with those attending funerals, burial boards implicitly acknowledged that perceptions of the cemetery as a public and regulated space coalesced with the role of the burial ground as a private landscape for the expression of grief and identity.

Perimeter walls and byelaws defined the cemetery as a municipal space for the disposal of the dead; they also separated and protected the bereaved from the clamour of *life*. In turn, the isolation of the mourner with the deceased facilitated the use of the cemetery as a private space where personal languages of loss, identity and remembrance found ready expression. The two functions of the burial ground were inextricable. When the sanctity of the cemetery as a public space was compromised, reprimand and censure were often framed with reference to the significance of the burial ground as a place where respect for death and grief presided. Conversely, personal biographies and stories of love and loss were made public via the headstone, the floral tribute and the visit to the grave.

⁴⁴ MOH Transcript, John Kelly, Tape 82. Lewis Jones also draws on the idea of the funeral as a forum for expressions of occupational (miners’) identity. See p. 111 above.

⁴⁵ LVRO 353 PAR, 23 March 1876.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

In May 1881, William Wortley, in his capacity as superintendent at Anfield Cemetery, lamented that people were using the burial ground as a thoroughfare and spoiling the 'quiet and orderliness' of the place.⁴⁷ This impinged upon reverence for the dead and impeded the role of the cemetery as a refuge for the bereaved. Similarly, in 1896, Wortley bemoaned the 'especially troublesome' behaviour of youths aged between seventeen and twenty who 'seem to make the cemetery a meeting place' on Sunday afternoons, wandering around in groups, 'talking and laughing in an unseemly manner and lying in the long grass and under the trees and sitting on the memorials'.⁴⁸ Likewise, children and 'young lads' from neighbourhoods flanking the cemetery were becoming 'very troublesome', 'climbing and swinging on the trees, stealing flowers and throwing stones at the fences, knocking off the paint and marking the walls'.⁴⁹

That the youths merely jeered at those who remonstrated with them moved Wortley to suggest that 'unruly spirits' be refused entry to the cemetery between three and five on Sunday afternoons. This would, he argued, 'prevent the cemetery becoming a meeting place for lounging youths, whose gossip, fun and silly nonsense, even when moderate, is offensive to people who wish quietly to visit the burial place of their dear ones'.⁵⁰ The juxtaposition between 'gangs' and 'crowds' of youths with 'respectable people' who 'wished to visit their graves', though clearly loaded, indicates that other visitors to the cemetery shared Wortley's disapproval.⁵¹ Indeed, a number lodged complaints concerning the 'very unseemly' behaviour of youngsters in the ground. Yet despite the apparent irreverence of the youths, graves and memorials were left untouched (even by stone-throwing children). Hence, the transgression of municipal and 'respectable' definitions of decorum within the cemetery did not annul a perception, however vague, of the resting place of the dead as *special*, if not necessarily *sacred*.

⁴⁷ LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/1, 3 May 1881.

⁴⁸ LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/2, 18 June 1896.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* See also LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/2, 16 July 1896.

Ironically, it may have been the leafy peacefulness of the cemetery that attracted youths, especially in urban environments, to utilise the burial ground as a recreational space. Problems relating to impudent youths were widespread, particularly in the warm summer months. During the spring of 1879 Bacup burial board resolved to print notices warning against 'disorderly conduct' within the ground.⁵² In the summer of 1887 Farnworth burial board contracted a Sunday watchman to monitor behaviour in the cemetery.⁵³ Similarly, in May 1889 Colne burial board ruled that notices would be posted in 'some conspicuous parts' of the cemetery warning persons against 'trespassing' on the grass and destroying and/or stealing flowers and shrubs from cemetery land.⁵⁴ This was a persistent problem. In June 1879, Middleton and Thornham burial board resolved to appoint a policeman to patrol the cemetery on Sunday afternoons for the duration of the summer months.⁵⁵ In February 1891, they agreed to post placards promising a reward of ten shillings to persons offering information leading to the prosecution of flower thieves.⁵⁶ Eighteen months later, they contracted extra watchmen for a trial period in an attempt to catch the thieves at work.⁵⁷ By June 1895, the board petitioned local police in July 1895 to supplement their own watchmen in supervising entry and conduct within the ground.⁵⁸

Common to the concerns of each board was the infringement of an abstract perception of the cemetery as a place sacred to the dead and the bereaved. Unlike public parks and other open spaces, recreational use of the cemetery was defined in relation to notions of mourning and commemoration. Indeed, headstones, monuments and floral tributes provided persistent visual reminders of death, decay and grief.⁵⁹ Significantly, encroachment on the sacrosanct ideals of burial space rarely translated into the desecration of graves or monuments. Indeed, it

⁵² LRO MBBa 3/4, 27 May 1879.

⁵³ BRO AF 2/16, 29 April 1887.

⁵⁴ LRO MBCo 4/2, 9 May 1889.

⁵⁵ LRO MBM 3/2, 4 June 1879.

⁵⁶ LRO MBM 3/2, 5 February 1891.

⁵⁷ LRO MBM 3/2, 1 September 1892.

⁵⁸ LRO MBM 3/2, 4 July 1895.

⁵⁹ As Lewis Jones noted, the headstone was a 'symbol of the corpse, an advertisement of decay' whilst 'withered' floral tributes were as dead as the bodies they marked. Jones, *Cwmardy*, p. 66.

might be argued that the only violation of graves occurred at the hands of cemetery authorities themselves.⁶⁰ Damage to memorials was limited to the theft of flowers from graves, a very mild form of 'graverobbery' compared to more sensational cases of 'desecration'. Nevertheless, the 'frequent pilfering from graves' was distressing and annoying to the bereaved who repeatedly complained to cemetery officials.⁶¹

Most of those apprehended for stealing flowers were children.⁶² This may simply mean that adults were more skilful thieves or unscrupulous in the use of their offspring. Yet despite the distress occasioned by flower theft, culprits tended to be treated with relative leniency. When Mary May appeared before Liverpool magistrates in 1887 for stealing a bouquet of roses from a grave at Anfield Cemetery, her crime was viewed in the light of having 'fallen into bad hands'. Her father promised to reform her and Mary was released with a mild scolding.⁶³ Likewise, Edward Billington, a boy called before Bacup burial board for stealing flowers in July 1880, was discharged with only an 'admonitory reprimand' on theft and trespass.⁶⁴ Bolton burial board preferred a policy of 'naming and shaming' in dealing with flower theft.⁶⁵ The typical manner in which this policy was administered was to press the offender to sign a 'submission'. For instance, Alice Cooper, caught stealing flowers from a grave in Heaton Cemetery in July 1887, signed a declaration stating that she had been detected 'plucking flowers' from a grave, an offence for which she was liable to a penalty of five pounds. On paying the costs for publication of the notice and expressing 'sorrow' for her

⁶⁰ See chapter four above for desecration and re-use of pauper graves by cemetery authorities, pp. 131-3.

⁶¹ Reference to pilfering taken from meeting of Bolton burial board, BRO AB 13/1/8, 14 July 1898. One journalist in Liverpool described the irreverent use of cemetery space by youths as 'shocking' and 'incredible' to the sensibilities of mourners. See *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 12 September 1891, p.6.

⁶² Indeed, some burial boards prohibited the entry of children under ten into the cemetery unless accompanied by a parent. See for instance, LRO MBM 3/3, 4 June 1896 and Rules and Regulations Farnworth Cemetery 1909, BRO AF 6/134/2.

⁶³ LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/1, 28 April 1887.

⁶⁴ LRO MBBa 3/4, 27 July 1880.

⁶⁵ The Board occasionally experimented with novel means of dealing with offenders. In 1883 they accepted a 'donation' of five shillings to the Bolton Infirmity Fund in lieu of prosecution. BRO AB 13/1/4, 9 August 1883. In 1886 the Board gave the graveowner a say in the punishment of the offender. BRO AB 13/1/5, 5 May 1887.

offence, the board overlooked legal prosecution.⁶⁶ The submission was then posted on noticeboards at the gates of the cemetery.⁶⁷

Admonishments by the burial board were rarely framed in a terminology of 'desecration'. Furthermore, they resembled the punishments meted out to those who plucked flowers in municipal parks.⁶⁸ As with the youths who used cemetery space as a leisure facility, it seems unlikely that children deliberately intended to dishonour the dead, especially as burial plots and headstones were left unharmed. Flower thieves appear, therefore, to have shared loose understandings of the grave as sacrosanct. Moreover, the significance of floral tributes as a symbol of loss could even motivate theft. Maggie Freeman, aged seven, attended a meeting of the Middleton and Thornham burial board with her mother in June 1905 to answer charges of stealing flower glasses. Yet far from committing a malicious act, Maggie had taken the glasses to place on the grave of her brother. As her mother suggested, the child had simply wished to replicate a gesture of remembrance and was not aware of the consequences of her actions.⁶⁹

Thus, sensitivity to the cemetery's dual purpose as a public space and as a landscape for grief was pervasive, even for those who apparently transgressed notions of reverence. Indeed, the significance attached to the burial ground as the customary resting place for the dead fostered potent beliefs concerning rights of access to the ground and the importance of cemetery space for the resolution of grief.⁷⁰ This is, perhaps, most explicit in the abandonment or illicit interment of babies' corpses. The costs and rites for the burial of a new-born baby, no matter how brief its life, were the same as those for a full-grown child. Conversely, stillbirths were interred for a nominal fee, in unconsecrated and unprofitable

⁶⁶ BRO ABZ 3/7, 4 August 1887.

⁶⁷ Middleton and Thornham burial board experimented with this policy in 1903, inducing flower pluckers to make a public apology in the local newspaper. LRO MBM 3/3, 3 September 1903.

⁶⁸ For instance, Charles Henry Cornwall was required to sign a submission on account of plucking flowers in Heywood Recreation ground. BRO AB 13/1/4, 4 September 1884. Richard Standish was required to sign a submission when caught trespassing on the strawberries in Bolton Park. AB 13/1/5, 17 May 1890.

⁶⁹ LRO MBM, 3/3, 1 June 1905.

⁷⁰ This was also a factor in the reluctance to adopt cremation.

ground, without any ceremony.⁷¹ The discrepancy in charges was perceived, by some at least, as grossly unfair. Indeed, many parents attempted to falsify the registration of new-born babies who had died shortly after birth in order to secure interment in the cheaper stillborn babies' grave. Others chose to bypass formal burial altogether and abandoned the tiny corpse in the cemetery grounds. For instance, in 1876 workmen at Anfield Cemetery discovered the body of a child in a fishbasket which had been dropped over the wall.⁷² In February 1889, a stonemason's labourer discovered a box hidden among the shrubs at Anfield in which lay the 'honeycombed' remains of a babe wrapped in cotton wool.⁷³ Two months later, the body of a new-born child in a wooden box was found beneath the surface of the soil in the same cemetery.⁷⁴

The complexities of these issues are addressed in chapter seven below. What is significant for this discussion, however, is the adherence to the defined space of the burial ground as the appropriate location for the disposal of the dead, even if this necessitated an undignified and unconventional *burial*. For instance, on 9 September 1891, cemetery employees at Anfield noted three women ('worse for liquor') loitering in the Roman Catholic portion of the ground. The sexton also spied the women hiding amongst the shrubbery. Suspecting 'all was not right', he went to investigate and discovered the body of a 'small foetus' in a cardboard box buried beneath the earth. The women were then detained whilst the police and a doctor were summoned. According to the doctor, the corpse was that of a stillborn foetus of several months gestation. On questioning, it transpired that one of the women had miscarried the child and, with two neighbours, had undertaken to conceal the corpse in the grounds of the cemetery. Once the facts of the case were established, nothing further was done and the women went home.⁷⁵

This example is unusual in that the corpse was that of a foetus. None the less, it highlights the resourcefulness displayed by poorer families with regard to burial

⁷¹ See p. 249 below.

⁷² LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/1, 23 March 1876.

⁷³ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 9 February 1889, p. 7.

⁷⁴ Liverpool Weekly Mercury, 20 April 1889, p. 1.

⁷⁵ LVRO 353 PAR 6/5/1, 19 September 1891.

and suggests the sympathy of neighbours and friends with regard to securing interment. The reluctance to pay even nominal costs for a burial may suggest that the corpses of stillbirths and new-born babies were simply a nuisance and occasioned little sorrow. Yet the very act of depositing a body illicitly in the cemetery implies the opposite, a possibility reinforced by the Dutch courage of the three women involved in the case above. This suggests that, contrary to the alleged indifference of working-class parents towards their small offspring, some significance was vested in the resting places of new-born and stillborn babies.⁷⁶ What is particularly striking, however, is the implication that the defined space of the cemetery held some kind of *special* meaning. This is not to suggest that the women necessarily associated the ground with Christian notions of resurrection, but that it represented the right and proper place for the dead to go, even if this meant an ignoble interment. It is also likely that in hiding the box in the Roman Catholic portion of the ground, the collaborators attached a degree of significance to denominational space. Furthermore, implicit in such rudimentary burials is an attachment to the finality embodied in the funeral: laying the dead to rest in the appropriate repository (however makeshift), enabled the bereaved to return to the sphere of the living.

The Neglected Grave

The public/ private meanings invested in the cemetery coalesced, therefore, into a broad conceptual understanding of burial space as a landscape for the expression of loss and commemoration. Indeed, in fulfilling the role of ‘the mourner’, bereaved individuals were *expected* to use the public cemetery as a theatre for their grief, both in the context of the funeral and the memorialisation of the dead. At a more abstract level, the cemetery’s association with sanctity and genealogy prompted feelings of tranquillity whilst the language of the ‘family grave’ drew on comforting notions of celestial reunion.⁷⁷ As Hannah Mitchell reflected, the graveyard was ‘the cradle of my race’, inseparable from ‘a feeling of peace and

⁷⁶ This is explored in detail in chapter seven below.

⁷⁷ See Philpot’s ruminations on the graveyard in Tressell, *The Ragged*, p. 506.

rest as one who came home after a long absence.’⁷⁸ Furthermore, burial space encouraged reflection, not only on death but also on life. Gissing drew on this notion in the closing pages of The Nether World. For Jane, ‘all days were sacred’ to the memory of her grandfather. Yet on each anniversary of his burial, she finished work early and made the long journey to the cemetery, as did her erstwhile companion, Sidney Kirkwood.⁷⁹ It is significant that Gissing chose to end his bleak novel with this image, the poignancy of which exemplifies the cemetery as the site for commemoration *and* expressions of hope, disappointment and fortitude.

The emphasis on sanctity and respect for the dead could, however, render the commemorative function of the cemetery maudlin. As an article in The Porcupine in June 1878 noted, the effects of the cemetery - including the headstones - were often mawkish and comical:

Here we are at the gate. Beside it, embedded in the wall, is a stone tablet, graven with a legend in black letters. Expectation is foiled, however, for the mural tablet commemorates nothing more important than the hours during which the cemetery is open... It is in keeping with the spirit of the place.⁸⁰

The message - like the cemetery itself - was ‘so sombre’ yet ‘so commonplace’. Speculation that this oppressive and ‘abominable’ culture of mourning was driven by commerce consolidated the author’s searing criticism of the cemetery as a site for hypocrisy rather than grief.⁸¹

The cynicism of the article was, perhaps, unfair in its unrelenting negation of the cemetery as a landscape for sincere expressions of loss. Complaints relating to flower theft and irreverent youths highlight the presence of those who visited the

⁷⁸ Hannah Mitchell, The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell - Suffragette and Rebel (London, 1977), pp. 60-1.

⁷⁹ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 391.

⁸⁰ The Porcupine, 1 June 1878, p. 134.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

burial ground to pay tribute to their loved ones. Likewise, the rows of headstones lining cemetery pathways testify to an active culture of physically commemorating the dead at the point of their decay. Nevertheless, the author's observations relating to commerce and hypocrisy demonstrate that the tangible languages of grief within burial space were articulated by those with sufficient resources to purchase the appropriate symbols of loss: the headstone and the floral tribute. Indeed, some graveowners never installed headstones and/ or neglected the care of their burial plots. Others only expressed an interest in their gravespace in relation to its value as a commodity or its potential to hold more interments. Ostensibly, this may support charges (outlined in earlier chapters) that the working-class culture of death was little more than an exercise in revelry and display. However, I would suggest that material circumstances impeded the ability to purchase a headstone and wreaths of flowers. Far from equating this with contained grief or an ambivalence to the commemoration of the dead (as David Vincent might suggest), I contend that the primary importance of the grave lay in securing decent interment.⁸² Once this obligation was fulfilled, the bereaved turned to prioritise the needs of living. This is not to suggest that remembrance of the dead was neglected but that commemoration adopted flexible, abstract and personal forms.

The purchase of exclusive rights to a burial plot permitted the interment of several corpses and the installation of a headstone. However, a significant minority of graveowners, almost always of third-class graves, failed to erect any headstone or memorial at all. In March 1899, for instance, Mary Fare explained to Bolton burial board that she had not been in a position to 'afford any stone' for the grave of her husband who had died some years earlier.⁸³ The most striking example of failure to install a headstone is found in the records of Stretford burial board. The board had taken the unusual step of stipulating in its regulations that the ownership of any private grave without a headstone six months after the first

⁸² Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 39-61.

⁸³ BRO ABZ 3/1/7, 24 March 1899.

interment would revert back to the Board.⁸⁴ As the clerk noted in July 1888, however, despite 'repeated applications' to the families concerned, graveowners consistently failed to comply with the regulation on account of 'extenuating circumstances'.⁸⁵ Faced with a deluge of such pleas from recently bereaved families the board resolved to exercise discretion in enforcing the rule and the majority of graveowners were granted a further six months in which to install a headstone.⁸⁶ Two decades later, the board retained the regulation but continued to treat 'each case on its merits', frequently re-renewing extensions again and again.⁸⁷

Funerals left families in debt, even with the buffer of burial insurance. That graves had to be given time to settle before any headstone could be installed meant that consideration of memorialisation fell outside most accounts for funeral costs.⁸⁸ Thus, resources accumulated for interment were usually spent long before the bereaved contemplated the additional expense of a headstone, a trend which Stretford burial board appear to have accepted as almost inevitable. The installation of a memorial was, therefore, something which bore little relevance to immediate grief and could be postponed indefinitely without necessarily diminishing the loss felt for the deceased. Indeed, the absence of a headstone did not preclude a visit to the cemetery or the grave. For instance, in 1904 one mother recollected how she had visited the grave of her son, Arthur Jenkins (died aged five), ever since his funeral five years previously, 'putting flowers on it from time to time'. Whilst there was no formal memorial marking the spot, a glass jar containing a funeral card proclaimed the identity of her son and distinguished his resting place.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ In 1906 the board enquired as to the procedure of other burial authorities in the Northwest and concluded that they were the only board to insist on memorial installation. LRO MBS 2/20, 9 January 1906.

⁸⁵ LRO MBS 2/18, 16 July 1888.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Since the opening of the cemetery in 1885, almost every monthly board meeting was typified by the consideration of pleas from between one to fifteen graveowners to extend the period for the installation of a headstone. See LRO MBS 2/19, 18 September 1900, 12 November and 10 December 1901 and 11 March 1902.

⁸⁷ LRO MBS 2/20, 9 January 1906.

⁸⁸ Graves had to 'settle' for approximately a month before any headstone could be erected.

⁸⁹ PRO HO45/ 10305/119620, May 1904.

That graves tended to fall into a state of neglect and disrepair in the aftermath of burial further suggests, however, the receding importance of the burial plot after interment. In 1890, Bolton burial board resolved to remove and store any headstone which appeared in an unsatisfactory condition until the owner or person interested claimed and undertook to restore it.⁹⁰ A report by the chair of Stretford burial board in September 1900 stated that private graves in the cemetery had a 'very neglected appearance' and that graveowners ought to be 'enforce[d]' to keep them 'in a proper condition'.⁹¹ Middleton and Thornham burial board noted in the spring of 1910 that most graves were neglected whilst headstones were in a 'dilapidated and dangerous condition'.⁹² Such was the condition of Preston Cemetery in 1906 that the board threatened drastic measures: an advertisement in the local press stated that most private grave and vault spaces were 'untidy, ill-kept and neglected' whilst memorial paraphernalia (such as boundary stones, iron railings, vases) were 'in bad condition and out of repair' and bore a most 'disorderly appearance'. The notice, dated 11 April, gave graveowners and persons interested in such spaces until 30 June to put their graves in 'proper order and good repair and condition'. Failure to do so would result in all items which were unsightly or damaged being removed whilst all graves which appeared to be neglected would be grassed over.⁹³ It should be emphasised that such measures were enacted with reference to the *general* appearance of the cemetery rather than *exceptional* graves.

Since 1896, Bolton burial board had repeatedly issued postcards to graveowners requesting them to put their graves in order.⁹⁴ In May 1898, the superintendent of Bolton cemeteries, William Longworth, suggested that the board grass over the 2000 graves at Tonge Cemetery which were full or only had room for one more interment. Almost all the graves appeared neglected. Any shrubs or memorials on

⁹⁰ BRO AB 3/1/5, 11 December 1890.

⁹¹ LRO MBS 2/19, 18 September 1900.

⁹² LRO MBM 3/3, 7 April 1910.

⁹³ LRO UDCI 58/1, circa December 1919.

⁹⁴ BRO AB13/1/8, 30 March 1899. Taken from a report entitled, 'Keeping Graves in Order' by William Longworth, on the burial board's policies towards neglected graves.

the burial plots could be removed to a spare piece of land to be reclaimed should graveowners wish.⁹⁵ One year later, however, only seven owners had restored their graves, claimed memorials and paid the board arrears for the upkeep of the plot. Nevertheless, rumours that the board were removing paraphernalia from all burial plots prompted a flood of complaints.⁹⁶ In response to the allegations, the board placed a notice in the local press outlining their policy with respect to the neglect of graves: new graveowners were warned that the costs to the Corporation for maintaining burial plots would be passed onto them 'and no grave or vault will be opened upon which any such cost remains unpaid'.⁹⁷ This threat implied that as arrears accumulated, it became less likely that graveowners would (or could) pay outstanding charges to the board. Yet the inclusion of new gravespaces in measures to deal with neglect suggests that ambivalence towards the resting place of the dead began soon after burial.

Longworth reported that many of the overgrown burial plots lacked headstones (an echo of Stretford board's difficulties). In a notice in the local press in March 1899, he notified the owners that unless these graves were put in order within twenty-one days they would be 'soddened down'. Neglected graves with curbs and headstones would be planted with ivy and the cost charged to the owner. Those who wished to intervene in the landscaping of their graves were advised to give the Corporation notice of their intention to put their plots in order.⁹⁸ With a few exceptions, the 1,465 respondents to the notice (806 owning graves at Tonge Cemetery, 659 owning graves at Heaton) claimed that they had maintained the upkeep of their burial plot. However, Longworth reported that when a number of owners were taken to the cemetery, they had been unable to locate their gravespaces.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* This can, perhaps, be related to the issue of ownership and choice: passive neglect of graves was no doubt construed differently to remaining inactive whilst others destroyed graves.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Whilst it is possible that some graveowners deliberately misinformed the board regarding the maintenance of their graves, it also seems plausible to suggest that in the act of remembering the burial plot (and by implication, the dead), graveowners were inclined to invoke a language of maintenance not from a desire to deceive but from a wish to believe that the deceased were cared for. The insistence by burial boards on the installation of headstones and grave maintenance highlights a municipal discourse of appropriate commemorative practice which no doubt permeated many people's experiences of bereavement: caring for a grave fostered associations with respect for the memory of the dead. Conversely, the very term 'neglected grave' was (and is) loaded with negative connotations for the physical form of the burial plot and abstract notions of loss and commemoration.

Equations between the neglected grave and the forgotten dead made no concession to the possibility that the grave's significance for grief and remembrance was temporary. Moreover, bereavement was not a fixed state, nor was commemoration restricted to the cemetery. Indeed, the initiatives undertaken by many burial boards to introduce fees for the care of graves in perpetuity rested on the implicit assumption that, with the passage of time, graveowners would be less inclined to tend their graves.¹⁰⁰ To a point, therefore, the bereaved were not expected to visit the grave of a loved one as their grief became less keen (the premise on which leasehold graves were founded). Moreover, as Bolton burial board conceded, 'certain people of the poorer classes' lacked the time, energy and finance to maintain their graves to the cemetery's expectations.¹⁰¹ On a more practical level, graveowners also died or moved away.¹⁰² Thus, correlations between memory and the tended grave were tenuous and, sometimes, misleading. A proposal at Birkenhead Council in 1888 to build new greenhouses highlighted

¹⁰⁰ See for instance, LRO MBMo 2/1, 23 March 1880, UDRO 3/2, 23 July 1883, Haslingden Cemetery Fees, 1909, MBH 42/2, Chorley Cemetery Fees, 1913, MBCh 29/15, and Haslingden Cemetery Fees, 1917, MBH 42/3.

¹⁰¹ BRO AB 13/1/8, 30 March 1899. In such circumstances, Longworth suggested that the graves be grassed over, retaining a small circular bed of two feet diameter which would entail little labour for the owner.

¹⁰² For instance, the low response rate to questionnaires sent to graveowners concerning the closure of St. James' Cemetery was attributed to the passage of time and original graveowners having died or moved. Reports and Memoranda, c.1930s, LVRO 352 CEM 3/14/1-4.

that the committee charged five shillings a year to graveowners for keeping graves in Birkenhead Cemetery decorated with fresh flowers throughout the summer months.¹⁰³ Clearly, the graves were visually impressive but the tributes decorating them indicated the efficiency of municipal employees rather than the spontaneous gestures of mourners.

The impetus to maintain the appearance of the cemetery was tied to a desire to sustain the moral purpose and sacred associations of the burial ground. It was also inseparable from public health concerns. From the 1840s onwards, the sanctity of many cemeteries and churchyards was compromised by overcrowded graves, pungent stenches and exposed coffins and remains.¹⁰⁴ Growing sanitary concerns led to the closure and landscaping of most intra-mural burial grounds. From the late 1870s, Liverpool Corporation acquired several burial grounds with the intention of landscaping them as open spaces.¹⁰⁵ For instance, St. Martin's-in-the-Field, procured in 1878, was to be transformed from a 'very unsightly and indecent' site into an ornamental garden with walks, fountains, shrubs and flowers.¹⁰⁶

In all but one of the graveyards acquired by Liverpool Corporation, the remains of the dead were left undisturbed. Nevertheless, most of the conversions necessitated the removal or flattening of headstones and memorials. That the Corporation prefaced each of their proposals for conversion with a promise to make detailed plans of the burial plots and copies of memorial inscriptions, to be made available for public consultation, demonstrates an effort to transpose the commemorative role of the burial ground onto different media, thus retaining some notion of permanence.¹⁰⁷ The Corporation's proposals for closure were invariably promoted as 'for the public benefit' and 'in the interests of public safety' or 'convenience'. Moreover, they persistently met with the 'unanimous approval' of local residents

¹⁰³ Liverpool Weekly Courier, 2 June 1888, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ See Chadwick, 'Report from the Select Committee', 1842. See also Brooks, Mortal Remains, pp. 30-47 and Curl, The Victorian Celebration, pp. 27-53.

¹⁰⁵ See LVRO 352 CEM 1/18/1 Faculty Book, for details of acquisitions of burial ground from February 1878 to September 1902.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ This can, perhaps, be likened to the rolls of honour used to commemorate the war dead.

and, presumably, graveowners.¹⁰⁸ The apparent ease with which memorials were sacrificed sits somewhat uncomfortably with notions of caring for the grave. However, in almost all of the sites landscaped by the Corporation, the ground had been closed for interment some three or four decades previously.¹⁰⁹ Thus, those with an interest in a grave had no doubt resolved their grief. Furthermore, they had little to sacrifice in terms of forfeited burial space. Indeed, when Liverpool Corporation advertised its intention to close and landscape the Necropolis Cemetery in 1898, graveowners were far from acquiescent. An estimated 600 owners attended a public meeting with the Corporation on the subject of closure whilst hundreds more failed to gain admission.¹¹⁰

Heralded as a model cemetery when it opened in 1825, the Necropolis was, by the 1890s, widely perceived as a health hazard and associated with disease, vermin and a foul stench.¹¹¹ Closure and landscaping of the ground necessitated the removal of most headstones and some physical remains. Where the disturbance of corpses was unavoidable (for instance, where the land was to be re-used in road improvements), the Corporation undertook to advertise their intentions for three successive days in the local press, stating the conditions of removal. The public were allowed two months following publication of these notices in which to contact the Corporation if they wished to move the remains of their deceased to alternative gravespace. In such cases, the Corporation promised to bear the cost of removal (to an upper limit of ten pounds) in order to allay fears that graves were being desecrated. Families who wanted to maintain graves as memorials could transfer the remains of the dead, along with their headstones, to alternative gravespace for a nominal fee.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ See for instance, details relating to acquisition of St. Lukes (1885), St. James (1899) and St. Peters (1902) in LVRO 352 CEM 1/18/1. Public meetings were held to advertise the Corporation's intentions at which residents were given the opportunity to lodge protest or complaint. Residents and graveowners were given a further two to three months in which to approach the Corporation with queries or complaints. There is nothing in the records to suggest that anyone ever did.

¹⁰⁹ Faculty Book, LVRO 352 CEM 1/18/1.

¹¹⁰ City of Liverpool Necropolis Cemetery Removal of Headstones, Report of the Town Clerk (Pickmere) on Resolution of the Graveowners Association, LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/1, 8 November 1905, p. 24.

¹¹¹ Ibid. pp. 4-6.

¹¹² 'The Liverpool Corporation Act, 1898', LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/1.

Anticipating public hostility to their plans, the Corporation secured the passage of the 1898 Liverpool Corporation Act, a decree which empowered them to oversee the closure of the ground in the interests of 'public advantage'.¹¹³ However, few graveowners expressed a wish to move the remains of their dead or the memorials installed to commemorate them. Rather, the majority of correspondence with (and complaint to) the Corporation hinged upon claims for the compensation of unused gravespace. Unable to ignore the issue of forfeited gravespace, the Corporation purchased 297 empty gravespaces at Anfield Cemetery in 1900 (at a cost of 500 pounds) for the purpose of compensating owners of graves in the Necropolis which held no more than two bodies.¹¹⁴ The interests of graveowners were represented by the Graveowners' Association who negotiated with the Corporation on the terms and conditions for the allotment of compensatory grave space.¹¹⁵ Despite these measures, it took the Corporation almost ten years following the closure of the ground to settle matters of compensation and forfeiture with owners of the graves in the Necropolis.¹¹⁶

Repeatedly, the Corporation asserted that the closure of the cemetery was 'for the good of the community at large'.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, they were not:

compelled to accede to the wishes of owners as graveowners' rights only amounted to a license to bury so long as the burial ground remained open for interments, and that so soon as the cemetery was closed against interments then this license was revoked.¹¹⁸

The town clerk asserted that each complaint and claim for compensation, from 'rich or poor' alike, had been treated with consideration, 'care and patience'.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ 'Memorandum of Agreement of Removal of Graves, 1901', LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/1.

¹¹⁵ Papers Relating to Allotment of Graves and Removal of Headstones, LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/1.

¹¹⁶ Necropolis Letter Book, 20 April 1907, LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/3.

¹¹⁷ Report of the Town Clerk on Resolution of the Grave Owner's Association, 8 November 1905, LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/1.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Necropolis Letter Book, 20 April 1907, LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/3.

Even the most 'boisterous' graveowners had left the town hall 'perfectly satisfied' despite the fact that graveowners could not be expected to approve plans for closure 'at a time when the judgement is clouded by sentiment of sorrow and affection.'¹²⁰ Moreover, compensation for forfeited gravespace had been intended as a conciliatory gesture by the Corporation towards 'certain cases of great hardship'. Yet, the clerk argued, the Graveowners' Association had shown 'no consideration' for the owners of plots in the third-class division of the cemetery, exemplified by the fact that a number of poorer graveowners had not claimed the compensatory space to which they were entitled.¹²¹

The apparent acquiescence of some poorer graveowners in forfeiting gravespace is curious. Given the cost and significance of the private grave it seems unlikely that those entitled to compensatory plots would have knowingly sacrificed alternative gravespace. However, not only did the Corporation's publication of notices assume that all graveowners read newspapers, the adverts were couched in obscure legal terminology, even in more accessible newspapers such as the Liverpool Daily Courier.¹²² To a point, the Corporation recognised that poorer graveowners were probably under- or mis-informed concerning compensatory rights and took steps to retrieve plots given to the Graveowners' Association in an attempt to encourage those owners to approach the municipality.¹²³ In addition, however, claims for compensation had to be substantiated by documentary evidence of purchase. As the Corporation noted, numbers of those who did apply for a compensatory grave were unable to support their claims with the appropriate documents.¹²⁴

Overall, however, the concern for the forfeiture of empty gravespace as opposed to the fate of remains or memorials suggests that the pecuniary loss entailed in the

¹²⁰ Ibid. The clerk appears to have overlooked the fact that at the time of his statement, the last interment had taken place seven years previously.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² The notice was also published in the Liverpool Mercury and Liverpool Daily Post.

¹²³ Necropolis Letter Book, 20 April 1907, LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/3.

¹²⁴ Of course, the less scrupulous may have spied an opportunity for a 'free' gravespace. However, the loss of grave deeds was a common problem. For instance, in response to the number of original grave deeds which were lost, Bacup burial board resolved in 1878 to begin charging a fee (1s 6d) for replacement deeds. LRO MBBa 3/4, 24 September 1878.

closure of the Necropolis took precedence over the use of the grave as a permanent point of commemoration. Ostensibly, this 'neglect' implied a callous indifference to the dead, especially when juxtaposed with the minority of those who, 'purely from sentiment', re-located the dead.¹²⁵ Yet despite the Corporation's nominal fees, the transfer of remains and memorials at the graveowner's behest represented an extraordinary expense few families would, or could, have budgeted for. Furthermore, as the following chapter demonstrates, expressions of grief and commemoration after interment tended to be located in domestic space: for many, the cemetery was spatially and conceptually distant. Significantly, however, notions of grave maintenance presupposed single ownership of burial plots. Yet the private grave was sometimes shared between families and friends to defray the costs of burial, rendering the identity of those responsible for maintaining it questionable and blunting the desirability of installing a *family* headstone. Indeed, the multiple ownership of a single gravespace epitomises the ambiguity surrounding attitudes towards the grave. Firstly, the willingness to inter the dead in a second-hand grave suggests that pragmatism was prioritised over the perceived prestige of buying a grave of one's own. Costs for burial in a shared grave were significantly diminished: a small fee was paid to the graveowner along with the Corporation's nominal fee for interment.¹²⁶ Secondly, co-operation in sharing or parting with grave deeds (and by implication, the dead buried therein) further casts doubt on the significance of the grave in the post-interment period.

Decent Burial and the Grave as Private Property

The perception of the gravespace as a commodity or an investment is far removed from the sentimental associations promoted by municipal authorities. Yet as the boom in burial insurance indicates, those with meagre or fluctuating incomes had

¹²⁵ The removal of remains still had to be processed via the Home Office. The Secretary of State conjectured that those who moved their loved ones from the graves did so for sentimental reasons, a gesture he sympathised with as the Corporation were probably going to turn the cemetery into a recreational space. PRO HO45/9959/V27484, November 1900.

¹²⁶ This enabled those with limited resources to secure burials in private graves rather than turn to the parish. See for instance, Chorley Register of Burial Grants 1885-91 where the majority of grave transfers were either from or to widows, LRO MBCh 56/4.

to adopt pragmatic measures to ensure burial in a private grave. Thus, some families purchased graves in advance of death during times of economic security. For instance, the registrar's report for Haslingden Cemetery in 1903 noted the purchase of numerous graves which had subsequently remained empty.¹²⁷ Likewise, the disputes concerning the closure of the Necropolis highlighted that a number of graveowners had purchased a burial plot prior to need.¹²⁸ Such foresight appears to have been widespread. Indeed, Colne burial board resolved in 1889 to prohibit the purchase of more than one gravespace at a time.¹²⁹ The availability of an empty grave probably soothed anxieties concerning the possibility of an undignified burial in a pauper's plot. Yet it also represented 'real estate' which could be re-sold or loaned out in formal and informal systems of exchange.¹³⁰

The acceptance of grave deeds for pledge at the pawnbrokers testifies to the fiscal value of a burial plot, although like the wedding ring, the grave carried meaning beyond its economic worth and was, therefore, likely to be redeemed.¹³¹ However, empty gravespace could also be sold formally through the burial board. For instance, James Broadhurst applied to Bolton burial board in 1888 requesting that the registrar sell the remaining space in his grave for 'a small sacrifice'.¹³² William Heaton approached the board in 1897 regarding the potential sale of his grave. He had buried one child in the grave but intended to move to York and had no further use for the remaining space. As the plot was situated in a 'choice' location, William suggested that it might be worth an attractive sum of money.¹³³ Clearly, pragmatism rather than sentiment influenced the evaluation of his burial plot and, presumably, the remains of his child.

¹²⁷ LRO MBH 42/2.

¹²⁸ Report of the Town Clerk, 1905, LVRO 352 CEM 2/6/1, p. 14.

¹²⁹ LRO MBCo 4/2, 20 November 1889.

¹³⁰ In correspondence between James Meadowcroft, a plumber, and Bury burial board regarding the ownership of a grave, Meadowcroft repeatedly referred to his gravespace as 'real estate'. PRO HO45/10304/118370, October - December 1904.

¹³¹ See for instance, BOHT, Tape 18, Ref: AL/LSS/A/023. The extra value invested in the grave deeds was not necessarily tied to sentimental attachments to the dead, but could be related to the security of one's own resting place.

¹³² BRO ABZ 3/1/4, 28 March 1889.

¹³³ BRO ABZ 3/1/7, 5 March 1897.

On a less mercenary note, the willingness to share grave deeds amongst extended kin and neighbours suggests that burial space was also perceived as a communal resource. Graveowners applied to the relevant burial board and requested that ownership of their deeds be transferred to someone else. That most burial boards included guidelines for transfer in their regulations and printed standardised application forms suggests that the practice was relatively common.¹³⁴ Moreover, despite the common ruling that only immediate kin could be interred in a single grave, most burial boards exercised a degree of flexibility in permitting the transfer of deeds to extended kin and friends. For instance, in August 1878 James Marsden, a joiner, applied to Bolton burial board to transfer his gravespace in Tonge Cemetery to Joseph Peters, a carter. Peters had already interred one child in this grave.¹³⁵ Similarly, Margaret Smith requested in May 1891 that her (deceased) mother's gravespace be transferred to herself as she wished to inter the child of her second cousin, Maggie Caldiley.¹³⁶ It is possible that graveowners transferred their gravespace reluctantly on account of pecuniary hardship, receiving either a fee or payment in kind. Yet it seems equally plausible that systems of exchange relating to grave deeds also drew on the same notions of mutual aid inherent in street and workplace funeral collections.¹³⁷

Grave deeds might also be given as a gift or bequeathed to friends and relatives in wills. Thus, in 1877 Edward Crock wrote to his brother John, a warehouseman, enclosing the deeds to his burial plot in Tonge Cemetery in Bolton: the deeds were 'a gift to you from your ever loving and affectionate brother'.¹³⁸ A gravespace purchased by Hannah Bennison in 1874 housed Hannah's husband but was given to Mary Winstanley, her friend and neighbour, when Hannah moved to Sale some years later.¹³⁹ When Mrs. MacAllister moved to Blackburn in 1900, she

¹³⁴ LRO MBH 42/1, MBH 42/2 and MBCh 56/4. It is possible that cemetery authorities' profits suffered from this practice. Indeed, in February 1918 Whitworth Cemetery authority resolved to refuse consent for grave transfer unless fifty percent of the original fees were paid to the registrar. LRO UDWh 6/1, 6 February 1918.

¹³⁵ BRO ABZ 3/1/1, 28 August 1878.

¹³⁶ BRO ABZ 3/1/2, 11 May 1891.

¹³⁷ See pp. 112-15 above.

¹³⁸ BRO ABZ 3/1/2, 7 April 1877.

¹³⁹ BRO ABZ 3/1/9, 21 May 1907.

notified Bolton burial board of her intention to transfer her grave deeds to Mrs. Popplewell, 'an old and dear friend of mine'.¹⁴⁰ The concept of the burial plot as a token of affection indicates the perception of gravespace as a valuable commodity. It also suggests that the principal significance of the grave lay in securing a burial space for oneself or for loved ones. Moreover, the willingness to donate the deeds to a burial plot in which relatives had been interred indicates a pragmatism in circumstances where the bereaved were no longer in proximity to their dead. This need not imply that donors were careless as to the fate of their dead but that they prioritised the practical value of grave deeds for others.

Petitions to Bolton burial board claiming the right to inheritance of grave deeds illustrate the networks of informal exchange and mutuality which operated at local levels. Some petitioners stated that they had paid the burial expenses of the graveowner in the expectation that their generosity would be reciprocated with the subsequent transfer of grave deeds to themselves. Samuel Davis, for instance, applied to have the deeds of a grave owned by his uncle's widow, Alice Davis, transferred to himself following the interment of Alice as there were no surviving children from her marriage. The note that Samuel had 'paid all [Alice's] funeral expenses' reads as an implicit justification for his claim to the deeds.¹⁴¹ Likewise, Alfred John Goodman, a turner, petitioned the board to resolve a dispute between himself and his brother. Alfred's brother was in possession of the deeds to a grave in which both their parents were interred. Given that Alfred had organised his mother's funeral on behalf of his ailing father and subsequently paid the expenses for his father's interment, he argued that his claim to ownership of the grave was greater.¹⁴²

Clearly, perceptions of grave deeds as a shared resource could create dispute and disharmony amongst family members, particularly if there was limited space within the grave in question.¹⁴³ Following the burial of James Fletcher in Bolton,

¹⁴⁰ BRO ABZ 3/1/3, 24 March 1900.

¹⁴¹ BRO ABZ 3/1/3, no date - circa 1902.

¹⁴² BRO ABZ 3/1/8, 24 November 1893.

¹⁴³ More practical problems also occurred. When the body of Sarah Ellen Hulme (a four-month-old child) was interred in the wrong grave at Farnworth Cemetery, it transpired that her parents

the parents of his first wife retained the deeds to his grave. They may have felt they had a higher claim to the grave given that their daughter and two of their grandchildren were also interred there. However, James' second wife applied to the Corporation to have the deeds formally transferred to herself: as a widow with two dependent children and little income, guaranteed grave space would alleviate some financial worry. She made no reference to a desire to be laid to rest with her husband.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, Lenora Howard applied to Bolton burial board in November 1890 requesting intervention in a family dispute concerning ownership of grave deeds. Lenora's mother, Mary Ann Howarth, had purchased a grave in order to bury her husband and three of Lenora's children. Prior to Mary's own death, however, she had given the deeds to the grave to her son-in-law, Joseph Lord. Since her mother's burial, Lenora's five-year-old child had died and Lenora now requested that she be permitted to inter the child in the grave. Her brother and sister consented to the request but Joseph Lord refused.¹⁴⁵ The concern to bury the child with his siblings may have influenced Lenora's application for the deeds. Yet it is more probable that the availability of space in an existing grave was especially attractive when set against the cost of purchasing a new grave or pauper burial.

Fears for one's own resting place often hindered generosity with grave deeds. In 1890, Ann Gradwell inherited the deeds to her sister's grave in Heaton Cemetery in Bolton which had two spaces available for interment. In accordance with her sister's wishes, Ann loaned the deeds to Mary Nicholson who was to be interred in one of the remaining spaces. A dispute arose between the women when Mary stated her intention to keep the grave deeds to secure burial for herself and her child. Ann's efforts to contest this derived not so much from a desire to be buried with her sister but from the fact that she no longer had an assured resting place.¹⁴⁶ In this sense, the language of the *family* grave not only drew on claims to

had borrowed the grave from a friend, John Mellor, and were unaware of the location of the grave. BRO AF 6/132/3, 6 June 1917.

¹⁴⁴ BRO ABZ 3/1/8, no date - circa 1886.

¹⁴⁵ BRO ABZ 3/1/8, 28 November 1890. In this case, the town clerk stipulated that if Lenora could obtain the signatures of consenting siblings, the grave space would be transferred to her.

¹⁴⁶ BRO ABZ 3/1/8, 17 March 1890.

ownership of the dead and rotting reunions, it also made wider reference to rights of access, inheritance and anxieties concerning one's own resting place. Similarly, in 1886 Mary Haslam purchased a grave in Heaton Cemetery in which she was interred on 9 February 1887. Prior to her death, Mary agreed that her sister Sophia Whiteside, a widow with two children, could purchase the remaining space in the grave. Two other sisters consented to the arrangement. Sophia paid Mary four shillings and undertook to care for her funeral arrangements: 'Whilst my sister was ill I paid her Burial Club money and at her death I drew from the club the sum of three pounds for which I gave a receipt to the Collector'.¹⁴⁷ When Mary died, Sophia took the club money and the grave deeds to the undertaker, Dewhurst. Sophia then became ill herself and was 'confined to my bed at the time of the funeral'.¹⁴⁸ Consequently, the undertaker returned the grave deeds to Sophia's brother who then refused to give them to Sophia unless she paid him ten shillings. Sophia had paid one instalment of two shillings and sixpence when her brother stated his intention to keep the grave for his son; he refused to 'give up the grant for anyone'.¹⁴⁹

The transfer of grave deeds on both formal and informal levels of exchange illustrates the complexity of attitudes towards the cemetery and cultures of grief and remembrance. The use of gravespace as a moveable resource also demonstrates that the cultural ideal of the family grave was rather precarious. Reunions within the grave were symbolic, both of kinship ties in life and, as memorial inscriptions were keen to promote, hopes for renewed relationships in the afterlife. Yet the exchange of deeds highlights that for some, the ideal of the family grave was overshadowed by the desire to guarantee burial in a private gravespace, even if this necessitated interment in a grave owned by neighbours or distant relatives. Moreover, the squabbles between family members concerning ownership of deeds was the very antithesis of idealised family graves. This is not to suggest that the desire for reunions with decaying relatives was overlooked, but that such ideals had to be managed in tandem with a pragmatic approach to

¹⁴⁷ BRO ABZ 3/1/8, No date - circa 1887.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

interment. Furthermore, the shared ownership of grave deeds supports the notion that the funeral took priority in the financial management of burial resources: families were willing to sacrifice the long-term implications of exclusive grave ownership provided that sacrifice facilitated the burial of the dead with due dignity and respect.

Conclusion

For some, burial space represented a locus for expressions of grief and commemoration through the installation of headstones, gifts of flowers and visits to the grave. Yet in so far as a working-class culture of post-interment grief and remembrance can be written with regard to the cemetery, it was a culture typified by ambivalence and informed by pragmatism. Narratives of grief which used the cemetery as their principal point of reference tended to hinge upon the rituals of interment rather than long-term commemoration. Moreover, the fusion between notions of custom, identity, grief and memory render isolated analysis of perceptions of the cemetery as a landscape for grief problematic. Rather, a multiplicity of meanings concerning cemetery space tended to fall within a loose language of sanctity and reverence for the dead. A private gravespace ensured that the bereaved were entitled to claim the identity and dignity of the dead and to *enact their grief through participation in mourning rituals which used the grave as a focal point*. Within the context of memory, therefore, the grave was associated with the funeral and burying the dead with decency. Thus, the dead (and their grave) could be remembered in the aftermath of interment without necessitating a visit to the cemetery. 'Neglect' in this sense is a misnomer: memories of the dead were not so much discarded after burial as remembered in different contexts and through different media. As the following chapter illustrates, languages of loss adopted a multitude of linguistic and symbolic forms, often expressed in domestic and personal space, which were not always recognisable to others. Thus, the pragmatism inherent in the working-class culture of bereavement was not incompatible with profound sorrow. It did, however, testify to the need to

manipulate responses to loss in order to meet the demands, and constraints, of life.

Chapter Six

Loss, Memory and the Management of Feeling

The preceding chapters have explored responses to bereavement which centred on the principal artefacts of death: the corpse, the funeral and the grave. It remains, therefore, to explore how normative grief was defined by the working classes; how bereavement found verbal and symbolic expression outside of burial rites; and the ways in which the dead were remembered once they had been laid to rest. David Vincent has argued that working-class responses to bereavement were contained by material circumstance: poverty prohibited the indulgence of 'pure' grief.¹ There are, however, several problems with this approach. Firstly, it is not inevitable that the relationship between poverty and death should limit grief. The two could operate together to create an overriding sense of desolation and despair. Likewise, the reverse was sometimes true: poverty might exacerbate the anguish of loss. Secondly, Vincent is evasive regarding his use of the phrase *pure* grief: he fails to clarify his definition of this term and, moreover, omits to identify those who did register this experience.² Implicit in Vincent's narrative is an assumption that unfettered emotion was an ideal and privileged form of bereavement. That the working classes had not the 'luxury' to develop or indulge this heightened sensibility intimates that they were denied access to the models of *good* grief available to those in wealthier circumstances.

In this chapter, I propose a more flexible understanding of responses to bereavement. I argue that grief was manifest in diverse ways, at different times and was tempered by a multitude of factors, including - but extending beyond - material privation. Given the significance attached to the relationship between death and poverty, I begin this chapter with an exploration of how the two worked together. In particular, I examine responses to the death of a breadwinner which, almost invariably, plunged the

¹ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 39-61.

² At no point does Vincent cite any other work on death in Victorian culture.

bereaved into economic uncertainty, if not destitution. Moreover, death effected multiple tragedies which did not diminish, but intensified the distress of bereavement: it is impossible to disentangle sorrow for a lost relationship and financial anxiety about the future from wider issues, such as crushed dreams, shattered homes and families, and broken routines and identities.

As in earlier chapters, this discussion reiterates the argument that expressions of bereavement did not necessitate verbal fluency. Grief could express itself through physical symptoms (such as weight loss or nightmares), in acts of commemoration, in seeking to contact the dead, in fractured speech and, significantly, in silence. For many, remembrance of the dead adopted a timelessness which not only enabled the bereaved to maintain some form of relationship with the memory of the dead, it often represented a healthy adaptation to loss also.³ Indeed, an acknowledgement of the diversity of grief should not detract from a recognition that many mourners shared a general consensus relating to *normative* grief and the desirability of resolution. This is not to suggest a reversion to proscriptive models of good grief but to suggest that most families expected the bereaved to achieve a degree of restitution. Within shared understandings of normative grief, however, individual perceptions of timescales and forms of expression differed widely. Indeed, an analysis of experiences defined as extreme or chronic grief facilitates a reading of the subjective criteria for recovery and re-integration into the sphere of the living.⁴ In conclusion, therefore, this chapter demonstrates that material privation cannot be equated with the containment of feeling. Grief was rarely set aside so easily. Rather, individuals developed strategies to accommodate the tumult of bereavement and all its consequences.

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³ See also Shuchter and Zisook, 'The Course of Normal Grief', p. 25.

⁴ Jalland uses the terms 'chronic' and 'abnormal' grief to describe the minority of cases amongst elite families where some form of resolution was not reached within approximately two years of death. Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, p. 318.

Poverty and Grief: The Material Impact of Bereavement

Vincent is right to draw attention to the material impact of bereavement. In a literal sense, funerals necessitated extraordinary expenditure. Yet the death of a wage-earner, especially a breadwinner, also dealt a blow to family resources. In such circumstances, news of a death was inseparable from calculations regarding burial costs, loss of income and material security. As Kathleen Woodward observed, a mother might be 'beside herself with grief' when a 'good' child died; all the more, however, if they were also her principal means of support.⁵ Bereavement and material tragedy were, however, most commonly associated with widowhood.⁶ Indeed, Jack London asserted that the death of the male breadwinner was the worst disaster that could befall a family:

The thing happens, the father is struck down, and what then? A mother with three children can do little or nothing... There is no guarding against it. It is fortuitous. A family stands so many chances of escaping the bottom of the Abyss, and so many chances of falling plump down to it.⁷

There can be little doubt that widows, especially those with dependant children, were concentrated in poor housing and engaged in low income, low status employment. Arthur Morrison's literary portrayal of the mean streets of London characterised the widow as gaunt, overworked and exhausted.⁸ Booth's survey of London's working-class districts highlighted a preponderance of widows residing in cramped rooms in the worst slums. An overview of a district typified by 'almost solid' poverty illustrated the diverse occupations pursued by widows: hawker, brush drawer, paper kite maker, watercress seller, coster, washerwoman and mangler, 'odd jobber',

⁵ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p. 131.

⁶ This may account for the role of the widow as the supreme case study for analyses of bereavement. The classic study of widows is Peter Marris's *Widows and Their Families* (London, 1957).

⁷ London, *The People*, pp. 251-2.

⁸ Morrison, *Tales of Mean Streets*, pp. xxi-xxii.

charwoman, ironer, factory employee, matchbox maker and prostitute.⁹ In a similar area, a 'barely clad' and 'dejected' widow lived as best she could from needlework, yet she was often 'without fire or food'.¹⁰ At their most abject, widows survived by 'begging or picking up odds and ends in the street'.¹¹ One widow was reputed to be '*one of the best beggars in the district*'.¹² Another, almost blind, 'struggle[d] hard for her children'.¹³ Similarly, Rowntree's survey of York indicated that almost two-thirds of those in the lowest income group (under eighteen shillings per week) were families whose immediate cause of poverty was the death or illness of the male breadwinner.¹⁴ Furthermore, over fifteen percent of those in primary poverty were thus situated due to the death of the principal wage earner.¹⁵

Retrospective accounts of the death of a father tend to support the parallel between widowhood and poverty. Mildred Metcalfe, born in 1891, recalled her father's death at the age of fifty-seven in tandem with the observation that her mother had a 'hard life'.¹⁶ When Joseph Stevens' father (a joiner) died in 1907, he bequeathed his family a 'tidy sum'. Yet the legacy rapidly disappeared: the piano was sold and the family soon turned to the pawnbroker.¹⁷ Jack Lannigan, born in 1890, recollected that following his father's death, he and his brother 'became very hungry kids'. Lannigan begged for bread whilst his brother became a lather boy in a local barber's in order to contribute to the family wage.¹⁸ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that most widows with dependant children were forced to turn to the poor law guardians.

An article in the Liverpool Review in November 1890 observed that widows featured prominently among the 'motley lot' who regularly queued for outdoor relief:

⁹ Booth, Labour and Life, Vol. II, pp. 94-138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 69.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 49.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 178.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 179.

¹⁴ Rowntree, Poverty, pp. 69-73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 154.

¹⁶ MOH Tape, Mildred Metcalfe, Tape 723.

¹⁷ MOH Transcript, Joseph Stevens, Tape 101.

¹⁸ Burnett, Destiny Obscure, p. 97.

The poor struggling self-respecting widow can hold out no longer. The parish - that fated and hated name! - must be appealed to, and thus the terrible descent is made from the happy, self-supporting home down through weakening efforts and narrowing opportunities to the parish and the grave.¹⁹

Little had changed when, in 1909, the guardians in West Derby, Liverpool, commissioned the first of a series of special reports into the living standards of widows with young children who claimed relief.²⁰ Having investigated a random sample of thirty-four widows with dependants in each relief district, the guardians concluded that although individual circumstances varied, the amount of relief given was inadequate to provide sufficient nutrition for growing children. For the most part, widows were a 'very respectable, striving, and worthy class', yet the majority bore a 'weak and ill-nourished' appearance and the hardship they endured was 'appalling'. Indeed, it was 'not to be wondered at' that such families tended to live in squalid surroundings and children were sent to work at the earliest opportunity. The report recommended that the basic amount of relief given be increased.²¹ Unlike the Liverpool Review, however, the guardians failed to consider the demoralisation occasioned by the slide into destitution and charity and the ways in which this exacerbated sorrow at the loss of a spouse.

The fundamental obstacle to the widow regaining economic autonomy was, however, her children. Gissing had outlined this predicament in The Nether World in 1889. When her husband Bob suddenly dies, Pennyloaf Candy is 'all but crazy with grief'. *Her emotional distress is exacerbated by the unexpected removal of the family's chief source of income (albeit an irregular one).* Pennyloaf knows she must find employment, yet the need to care for her young children circumscribes the

¹⁹ Liverpool Review, 1 November 1890, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ LVRO 353 WES 1/42, 30 October 1909. Reports were also conducted in 1912 and 1914.

²¹ *Ibid.* Even then, widows would still have to exercise 'great economy' and engage in some paid employment.

opportunities available to her. It is only by chance that Pennyloaf is able to combine resources with another widow to share a home, childcare and employment.²²

Of course, some mothers were able to return to work, either by conferring childcare responsibilities on an elder child or by trusting neighbours to police children's behaviour.²³ Overall, however, philanthropists and poor law guardians interpreted this as 'neglect'.²⁴ As Mrs. Tudhope, a member of the Liverpool Central Relief and Charity Organisation Society, recommended in 1900, widows with dependent children should be encouraged to participate in home-based employment schemes: domestic work facilitated financial independence without compromising childcare responsibilities.²⁵ Many widows were reluctant to seek employment outside the home or sought jobs where they could take young children with them. Rowntree noted that most widows in York charred, took in laundry or catered for lodgers.²⁶ When Frank Marsden's father died in 1910, his mother was left destitute with four young children and three elderly relatives to care for. She supported the family by catering for lodgers, as did Arthur Thierens' mother when his father died in 1914.²⁷ One Bolton man, born in 1907, recalled that after the death of his father, his mother took in laundry to support the family.²⁸

Clearly, widows were particularly vulnerable to the material implications of death. Yet as many studies of working-class household management have highlighted most women were also adept at stretching scarce resources to 'make ends meet' and could

²² Gissing, *The Nether World*, pp. 356-7.

²³ MOH Transcript, Mr. Peacock, Tape 652. Born in 1895, Mr. Peacock recalled that parents frequently left children to play on the streets in faith that neighbours would look out for them.

²⁴ The relationship between working mothers and child neglect was a controversial issue during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, especially in relation to more general debates regarding infant mortality and cruelty to children. See chapter seven below.

²⁵ Mrs. Tudhope, 'Suggestions on Helping Widows With Dependent Children' in Grisewood, *The Poor of Liverpool*, pp. 1-6 (Paper read at Annual Conference of Friendly Visitors, 16 October 1900).

²⁶ Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 37.

²⁷ MOH Transcript, Frank Marsden, Tape 717 and MOH Tape, Arthur Thierens, Tape 821.

²⁸ BOHT Tape 79b, Ref. AB/ LSS/A/021. His father died whilst he was still a baby.

call upon neighbourhood networks of support.²⁹ The flipside of this culture meant that the death of a wife and mother often precipitated the breakdown of domestic economy and the splintering of the family unit. As Carl Chinn has noted, 'a family might survive without its father; it was rarer it did so without its mother.'³⁰ Young children were frequently sent to live with neighbours or extended family. When Edna Thorpe's mother died, she and her sister went to live with an aunt whilst her three brothers moved to lodgings with their father.³¹ Older children might find themselves launched into independence or were impelled to take employment which also provided accommodation and food. When Edith Jennings' mother died, two siblings entered orphanages, Edith trained for domestic service and her brother, aged fourteen, became an apprentice joiner.³² Others, like Alice Rushmer, married at the earliest opportunity. Romance aside, having 'no home nor nothing' rendered marriage an attractive prospect.³³

Such abrupt changes in lifestyle and environment can only have exacerbated the shock of bereavement. Yet some fathers strove to maintain the home and family in a bid to limit the upheavals occasioned by death. When Winnifred Jay's mother died in 1910, the family 'just had to make the best of it': Winnifred's father assumed responsibility for cooking meals after work whilst Winnifred regularly missed school to do the laundry, and pay the rent and club money.³⁴ Jim Walsh's mother died in 1908 when he was eight-years-old. One sister was already 'skivvying' in domestic service whilst his eldest brother lived with an uncle. For the four children who remained at home, Jim's father 'struggled along' to provide 'the best he could'. A labourer, his father worked during the week and spent his weekends attending to

²⁹ See for instance, Chinn, *They Worked*, pp. 30-40 and pp. 52-67, Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, pp. 148-68, 183-201, Elizabeth Roberts, 'Women's Strategies, 1890-1940' in Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford, [1986] 1989), pp. 223-48, Ross, 'Survival Networks', and Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet*.

³⁰ Chinn, *They Worked*, p. 17

³¹ MOH Transcript, Edna Thorpe, Tape 81.

³² MOH Transcript, Edith Jennings, Tape 14.

³³ Alice Rushmer, Born circa 1895. Mary Chamberlain, *Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village* (London, [1975] 1983), pp. 78-81.

³⁴ MOH Transcript, Winnifred Jay, Tape 43.

domestic chores; washing on Saturday afternoons and baking bread and broth on Sundays. Jim's overriding recollection of his father was that 'life was really hard for him.' Indeed, one year following the death of their mother, his father 'must have got to the bottom of his patience' and escorted the family to the workhouse. When they arrived at the gates, however, 'he thought better of it'. This is not to suggest that his father was a model of virtue and fortitude: every so often, he 'went on the spree'. Yet this account of 'hard times' and the sense of conflict implied by the excursion to the workhouse suggests a quiet determination to preserve a home and family - even with sporadic lapses into heavy drinking.³⁵

In shifting analysis to the widower, it is possible to move away from the fixation with poverty. Stories of widowers striving to maintain home and family alert us to the multiple tragedies occasioned by death. Moreover, such accounts provide a rare insight into domestic and emotional aspects of masculinity. The impetus to sustain a home for one's children highlights the importance attached to filial relationships whilst illustrating how seemingly pragmatic priorities could be imbued with personal significance: the struggle to remain 'a family' implicitly told of love, loyalty and selflessness.

For those whose homes and families did disintegrate in the aftermath of death, bereavement was aggravated by the loss of a familiar environment and lifestyle. Rose Mutch, born in 1905, recalled that her 'hard life' began at the age of seven when her father died. Her mother, a sick woman, was unable to care for the family and their 'home got broken up': several older children found work and lodging with relatives whilst two younger sisters entered a Dr. Barnado's home.³⁶ Elsie Oman's recollection of her mother's death was inseparable from the memory of a world that 'fell apart'. As her father was in the navy, Elsie (aged seven) was sent to live with an aunt whilst her brother (aged three) was cared for by a neighbour. One year later, both children

³⁵ MOH Transcript, Jim Walsh, Tape 458.

³⁶ MOH Transcript, Rose Mutch, Tape 5.

were 'dumped on' a different aunt, so that they could grow up together.³⁷ Retrospectively, the bereavement became synonymous with the destruction of a home in both a literal and abstract sense.

Such experiences effected significant changes in a child's life and personality and were frequently detrimental to their education.³⁸ Moreover, children were often sensitive to adult distress. Mrs Petts' overriding memory of her widowed mother was of a diminished, weeping woman whom she could do nothing to help.³⁹ The death of one nine-year old's father in a mining accident in 1910, brought an abrupt end to childhood: she fretted about the family income and, following the subsequent birth of a baby brother, became the principal carer for both the baby and her younger siblings.⁴⁰ When both parents died, children as young as thirteen undertook to care and provide for their younger siblings rather than dismantle the family unit.⁴¹ Recollections such as 'we all contributed' and 'stuck close' indicate not only the survival strategies of bereft children, but the significance attached to familial ties.⁴² The stories cited here also imply that female children were particularly susceptible to the effects of bereavement, many stepping into the adult role of household manager and mother, perhaps in the belief that they were simply fulfilling their perceived feminine destiny sooner rather than later.

Vincent asserts that young children's emotional frameworks were not sufficiently sophisticated to register the impact of death or imbue bereavement with personal significance.⁴³ To a point, this may be true. Yet given Vincent's emphasis on the

³⁷ Oman, *Salford Stepping Stones*, p. 13.

³⁸ See for instance MOH Transcript, Mrs Seal, Tape 50b. Mrs. Seal, born in 1913, suggested that her mother's illiteracy stemmed from having to remain at home to care for her younger siblings after Mrs. Seal's grandmother died.

³⁹ MOH Transcript, Mrs. Petts, Tape 76.

⁴⁰ BOHT Tape 96, Reference AB/KP/1c/009.

⁴¹ A woman, born circa 1900, was thirteen when both her parents died. As the eldest, she became the head of the family. Seabrook, *Working-Class Childhood*, p. 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 35. A Blackburn man, born circa 1906, lost both parents before he reached ten. His elder sister Maud, aged fourteen, took the role of 'mother'. The five siblings became, and remained, extremely close.

⁴³ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p.56.

relationship between the emotional and the material, it is curious that he fails to explore bereavement in childhood in the context of its practical repercussions. Children may not have understood or been able to express the changes wrought by death, yet few would have been insensitive to the upheavals occasioned by bereavement. Vincent's failure to develop his analysis of bereavement in childhood is indicative of a fundamental flaw in his approach. Undoubtedly, poverty and bereavement were inextricable. Yet the perception of the emotional as eclipsed by the material highlights a failure to explore grief as a complicated and highly individual experience, the shaping and manifestation of which took many forms.

Poverty and Grief: The Complexity of Feeling

Florence Bell's study of Middlesbrough suggests a sensitivity to the complex relationship between poverty, bereavement and the wider implications of loss.⁴⁴ Bell portrayed many of the marriages and familial relationships she encountered as typified by devotion.⁴⁵ It was against this backdrop that she repeatedly cited instances of the death of a male breadwinner. Indeed, the tenacity and resourcefulness of widows contributed to her overall perception of the wives of ironworkers as resolute and competent household managers.⁴⁶ At one house, Bell met a woman, recently widowed, who sat in 'blank misery' and spoke only in 'little disjointed sentences'. The death of her spouse had left the woman 'bewildered and rudderless': the focus of her life was gone and there no longer seemed any reason to 'have anything done at the appointed time'. Her eldest daughter, meanwhile, sat with a 'face of hopeless misery'. Their house, which had been neat and comfortable, 'looked strangely transformed'. Bell implied that this was due, in part, to the uncertainty of their future and the probability that they would lose their home.⁴⁷ Yet far from suggesting that the emotional was subsumed to the material, Bell outlined a multi-faceted face of loss,

⁴⁴ Bell, *At the Works*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, see for instance pp. 114-5, 173-4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-245.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

characterised by multiple sorrows and anxieties. Thus, whilst the prospect of destitution preyed heavily on the minds of widows, it was (and is) impossible to disentangle financial worries from the wider tragedies effected by death.

Bell also cited the case of a widow whose eldest son had died at the age of twenty-two. Her grief at the loss of 'an excellent son' was not superseded by financial anxiety, it was compounded by it because the son had supported her.⁴⁸ The mother's notion of *excellence* may have been rooted in the son's willingness to provide for her, yet this undertaking in itself hinted at qualities of selflessness, loyalty and pride - attributes which would be mourned. Another widow who mourned the death of her eldest son sat 'wringing her hands' whilst her younger son 'cried forlornly'. Bell imagined that the woman's grief was aggravated by financial worries. However, her grief told of crushed hopes and ambitions too. Indeed, the efforts of the younger son to emulate his dead brother and adopt his role suggested to Bell that the boy had not only lost a sibling but his hero also.⁴⁹

Thus, poverty need not constrict bereavement. Rather, grief encompassed the loss of a specific individual and huge changes in the mourner's identity and role. For instance, when Mrs Hewett dies in The Nether World, her husband John is consumed by remorse, regret and bitterness. Yet the prospect that he must bury her in a pauper grave compounds his grief, not on account of any slur on respectability, but because the poverty which necessitates the common grave is a symbol of crushed dreams: 'Do you remember what hopes I used to have when we were first married? See the end of 'em - look at this underground hole - look at this bed she lays on!'⁵⁰ When an old friend offers to pay for the burial of his wife, Hewett expresses a 'sobbing gratitude'. Exhausted, he falls 'Nerveless, voiceless... upon the chair and let his head lie by that of the dead woman.'⁵¹ The image is simple yet poignant. Gissing suggests that grief is

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 104-5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 190.

⁵¹ Ibid. pp. 190-1.

manifest not only in relation to the present and the future, but also to the past; loss is bound with material concerns but not confined to them.

Thus, I would reject Vincent's use of the phrase *contained* (and *controlled*) grief, replete with its connotations of suppressed and unacknowledged emotion. Vincent leaves little room for manoeuvre in such terms, creating a dichotomy between *pure* and *contained* bereavement. Rather, I would suggest that grief was *managed*: individuals developed strategies for accepting death and grief which allowed them to complete the practical tasks associated with bereavement but which also provided scope for reflection, sorrow and anger in isolated moments and spaces. As D. H. Lawrence suggested, grief for the deceased might be perceived as an indulgence of sentiment but it could also signify a deliberate strategy in the management of feeling. Thus, when Lizzie learns of her husband Walter's accident in 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', her thoughts immediately turn to material security: 'If he was killed - would she be able to manage on the little pension and what could she earn? - she counted up rapidly'. When 'sentimental luxury' begins to intervene with her calculations, she concentrates only on her children.⁵² The notion that emotional reflection is both 'sentimental' and 'luxurious' does not, however, annul Lizzie's scope for ruminating on the personal tragedy of loss. Rather, she chooses to focus on the pragmatics of death and survival in the first instance, and only later, when washing her husband's corpse, does she take stock of her emotions and the character of the relationship lost.⁵³ Of course, at the heart of Lizzie's tragedy is the contemplation of her failed relationship with Walter. Indeed, had it been otherwise, the luxury of sentiment may have been harder to postpone. Hence, pragmatic and emotional responses to death did not conflict but co-existed in a broad but complex framework of feeling.

⁵² Lawrence, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', p.278.

⁵³ See also p. 79-80 above.

The concept of managing grief acknowledges that some mourners possessed a capacity to rationalise death and attribute bereavement with apparently unsentimental meaning. For instance, Jeremy Seabrook's overview of working-class childhood cites a Wigan woman's account of her brother's death in a mining accident. The recollection is dominated by her Grandmother's response to the bereavement: relief that a weakly grandson had died rather than one of his stronger brothers. This sentiment, seemingly harsh, was interpreted by the respondent not as indifference or callousness but as a bargaining with the economics of death: 'if one of them had been killed, it was better it should be him, because he wasn't as strong as the others.'⁵⁴

This recollection also highlights the danger of equating stoicism with a blind fatalism. In her memoirs of Edwardian Liverpool, Elsie Pettigrew reflected on the death of her stepsister Alice who had left the family home to work in domestic service. Recalling that 'in those days you were used to people dying so young in life', Pettigrew perceived no contradiction with her parallel assertion that Alice was 'sadly missed by our whole family'. Whilst this may illustrate a retrospective obligation to express a sense of loss, especially when writing in a context where death is less frequent, I would suggest that Pettigrew's memory indicates the potential for stoicism to temper responses to death without, necessarily, reducing the sadness or significance of loss.⁵⁵ Maud Pember Reeves also drew attention to the manner in which stoicism could be confused with apathy. Citing the case of Mrs. S., Reeves noted that when any of her children died, the woman 'cried a very little, but went about much as usual'. As far as Mrs. S. was concerned, she had done all she could for the child within her means. Reeves concluded this account by noting that Mrs. S. 'loved her family in a patient, suffering loyal sort of way which cannot have been very exhilarating for them'.⁵⁶ Within the context of daily survival, therefore, women such as Mrs S. were not

⁵⁴ Mrs. McIver, born circa 1905-1910. Seabrook, *Working-Class Childhood*, p. 68.

⁵⁵ Elsie Pettigrew, *Time to Remember - Growing up in Liverpool from 1912 Onwards* (Liverpool, 1989), p. 15.

⁵⁶ Reeves, *Round About a Pound*, p. 91.

devoid of emotion. Rather, their circumstances blunted its *expression*: love and grief were like life - unextravagant.

In prioritising the working-class ability to *contain* grief, Vincent has, perhaps, read his autobiographical sources too literally. A key point in support of his thesis is the notion that few mourners could afford to indulge grief by abandoning work.⁵⁷ This seems a rather simplistic measure of responses to death. Grief may, indeed, have been subsumed to the necessity to earn a living. However, it is also plausible to suggest that, as far as possible, the bereaved manipulated their occupational responsibilities to accommodate grief. As Alice Foley highlighted, members of 'good-natured' communities often made practical allowances for bereavement: in factories, 'willing, sympathetic hands' kept looms running so that the bereaved could return home without diminishing their earnings.⁵⁸ Likewise, Sunday funerals were particularly popular among the working classes.⁵⁹ The cynical commentator asserted that this permitted members of mourning parties to overindulge for a day: 'They go in for a spree, a feed, a guzzle, winding up with long pipes, long yarns, and very often, a row.'⁶⁰ A more sympathetic reading, however, allows for the possibility that mourners contrived to organise funerals at times when participation would not affect their earnings.⁶¹ In cases where burial boards prohibited Sunday funerals, workers persisted in striving to arrange burials at times when the maximum number of people could attend without detriment to their income. For instance, in July 1890, Alfred Stansfield approached Middleton burial board on behalf of a number of Nonconformists to request that the times of funerals in the unconsecrated portion of the cemetery be changed: it was difficult for people 'which [sic] work in spinning

⁵⁷ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 59.

⁵⁸ Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 60.

⁵⁹ Cline, *Lifting the Taboo*, p. 43 and David Clark, 'Death in Staithes' in Dickenson and Johnson, *Death, Dying and Bereavement*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ *The Porcupine*, 13 June 1863, pp. 84-5.

⁶¹ In contrast, weekday weddings remained relatively popular into the early twentieth century, testifying to the force of custom (especially that of Saint Monday). See Douglas Reid, 'Weddings, Weekdays, Work and Leisure in Urban England 1791-1911: The Decline of Saint Monday Revisited', *Past and Present*, 153 (1996), pp. 135-63.

mills and people engaged in warehouses in Manchester' to attend funerals as 'it means a whole afternoon off at works and leaving warehouses at the busiest time for to catch the train.'⁶² The compromise between attending a funeral and losing earnings demonstrates that whilst financial considerations were important, they did not override the desire to pay one's respects to the dead.

Expressions of Loss

It should be noted, however, that the focus on pragmatic concerns in the aftermath of death could also assuage grief, not least because confronting the practicalities of bereavement provided mourners with a relatively impersonal language of grief. In contrast, expressions of emotional anguish were intensely personal. Indeed, it is often visual images of grief rather than spoken sentiments that create lasting impressions of intimate loss. Jack Martin recalled the grief of a mother whose son had died in the pit:

every drop of blood appeared to leave her face and she seemed to realise that there was something seriously wrong. She partly stumbled... and I could see she was on the point of collapse. She said to me, "It's our Billy", and then she fell in a dead faint in the middle of the street.⁶³

Martin found the sight of 'this noble and hardworking mother going through mental torture and agony' unbearable.⁶⁴ Similarly, when an explosion at Pretoria Pit, near Bolton, on 21 December 1910 claimed the life of one boy's father, the overwhelming memory the child recreated in adulthood was of his mother standing resolute by the pit head until the remains of her husband were brought to the surface.⁶⁵ Lewis Jones also conveyed a powerful sense of the vision of grief. In *Cwmardy*, Len is sent to acquaint a woman with the death of her husband in the pit, the 'most unpleasant job'

⁶² LRO MBM 3/2 5 July 1890. The board made Nonconformist funerals thirty minutes later.

⁶³ Jack Martin, *The Life Story of A Working Man* (Bolton, 1973), p. 85.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Bromilow and Power, *Looking Back*, p. 42. This example also suggests a desire to claim the corpse.

for a miner to undertake.⁶⁶ As the widow guesses the purpose of Len's visit, 'her face went white as a death mask with blue streaks and black shadows painted across it'. The insight strikes her 'like a physical blow', she bursts into 'hysterical sobs', crying 'Bill is dead. I can see it in your eyes. Oh, Bill, Bill! Oh, my little babies!'⁶⁷ It is, perhaps, unsurprising that these examples accrue from messengers of unexpected deaths - the emotional distance from the bereavement itself permitted the authors to gauge the response of others to news of death.

Clearly, the expression of grief was not restricted to verbal fluency. Bell noted that houses where a bereavement had occurred tended to be 'full, quite full, of visitors':

All round the walls, on three sides of the room, wherever there is available space, people are seated, tightly wedged together, sitting sometimes in silence, sometimes bringing out simple inarticulate sentences of attempted consolation... The men who sit round will smoke in silence.⁶⁸

Vincent may be right to assert that such examples illustrate a lack of verbal language for grief.⁶⁹ I would suggest, however, that they illustrate not so much a class-barrier to sentimental discourse but that overwhelming feelings of loss were, simply, inexpressible. In such circumstances, words were superfluous: condolence and loss found adequate expression through the gathering of friends in a simple gesture of sympathy.

The manifestation of grief could also adopt extraordinary and unexpected forms. For instance, the sudden disappearance of Elsie Oman's mother was never explained to her. It was only by concealing herself underneath her aunt's dining table, where it was 'warm, snug and private', and eavesdropping on the conversations of adults that Elsie

⁶⁶ Jones, *Cwmardy*, p. 140.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁶⁸ Bell, *At the Works*, pp. 103-4.

⁶⁹ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 41-2.

learned of her mother's death. The devastating truth made a sharp incursion into the comfort of Elsie's hiding place. She then mirrored the verbal silence surrounding her mother's death by expressing her own grief in a refusal to eat.⁷⁰ Florence Jones experienced persistent nightmares following the death of her mother: 'I dreamed I was riding in the funeral coach again, sometimes on top of it, throwing soil onto the coffin with mother looking on. Terrible nightmares. Poor Mother'. The narration of this memory in brief, disjointed sentences hints at a confusion and rage which contrasts sharply with the apparently simple statement that 'the family seemed to go to pieces' in the aftermath of her mother's death.⁷¹

Similarly, Margaret Penn illustrated how grief could be expressed in unforeseen and seemingly subdued statements. When her paternal grandmother died, Margaret observed that her father did not 'seem to be very upset', not least because the woman was elderly and 'had lived her time'. However, after viewing the corpse, her father 'chokingly' called out his usual farewell: 'Ah'm away now mother'. For Margaret, the unexpected gesture conveyed a simple but 'deep, warm affection'.⁷² Rather differently, Margaret recalled her grandfather's musings on the death of his wife, chiefly that it 'winna be long' before he would join her. This blunt premonition of his own death implied that his life had lost its focus and, moreover, that the elderly man would welcome death.⁷³

If the bereaved were inarticulate concerning personal loss, it was partly because coherent and detailed expressions were at odds with sentiment: short and/ or fractured sentences reflect the bewilderment, sorrow and heartache of grief. As a forlorn carpenter revealed to Jack London, he had known 'bliss' through the love of his wife and three daughters. His happiness ended abruptly, however, with their

⁷⁰ MOH Transcript, Elsie Oman, Tape 12. She was eventually admitted to Salford Royal Hospital on account of this response.

⁷¹ Jones, *Memoirs*, p. 90.

⁷² Penn, *Manchester*, p. 35.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

deaths (his daughters all died within a fortnight).⁷⁴ The succinct manner in which the carpenter expressed his loss conveyed the impact of sudden death: words failed to express his sorrow. D. H. Lawrence went so far as to suggest that profound grief could be made manifest in silence. In Sons and Lovers the death of William Morel devastates his mother. The only words Mrs. Morel utters in relation to her sorrow - 'Oh my son - my son' - tell of her grief. Yet it is her silence which best conveys the desolation she feels, especially when set against her articulacy in the rest of the novel. She becomes 'small, white and mute' in the throes of bereavement and long after the burial has taken place: 'She remained shut off'.⁷⁵ The silence which falls on the Morel household does not resonate with peace. Rather, it is heavy, oppressive and ominous.

In Cwmardy, Lewis Jones also illustrated the inadequacy of words to express sensibility. At the death of their daughter Jane, neither Shane nor Jim can articulate linguistically the depth of their loss. Shane wails and sobs, rocks and moans. Later, at the funeral, tears 'overflowed and streamed down her face'.⁷⁶ Jim, meanwhile, is 'speechless with grief' and at the funeral, hides his face while the other men present swallow hard, look awkward, and generally try 'to appear unconcerned'.⁷⁷ Immediately after the burial, Jim resumes 'the usual routine of his life'.⁷⁸ Months later, Jim has cause to wear his suit, prompting Shane to recall that the last time he wore the clothes was at Jane's funeral. Jim's response, 'it be no good worrying 'bout it now', sounds almost dismissive.⁷⁹ However, at no point does Jones suggest that Jim does not share the grief or memories of Shane. Rather, Jim's grief is 'resigned' - it is quiet and solitary in comparison to Shane's tearfulness. Resignation in this account suggests the inarticulacy of grief, not so much from a conscious wish to *control* grief as from an unconscious adherence to gendered cultures of emotional expression. Repeatedly, Jones emphasises the cultural distinctions between the miners

⁷⁴ London, The People, p. 88.

⁷⁵ D. H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers (Penguin, Harmondsworth, [1913] 1975), pp. 168-74.

⁷⁶ Jones, Cwmardy, p. 64.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

and their wives and the differing social, political and occupational worlds they inhabit. Both are attributed with characteristics of fortitude and resilience, yet those traits are manifest in different ways. The miners cling to a stereotype of masculine emotional strength whilst their wives are permitted to sob and wail in accordance with notions of feminine susceptibility to emotional excitement. In light of this, it is unsurprising that most of the retrospective accounts of grief cited here derive from female authors. Not only do such distinctions remind us that bereavement was mediated and interpreted by gender, the observation should also alert us to Vincent's overwhelming reliance on *male* autobiography as a text on working-class grief.⁸⁰

Memory and Commemoration

The acknowledgement that grief could be profound but not necessarily public supports a concept of grief as a mutable state with no fixed agenda or timescale. Vincent's emphasis on contained grief and the limits of poverty implies that the resumption of daily toil in the immediate aftermath of death precluded persistent feelings of loss. Again, I would suggest that this restricts a robust analysis of bereavement, not only with reference to the period of interment but also in terms of post-burial commemoration. As outlined in chapter five, the degree to which the cemetery was utilised as a landscape for grief is uncertain. Rather, commemoration tended to be rooted in mementoes of the dead which were interwoven with domestic space and infused with intimate meaning. Indeed, memorialising the deceased in private was directly related to a lucrative industry: items manufactured specifically for the purposes of mourning (such as mourning cards and jet jewellery) were intended to be kept as personal souvenirs of the deceased. Likewise, letters of condolence and notes of sympathy represented a lasting source of comfort to the bereaved whilst testifying to the qualities of the deceased. Less popular, written memorials to the dead and lengthy accounts of their life and demise (perhaps the most notorious

⁸⁰ Vincent notes the silence surrounding the experience of women and female children; only six female autobiographies appear in his book. He persists, however, in writing in terms of 'the working-class'. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 8-9, 40-1.

example of this being Leslie Stephen's 'Mausoleum Book') operated not only as biographies but also as testimonies to the grief of the bereaved.⁸¹

Such practices are typically perceived as the preserve of the middle and upper classes, not least because they required disposable income and a high degree of literacy. Yet the memento could adopt a variety of guises, many of which - the lock of hair is the finest example - required little or no expense. Alice Foley recalled that a shabby picture adorning one of her many childhood homes was made of 'two black-rimmed fretwork cards behind the glass with slender angel forms blowing trumpets and small printed verses underneath them.' The picture also bore the epitaphs of both Foley's grandparents.⁸² Not only did the picture prove an endless source of fascination to Foley, it also testified to the resourcefulness of poorer families in commemorating the dead.

For some, the home itself was a ready-made memorial to the dead. Indeed, after the death of their child, A. S. Jasper's sister and her husband felt impelled to move to new accommodation as 'the place they had gave too many memories of the baby'.⁸³ Yet possessions were frequently retained because of their pleasant associations with the personality of the deceased. Elsie Oman recalled how her 'mother's belongings was divided in the family' after her death. Of particular value was a collection of glass dishes, of little monetary worth (most had been bought 'cheap' and 'second hand') but 'beautiful', perhaps, as much in memory of a mother's 'mania' for glass as for their aesthetic qualities.⁸⁴ More tenuous links with the dead could be maintained through abstract association. Elise Pettigrew recalled that when the last of her father's offspring from a previous marriage expired, it dealt him a 'hard blow': not

⁸¹ See for instance Morley, *Death, Heaven*, pp. 63-79 and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 300-317. For details of Stephen and his 'Mausoleum Book' see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1997), pp. 50-95.

⁸² Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 5.

⁸³ Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, p. 49.

⁸⁴ MOH Transcript, Elise Oman, Tape. 12.

only had all the children from his first marriage died, whilst they were alive they embodied living links with his dead wife.⁸⁵

The most common form of commemoration, however, was verbal remembrance: talking about the deceased gave vent to feelings of loss whilst simultaneously drawing the memory of the dead into the context of the living.⁸⁶ The funeral itself provided a forum for collective remembering.⁸⁷ As a fixed social ritual, memories of funerals commemorated both the dead and one's own grief. One Bolton woman could vividly recall her two-year-old brother's funeral. She was unaware, however, whether this was an autonomous recollection or one which had been shaped by her parents' frequent narration of the event throughout her childhood.⁸⁸ In this sense, reminiscence not only sustained the memory of the dead, it helped to create visual images for others.

A more unusual trend in domestic commemoration, post-mortem photography, featured the corpse recumbent on a bed or couch with sheets and pillows in an arrangement suggesting sleep rather than death.⁸⁹ Assessing the impetus to commission such portraits, Audrey Linkman has drawn a distinction between the portrait as memento mori - intended to encourage contemplation of one's own mortality - and as a 'palliative'. In essence, the soothing qualities of the post-mortem photograph hinged on the denial of death: photographers 'consciously attempted to ameliorate the finality of death by suggesting a kinder, gentler, more familiar state of being.' Far from being macabre, post-mortem photographs were 'tokens of the

⁸⁵ Pettigrew, *Time to Remember*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way', p.205.

⁸⁷ Ivy Troope, born circa 1910, claimed that elderly people enjoyed funerals as opportunities to remember. Chamberlain, *Fenwomen*, p. 182.

⁸⁸ BOHT, Tape 32a, Reference: AL/KP/1c/013.

⁸⁹ See Audrey Linkman, 'Not Dead But Sleeping: Post-Mortem Photography in Nineteenth-Century Britain' in *Proceedings of the Conference of the European Society for the History of Photography* (Udine, 1999). See also Audrey Linkman, 'Passing Trade: Death and the Family Album in Britain, 1860-1900', *The Photohistorian*, 123 (1998), pp. 18-28, Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 288-291 and Henk Setten, 'Child Death and Photography', [Http://www.socsci.kun.nl/ped/whp/histeduc/19cphotos.html](http://www.socsci.kun.nl/ped/whp/histeduc/19cphotos.html), January 1998, pp. 1-10.

deepest love and affection' which permitted the bereaved to capture the serenity of death.⁹⁰

As Linkman concedes, this practice was limited to a minority of late-Victorian elite families thus rendering generalisations about the practice problematic, especially as most of the surviving portraits are divorced from their original context.⁹¹ Moreover, photography was still a luxury for most working-class families by the end of the Edwardian era whilst the cost of requesting the photographer to attend the family home further prohibited indulgence in this practice. Indeed, one photographer expressed horror at receiving a commission from a shopkeeper, not least because the deceased lay in a room in daily use as a living, eating and sleeping area. He was incredulous that the house was so cramped 'yet the occupiers could afford to have the child photographed'.⁹²

Children appear to have been the most common subjects for post-mortem photography. According to the British Journal of Photography, this was because most adults had been portrayed in life, whereas children were 'cut off' before families had the opportunity to commission a portrait.⁹³ The notion that the photograph of the dead child was a relic of a life which had not the opportunity to divest itself in other forms demonstrates the significance of the personal memento. For working-class families, the material effects of an infant would probably be recycled for the next child. The photograph, therefore, represented a tangible artefact of a life and personality. Moreover, the cost of an infant portrait was significantly reduced as corpses could easily (and inconspicuously) be taken to the photographer's premises. Indeed, Mr. Wallis, a tinker from Liverpool, recalled that his grandfather ran a small photography shop in a poor, Irish Catholic district of Liverpool at the beginning of the twentieth century. Portraits of deceased infants were a principal source of

⁹⁰ Linkman, 'Not Dead', p. 16.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁹² British Journal of Photography, 3 August 1883, pp. 449-50 [C. Brangwin Barnes].

⁹³ *Ibid.*

revenue: the image of the child would be mounted onto a matchbox with 'lovely little scrolls', sometimes accompanied by a memento, such as a piece of hair.⁹⁴ Such memorials were relatively cheap to produce yet it is impossible to estimate how widespread this practice was. Nevertheless, they are surely a corrective to the impression that the lives (and deaths) of infants were held cheap.⁹⁵

However, grief need not always fix on the deceased or their effects: it could manifest itself with reference to the pain and horror of one's own suffering. The capacity to empathise with the grief of others was often borne of personal feelings of loss. As a child, Elsie Pettigrew noted that a degree of familiarity with death as a child fostered not indifference, but empathy. Elsie would lie awake in bed, imagining her own death and the grief of her family on discovering it. Once engaged in these fantasies, Elsie would begin to cry for her own grief at the death of her sister, Margaret.⁹⁶ Kathleen Woodward's mother frequently reminisced about having borne a dead child, yet her recollections were grounded in references to her own distress. Indeed, the story became a signifier of her 'flinty endurance'. That it was only after a drink at 'The World On Its Toes' that Kathleen's mother 'would relent and talk of the Past' also implies a conscious management of sorrow behind an apparently impassive exterior.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the account highlights the potential for children to develop a sensitivity to the impact of bereavement. Kathleen recalls that as a child she absorbed her mother's story to the point where she 'used to think of that dead child in bed at night, before I went to sleep'. The narrative filled her with 'horror and suffocating fear' whilst simultaneously fostering a surge of passion towards her mother.⁹⁸ This memory is richly suggestive of the complexity and ambivalence of familial relationships defined, to external observers at least, by poverty. It also illustrates that we cannot interpret 'grief' as a fixed emotion with a proscribed agenda of roles and responses.

⁹⁴ MOH Tape, Mr. Wallis, Tape. 919.

⁹⁵ See chapter seven below.

⁹⁶ Pettigrew, *Time to Remember*, p. 21.

⁹⁷ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp. 6-8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

There is a danger, however, of romanticising working-class relationships and creating a vision of bereavement as invariably characterised by emotional trauma; memories of the deceased could also be comforting and pleasant. Yet it is equally significant to note that *some* individuals met *some* deaths with relief and/ or indifference. This could adopt a variety of guises: gratitude for the deliverance of the dead from pain and illness, respite from unpleasant relationships and, perhaps, thankfulness for the alleviation of a financial burden. Kathleen Woodward recalled that:

one of the few pictures which lightened our walls at Jipping Street was a framed certificate of [my Grandfather's] death, on which was also recorded the fact that his body was washed up at Mortlake. This solitary memorial held for me a most fearful interest'.⁹⁹

Yet far from symbolising grief, the certificate testified to her grandmother's relief at the death of a tyrannical husband. In a similar vein, some widows and widowers remarried with relative haste. Pat O'Mara detailed the slow and painful death of his once beautiful aunt. The seemingly compassionate observation that her husband (who had given her syphilis) was 'prostrated, and carried on desperately at the funeral' is, however, cancelled by the curt note that 'ten months later' he married Bridgett Kelly.¹⁰⁰ Clearly, rapid remarriage could be read as insufficient grief, causing bitter recrimination in families who thought the dead deserved to be mourned a little longer. Likewise, it would be naive to assume that the material effects of the dead were always retained as keepsakes. The Vestry records for Brownlow Hill Workhouse in Liverpool indicate numerous families making applications to claim the effects of relatives who had died in the workhouse.¹⁰¹ Yet many families recycled or pawned the deceased's belongings. As one employee in a pawnshop recalled, the effects of the dead, including wedding rings, were an easy way for families to raise 'ready cash'.

⁹⁹ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p. 5

¹⁰⁰ O'Mara, *Autobiography of a Liverpool Slummy*, pp. 18-9.

¹⁰¹ LVRO 353 SEL 10/11-17, 1882-1911.

Indeed, pawnbrokers had to be alert to the identity of the bereaved; families would pawn the effects of the dead with no intention of reclaiming the items.¹⁰² Whilst this may well have been necessitated by privation, it seems equally plausible to suggest that, for some at least, remembering the dead was undesirable.

Extreme Responses to Bereavement

The recognition that bereavement was not always a harrowing experience serves to remind us that working-class responses to death were far from uniform. Similarly, an analysis of chronic grief demonstrates that the resolution of grief was not always inevitable. Instances of extreme grief also illustrate the need to move beyond a materialist paradigm of bereavement and analyses of the funeral as a self-contained ritual of closure. Moreover, the limits of tolerance towards relatives who failed to resolve grief are indicative of broad concepts of *normative* grief: those who 'lost all sympathy' for the grief-stricken were implicitly expressing a notion of what constituted *acceptable* grief.¹⁰³ This section will draw on the medical records of individuals defined as 'insane' and whose madness was thought to have been precipitated by bereavement. A large number of case records used in this analysis indicate that on admission to an asylum, patients tended to be accompanied by relatives who, in most instances, related their perception of factors affecting mental health. Moreover, both Prestwich (near Manchester) and Lancaster Moor Asylums issued detailed questionnaires to relatives requesting information on the mental, economic and social background of the 'lunatic'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² MOH Transcript, Mrs. Holtby, Tape 791.

¹⁰³ For instance, Jane Ann Smith, admitted to Prestwich asylum in April 1890, claimed her sister had lost sympathy for her. LRO QAM 6/5/33. Likewise, Margaret Barrow, admitted to Prestwich in June 1880 had become 'troublesome to her son'. LRO QAM 6/6/7.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance, LRO HRL 3/14. Questionnaires were distributed in order to 'direct the treatment of the patient to the best possible advantage'. An average of thirty-four questions covered the patient's family history along with their previous experiences of illness, distress and poverty.

The use of medical records as a text on extreme bereavement is problematic. It is impossible to assess retrospectively the diagnoses of either medical staff or next of kin. Furthermore, the stories that case records relate were refracted through asylum staff who transcribed the information they perceived to be relevant and/ or true.¹⁰⁵ In addition, given their marginal status, lunatic asylum patients are hardly representative. It should also be noted that whilst a number of men were admitted to the asylum on account of chronic grief, bereavement tends to feature in a greater number of female case records. This is not to suggest that men were more adept at resolving bereavement. Rather, such discrepancies point to the significance of gender as a factor affecting both the experience and the classification of grief and madness. To a point, women were *expected* to feel emotional upset more keenly and manifest it in socially visible ways. Thus, whilst grief as a cause of insanity conformed to stereotypes of feminine psychology, men were more likely to be admitted to asylums on account of unemployment and drink, factors accorded with notions of masculinity.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, these records provide a rare snapshot of familial relationships as perceived by the poor. They also illustrate the imagery and language used to describe and categorise grief. Moreover, case histories demonstrate the vast range of individual criteria for the successful resolution of a bereavement process.

That some relatives chose to emphasise bereavement as a cause of mental illness raises several issues. In providing a retrospective biography, relatives may have fixed on the extraordinary events in lives rather than the grinding problems of daily survival. Indeed, this may explain why bereavement was ascribed as the cause of

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, medical staff sometimes rejected bereavement as a cause of insanity. For instance, when Margaret Hamen entered Prestwich asylum in January 1890, bereavement was rejected by the admissions officer who suggested 'heredity, puerperal fever, lactation and disappointment' had caused Margaret's demise. LRO QAM 6/5/33. The admissions officer overseeing the case of Mary Hewitt agreed that bereavement had influenced her illness. Yet it was not grief but Mary's subsequent co-habitation with the 'unsteady' Tom Taylor in the aftermath of bereavement which was emphasised. LRO QAM 6/5/25.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance, Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* (London, 1987), Jane Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991) and Kerry Davies, "'Sexing the Mind?': Women, Gender and Madness in Nineteenth Century Welsh Asylums", *Llafur: The Journal of Welsh Labour History*, 7 (1996), pp. 29-40.

bouts of madness long after the death in question had occurred. Eliza Elastee's daughter stated that the onset of her mother's mania in 1885 was rooted in the death of a child some five years previously.¹⁰⁷ Thomas Parker, a labourer, had displayed signs of mental illness for four weeks when he entered Lancaster Moor Asylum in January 1881. The cause of his despair, however, was assigned to the death of his daughter two years before.¹⁰⁸ Thomas Gough, a labourer from Liverpool, was admitted to Lancaster Moor in June 1880. According to his sister, the death of their father eighteen months previously had deeply affected Thomas, and he had been 'getting worse for the last six or seven months'. He had twice attempted suicide, once by hanging and once by slitting his throat.¹⁰⁹

Undoubtedly, admission to the asylum carried a stigma. It was, therefore, in the interests of a family to locate a social cause for insanity. This would enable relatives to reject notions of hereditary illness. Moreover, attributing madness to grief may have encouraged sympathy rather than disparagement from other individuals. However, if extreme cases of grief were supposed to evoke compassion, it must also be assumed that grief as a potentially devastating experience was a shared concept. As John Walton has argued, most admissions to the asylum were initiated by the next of kin after a lengthy decision-making process, highlighting the massive grey area between definitions of unacceptable behaviour and insanity.¹¹⁰ Likewise, David Wright has argued persuasively for a separation of the history of institutional confinement from the history of psychiatry to facilitate an analysis of the relationship between confinement to the asylum and familial patterns of care.¹¹¹ It is, therefore, possible to read decisions to admit relatives to the asylum on account of grief as texts on acceptable and extreme responses to death. For instance, Margaret Riley, a young

¹⁰⁷ LRO QAM 6/5/25. Admitted to Prestwich 7 January 1885. Last entry 1 July 1885.

¹⁰⁸ LRO HRL 2/10. Discharged as recovered 5 April 1881.

¹⁰⁹ LRO HRL 2/10. Discharged as recovered 7 December 1880.

¹¹⁰ John Walton, 'Lunacy in the Industrial Revolution: A Study of Asylum Admission in Lancashire, 1848-1850', *Journal of Social History*, 13, 1 (1979), pp. 1-22.

¹¹¹ David Wright, 'Getting out of the Asylum: Understanding the Confinement of the Insane in the Nineteenth Century', *Social History of Medicine*, 10, 1 (1997), pp. 137-55.

servant from Liverpool, was admitted to Lancaster Moor in January 1880. Her brother described her as industrious, regular and temperate. He noted, however, that 'she would grieve greatly for any family trouble'. In particular, 'she grieved greatly after a sudden death of one of her brothers or if any of her people died she would cry greatly.'¹¹² It is difficult to discern what Riley defined as *great* grief. Yet the phrase is richly suggestive: it implies profound distress but also indicates that Riley was reading Margaret's chronic grief against a notion of *normative* grief.

Similarly, Richard Leighton gave a vivid description of his wife's 'furies' in the two weeks preceding her admission to Lancaster Moor Asylum in June 1880. Frances Leighton had become 'ill in mind' a few days after the death of their daughter and had 'got rougher and rougher every day since and fearful last night, throwing herself about'. That Richard had waited two weeks before escorting Frances to the asylum suggests an initial tolerance of her 'furies', possibly in the belief that the behaviour was related to the shock of bereavement and would subside.¹¹³ This not only suggests that, for some at least, grief had recognised forms and limits, it also implies a discomfort in dealing with those who transgressed such boundaries. Indeed, conflicting interpretations of acceptable grief had the potential to create discord between family members. Rebecca Ninnis, a thirty-four-year-old weaver, was admitted to Lancaster Moor in August 1895 on account of being violent, abusive and 'unmanageable'. The admissions officer suggested that a recent confinement and alcohol consumption had precipitated the attack of mania. Rebecca's husband William flatly rejected this diagnosis. He asserted that Rebecca had 'troubled a trifle' at the deaths of her mother, two sisters and brother, and had taken to attending spiritualist meetings in an attempt to establish contact with them. His emphasis that spiritualism was the 'one thing' which had affected his wife indicates the extent of his disapproval. Indeed, Rebecca had 'never been the same woman' since participating in

¹¹² LRO HRL 3/8. Discharged to workhouse 14 September 1880.

¹¹³ LRO HRL 3/8. Discharged as recovered June 1882.

such pursuits.¹¹⁴ Clearly, spiritualism conflicted with William's definition of acceptable mourning and, therefore, became integral to his concept of chronic grief.

Perceptions of extreme grief demonstrate that most people expected the bereaved to achieve a degree of resolution in the aftermath of death. Acceptable grief was not, however, equated with forgetting or 'getting over' the dead. Elizabeth Hughes was admitted to Lancaster Moor in November 1895. She was described as delusional, irrational and contradictory. Her husband Thomas attributed the principal cause of her condition to the sudden, accidental death of their daughter eleven years previously. Thomas then related the circumstances of the girl's death in some detail. He did not, however, perceive this capacity to give a full description of the bereavement as incompatible with his own resolution of grief.¹¹⁵

Clearly, concepts of chronic grief were highly subjective. Margaret Dobie (aged thirty-seven), an unmarried shopwoman from Bolton, was admitted to Prestwich Asylum in January 1880 having attempted to cut her throat. The uncle who accompanied her on admission disputed the medical officer's suggestion that the attack was sudden and occasioned by ill health. Margaret had, he claimed, experienced a previous attack of insanity some nine months earlier, after the death of her father. Although she had improved since that time, she had remained 'nervous' and 'timid' and, having no other immediate family, was 'very lonely'.¹¹⁶ Whether or not Margaret's uncle was accurate in his diagnosis is, to a point, irrelevant. What is striking is his perception of the capacity of bereavement to effect devastation on an individual life. Similarly, Emma Grindrod, a dressmaker from Rochdale, attempted to commit suicide in February 1880 by driving a needle into her chest. The aunt who accompanied her on admission to Prestwich Asylum informed the medical officer that Emma's mother had died some years previously of phthisis. Emma had always 'lived

¹¹⁴ LRO HRL 3/19. Died of Retro-Peritoneal Sarcoma 1 March 1905.

¹¹⁵ LRO HRL 3/19. Discharged as recovered 8 February 1896.

¹¹⁶ LRO QAM 6/6/17. Died of Phthisis 20 March 1880.

poorly' and 'worked rather hard', being a melancholy woman and never sleeping too well. The recent death of her father had, however, 'greatly upset her'.¹¹⁷

In these accounts bereavement was framed as an emotionally distressing experience. Yet the implicit juxtaposition between solitary bereavement and the experience of those who maintained other close relationships suggested that loneliness in the aftermath of death was thought to exacerbate loss. Likewise, these stories illustrate how the loss of a relative not only occasioned emotional anguish but shattered homes and routines too. Rachel Hodson, a cotton winder aged thirty-three from Bolton, was admitted to Prestwich in February 1885 after stabbing herself in the throat with a pair of scissors. According to her sister: 'Father died last November and not right since - gone worse. Not slept well for long time, eats little yet went to Mill till two days ago.' Rachel had nursed her father during his final illness. The detail that she had to lift him in and out of bed suggests the extent of his infirmity. As the medical officer noted, his subsequent death was 'evidently a great trouble' to her. In the days following her admission, Rachel fluctuated between upbraiding herself for neglecting her father's home and asking asylum nurses for something 'to sleep her to wake no more'. Rachel was a spinster and her notes suggest that she lived alone with her father (her mother had died some years previously from a stroke). His death, therefore, meant the loss of a relationship, a routine, an identity as daughter/ carer and, perhaps, a home.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Robert Bell (aged fifty-seven), a bachelor labourer from Ulverston, was admitted to Lancaster Moor Asylum in March 1890. His brother John located the onset of Robert's symptoms (indifference to his surroundings and restlessness in the night) at the death of their mother two years previously: Robert had begun to 'ail' whilst 'living by himself in a lonely cottage'. John reiterated that since their mother's death, Robert had lived 'all alone by himself'. He had threatened to drown himself and said spirits told him to 'make away' with himself.¹¹⁹ Again, we return to the complexity of bereavement: the emphasis on loneliness suggests that it

¹¹⁷ LRO QAM 6/6/17. Discharged as recovered 20 August 1880.

¹¹⁸ LRO QAM 6/5/25. Last entry 1 July 1885 states 'much same but generally busy'.

¹¹⁹ LRO HRL 2/16. Died 27 November 1890 with fluid on his lungs.

was not just a wage and home that was mourned, but companionship and identity also.

Whilst it is difficult to generalise from small samples, Robert Bell is something of an exception. The asylum records consulted for this research suggest a preponderance of single women whose breakdown was thought to be rooted in grief and loneliness at the death of a parent. This may illustrate nothing more than a higher ratio of unmarried women who depended on their parents. However, it also implies the social (and economic) isolation of bereaved spinsters.¹²⁰ As the case of Alice Weston highlights, the grief-stricken spinster was often thrown back on her own resources. Accompanied by her friend Sarah Radcliffe, Alice entered Lancaster Moor Asylum on 3 March 1895. An unmarried woman, aged forty-six, Alice had moved from London to Burnley to work as a machinist. All her relatives had died except an aunt to whom she 'was much devoted'. Since the death of this aunt six years previously, however, she had been completely alone and suffered much poverty. Sarah Radcliffe was also unmarried and alone in the world - 'having no parents'. Thus, when Alice returned to health, they resolved to make a 'comfortable home' and live together 'as sisters'.¹²¹

The case histories of the chronically bereaved, whether medically accurate or not, tell stories of love, familiarity, and the influence of external factors on an individual's experience of grief. In particular, they indicate that the death of a spouse was construed as a tragedy, not so much from the loss of a breadwinner or household manager, but from the devastating personal sorrow occasioned by losing one's partner and companion.¹²² For instance, Robert Holt, a cotton bleacher from Bolton, entered Prestwich Asylum in October 1880 in an emaciated and 'demented' state.

¹²⁰ Compared with widows, bereaved spinsters had no children to support but, in turn, had no children to support them in older age.

¹²¹ LRO HRL 3/19. Admitted 3 March 1895. Discharged as recovered 3 March 1896.

¹²² Conjugal bereavement is the most frequently documented form of loss in grief-analysis today on account of the intensity of the relationship lost and the simultaneous losses of financial security, social status, and primary support networks. See Margaret Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe and Robert Hansson, 'Bereavement, Research and Theory: An Introduction to the Handbook' in Stroebe et al., *The Handbook of Bereavement*, pp. 10-11.

According to his records, he ‘never appeared to get over the shock’ of his wife’s death two years previously.¹²³ Similarly, Philip King, a tailor from Liverpool, was admitted to Lancaster Moor Asylum in February 1880. He dated his depression from the death of his wife in the previous July.¹²⁴ Hamilton Cunningham, a hawker, entered Lancaster Moor in February 1885. His sister Elizabeth Walton stated that: ‘he has never been happy or cheerful since he lost his wife and we all think that has preyed on his mind for he was always thinking about his wife.’¹²⁵ Following the sudden death of her husband in July 1885, Phoebe Entwhistle had become increasingly low-spirited: she resigned her post as a weaver, sacrificed her home and went to live with her brother. In October, she was admitted to Prestwich Asylum described as suffering from mania.¹²⁶

Frequently, the bereaved spouse not only lost their partner, they also forfeited their identity and their lifestyle. Samuel Goldsmith (aged seventy-two), a warehouseman from Chorlton, was admitted to Prestwich Asylum in November 1886. The onset of his dementia was attributed to the death of his wife whom he had nursed through illness for the previous four years.¹²⁷ The narrative suggests that grief, combined with the absence of a familiar structure and role, precipitated dementia. Likewise, John Glasford, admitted to Lancaster Moor in July 1890, was said to have been ‘troubling’ ever since he buried his wife fifteen months previously: he had ‘broke up his home and he never seemed satisfied since’.¹²⁸ The image of the deliberately dismantled home not only reinforces a sense of loss, it also seems symbolic of the passing of a familiar life, relationship and environment.

The despair of some individuals at the death of their spouse was thought to be sufficiently powerful to precipitate drastic action. On the night of his suicide in March

¹²³ LRO QAM 6/6/17. Discharged to workhouse 26 May 1880.

¹²⁴ LRO HRL 2/10. Died of Phthisis pulmonatis 26 February 1881.

¹²⁵ LRO HRL 2/15. Died of senile decay 17 January 1889.

¹²⁶ LRO QAM 6/5/26. Last entry 30 October 1885 suggests no improvement in Phoebe’s condition.

¹²⁷ LRO QAM 6/6/26. Died from old age 1 January 1887.

¹²⁸ LRO HRL 2/16. Died 3 May 1901 of Carcinoma of prostate gland.

1898, John Drummond, a clogger from Caernarfon, had told neighbours that he was 'a lost man since his wife died'.¹²⁹ An inquest in May 1889 into the suicide of Ann Richardson, a sixty-three-year-old woman from Liverpool, concluded that the death was motivated by the recent loss of her husband, since when she had been 'in very low spirits'.¹³⁰ Joseph Hartley, a coke burner, was found hanging 'within an hour' of his wife's death. The coroner's inquest reported that 'when the breath had left his wife's body he kissed her, and in the greatest grief left the room, and it is surmised, immediately hanged himself.' He left several young children behind.¹³¹ Whilst it is impossible to determine the character of such marriages, the acknowledgement that the death of a spouse could facilitate such profound personal sorrow should warn against reading the working-class marriage exclusively as an economic contract devoid of friendship and emotion.¹³² In levelling all personal tragedies with privation and toil, Vincent overlooks the capacity for individuals to articulate both a language of love and of extreme emotional trauma. Yet those who related tales of distress not only drew attention to the torment of bereavement, they also expressed detailed perceptions of their relatives' well-being in a language of concern and compassion. Far from portraying a monolithic culture of blunted sensibility, therefore, the biographies of the chronically bereaved point to a web of lives which were influenced and expressed in tandem with the pragmatics of survival, but not defined exclusively by them.

Talking to the Dead

The stories of extreme grief narrated by the insane and their friends are suggestive of wider notions relating to *acceptable* forms of mourning and the renegotiation of identities and relationships between the bereaved and deceased. Significantly, many of

¹²⁹ *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 26 March 1898, p. 5.

¹³⁰ *Liverpool Weekly Mercury*, 25 May 1889, p. 1.

¹³¹ *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 5 March 1898, p. 8.

¹³² Vincent suggests that the romantic love of courtship was blunted during marriage by the hardships of poverty. He does, however, concede that spouses could retain some form of 'bond' on the basis of shared experience. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 54-5.

those admitted to the asylum on account of chronic grief experienced ‘hallucinations’ or ‘delusions’ of the dead. These cases are interesting as a text not only on normative mourning behaviour but on perceptions of the spirit world also. In particular, references to visions of the dead indicate a familiarity with metaphors, images and concepts borrowed from formal spiritualism. For instance, Sarah Hannah Lupton, aged twenty-seven, was admitted to Prestwich asylum in May 1890. She was described as suicidal, dangerous and manic. The cause of her insanity was explicitly stated as spiritualism: ‘she is sleepless, excited and talking incessantly and incoherently suffering from delusions in connexion with spiritualism, believes herself to be what she regards as a “medium”’.¹³³ Likewise, James Gardener, a miner from Bolton, spent several weeks in Prestwich Asylum in the summer of 1885 under the belief that he was in communication with the spirits of the dead.¹³⁴

Yet those who claimed to see the dead were often aware, in moments of clarity, that such visions were unacceptable within a rational conceptual framework. On admission to Prestwich Asylum in February 1885, Elizabeth Ellis, a young millhand of ‘loose character’, asserted that she saw and conversed with her dead father. When questioned about her hallucinations the following day, Elizabeth reflected that she ‘must have been out of her mind.’ Coupled with her ‘quiet’, ‘gloomy’ and ‘morose’ state, her own assertion of irrationality implied an acute awareness that visions of the dead were unorthodox.¹³⁵ Jane Wright, a forty-two-year-old domestic servant admitted to Lancaster Moor Asylum in February 1880, not only believed she was in communication with the dead, her mind was filled with images of graveyards and ‘coffins in their holes’. In relating this to the medical officer, however, she stated with seeming coherence that her condition was directly related to the ‘the influence of poverty’.¹³⁶ Similarly, Elizabeth Kennedy, admitted to Prestwich Asylum in April 1890, believed she was haunted by the spirit of her mother-in-law. In explaining this

¹³³ LRO QAM 6/5/33. Discharged as recovered 20 February 1890.

¹³⁴ LRO QAM 6/6/24. Admitted 8 June 1885. Discharged as recovered 23 July 1885.

¹³⁵ LRO QAM 6/5/25. Last entry 13 June ‘transferred to annexe’.

¹³⁶ LRO HRL 3/8. Died 3 August 1910 of ‘bronchio-pneumonia’.

conviction, Elizabeth stated that she 'was a bit of a gad about before she married' which had 'incensed' the older woman. In addition, she had recently buried a child and complained of being 'put on with poverty and one thing and another'.¹³⁷

Admittedly, unsolicited visions of the dead could be terrifying.¹³⁸ Yet they were also described, by some at least, as a source of comfort. Sarah Ann Lang, a sixty-year-old widow, believed that the spirit of her mother was guarding over her.¹³⁹ Michael Mason, aged twenty, stated that his father and sister, both sometime deceased, came to sit with him at night.¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Bowmen, aged fifty-three, asserted on her admission to Prestwich Asylum in November 1885 that her deceased husband was waiting for her, illustrating the consolation to be taken from notions of celestial reunion.¹⁴¹ William Booth, an elderly widower from Manchester, continually spoke to his wife 'though she has been dead some years'.¹⁴² Likewise, Thomas Heath, an elderly paper box maker, was admitted to Prestwich asylum in April 1885. A feeble man, he was indifferent to 'time and season', constantly talking about and reliving the relationships of his past and imagining his deceased mother sat with him.¹⁴³ Whilst it is impossible to ascertain the full character of mental illness, the inclination to live in the past and converse with the dead is indicative of the comfort of memory: present loneliness, privation and grief could be assuaged by recreating the relationships - albeit in a fictional sense - of the past.

Clearly, the accounts of asylum patients represent a minority experience. Yet given the sheer silence which surrounds normative bereavement, it is possible to read what was deemed unacceptable as an implicit text on acceptable grief. With reference to

¹³⁷ LRO QAM 6/5/33. Last entry 20 July 1892 'Moved to chronic book'.

¹³⁸ See for instance, LRO QAM 6/6/25. John Kenney, aged twenty-eight, saw spirits and 'horrible figures dancing over him'. Also LRO QAM 6/5/34. Sarah Meredith, aged forty, saw spirits 'day and night' and was 'very frightened of them'.

¹³⁹ LRO HRL 3/19. Admitted 3 January 1895. Discharged on application 8 January 1895.

¹⁴⁰ LRO QAM 6/6/33. Admitted 3 March 1890. Discharged to friends 22 September 1890.

¹⁴¹ LRO QAM 6/5/26. Elizabeth died two weeks later from cerebral tension and epileptic convulsions.

¹⁴² LRO QAM 6/6/24. Admitted 18 September 1885. Discharged to the workhouse 23 June 1886.

¹⁴³ LRO QAM 6/6/24. Died of epileptic dementia and senile gangrene 13 September 1885.

visions of spirits, sustained communication with the dead was frequently dismissed as irrational and inappropriate behaviour. Yet conscious attempts to communicate with the dead highlight a desire not only to remember but to regenerate relationships between the bereaved and deceased. In an organised and *rational* context, contact with the deceased was sought through the psychic powers of the medium. Less formally, individuals could feel the 'presence' of the dead. Although widely perceived as unorthodox, a belief in spirits was often - like the delusions of the insane - a comfort to the bereaved. Indeed, notions of a spirit world were actually promoted in popular ideas relating to the physical integrity of the dead in the afterlife and visions of heaven as a home.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, references to the cemetery as 'God's acre' concealed the 'horrible reality' of decay with 'beautiful sentiment'.¹⁴⁵ Overall, therefore, concepts of the pervasive presence of the dead were a continuum of broader cultural frameworks which sanitised death and ameliorated grief by promising reunion with the dead.

Spiritualism

The popularity of spiritualism surged in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, despite accusations that it was wholly unscientific, irreligious and completely devoid of 'common sense'.¹⁴⁶ Overwhelmingly, however, spiritualism as a forum for the expression and management of bereavement has been overlooked. Even contemporary analyses which derided spiritualist visions as little more than fanciful thinking failed to explore the impetus behind attempts to contact the dead.¹⁴⁷ Historiographical analysis has similarly shied away from addressing the impulse to turn to spiritualism in the decades preceding the First World War. For instance, whilst conceding that fears relating to death were important, Logie Barrow has argued that

¹⁴⁴ See p. 4 above.

¹⁴⁵ *Lancet*, 12 December 1896, pp. 1716-7.

¹⁴⁶ *Lancet*, 23 September 1876, pp. 431-3.

¹⁴⁷ *Lancet*, 21 May 1881, p. 837. .

the plebeian appeal of spiritualism lay, principally, in its promotion of a democratic dissemination of knowledge.¹⁴⁸

This neglect may derive from a reluctance to confront issues relating to the validity of spiritualism. As endless investigations (notably by the Society for Psychical Research) illustrated, questions of 'truth' were highly subjective, often controversial and risked crushing the hope, trust and belief of grief-stricken individuals.¹⁴⁹ Yet to a point, questions of authenticity are irrelevant. What is significant is the desire to maintain contact with the deceased and the meanings attributed to such post-mortem relationships. Alex Owen states that questions relating to the legitimacy of spiritualist phenomena have dominated research with the effect of closing discussion on the significance of a spiritualist discourse.¹⁵⁰ Owen's own analysis concentrates on the gendered implications of spiritualism. In particular, the role of 'medium' presented women with a supreme opportunity to subvert conventional gender roles. Moreover, women were often seen to be the crucial link in the spirit chain.¹⁵¹ By concentrating on the relationship between spiritualism, femininity and power, however, Owen omits to consider spiritualism as an agency for the expression of grief. Likewise, Ruth Brandon almost entirely ignores the bereaved, concentrating instead on the medium as celebrity and fraudster. In this sense, grief is only considered in its capacity to render the bereaved vulnerable to exploitation.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Logie Barrow, Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850 - 1910 (London, 1989).

¹⁴⁹ See for instance, Frank Podmore, Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism Volumes I and II (London, 1902). Volume two focuses on English spiritualism.

¹⁵⁰ Alex Owen, The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England (London, 1989), p. viii. See also Joshua John Schwieso, "Religious Fanaticism" and Wrongful Confinement in Victorian England: The Affair of Louisa Nottidge', Social History of Medicine, 9, 2 (1996), pp. 157-74.

¹⁵¹ Owen, The Darkened Room, p. 1-17.

¹⁵² Ruth Brandon, The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (London, 1983).

The exceptions to this analytical trend have chiefly been concerned with the boom in spiritualism during and immediately after the First World War.¹⁵³ The most authoritative work in this field is Jay Winter's Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning.¹⁵⁴ Concerned with the cultural commemoration of the dead in the aftermath of the First World War, Winter perceives the surge in spiritualism's popularity as indicative of a pan-cultural need to remember and acknowledge the sacrifices of both the war-dead and the bereaved. Shifting the focus away from the medium, Winter offers a twofold definition of spiritualism. Firstly, spiritualism was perceived as a secular phenomenon grounded in a psychical and psychological quest to communicate with the dead. Secondly, it was interpreted as a religious perception of angels, apocalypse, and divine presences in daily life. Common to both definitions, however, was the willingness to surpass conventional materialism and theology. Whilst some engaged in spiritualism as part of wider research on the paranormal, many 'simply wanted to converse with the dead.'¹⁵⁵ I would suggest that Winter's definition of spiritualism can be developed one step further, enlarging its remit from association with mediums and the divine to include personal conversations with the dead in informal, individualised contexts. Such conversations may well have been, and were *expected* to be, monologues. Indeed, whether the dead heard, understood and/ or responded is not really at issue: the bereaved could talk to the dead - either silently or aloud - from a simple desire to remember and maintain a relationship. In this sense, what Cannadine has called a 'private denial of death' can be re-defined as a personal gesture of commemoration.¹⁵⁶

Such examples are, by their very nature, difficult to ascertain. Moreover, contemporary commentators tended to be disparaging about ghosts and

¹⁵³ See for instance, Cannadine, 'War and Death' and Jennifer Hazelgrove, 'Spiritualism after the Great War', Twentieth Century British History, 10, 4 (1999), pp. 404-30. See also Oliver Lodge, Raymond: Life and Death with Examples of the Evidence for Survival of Memory and Affection After Death (London, 1916).

¹⁵⁴ Winter, Sites of Memory.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-5.

¹⁵⁶ Cannadine, 'War and Death'; p. 227.

‘superstition’. In a story concerning the fear instilled among the residents of a female lodging house on account of a ‘ghost’, Charles Booth distanced himself from ‘the superstition of these people’ by recounting the success of a placebo-effect exorcism.¹⁵⁷ Likewise, superstition often attracted ridicule at a more popular level. In his autobiography *Shop Boy*, John Thomas suggested that even those who professed to believe in ‘signs’ from another world (namely his grandmother and her friends) treated them as a source of amusement rather than profound meaning.¹⁵⁸ Likewise, Florence Jones’ recollection of a seance in early-twentieth-century Liverpool was characterised by memories of stifled giggles and an overriding assumption that the medium was a fake. Furthermore, far from wanting to contact the dead, Florence and her friends simply wanted to know whether or not they would marry.¹⁵⁹ Thus, not only could the seance be appropriated for different purposes, disparagement was not always in conflict with an element, however slight, of hope.

Robert Roberts also adopted a pejorative tone with regard to superstition, narrating his accounts of beliefs in ghosts and spirits with a mix of humour and incredulity. This is, perhaps, a perpetuation of a childhood tendency to ridicule those who professed a belief in the paranormal. As Roberts notes, ‘Ladies susceptible to night noises roused a cruel streak in us boys’. Likewise, jocular references to ‘illiterate elders’ who related stories of the supernatural, and of quack doctors who ran ‘sidelines’ in mediumship, suggests Roberts’ desire to distance himself from the irrational. Yet despite his derisory tone, Roberts hints that such beliefs could mitigate the grief of the bereaved. Relating the story of a local family who lived in fear of their dead mother returning to haunt them, Roberts recalled that he and his peers failed to comprehend their anxiety. As his sister Ellie observed, the family cannot have loved their mother very much:

¹⁵⁷ Booth, *Labour and Life*, Vol. II, pp. 72-3.

¹⁵⁸ John Thomas, *Shop Boy: An Autobiography* (London, 1983), pp. 26-7.

¹⁵⁹ Jones, *Memoirs*, pp. 83-4.

When [Roberts'] Mother passed away in the unthinkable future, Ellie asked, would she, without fail, come back and haunt us - at any time, just at her own convenience? Because there was nothing any of us would want more!¹⁶⁰

Similarly, Hannah Mitchell implied that talking to the dead was a palliative to loss. Mitchell described her grandmother as a woman not given to fancy. Yet:

[She] would sit talking to her husband who had died many years before, and would seem surprised if I said I couldn't see him. A few minutes later she would be talking about everyday things like washing and baking.¹⁶¹

Likewise, John Dugdale, born in 1906, recalled that after finding his grandfather dead in bed one morning, he could feel the man's presence 'for weeks after'.¹⁶² Whether the elderly man was 'with' John or not did not matter: the sense of his nearness was a balm to the boy's grief. To take a brief example from the First World War, Harold Owen recounted seeing a vision of his brother Wilfred before receiving notification of his death. In Harold's memoir, however, the authenticity of the vision was not at issue. Of more significance was the meaning attributed to the apparition within the context of loss and understanding: after an initial feeling of intense loneliness, Harold reached an *inner* vision of happiness and the *real* Wilfred.¹⁶³ Thus, individuals did not need to believe that the dead accompanied them or responded to appeals made to them. Rather, loosely defined notions of dia/monologues with the dead indicated a desire to remember the deceased in a personal and meaningful way.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Roberts, *A Ragged Schooling*, pp. 131-3.

¹⁶¹ Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 48.

¹⁶² Stalybridge Oral History Transcript, John Dugdale, Uncatalogued.

¹⁶³ Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity* (London, 1968), pp. 231-3.

¹⁶⁴ According to Shuchter and Zisook, this is relatively common today: the bereaved can feel [the dead] hovering, watching out for them'. Shuchter and Zisook, 'The Course of Normal Grief', p. 34.

Conclusion

Previous chapters have focused on the artefacts of death and the public rites of mourning as forums for negotiating grief. This chapter has developed that analysis to examine the ways in which bereavement was understood and made manifest outside shared cultural representations of loss. The management of personal feeling enabled the bereaved to confront the multiple losses and problems precipitated by death. Yet it also facilitated private opportunities for giving way to anguish and distress. In this sense, the negative implications of Vincent's notion of contained and controlled grief are overturned.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, the only 'suppression' of feeling evident in my analysis of responses to bereavement was temporary. In managing grief, working-class families did not negate loss, they formulated positive, constructive and, crucially, malleable means for its expression. Moreover, whilst most individuals held some notion of resolution and restitution, this did not conflict with holding a treasury of memories or with maintaining abstract relationships with the dead. That these were not always visible to external observers does not cancel their significance for the individual mourner. As the following chapter highlights, languages of resignation, poverty and fatalism - so often mistaken for indifference or a lack of humanity - frequently concealed a wealth of emotion which was no less harrowing for being intensely private.

¹⁶⁵ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 59.

Chapter Seven

The Death of Children: A Case Study in the Culture of Bereavement

Despite a gradual decline in the general mortality rate at the end of the nineteenth century, the infant mortality rate remained disproportionately high until the First World War.¹ Concentrated in poor and overcrowded urban districts, infant mortality occurred with such frequency that working-class parents were thought to have acquired a degree of immunity towards these deaths, especially as high birth rates replaced lost lives with startling rapidity.² This perception of apathy towards child mortality in general was, however, overshadowed by the spectres of infanticide and child neglect.³ At best, working class parents were seen as fatalistic and ignorant; at worst, they were mercenaries who perceived the lives of their offspring exclusively in material terms.⁴ The diminution of family size alleviated household expenditure whilst

¹ In the decade 1891-1900, the general mortality rate was 18.2 deaths per 1000 live births. The infant mortality rate was 153 deaths per 1000 live births. See for instance, Roberts Woods and Nicola Shelton, *An Atlas of Victorian Mortality* (Liverpool, 1997), Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, pp. 1-10, Graham Mooney, 'Stillbirths and the Measurement of Infant Mortality Rates c.1890-1930', *Local Population Studies*, 53 (1994), pp. 42-52 and Deborah Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Young Children: A History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England 1898-1918* (London, 1987).

² Between 1891 and 1900, Birmingham, Blackburn, Leicester, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Preston and Salford had the highest rates of infant mortality in England, at 220 or more infant deaths per 1000 live births. See Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, p. 10. The correlation between high mortality rates and emotional immunity to death has been applied mainly to pre-industrial society. See for instance, Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York, 1977), p. 70. For application of this idea to responses to infant death in the nineteenth century see Rose, *The Massacre*, p. 5. Both Ellen Ross and Angus McLaren argue that as new historical work accumulates, the idea that high birth and mortality rates made bereavement less painful is rapidly becoming untenable. See Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 190 and Angus McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1984), p. 10.

³ The term 'child' is used in a general sense in this chapter to include babies, infants and young children. Where an example refers explicitly to an infant or new-born baby, I use the appropriate term.

⁴ For contemporary examples see, *Lancet*, 2 June 1883, p. 963, *Lancet*, 5 April 1884, p. 633, *Lancet*, 13 July 1889, p. 83, *Lancet*, 28 July 25 November 1899, p. 1470, *Lancet*, 16 June 1906, p. 1710. See also R. Jones, 'The Perils and Protection of Infant Life (Howard Medal Prize Essay)' in *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LVII (March, 1894), pp. 1-98. See also George Behmler, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908* (Stanford, 1982) and Harry Hendrick, *Child Welfare: England 1872-1989* (London, 1994).

child life insurance policies heralded a minor windfall. Of course, older children who provided vital household assistance or were engaged in paid employment would be mourned in the event of their death on account of the loss of their labour. Such crude visions of responses to child death epitomise the materialist paradigm of bereavement and, like Vincent's undoubtedly more sophisticated account of responses to death, call the humanity of the poor into question.

Estimates of the extent of infanticide are problematic. The death of a child required no elaborate planning and was easily concealed with mock-sentiment. As one correspondent to The Times stated: 'how little is needed to let a child die! A single draught of air may dispose of a baby'; and how easy to pretend sorrow, "Poor little fellow, he will be happier elsewhere" is said with a tear as the five pounds burial money is pocketed'.⁵ That few parents were charged and convicted of murder or manslaughter has fostered claims that official statistics have grossly underestimated the numbers of parents guilty of infanticide.⁶ More controversially, Howard Taylor has argued that prosecutions for infanticide were deliberately kept to a minimum in line with the crime quotas set by the Home Office.⁷ Conversely, Ann Higginbotham and Anthony Wohl have suggested that the sensationalism (contemporary and historical) surrounding infanticide has led to exaggerated calculations.⁸ Certainly, the negative stereotypes which characterise analyses of infanticide have been applied almost indiscriminately to working-class attitudes to young children in general: charges of fatalism, ignorance and privation have been confused with accusations of neglect.

⁵ The Times, 4 August 1891, p. 7.

⁶ Roger Sauer has suggested that, at least until the mid-nineteenth century, child murder was considered a less heinous crime than adult murder, a distinction which left juries and coroners reluctant to reach verdicts which would necessitate the death sentence. Roger Sauer, 'Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth Century Britain', Population Studies, 32, 1 (1978), pp. 81-94. See also Rose, The Massacre, pp. 57-69.

⁷ Howard Taylor, 'Rationing Crime: The Political Economy of Criminal Statistics Since the 1850s', Economic History Review, 51, 3 (1998), pp. 569-90.

⁸ Higginbotham, 'Sin of the Age', pp. 319-37 and Wohl, Endangered Lives, p. 34.

This chapter aims to redress these negative stereotypes by examining responses to child death as the epitome of a pragmatic culture of bereavement which did not suppress grief but enabled parents to manage sorrow and loss. The publication of Maternity: Letters from Working Women in 1915 highlighted that for most working-class women at the turn of the twentieth century, pregnancy was characterised by fear, despondency and despair.⁹ Most children were unplanned, their birth endangered the lives of their mothers and they represented a costly addition to the family unit. For unmarried or deserted women, such factors were exacerbated by social isolation and increased economic insecurity.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, many women tried to procure abortifacients or attempted to induce miscarriage.¹¹ If a child survived pregnancy, the first three months of life represented a period of pronounced physiological vulnerability.¹² Thus, as Ellen Ross notes, mothers were often wary of forming strong emotional bonds to new-born babies (especially those infants who seemed ‘sickly’ or ‘delicate’) and made implicit distinctions between *bearing* and *rearing* children.¹³ Unplanned pregnancy, hesitant attachments to new-born babies and ‘ignorance’ were, however, markedly different from wilful neglect and murder.

⁹ Margaret Llewelyn Davies (ed.), Maternity: Letters from Working Women (London, [1915] 1989). See also Ross, Love and Toil, pp. 91-127.

¹⁰ See Angus McLaren, Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England (London, 1978), Anne Oakley, The Captured Womb: A History of the Medical Care of Pregnant Women (Oxford, 1984), F. B. Smith, The People’s Health 1830-1910 (London, 1979), pp. 13-64, Jane Lewis, ‘The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England, 1900-1939’ (London, 1980), pp. 196-218, Roberts, A Woman’s Place, pp. 72-109 and Rose, The Massacre, pp. 170-174. For birth control movement after First World War see Marie Stopes, Contraception (Birth Control): Its Theory, History and Practice, A Manual for the Medical and Legal Professions (London, 1923) and Ruth Hall, Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s (Harmondsworth, 1978).

¹¹ See John Keown, Abortion, Doctors and the Law: Some Aspects of the Legal Regulation of Abortion in England from 1803-1982 (Cambridge, 1988), Patricia Knight, ‘Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England’, History Workshop Journal, 4 (1977), pp. 57-69, Angus McLaren, ‘Abortion in England’, Victorian Studies, 20, 4 (1977), pp. 379-400 and Barbara Brookes, Abortion in England, 1900-1967 (London, 1988).

¹² Woods and Shelton note that the risk of death from disease decreased rapidly after the age of twelve months. For detailed breakdown of causes of death in infancy and early childhood according to district and environment in Victorian Britain see, Woods and Shelton, An Atlas, pp. 47-92.

¹³ Ross, Love and Toil, p. 131, 179-86. See also Michael Tooley, Abortion and Infanticide (Oxford, 1983), pp. 310-22.

I suggest that the relationships between parents and their offspring were highly ambiguous and that attitudes to child life *and* death were characterised by the strategic management of feeling. Alice Foley's reconstruction of her childhood is a prime example of the ambiguity of kinship ties. Alice imagines that each new-born baby in her family represented 'another unwanted addition to an already harassed household yell[ing] its way into existence.'¹⁴ Yet despite an ostensible indifference to her children, Alice's mother insisted that each new-born babe be baptised immediately in case of death. The 'christening' was not a cultural rite of passage (Alice's sister carried her to the priest in the dead of night) but was perceived as important in terms of the afterlife (Catholic liturgy dictated that unbaptised babies were consigned to limbo) and burial (baptism permitted the interment of the corpse in consecrated ground). The disparity between maternal indifference and baptismal significance suggests a complexity which is echoed throughout Alice's biography. Crucially, the vision of a bleak infancy, untouched by displays of affection, does not conflict with notions of emotional attachment. Rather, it works as a device to emphasise the hardship which characterised most working-class families and, moreover, the perpetual exhaustion of mothers. Significantly, there is no doubting Alice's feelings towards her 'kindly, undemonstrative' mother: 'I loved her passionately'.¹⁵

Alice's account suggests that concepts of love were complicated and subject to individual criteria which were not always identifiable to observers. In this light, I would suggest we must re-read responses to infant and child death. Children who were sick and dying were often nursed with solicitous care and parents insured their lives in order to meet the costs of a decent burial; caring for the corpse and the rituals of interment were as significant for the young as they were for adults. The exceptions to formal interment, notably the fraudulent burial of new-born corpses, need not suggest acts of callousness or indifference. Rather, they point to a culture of pragmatism which allowed grief to adopt pliable forms and meanings. In conclusion, I

¹⁴ Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 3-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

re-iterate my principal argument that grief was a highly individualised concept, the expression of which was not always visible or, indeed, viable to others. This discussion of the death and disposal of the child is, therefore, structured as a case-study of the working-class culture of bereavement as outlined in this thesis. As such, it can be read as a preliminary conclusion.

Poverty, Insurance and Ignorance

It is not my intention in this chapter to dwell on issues of demography, epidemiology, the extent of infanticide or campaigns for legislative reform to protect infant life. These have been well documented by others.¹⁶ The contextualisation of an analysis of child death demands, however, some discussion of the negative stereotypes which characterised perceptions of the working-class parent. In particular, poor social and environmental conditions were often read as synonymous with apathetic, ignorant and slothful parentage. Andrew Mearns claimed that many poor children were neglected and subjected to cruelty from birth.¹⁷ Some years later, Jack London asserted that the children of the abyss 'die like flies'. What distinguished survivors was a capacity to adapt to degradation:

In the dens and lairs in which they live they are exposed to all that is obscene and indecent. And as their minds are made rotten, so are their bodies made rotten by bad sanitation, overcrowding, and underfeeding.¹⁸

¹⁶ See for instance, Roger Cooter, *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare 1880-1940* (London, 1992), Anne Hardy, 'Rickets and the Rest: Child-Care, Diet and the Infectious Children's Diseases, 1850-1914', *Social History of Medicine*, 5, 3 (1992), pp. 389-412, Jane Lewis, 'The Working-Class Mother and State Intervention' in Lewis, *Labour and Love*, pp. 99-120, Irvine Loudon, 'On Maternal and Infant Mortality, 1900-1960', *Social History of Medicine*, 4, 1 (1991), pp. 29-73 and Naomi Williams, 'Death in its Season: Class, Environment and the Mortality of Infants in Nineteenth-Century Sheffield', *Social History of Medicine*, 5, 1 (1992), pp. 71-94.

¹⁷ Mearns, *The Bitter Cry*, p. 16.

¹⁸ London, *The People*, p. 276.

Noting that over fifty percent of children in the East-end of London died before the age of five, London exclaimed: 'Slaughter! Herod did not do quite so badly.'¹⁹ Describing Edwardian Liverpool, Andie Clerk stated that the 'sins' of parents were visited upon their children: it had 'nothing to do with God, it's inevitable and couldn't be otherwise.'²⁰

Depictions of degradation and apathy dovetailed with allegations that the deaths of the young were welcome. In the novel A Child of the Jago, Arthur Morrison suggested that poverty fostered inertia. When Hannah Perrott doubts the wisdom of leaving her sick infant Looey unattended whilst she goes drinking, 'native inertness' supersedes her apprehension. When the child dies in her absence, she feels only 'listless relief'; her husband Josh feels 'nothing in particular' and suggests a return to the pub; their neighbours congratulate them on their prospective insurance claim.²¹ Morrison portrays such attitudes as inseparable from a particular social environment. This did not excuse slumdweller's disaffection. Rather, it condemned the poverty which bred a culture of passivity. Gissing also conveyed the implicit benefits of child death for those in privation when describing the Hewett's gradual descent into abject poverty in The Nether World: 'For two years things had gone miserably for them, their only piece of good fortune being the death of the youngest child.'²² Gissing further hints that the material advantages of death are inescapable, even to those of a more sensitive disposition. The prospect of providing for another child fills expectant father Bob Hewett with bitterness. When the child is stillborn, he can only express gratitude: 'Thank goodness for that, any way!' In contrast, his wife is described as 'very low'. Her sorrow is, however, placed within a pragmatic context: she cannot be 'over sorry' that the child is dead given the family's extreme poverty.²³

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 254.

²⁰ Clerk, The Autobiography, p. 7.

²¹ Arthur Morrison, A Child of the Jago (London, [1896] 1971), pp. 101-4.

²² Gissing, The Nether World, p. 141.

²³ Ibid., pp. 313-4. See also Tressell, The Ragged, p. 45.

It was this correlation between child mortality and material relief that fuelled the moral panic concerning the insurance of infant lives. Identified as an incentive to infanticide, campaigns to ban infant insurance persisted well into the early decades of the twentieth century.²⁴ A correspondent to The Times in 1884 likened the burial club collector to the Grim Reaper, claiming that life insurance was ‘an abominable system’ which ‘unquestionably [set] a premium upon infanticide.’²⁵ The notion that infant insurance was death personified rested on the unequivocal assumption that poorer parents had little affection for their offspring. At the forefront of campaigns to police life insurance, the editors of the Lancet were careful to avoid blanket condemnation of the working classes: parents were *probably* fond of their offspring but, all too often, *let their children die*.²⁶ Inseparable from the physiological vulnerability of infant life and the notion that infant insurance encouraged equations between death and pecuniary gain lay the perception that poverty deadened sensibility.²⁷ Indeed, one of the few arguments published in the Lancet in favour of infant insurance conjectured that its abolition would prove counterproductive: burial expenses would exacerbate financial burdens and propel parents to further disaffection.²⁸

The suspicion that life insurance motivated neglect was pervasive. In his capacity as Assistant Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool, Edward Hope included burial insurance as an implicit criterion for assessing suspected cases of child neglect. Visiting a house where three children had recently died in February 1884, Hope reported that an eight-month-old infant lay sick in its mother’s arms whilst a ‘very ill, very dirty, very much neglected’ seven-year-old lay close by. The family appeared

²⁴ For an overview of legislative measures in relation to infant burial insurance from 1850s see Rose, The Massacre, pp. 136-58. At the end of the nineteenth century, an estimated eighty percent of children were insured. See Public Health, VII, 82 (1895), p. 164.

²⁵ The Times, 29 September 1884, p. 12. Most commentators assumed that parents reaped a profit from the death of insured infants. See for instance, Lancet, 7 July 1877, p. 36 and Lancet, 10 September 1904, p. 797.

²⁶ Lancet, 1 September 1877, p. 331. See also Lancet, 24 January 1885, p. 167. The author did not wish to ‘blacken the reputation of human nature’ yet claimed that the working classes did not respect infant life as they should.

²⁷ See for instance, Lancet, 13 July 1889, p. 83, Lancet, 14 November 1896, p. 1398, Lancet, 30 July 1904, pp. 330-1, and Lancet, 25 September 1909, p. 962.

²⁸ Lancet, 6 October 1888, pp. 680 - 1.

destitute. Nevertheless, insurance policies had been purchased for each child.²⁹ At a house in January 1895, two small girls lay sick with scarlatina. Two other siblings had already died. Their parents were 'very poor people' but had insured each child's life for thirty shillings.³⁰ That some parents explicitly expressed an interest in the life insurance of sick children further cemented negative stereotypes. When Hope noted that the mother of James Hervey (aged six and sick with scarlatina) was 'anxious to get him in a club on hearing a bad prognosis', he implied that her principal concern lay with finance rather than the welfare of her son.³¹ On calling at the Rooney household in October 1887, Hope was incredulous to find a three-year-old, evidently dying, in the care of a woman who 'is useless as a nurse'. His mother had gone 'down to a club'. Two children had already died at this address and Hope ordered the removal of a fourth who displayed symptoms of scarlatina rather than leave it in a 'house of this character'.³² Implicit in Hope's denunciation of the household was a perception of a hard-hearted mother who thought more of money than her child. Moreover, the disparity between making provision to insure the lives of offspring and dwelling in 'abominable hovels' which were 'unfit for human habitation' suggested a disordering of priorities and, as chapter two illustrated, compounded claims that the working classes invested in death at the expense of life.³³

Clearly, the prejudice against infant insurance fostered a climate of suspicion among those who worked with the working classes. For instance, the much publicised scheme to reduce infant mortality in Huddersfield, introduced in 1906, rested on a series of damning misgivings concerning working-class morality. Parents were offered a reward of one shilling for the early registration of new-born babies (within forty-eight hours of birth) and issued with a promissory note for one sovereign, to be paid

²⁹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 1 February 1884.

³⁰ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 2 March 1887.

³¹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 21 March 1884.

³² LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 28 October 1887.

³³ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 6 May 1887.

on the infant reaching its first birthday.³⁴ The underlying assumption that parents would exercise greater care for their offspring if promised a financial reward highlights the insidiousness of stereotypes which equated poverty with apathy. Indeed, expectant mothers exercised caution when talking of their anxieties concerning pregnancy and material circumstances for fear of being accused of neglect should the child subsequently die.³⁵ Likewise, Maud Pember Reeves noted the importance mothers attached to securing proof of stillbirth in order to deflect allegations that they had murdered a new-born child.³⁶

The libel against working-class parents who insured the lives of young offspring did not, however, go unchallenged. In a 'vindication' of 'slum mothers' published in 1891, the physician Edward Berdoe argued that allegations concerning profiteering from death clubs were 'unpleasantly suggestive' about the character of working-class parents. Moreover, they overlooked the necessity of burial clubs:

When a working man... [who] has to support himself, his wife, and three or four children, loses one of the latter after a more or less expensive illness, it very rarely happens... that he has a fund saved up out of which he can pay three or four pounds for a funeral.³⁷

In his professional capacity, Berdoe witnessed the 'tender regard' and self-sacrifice most mothers displayed towards sick children. Few, even the very poorest, appeared 'anxious to finger the gold promised by the death-club.' Any concern for burial policy payments was borne, Berdoe suggested, of the significance the working classes attached to rites of burial.³⁸ In an award winning essay on the perils of infant life

³⁴ See Hilary Marland, 'A Pioneer in Infant Welfare: The Huddersfield Scheme, 1903-1920', *Social History of Medicine*, 6, 1 (1993), pp. 25-50.

³⁵ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 98.

³⁶ Reeves, *Round About A Pound*, p. 70.

³⁷ Edward Berdoe, 'Slum Mothers and Death Clubs: A Vindication', *The Nineteenth Century*, April 1891, pp. 560-3.

³⁸ *Ibid.* Wohl suggests that insurance men rejected claims of burial club related child neglect, arguing that those most likely to insure their offspring were provident and respectable families. The

(1894), Hugh Jones (a physician based at the Royal Southern Hospital in Liverpool) concluded that burial insurance had been ‘accorded an importance far beyond its merits’. Indeed, ‘evidence’ purporting to reveal a causal relationship between burial clubs and infant mortality was largely based ‘upon surmise, hearsay, or general impression’. Far more pernicious, suggested Jones, was the ignorance of the poor.³⁹ In response to Jones’ essay, members of the Royal Statistical Society agreed that, for most, life insurance was a judicious investment: mothers were aware of high mortality rates and insured their offspring to secure ‘what they called a decent funeral’. That the working-class culture of death was ‘shocking’ to others amounted to little more than a failure to recognise a different language for death, borne of familiarity.⁴⁰ Two decades later, Maud Pember Reeves reiterated the notion that life insurance was a necessary feature of a culture of poverty and pragmatism: ‘Shall they run the risk of burial by the parish, or shall they take Time by the forelock and insure each child as it is born, at the rate of a penny a week?’⁴¹

Reeves’ implicit argument that a culture of pragmatism had been confused with one of hard-heartedness and lassitude extended beyond the issue of insurance. Accusations that working-class parents neglected their offspring from ‘ignorance’ (exemplified in overlaying, mothers working in paid employment and ‘improper’ feeding) similarly held negative connotations for perceptions of sensibility. Overlaying (the suffocation of babies in bed with their parents) was particularly controversial, not least because evidence of intent to harm was so problematic.⁴² Undeniably, overlaying provided considerable scope for criminal design. Kathleen Woodward noted the cynical assumption that ‘turning over’ on an unwanted baby could save parents a ‘lot

intemperate and idle, those assumed most likely to perceive insure as an incentive to felony, rarely took out insurance at all. It was, however, in the interests of the insurance companies to argue this. See Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, p 34.

³⁹ Jones, ‘The Perils’, pp. 1-98.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 99-103.

⁴¹ Reeves, *Round About a Pound*, p. 67.

⁴² For reviews of inquests into overlaying see for instance, *Lancet*, 2 June 1883, p. 963, *Lancet*, 29 July 1905, p. 307 and *Lancet*, 5 February 1910, p. 379.

of trouble.’⁴³ That incidents of overlaying peaked at the weekend also supported claims that reckless and drunken parents cared little for their offspring.⁴⁴ Indeed, a report in the Lancet in 1905 concluded that the mothers of the ‘mean streets’ were ‘more or less drunk and too stupid or too tired to notice that the child they have with them in bed is being suffocated’.⁴⁵

According to Robert Roberts, deaths from overlaying were the cause of much ‘searching gossip’:

Did it happen in the small hours of Sunday morning after the mother had been out drinking? Was the child illegitimate? Had it been insured, and for how much? Had it been ailing, or was another baby on its way?

Having painted a rather sordid picture, however, Roberts concedes that ‘Most folk, though, talked kindly of it all - poor little soul! A tragic accident.’⁴⁶ As Ross notes, most cases of overlaying probably were accidental and would, today, be classed as ‘crib deaths’.⁴⁷ A debate at the Midwives Institute in 1908 highlighted that many women put their babies in bed with them, especially during winter, because the warmth of a mother’s body was vital to a child’s survival (particularly when the quality and quantity of bed clothing was inadequate).⁴⁸ Similarly, Reeves claimed that mothers derided the idea that babies would be warm in a cot: ‘when one looks at the cotton cot blankets, about thirty inches long, which are all their wildest dreams aspire to, one understands their disbelief.’⁴⁹ The parental bed could be warm and comforting

⁴³ Woodward was referring to her own mother’s comment concerning the birth of ‘Crazy Kate’, a girl born with what would now be termed as ‘learning difficulties’. Woodward, Jipping Street, p. 96.

⁴⁴ See Jones for breakdown of statistics relating alcohol to overlaying. Jones, ‘The Perils’, p. 41. See also Lancet, 11 March 1905, p. 660, Lancet, 20 January 1906, p. 189 and Lancet, 16 June 1906, p. 1710.

⁴⁵ Lancet, 11 March 1905, p. 660.

⁴⁶ Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 85.

⁴⁷ Ross, Love and Toil, p. 189. The current medical term for crib death is Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

⁴⁸ Lancet, 23 May 1908, pp. 1507-8. They also dismissed claims that alcohol produced deep sleep, suggesting that working-class mothers were exhausted from overwork.

⁴⁹ Reeves, Round About a Pound, p. 51.

in an abstract sense too. In adulthood, A. S. Jasper could vividly recall his sense of pique when his sister was born and he had to surrender his place in his mother's bed to make room for the new baby.⁵⁰

Similarly contentious, female industrial employment was denounced as a fundamental cause of child mortality: children not only suffered the 'perils due to their neglect by their mothers' but were also susceptible to 'the ignorance of those to whose care they are entrusted.'⁵¹ Yet the wages earned by working mothers were often crucial to the living standards of their families.⁵² Moreover, as Poplar MP Will Crooks stated, most working parents were anxious to place their offspring with 'respectable' and kindly persons.⁵³ Common to these debates concerning infant welfare was the ease with which notions of ignorance merged with more accusatory charges of neglect. Yet middle-class definitions of *ignorance* tended to collide with many poor parents' perceptions of *care*. As Florence Bell noted, the biggest liability to infant life was not want of affection, but a lack of knowledge pertaining to nutrition and sanitation.⁵⁴ Robert Tressell also illustrated the tension between conflicting definitions of care and ignorance. Emphasising the pride the Eastons take in their 'very beautiful child' and the anxiety they express at his weight loss, both parents are oblivious to the fact that the solids with which they feed the child (at the expense of their own appetites) are the root of the babe's discomfort and vomiting.⁵⁵ This was not wilful 'neglect' but a

⁵⁰ Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, p. 12.

⁵¹ Jones, 'The Perils', p. 56. The law at the time (Factory Act 1891) stipulated that mother's jobs were to be kept available for one month after confinement, after which time they had to return to work or forfeit their job.

⁵² See for instance, *Lancet*, 28 March 1898, p. 878. See also the Home Secretary's observation that in Lancashire, women were often an equal breadwinner to their husbands, *The Times*, 15 November 1894, p. 7. Extensive studies on the effects of mill work on infant welfare were also conducted in the summer of 1906. See *Lancet*, 7 July 1906, p. 51 and *Lancet*, 18 August 1906, pp. 423-4. See also Clara E. Collet, 'The Collection and Utilisation of Official Statistics Bearing on the Extent and Effects of the Industrial Employment of Women', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LXI (April 1898), pp. 219-60. A number of studies prior to the First World War argued that improper feeding and the mother's absence from home were interrelated. See for instance, *Lancet*, 8 April 1911, p. 969 and *Lancet*, 26 April 1913, p. 1202.

⁵³ Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Select Committee on Infant Life Protection and Safety of Nurse Children Bills, P. P. 1896 (343) X.225.

⁵⁴ Bell, *At the Works*, pp. 197-8, 213.

⁵⁵ Tressell, *The Ragged*, pp. 57-60.

mistaken concept of good infant feeding. Indeed, the implication that parents, especially mothers, *neglected* their children by adhering to customary childrearing practice could cause deep resentment.⁵⁶ Andie Clerk stated that the ‘narrow-minded bigoted interference’ of ‘do-gooders’ was as damaging to children as parental *ignorance*.⁵⁷ Annie Buckley, born in 1902, recalled her mother’s outrage when a young, unmarried visitor from Oldham Health Clinic called to offer childcare advice after the birth of a younger sibling: ‘When you’ve brought up as many children as me, you can come and tell me how to bring them up.’⁵⁸ Defiance in the face of ‘lady visitors’ suggests not so much an indifference to children as a sensitivity to the slur on the parenting skills of poor families.⁵⁹

The Dying Child

Much of the material relating to the death of infants and young children fixed on the perceived responsibilities of the mother: child mortality was, ‘too often’, the result of ‘the mother’s delinquencies.’⁶⁰ Such perceptions were internalised by women; a *good* mother worked hard for her children.⁶¹ Consequently, when children died, it suggested the failure of the mother. Moreover, some men explicitly blamed their

⁵⁶ From the late nineteenth century, the state increasingly intervened in the feeding and healthcare of young children. See the *Lancet*, 25 January 1902, p. 259 for details of schemes introduced in Stockport from 1890s and *Lancet*, 8 April 1911, p. 969 for details of schemes introduced by Jessie Duncan in Birmingham from 1910s. See also *Lancet*, 25 February 1900, p. 544 and *Lancet*, 26 January 1907, p. 257. For historical commentaries see Smith, *The People’s Health*, pp. 65-135, Carol Dyhouse, ‘Working-Class Mothers and Infant Mortality in England, 1895-1914’, *Journal of Social History*, 12, 2 (1978), pp. 248-66, Anna Davin, ‘Imperialism and Motherhood’, *History Workshop Journal*, 5 (1978), pp. 9-65, Rima Apple, ‘Constructing Mothers: Scientific Motherhood in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, *Social History of Medicine*, 8, 2 (1995), pp. 161-78 and Richard Hawes, ‘The Development of Municipal Infant Welfare Services in St. Helens, 1868-1914’, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 143 (1993), pp. 165-92.

⁵⁷ Clerk, *The Autobiography*, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁸ MOH Tape, Annie Buckley, Tape 594.

⁵⁹ For discussion of acceptance of educational imperatives see, Lara Marks, *Metropolitan Maternity: Maternal and Infant Welfare Services in Early Twentieth-Century London* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 263-89.

⁶⁰ *Lancet*, 16 June 1906, p. 1710.

⁶¹ See Ross, *Love and Toil*, p.128.

wives for the death of young children.⁶² The suffocation of an infant in its drunken mother's arms filled one father with disgust. Despite his wife's cries and protestations ('Oh my baby'), he refused to admit her into their house.⁶³ Miss Entwhistle, born 1896, related the story of a younger sibling's suffocation in bed in her mother's arms: '[mother] got a clobbering [off father] for that'.⁶⁴ Similarly, Teresa Turner, born in 1903, claimed that her twelve-month-old sister died of a 'broken heart' when her mother placed her in a neighbour's care. That the cause of death assigned by the doctor (overfeeding and blocked bowels) was dismissed by the family as an 'excuse' provided enormous scope for guilt on the mother's part, compounded no doubt by the reaction of her husband: he 'went off the deep end, of course he worshipped her'.⁶⁵

The fatalism which often permeated mothers' references to child bereavement may reflect a desire to deflect personal culpability. Yet notions of fate and destiny also provided a degree of solace: mothers who strove in vain to nurse dying children could derive some comfort from knowing that they had done all within their means to prevent death but were powerless when pitted against Providence.⁶⁶ Indeed, expressions of resignation glossed over the self-sacrifice and solicitous care many mothers did exercise towards their children.⁶⁷ Ross refers to this as the 'emotional paradox' which characterised maternal affections: fatalism, reluctant pregnancies and

⁶² Although some fathers were undoubtedly cruel to their children. Jack Martin berated his drunken, cruel father. Martin, *The Life Story*, p. 15. Alice Foley described her father as a vicious, cruel, 'open-mouthed braggart of an Irishman'. Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp. 3, 8. Pat O'Mara similarly recalled that his father held a terrifying presence within the family and would turn violent with alarming speed and unpredictability. O'Mara, *Autobiography*, p. 42.

⁶³ *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 October 1886, p. 6 and *Liverpool Mercury*, 20 October 1886, p. 8.

⁶⁴ MOH Tape, Miss Entwhistle, Tape 824.

⁶⁵ MOH Tape, Teresa Turner, Tape 668.

⁶⁶ See also Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 192.

⁶⁷ Perhaps the most common example of self-denial was the widespread practice of eating little of nutritional value in order to feed husbands and children. Rowntree noted a woman living off bread and tea in order to feed the rest of her family. Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 71. Hannah Mitchell recalled that her grandmother had been so malnourished from self-sacrifice that it was 'no wonder' so many of her children died. Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 46. Wohl notes that poor maternal health was one of the major causes of infantile weakness. Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, pp. 12-16.

tentative attachments to new-born babies must be set against the fights women waged for the survival of their offspring.⁶⁸

As outlined above, the working classes were consistently castigated for prioritising life insurance over formal medical care. The Lancet repeatedly accused parents of neglect for failure to summon a doctor in the early stages of a child's illness: 'They don't wish any better result than death, but only that they should be screened from an inquest.'⁶⁹ Such parents were, the editors argued, guilty of manslaughter and should be charged thus.⁷⁰ Yet some mothers believed that tender, home-based care was more effective than formal medicine and often exhausted themselves fighting for their child's life.⁷¹ Ross supports this notion, suggesting that skilled maternal attention provided children with their best chance for surviving a life-threatening illness.⁷² One contributor to the Women's Co-operative Guild's letters on maternity explicitly stated that 'adoration' of her 'treasures' had sustained them in their fight for life.⁷³ Another mother recounted the apparently fatal illness of an infant daughter. Caring for the child exacted a 'fearful' toll on the woman's own health, yet she maintained her vigil and the child recovered. The implication in this account was that selfless devotion, epitomised in the phrase 'but I loved', proved a formidable weapon in the battle against death.⁷⁴ It could also, however, represent a dreadful source of guilt if the battle was lost.

⁶⁸ Ross, Love and Toil, p. 181.

⁶⁹ Lancet, 23 October 1875, p. 616. See also Lancet, 30 October 1875, p. 649 and Lancet, 19 January 1895, p. 166.

⁷⁰ This particular call originated with reference to the religious sect, The Peculiar People, whose spiritual beliefs prohibited medical intervention in illness. For brief overview of background and beliefs of sect see The Times, 20 January 1888, p. 13. For calls to prosecute others who failed to call for medical help see Lancet, 8 January 1876, p. 64, Lancet, 30 September 1876, p. 478, Lancet, 11 November 1876, pp. 695-6, Lancet, 6 February 1886, p. 283, Lancet, 29 June 1889, p. 1316 and Lancet, 30 January 1909, p. 329.

⁷¹ Bell noted the fatigue incurred by caring for the sick. Bell, At the Works, pp. 200-1.

⁷² Ross, Love and Toil, p. 167.

⁷³ Davies, Maternity, p. 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Given the inferior value working-class parents were supposed to attach to infant life, one might expect that their illnesses were not tended as effectively as those of older children. Yet as Ross notes, the sheer vulnerability of small infants and their absolute dependency on others meant that mothers were more likely to prioritise their needs over those of an older child.⁷⁵ When the assistant medical officer Edward Hope visited a family of ten in Dryborough Street in Liverpool in December 1886, a five-year-old and an infant were both severely ill. The note that the older child, Emily, was in a 'very dirty and neglected condition' suggested parental apathy. It is only the observation that the sick baby 'occupies all the mother's time' that calls such an assumption into question.⁷⁶ A Bolton millworker, born in 1899, recalled an outbreak of measles which affected all the children in his family. Three siblings recovered and one sister died. A fifth child, the baby Frederick, lingered between life and death. His mother 'did her best' to fight for the babe's life, an effort lauded by the family doctor. When Frederick finally died, it was described as a harrowing 'tragedy'.⁷⁷

As chapter two demonstrated, many families were reluctant to admit the sick to hospital. Far from suggesting indifference, however, the insistence on nursing sick children within the home implies dedication and an overriding faith in maternal care. On visiting the Farrington family in June 1884, Hope urged admission to hospital for a child ill with smallpox as 'the mother was totally unable to continue to wait upon the patient.' The observation that one child had already been nursed back to health and that the family were striving to avoid pauperism suggested that Mrs. Farrington was physically exhausted, weak and anxious about finance.⁷⁸ In October 1885, Hope reported that Rose Mooney, aged five, was sick from scarlatina and ought to be removed to hospital 'but the mother declines to part with the child'.⁷⁹ Kate Westman, aged five, was ill with scarlet fever when Hope called in October 1886. Her mother

⁷⁵ Indeed, 'ex-babies' were expected to attain a degree of independence when a new baby arrived in the family. Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 38.

⁷⁶ LVRO 353 HEA 2/2, 6 December 1886.

⁷⁷ BOHT, Tape 121b, Ref: JP/LSS/A/015.

⁷⁸ LVRO 352 HEA 2/1, 24 June 1884.

⁷⁹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 15 October 1885.

refused to grant permission for the child's admission to hospital, however, claiming that her husband would assault her if Kate left the home.⁸⁰ When Hope visited three children (aged between three and seven) sick with scarlet fever in Henderson Street in December 1886, he recommended admission to hospital. Despite her advanced state of pregnancy, however, their mother objected to their removal from the home.⁸¹

Hospitalisation restricted parental access to children and ruptured relationships as well as home-based care. Moreover, as chapter two illustrated, some families thought that the best place for a child to die was in the home, surrounded by their parents and siblings. When Hope visited Georgina Nixon (aged five) and her sister Elizabeth (aged four) in their cellar dwelling in April 1886, he noted that their mother was averse to the children's removal to hospital: 'It appears she has already lost three children to this disease, the last about seven months ago.'⁸² Two fears are implicit in this statement: that two more children should die, but also that they should die outside the home and without their mother. In 1905, Alice Foley's father obstructed the removal of her brother to hospital for appendicitis, stating that 'if the boy had to die he should remain with his family'.⁸³ Following the boy's death, bitter recriminations erupted within the family on account of the 'bigotry' and 'obstinacy' of her father.⁸⁴ The fatalism inherent in this attitude should not, however, be read as indifference to the boy's death. Rather, Alice's father acted in what he perceived to be the best interests of the child, namely that the boy should remain within the familiar and comfortable environment of the home with his family. His prejudice against surgical skill may indeed have been rooted in an obstinate and intolerant personality, yet the conflict which ensued on account of such views suggests the degree to which family decisions about the care of the sick could be fraught with tension.

⁸⁰ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 15 October 1886.

⁸¹ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 18 November 1886.

⁸² LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 14 April 1886.

⁸³ Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 38.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

When children were admitted to hospital, parents continued to be solicitous of their welfare and objected to the bureaucracy which obstructed access to the child and to information about its welfare. A dispute arose in November 1885 when the mother of two children who had been removed to Netherfield Hospital with fever complained that when one of them was dying, she had been refused permission to see it.⁸⁵ Likewise, Robert Barnett complained that his child had been admitted to hospital some weeks before and that he had since been unable to obtain a satisfactory account of his condition.⁸⁶ When Mrs. Green's son was admitted to hospital with scarlet fever in November 1886, the prognosis for his recovery was good. Mrs. Green made daily enquiries about her boy and was informed that he was 'doing very well'. Having observed other parents talking to their children through hospital windows, however, Mrs Green was distraught to be told that her own son was too sick to appear at the window. In fact, he was dangerously ill. Mrs Green's vehement protestations to medical staff suggests her affection and concern for her son. In a broader context, the image of parents calling through hospital windows implies that children were missed, fretted over and that parents and offspring alike found pleasure and comfort in maintaining regular contact.⁸⁷ The same parents would, no doubt, grieve bitterly if their child died.

Laying Children to Rest: Corpses, Funerals and Graves

The pre-occupation with the relationship between material circumstances and child mortality has detracted from an analysis of the profound sorrow occasioned by such bereavements. Consequently, any discussion of the mourning and burial rites accorded to the young has concentrated on the disposal of murdered infants and the avoidance of burial costs: the 'dropping [of] dead infants to save funeral expenses'.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 5 November 1885.

⁸⁶ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 12 November 1885.

⁸⁷ LVRO 352 HEA 2/2, 13 November 1886.

⁸⁸ *Lancet*, 5 April 1884, p. 633.

Yet many parents treated the corpse of a child with dignity and respect and attached importance to the rites associated with the 'decent' funeral. Some parents, however, disposed of stillborn and new-born corpses by less formal means: either by concealment within the cemetery grounds or in the coffins or graves of others. To appreciate this, we must return to the distinction between a new-born (and stillborn) child and the child as social being. Funerals not only acted as landscapes for grief, they were forums for the expression of multiple identities. In this sense, illicit burial reflected the ephemeral identity of the stillborn or new-born baby. This need not be equated with indifference or lassitude. Rather, it testified to a culture which enabled parents to manage responses to life and death in tandem with the pragmatics of poverty.

Ellen Ross suggests that a funeral was often the only tangible gesture of loss a parent could make.⁸⁹ In this sense, the rituals surrounding the care of the corpse were no less significant as landscapes for the expression of grief for children than they were for adults. As chapter three illustrated, the cadavers of children and adults alike were laid out and visited by neighbours and friends who wished to pay their respects to the dead and the bereaved. Indeed, children were encouraged to visit the corpses of their peers, not least because it familiarised them with death.⁹⁰ Such practices facilitated a verbal and symbolic language of loss and condolence. Workplace and street collections also articulated sympathy for the bereaved and respect for the dead.⁹¹ Moreover, as most rituals concerning the care of the corpse centred on women, workplace collections provided a practical forum for men to express a language of grief and condolence.⁹² It is also plausible to suggest that the ability to finance a funeral encouraged fathers to feel proud that they could inter their child with dignity. Again, this was a palliative to grief and possibly ameliorated a sense of exclusion borne of the female-centred culture of caring for the corpse.

⁸⁹ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 192.

⁹⁰ See pp. 88-90 above.

⁹¹ See for instance Reeves, *Round About a Pound*, p. 68.

⁹² Ross, *Love and Toil*, pp. 193-4. See also Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, p. 14 and p. 49.

The discussion of washing and visiting the corpse in earlier chapters illustrated how the relaxed features of the cadaver were a palliative to the bereaved, especially if the death in question had been slow and painful. For some, however, the child's corpse adopted extra meaning: it represented the fragility of life, innocence and the consolation of spiritual belief. This is most explicit in the use of white coffins for children, a visual metaphor for the purity of the young.⁹³ Kathleen Woodward described one baby's coffin as a 'little white box, trimmed with fancy paper'. The paper, usually used to line wedding cakes at the pastry shop, suggests delicacy and sweetness.⁹⁴ That the prettified coffin holds the rotting corpse of a child demonstrates the use of symbolism in attempts to ameliorate the horror of death and decay. A. S. Jasper's association between a baby's corpse and his 'first glimpse of peace' similarly draws on notions of innocence. That the image is contextualised within a vermin-infested tenement flat emphasises the incorruptibility of the dead infant and, implicitly, draws attention to the awfulness - not of death, but of life.⁹⁵

Inherent in concepts of innocence was a subtle rationale, sometimes echoed by bereft parents, which could easily be mistaken for flippancy. Florence Bell was struck by one woman's candid assertion that 'I lost all my children when they were babies, but it was better they should go when they were young, for now I know they are little saints in heaven.' Another claimed that her child of six had been 'too clean to live'. Bell found such reconciliation with bereavement incredible and could only suggest that the children who died young tended to be those with fastidious and timid personalities.⁹⁶ What Bell overlooked was the value of conceptual frameworks which promised bereaved parents that their children had been saved from a life of privation

⁹³ See MOH Tape, Florence Smith, Tape 962 and Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, p. 14. Coffins could also be covered in white material. See Mary Chamberlain, *Growing Up in Lambeth* (London, 1989), pp. 85-7. This is a trend which appears still to be popular. See for instance the coffin catalogue at <http://www.funeralshop.co.uk>.

⁹⁴ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp. 78-81.

⁹⁵ Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, p. 14.

⁹⁶ Bell, *At the Works*, pp. 191-2.

and toil. Whether parents referred to sophisticated spiritual beliefs is not important. Rather, such perceptions suggest a rhetorical device which provided consolation merely by comparing 'peace' in death with the negatives of life.⁹⁷

High child mortality rates acquainted families with the possibility of death and its attendant costs. When contagious disease swept through a house, several children could die within days or weeks of each other, necessitating considerable outlay in funeral expenses. A ringspinner from Farnworth (born 1907) recalled that her father was 'very bitter for a long time' after being forced to inter his child in a common grave: six siblings had already died and the family could not afford another funeral.⁹⁸ J. Birley (born in the 1880s) recollected that the death of her baby brother whilst her father was away at sea proved a 'harrowing experience' for her mother, on account of grief and because, having no insurance policy to claim, it was 'almost impossible' to buy a grave for the child.⁹⁹ Again, this reminds us that burial insurance for children was valued for its intended purpose rather than the criminal designs of callous parents. Indeed, Birley's mother subsequently purchased policies for her other children in order to guarantee them a dignified resting place should they die.¹⁰⁰

Some parents adapted funeral ritual in a bid to alleviate burial costs. Robert Roberts recalled that parents who had lost a new-born baby would call on his shopkeeper mother to provide a box 'so they could take their young to the burial without the expense [of a coffin].'¹⁰¹ Likewise, Elsie Oman recounted that:

stillborn or young babies that died were put in empty wooden soap boxes and carried to the cemetery. If an older child of about three years died and they could afford a funeral, they would have one coach and the coffin would go in

⁹⁷ In addition, abstract associations with angels and cherubs could render the visual (and pungent) presence of a disfigured corpse palatable.

⁹⁸ BOHT Tape 158a, Reference: AL/JJ/1a/014.

⁹⁹ Irina Strickland (ed.), The Voices of Children, 1700-1914 (Oxford, 1973), p. 182.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 85.

a box with glass sides under the driver's seat. If it would not fit, the mourners would have it on their knees in the coach.¹⁰²

One Bolton woman, born in 1906, noted that her parents carried the coffin of her two-year-old brother from their house to the cemetery. In this sense, the funeral did not resemble a 'social event' in the way that adult burials did.¹⁰³ Such distinctions imply that adult funerals enacted a celebration of familial and communal ties which infants and small children would not have developed. In a practical sense, the small corpses of infants lent themselves to improvisation. Yet if children's funerals were less visible in a social context, there is little to suggest they were any less meaningful to the bereaved. Indeed, the image of parents carrying a coffin to the grave evokes a sense of intimate and concentrated grief.

The willingness to compromise burial custom need not, therefore, diminish the significance of the funeral. Similarly, antipathy to the pauper grave was not reserved for adults. As chapter four illustrated, many of the applications for exhumation from common graves were made in relation to babies' and children's corpses. Indeed, pauper burial was more undignified for young children as a greater number of bodies could be crammed into a single gravespace.¹⁰⁴ As one weaver, born in 1906, recalled: 'there was any amount of little coffins in this [pauper] grave.'¹⁰⁵ Yet again, the significance vested in interring the child in a private grave reiterates the practical value of burial insurance. Moreover, parents sometimes secured the transfer or second-hand purchase of grave deeds in order to ensure that their child was laid to rest with respect. Absolute ownership of the grave was, therefore, secondary to securing the right to inter the dead *decently*.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, when parents had no choice but to inter their child in a common grave, they continued to attach significance to cheap but expressive gestures of mourning - such as wearing black - in

¹⁰² Oman, *Salford Stepping Stones*, p. 9.

¹⁰³ BOHT Tape 32a, Ref: AL/KP/1c/013.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance LVRO 353 PAR 6/2/4 for plan of children's pauper graves.

¹⁰⁵ BOHT Tape 15b, Reference: AL/LSS/A/010.

¹⁰⁶ See pp. 182-4 above.

a bid to articulate personal meanings of loss and their respect for the dead.¹⁰⁷ Efforts to afford the child the same mourning rites as the adult suggests that parental responses to the death of offspring could hardly be typified as indifferent. Moreover, in securing decent rites of interment for children, parents also ensured that they had access to cultural languages of loss.

Most cemeteries at the turn of the twentieth century made no distinction between the burial of a new-born baby and that of an older child: both had access to the same language of sanctity, identity and commemoration and the funerals incurred the same charges. To a point, therefore, cemetery authorities recognised that parents did not always discriminate between the significance attached to the funeral of a baby and that of a child.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, many cemeteries faced persistent problems of illicit burial. In particular, parents were apt to secure false certification of a child's birth/death in order to inter its body as a 'stillbirth'. Legally, a child who breathed at birth was classified as having been born alive; stillborn babies were born dead. As such, stillbirths were not registered but had to be certified by a midwife or physician, a measure intended to detect foul play. Yet the stillbirth certificate also enabled parents to inter the corpse in the cemetery for a nominal fee.¹⁰⁹ That such burials took place without ritual in unmarked, unconsecrated, communal land reflects the non-status of the corpse.¹¹⁰

The differential burial costs for a stillborn and new-born child incurred a harsh pecuniary penalty on those whose child died soon after birth and, certainly, before

¹⁰⁷ Reeves, *Round About A Pound*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁸ Although cemeteries also profited from such non-discrimination in that they levied the same charge regardless of the youth of the babe. See below.

¹⁰⁹ For instance, Ramsbottom Cemetery in 1887 charged two shillings and sixpence for stillbirth burials whilst the interment of all children under ten incurred costs of ten shillings. At Colne in 1890, a stillbirth cost two shillings in comparison to the charge of nine shillings and sixpence for the interment of a child under eight years of age. Haslingden Cemetery also charged two shillings in 1901 for stillbirth burials whilst bodies under fourteen years of age were interred for eight shillings. LRO MBH 42/1.

¹¹⁰ Legally, however, a stillborn corpse could be disposed of in any way providing it had been certified as a stillbirth and did not cause a public nuisance. *Lancet*, 17 June 1911, p. 1675.

any insurance policy could be purchased or validated. Moreover, the transient identity of both the stillborn and new-born baby called into question the importance attached to its formal burial: many had not been named before death nor were they accorded the status of *person*. Indeed, the plight of poorer parents facing burial charges for these bodies aroused sympathy from all corners of the death and burial business. Reporting on the prosecution of a doctor in Lambeth in 1882 for the false certification of a child who had lived thirty-four hours, thereby facilitating false burial, the Lancet speculated that doctors frequently permitted compassion for the poor to impede adherence to legality.¹¹¹ At Tipton in 1893, a coroner examined a case concerning the death and burial of two twin children, born in the absence of a doctor or a midwife, but baptised. The inquest revealed that the babies were already dead when the minister arrived but that the mother could not collect any insurance money unless the babies had been baptised.¹¹²

The ease with which undertakers could slip the bodies of babies into adult coffins rendered them an obvious source of assistance for fraudulent interment.¹¹³ Similarly, cemetery officials and gravediggers were able to inter small corpses in a discreet (but none the less illicit) manner. At an inquest in 1888, the registrar for Mile End Cemetery, Portsmouth, revealed that he had buried between one and two hundred 'so-called' stillbirths every year without any certification.¹¹⁴ In Strood Village, Rochester, in 1892 a gravedigger was charged with interring the bodies of babies in the graves of other people.¹¹⁵ Similarly, one Barrow woman recollected taking the boxed corpse of a stillborn child with a letter from her mother to the local

¹¹¹ Lancet, 25 February 1882, p. 322.

¹¹² Lancet, 7 October 1893, p. 886.

¹¹³ The illicit burial of babies and stillbirths by undertakers was a commonly acknowledged problem. See for instance Lancet, 23 January 1891, p.207, Daily Post, 22 October 1896, p. 6 and Liverpool Weekly Courier, 10 September 1898, p. 5. Reeves also noted that undertakers often slipped babies' bodies into other people's coffins for a nominal fee. Reeves represented this as a favour to the poor. Reeves, Round About A Pound, p. 70.

¹¹⁴ Lancet, 15 September 1888, pp. 530-1. The problem of illicit burial was exacerbated by the lack of means to test the validity of stillbirth certificates and the ignorance of registrars concerning the 1874 Births and Deaths Registrations Act. See Lancet, 3 September 1882, pp. 430-1.

¹¹⁵ Lancet, 7 May 1892, p. 1040.

gravedigger. On depositing the box with a pile of 'other parcels', the gravedigger informed the twelve-year-old 'it'll be alright'.¹¹⁶ Another woman suggested that illicit burial was an established practice: 'you took it to the cemetery gatehouse and it was buried in somebody else's grave after the mourners had gone'.¹¹⁷

Midwives were especially well placed to assist poor mothers in the disposal of their dead babies. Indeed, accusations relating to the widespread practice of false stillbirth certification were integral to calls for the formal registration of midwives.¹¹⁸ Medical practitioners persistently voiced concern that midwives were apt to interpret 'stillbirth' loosely, especially with regard to babies who lived only for several hours.¹¹⁹ An inquiry into All Saints churchground in Birmingham in 1881 revealed that a local midwife was issuing false certificates of stillbirth for new-born infants for the purposes of illicit burial. She also passed the tiny corpses onto the sextoness at the cemetery for interment.¹²⁰ In 1888, a midwife from West Derby, Liverpool, stated her belief that any child who lived up to forty-eight hours could be classed as stillborn.¹²¹ Mary Shelton, a midwife from Hanley in Staffordshire, was fined six pounds in 1894 for falsely certifying a child as stillborn. In this case, not only had Shelton been absent from the birth, she was fully aware that the child had lived long enough to be baptised.¹²² In 1896, Hannah Bossons, also from Hanley, was tried for the fraudulent burial of an eighteen-hour-old male baby who had been overlain. Bossons wrote a certificate of stillbirth and took the body in a box to the local gravedigger for him to inter in the churchyard. On further questioning, Bossons

¹¹⁶ Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way', pp. 192-3. The gravedigger informed the girl that each box would be slipped into the top of a public grave as it became full.

¹¹⁷ BOHT Tape 120, Reference: AB/MS/1A/003.

¹¹⁸ The Midwives Act was passed in 1902. For details of campaigns for registration of midwives see Jean Dennison, Midwives and Medical Men: A History of the Struggle for the Control of Childbirth (London, 1988), pp. 161-74 and Nicky Leap and Billie Hunter, The Midwife's Tale: An Oral History from Handywoman to Professional Midwife (London, 1993).

¹¹⁹ The Select Committee on the Registration of stillbirths in 1893 recommended that the distinction between miscarriage and stillbirth be drawn at seven months gestation. Lancet, 25 March 1899, pp. 848-9.

¹²⁰ Lancet, 3 September 1882, pp. 430-1.

¹²¹ Lancet, 16 June 1888, p. 1222.

¹²² Lancet, 16 June 1894, p. 1541.

conceded that she regularly signed stillbirth certificates for babies who had lived up to four days and that many other midwives did the same. Not surprisingly, the coroner was incredulous that infants could so easily be 'removed' from life and statistics.¹²³

Clearly, some parents were indifferent to the burial of dead offspring or unable to deposit the body in recognised cemetery space.¹²⁴ One destitute woman, questioned by the coroner at Newington in 1895, stated that she had given the corpse of her twelve-day-old infant to a midwife on the assumption that she would 'throw it over the railings and give it a cheap funeral'.¹²⁵ Moreover, the clandestine nature of such arrangements left many parents who sought assistance in the disposal of their child vulnerable to the goodwill of their accomplices. Some undertakers took infant corpses for burial only to let them putrefy on the premises.¹²⁶ In 1891, public health officials discovered the decomposing remains of thirty-one stillbirths, new-born babies and infants concealed in the house of Emma Knowles, an undertaker in Birmingham.¹²⁷ In South Wales in 1911, a whole series of infant coffins were found to have been buried in the garden attached to a house formerly occupied by an undertaker.¹²⁸

We should, however, be wary of assuming that all parents who engaged in the illicit disposal of their infants had murdered them. Indeed, I would suggest that the fraudulent interment of infant corpses often signified emotional distress tempered by pragmatism: the expense entailed in the disposal of a child who had lived only a matter of hours or days was expenditure many families could ill afford. Similarly, passing the corpse onto a third party was not tantamount to indifference. Rather, it

¹²³ Lancet, 10 October 1896, p. 1024.

¹²⁴ See for instance Liverpool Mercury, 11 June 1886, p. 6, Liverpool Weekly Courier, 19 March 1892, p. 6 and Liverpool Echo, 28 December 1897, p. 3 for reports of babies' bodies discovered in fields, chimneys, in streets and washed up by the sea.

¹²⁵ Lancet, 5 January 1895, p. 75.

¹²⁶ Lancet, 30 October 1875, p. 640.

¹²⁷ Lancet, 17 August 1901, p. 457. The judge in this case exercised a degree of leniency in acceptance of Emma Knowles' poverty and she was bound over rather than given a prison sentence.

¹²⁸ Lancet, 17 June 1911, p. 1675.

was a precautionary measure intended to deflect suspicion away from the parents. Furthermore, as chapter five highlighted, adherence to the cemetery as the customary repository for the dead suggests a general perception of burial ground as the right and proper place for corpses to go, even if the 'burial' fell outside recognised definitions of mourning and remembrance. Loose notions of the cemetery as a sacred space were not necessarily attached to religious identity or spiritual belief. Rather, the cemetery was sacred in cultural terms: it represented a public space for burial and commemoration. Yet burial ground also signified abstract perceptions of laying the dead to rest and the closure of a public bereavement process. In this sense, the cemetery remained an important location for dignity and decency and notions of resting in *peace*, even for those whose lives were cut off prematurely.

Grieving for Dead Children

Shared understandings of mourning and burial rites provided, as we have seen, symbolic landscapes for the public representation of grief. As with adults, however, private responses to the death of a child extended beyond the rituals of interment. Indeed, a grieving process might begin with the illness of a child and persist long after its funeral. Within the private space of the home and individual reflection, grief adopted various guises, some of which were shared with family and friends, others which remained personal and tied to multiple anxieties and sorrows. Common to most, however, was the management of feeling. Again, I would suggest that in managing responses to child death, parents were able to attend to the pragmatics of life without nullifying their sense of loss. David Vincent suggests that the consideration of material relief could 'cushion the blow' of a child's early death.¹²⁹ As with deaths which occasioned pecuniary hardship, however, this consideration would hardly be viewed in isolation from the anguish of personal loss. Indeed, an alleviation of household expenditure seems a particular hard cushion with which to ameliorate grief. Parents may have referred to child death in languages of pragmatism and

¹²⁹ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 58.

resignation. Such expressions were easily be mistaken for flippancy or hard-heartedness. However, as with responses to adult bereavement, parents adopted malleable, symbolic and abstract gestures as their principal forums for articulating sorrow. Furthermore, they often held treasured memories and, indeed, harboured bitterness long after their children had died.

Gissing captured the mutability of parental grief in the pitiful character of Pennyloaf Candy. Pennyloaf's youngest child resembles 'a wax doll that has gone through much ill-usage'; it testifies to Pennyloaf's poverty and her ignorance in matters of nutrition and childcare. As the child's health visibly deteriorates, Pennyloaf's anxieties accrue. Finally, she determines to undertake the laborious journey to the hospital to seek advice. In the instant she meets the doctor, however, the child dies. Pennyloaf stares at the babe in 'a sort of astonishment', repeatedly asking 'Is she really dead?' Gissing implies that her 'stupid' questioning and 'dazed, heavy, tongue-tied state' embodies a state of shock and wonder. Far from a passionate outburst of grief, Pennyloaf's first instinct is to seek her old friend, Jane Snowdon. Desolation and despair only become manifest with the realisation that she has left her umbrella at the hospital and must walk in the rain in wet shoes. It is this relatively mundane disappointment that tips Pennyloaf into a need to 'overcome all obstacles' and speak to Jane.¹³⁰ Thus, Gissing not only illustrates the disparity between apparently subdued public responses to bereavement and private emotion, he also suggests the potential for individual grief to kaleidoscope through a medley of sorrows, concerns and needs, none of which need fix on the identity of the deceased. This riot of feeling did not annul a sense of grief - it represented the complexity of loss and the inextricability of death from wider anxieties.

Like Gissing, Florence Bell recognised that grief rarely operated in isolation and that relationships between parents and offspring were ambiguous. Nevertheless, Bell frequently lapsed into simplistic equations between poverty, high mortality rates and

¹³⁰ Gissing, *The Nether World*, pp. 267-8.

an immunity to grief. According to Bell, the ‘majority of parents, it is needless to say, love their children, in spite of all the trouble and anxiety they entail’: children were an occupation, a reason for prudence, and a bond between spouses.¹³¹ When children died, it occasioned great sadness, especially for the mother whose core identity hinged upon domesticity and childcare. One woman who withstood the deaths of four of her seven children was a ‘sickly-looking creature’ who had ‘never picked up since their death’.¹³² Another, Mrs. S., had never recovered from the successive deaths of nine children.¹³³ Bell was also struck by women who struggled to sustain the lives of children whose survival was, ‘frankly [of] no gain to the country’.¹³⁴ Mrs. D., a worn and weary woman, had given birth to sickly twins. Despite their frailty, their mother ‘beamed with exultation’ and looked down on them with ‘tenderness and rejoicing’. At great cost to her own health, Mrs. D. fought to keep the babies alive until, ‘to her intense grief’, one of them died.¹³⁵

Assertions of desolation and despair in response to child death (and stillbirth) were clearly comprehensible to Bell’s own sensibilities. She imagined that the comparative rarity of child mortality in middle-class families rendered the impact of multiple bereavement a ‘dread story’:

A woman among the well-to-do who should have had seventeen children and lost twelve, would be marked out as she went about the world for the wonder and compassion of her fellows...¹³⁶

The death of a child among the working classes was, however, ‘cruelly frequent’ and ‘accepted’ as a possible ‘destiny’ for each child born.¹³⁷ Anticipating Vincent, Bell’s comparison implied a conceptual framework for different degrees of grief in relation

¹³¹ Bell, *At the Works*, p. 191.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-6.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

to material wealth. Indeed, Bell speculated that 'easygoing, good-natured and cheery' mothers who lost children to death had achieved a 'comparative immunity' from bereavement.¹³⁸ Bell also noted the significance that poorer parents attached to the material implications of infant and child death. For some at least, she conjectured, death 'lessen[ed] the burden of life' and was construed as a 'positive benefit instead of a misfortune'. In this sense, mothers were tempted to practice passive neglect, 'allowing' their children to die.¹³⁹ Bell cited the example of a woman who expressed bitter regret that her child died a week prior to the validation of its insurance policy.¹⁴⁰ Another stated that it was 'better' that all her children had died as they were all insured.¹⁴¹ Bell placed such attitudes within the context of financial realism and pragmatic concern. What she overlooked, however, was that anxieties about finance represented a public language of loss which expressed bitterness and desolation, yet was sufficiently impersonal to articulate to others. Furthermore, Bell failed to acknowledge the possibility that in making conceptual links between material circumstance and death, parents were invoking a language which they thought Bell expected to hear or, at least, which represented a form of anguish she could comprehend. It is also plausible that reflections on the relationship between poverty and bereavement expressed not indifference, but a galling reflection on the circumstances which aided and abetted early death.

Repeatedly, we return to the absence of fluent verbal statements which convey the personal impact of death. As with responses to adult deaths, however, linguistic inarticulacy reflected the incoherence, incomprehension and frustration of grief. As Ross notes, mothers who kept a constant vigil by the hospital bedside of sick children were striking to nurses, primarily because they said so little.¹⁴² Yet verbal reticence was incongruous with their devoted and watchful care. Likewise, when children died,

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 191-2.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Ross, *Love and Toil*, pp. 168-9.

frugal expressions of loss concealed the agony of grief and were, consequently, often read as apathy. Ross cites the case of a mother who nursed her sick baby with unstinting devotion. When the infant died, she was distraught. Yet the doctor who arrived to certify the death simply beheld a composed woman whose only reference to bereavement was the dispassionate comment that it was 'better' now that the child was dead.¹⁴³

A woman cited in Jeremy Seabrook's collection of memoirs recalled that the death of her youngest brother Billy (from diphtheria) made a profound impact on her mother. For three days and nights, the mother nursed her 'favourite' child, hardly sleeping herself. Breaking the news of his death to other family members, however, she was inexpressive and concise: 'He's better now, he's with Grandma and Auntie Hetty.' The respondent's assertion that her mother 'never got over losing him' and 'mourned that child for the rest of her life' testifies to the inadequacy of language as representative of emotion.¹⁴⁴ As a child, Jane Hampson (born in 1898) inquired whether her mother was 'heart broken' at losing five of her children to death. The reply was succinct and unsentimental: 'I was but I hadn't time to be because there was always another coming.' Yet set against her mother's fondness for recounting the story of her eldest child's death from diphtheria and the assertion that the girl was 'the prettiest [child] she ever had', the glib denial of heart-break sounds hollow.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, as outlined in chapter six, memory was the simplest means of grieving for and commemorating the deceased. For instance, two sisters born at the close of the nineteenth century could recount in detail the death of their three-month-old brother, Oliver. Yet their *memories* were gleaned from the 'what I've heard them talk'. Indeed, one sister had not even been born at the time of Oliver's death.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Reeves, Round About A Pound, pp. 90-1, cited in Ross, Love and Toil, p. 167.

¹⁴⁴ Born early 1900s. Seabrook, Working-Class Childhood, p. 25.

¹⁴⁵ MOH Transcript, Jane Hampson, Tape 692.

¹⁴⁶ MOH Transcript, Mrs. Arnold and un-named sister, Tape 22.

In this sense, deeds and memories acted as supreme expressions of profound sorrow. Likewise, visual representations of grief were often more striking than the verbal statements attached to them. Tears were, perhaps, the most comprehensible and tangible articulation of loss. Margaret Penn recalled the funeral of a schoolmate whose mother, 'sobbing loudly', 'made as if to jump onto the coffin'.¹⁴⁷ A. S. Jasper recalled the visible sorrow of a bereft father whose 'eyes were red with crying'.¹⁴⁸ Relating the death of his niece, Jasper painted an image of weeping, despair, sleeplessness and the importance of Jasper's mother as a figure of strength: 'Mum pulled everyone together'.¹⁴⁹ One Bolton man, born in 1896, recollected the death of his baby sister when he was three-years-old. Hearing a 'horrible bustle' in the house one morning, the boy went to the kitchen: 'I saw a crowd there, mother's crying in the middle of the crowd, me aunts round her.' Retrospectively, the respondent could recreate the image 'as it was yesterday'.¹⁵⁰ The scene of a child watching his distraught mother surrounded by sympathetic relatives is striking: in all its simplicity, it conveys a profound sense of anguish.

As Ross notes, mothers tended to express grief through their bodies: they stumbled, raged, took to drink or simply became silent and still.¹⁵¹ One mother, writing to the Women's Co-operative Guild, related that she had nursed her 'sweet little girl' (aged four) day and night for two weeks. When the child died, she was 'so done up' with exhaustion and grief that she miscarried a baby and almost lost her own life.¹⁵² Grief could also adopt more abstract expressions. Kathleen Woodward described the catastrophic effect of infant death on her friend Lil. The harbinger of 'the sun and the stars of another world, and its laughter', Lil's contentedness ended abruptly with the death of her new-born baby: 'the light went out of her eyes and we heard her voice no more.' In this account, bereavement is synonymous with the loss of happiness and

¹⁴⁷ Penn, *Manchester*, pp. 160-2.

¹⁴⁸ Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁵⁰ BOHT Tape 41a, Reference: LSS/A/005.

¹⁵¹ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 191.

¹⁵² Davies, *Maternity*, p. 158.

innocence: the dead babe is the 'death of Lil' and of Kathleen's own childhood.¹⁵³ James Hardman, born in 1905, recalled that a 'terrible lot of trouble' erupted when his eighteen-month-old brother died whilst in hospital. The story of his father's bitter conviction that medical negligence had precipitated the boy's death was repeatedly told by the family who had difficulty in accepting that the child had died.¹⁵⁴ Likewise, Anne Tibble read into her parent's desperate wish for a baby son a narrative of searing loss and bitterness that their first male child had died.¹⁵⁵ Parents obviously experienced grief in different ways, to varying degrees, and could manifest their melancholy in abstract and oblique ways. For many, however, an elaborate verbal language of loss was unnecessary. The disappointment, pain and shock of death reverberated throughout the disposal of the corpse and remained potent in memory.

Conclusion

Infanticide, child neglect and the falsification of birth certificates featured prominently in Victorian and Edwardian debates concerning legal and moral reform. Clearly, some parents were indifferent and callous towards their offspring. Yet as theories linking death with disease, poverty and environmental conditions gained credence at the end of the nineteenth century, perceptions of the causes of infant mortality shifted away from an emphasis on child murder towards medical and public health issues. Indeed, the panic concerning infanticide stemmed, as Wohl suggests, from a tendency among the 'comfortable' Victorians to 'believe the very worst of the masses'.¹⁵⁶ That parents often expressed a language of fatalism in response to child death cemented negative perceptions of the relationship between poverty and sensibility. It followed that a class which could 'stoop to infanticide' and be resigned to infant death would not experience any great sorrow at the death of their offspring.¹⁵⁷ That Vincent uses

¹⁵³ Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp. 78-81.

¹⁵⁴ MOH Tape, James Henry Hardman, Tape 927.

¹⁵⁵ Tibble, *Greenhorn*, p. 63. This was particularly painful for Anne as she imagined her birth was a disappointment to them.

¹⁵⁶ See Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

working-class testimony to support this theory of contained/ limited grief consolidates this perception of the working-class culture of bereavement.¹⁵⁸

This circular hypothesis is as shocking to the commentator's sensibilities as it is comforting. In Britain at the end of the twentieth century, child death is rare and widely perceived as a tragedy.¹⁵⁹ As Vincent suggests, death on a similar scale to Victorian mortality rates 'would have a shattering effect on the personality and family life of anyone so afflicted in our own society'.¹⁶⁰ As Florence Bell noted with reference to middle-class families, we struggle to make the imaginative leap in comprehending *how* individuals coped with recurrent death. It is beyond our capacity to empathise with such bereavements. In this sense, the notion that poverty and familiarity with death dulled the sorrow of repeated deaths - to the point of indifference in some cases - horrifies us whilst rendering our definitions of grief (and by implication, our inability to empathise) inappropriate. Yet there is a crucial difference between acknowledging that there are different experiences of bereavement and assuming that one is more distressing than the other.

This chapter has shifted analysis away from indifference, resignation and poverty as evidence of an immunity to profound sorrow. I contend that the working-class experience of *bereavement* was synonymous with *grief*: child death provoked intense sorrow, distress, heartache, misery, wretchedness, pain and desolation. High infant mortality rates did not annul the hope that one's children would live. Indeed, it is worth remembering that whilst child death was common, *most* babies born alive *did* survive to adulthood. The language of resignation was part of a common vocabulary in which people aimed to make sense of life *and* death; the fatalism commonly associated with bereavement could express many things, not least a sense of exhaustion and weariness. Material circumstances were not irrelevant to responses to

¹⁵⁸ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 39-61.

¹⁵⁹ Wohl estimates that in the 1980s, the infant death rate was under sixteen deaths per 1000 births. Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁰ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 56.

death. They often necessitated pragmatism in the face of grief. This was not, however, tantamount to indifference. Care of the corpse, a dignified funeral, sobs, silence and memory all formed part of a culture of bereavement which was defined not by poverty, but by diversity. Individual parents experienced grief to different degrees and expressed their loss in a variety of ways which, crucially, were not always apparent to those who expected sentimental statements of loss or displays of unfettered emotion. Yet there is little reason to suppose that diverse and pragmatic responses to death were any less meaningful.

When Jane Nixon, a housewife from Ulverston, was admitted to Lancaster Asylum in July 1880, she related to medical staff a story of exhaustion, privation and desolation. Described as 'low' and 'desponding', Jane had been 'wish[ing] she were dead' for the past ten days. Her health was delicate and she appeared weak and fretful. The cause of her distress was, she said, bereavement. Several of her children had died within the past month, the last only two weeks previously, 'leaving her two out of seven'. Jane explained that during this time, she had been 'overworked', caring for her 'brother, cousin, children, husband and herself'; she had 'been sitting up nursing [the child], lost her appetite and felt ill for a fortnight before its death.'¹⁶¹ It may, of course, be coincidental that Jane's collapse occurred in the aftermath of the child's death. However, it also seems plausible to suggest that the will to nurse the child sustained Jane through her own exhaustion. The expiration of the child not only precipitated grief and frustration that her efforts had been in vain, but provided Jane with the space to surrender to weariness and heartache. Admittedly, this is a rare and, perhaps, extreme example. Nevertheless, it reminds us that bereavement was, for some at least, a 'shattering' experience. That many parents had an 'apparent capacity to survive' bereavement did not mean that they felt less sorrow.¹⁶² Rather, grief reflected the ambiguity and complexity of familial relationships; people appeared to

¹⁶¹ LRO HRL 3/8. No further entries.

¹⁶² Vincent, Bread, Knowledge and Freedom, p. 56.

live in mute resignation not from blunted sensibility but because they grieved in personal ways and imbued the seemingly ordinary with private meaning.

Conclusion

George Gissing's novel The Nether World, opens with the presence of a coffin in the parlour of the Peckover household. The box and its ghastly contents are portrayed as a source of horror and fear to Gissing's heroine Jane Snowden.¹ Writing some forty years after Dickens published Martin Chuzzlewit, Gissing's description of the Peckovers' preparations for the interment of the corpse drew on a similar caricature of the 'respectable' funeral: the greedy anticipation of burial club money; the coffin as a consumer good; the display of mourning paraphernalia; and the revelry of the wakes tea.² As the female mourners exclaim; 'Everythink [sic] most respectable, I'm sure!'.³ Gissing later contrasts this scene with the despair of John Hewett who faces the prospect of interring his wife in a pauper grave. Robbed of dignity in life, his wife must suffer an ignoble death:

It's a nice blasted world, this is, when they won't let you live, and then make you pay if you don't want to be buried like a dog! She's had nothing but pain and poverty all her life, and now they'll pitch her out of the way in a parish box.⁴

As the pauper grave is the antithesis of the 'respectable' funeral, so the anguish of Hewett is a foil to the shallow hypocrisy of the Peckovers.

Yet there is a third funeral at the close of the book, that of Michael Snowden, which throws a question mark over the neatness of the dichotomy between the pauper and the respectable burial. Michael Snowden's death is described in terms of love, tenderness and reconciliation with his granddaughter, Jane. The details of his coffin and the funeral procession to Abney Park Cemetery are not remarked upon. The only

¹ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 40-3. Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit, pp. 309-14.

³ Gissing, The Nether World, p. 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

evidence of mourning paraphernalia is a passing comment by a visitor to the house that Jane is wearing black. Moreover, Jane is comforted by a solitary gesture of condolence, the touch of Sidney Kirkwood's hand.⁵ The narrative focuses on Jane's solemnity and sincere sadness: she can 'neither speak nor understand anything that was said to her'.⁶ In her isolation (her father is fickle and she has been estranged from her closest friend, Kirkwood), Jane Snowden epitomises the loneliness of bereavement. No sunlight falls onto the open grave, yet the air is mild. Significantly, Gissing describes the trees as 'budded' and we are told that a 'breath which was the promise of spring' passes through the cemetery.⁷ The melancholy of the day, Gissing seems to suggest, will pass to renewal.

The death of Michael Snowdon is a foil to both the excesses of commercialism and the indignity of the pauper grave. It reflects the humanity of Jane Snowden and her idealistic grandfather. Jane partakes in the modest rituals which signify the passing of her grandfather but is unable to articulate her loss or her hopes for the future. Indeed, Gissing paints a picture of sincere grief as mute, confused and lonely. In challenging the stereotypes of the Peckover and Hewett funerals, this thesis has elaborated the themes inherent in Gissing's third funeral: the distress, inarticulacy and individuality of bereavement. Overall, however, I have sought to illustrate that whilst the complexity and diversity of responses to death cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between pauper and respectable burial, they were not confined to Gissing's third funeral either. Rather, public rituals of mourning and commemoration were appropriated by individuals and given unique meaning. In this sense, a single funeral represented shared cultural understandings of death and mourning but was fragmented into multiple meanings by those who witnessed it. Furthermore, the meanings an individual inscribed onto the funeral were never singular or static.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 349.

⁷ Ibid.

I have illustrated that grief stretched beyond the funeral and considerations of material circumstance. Families were often solicitous of the sick, and both carers and patients feared death. The rituals of caring for the corpse permitted the bereaved to confront their grief and renegotiate their own identities in relation to the deceased. The fulfilment of obligations to the dead testified to the ownership of the corpse. It also allowed those who sympathised with the loss to pay their respects to the dead and offer their condolences to the bereaved. Once the rites of burial were complete, the dead were commemorated in personal and domestic space.

Crucially, the pragmatism inherent in the culture of bereavement did not nullify grief but represented the management of feeling. David Vincent has suggested that bereavement merely intensified the misery of poverty and that grief was subsumed to the pressing needs of life.⁸ This thesis has explored the relationship between poverty and death to conclude that the sensibility of the working classes did not dissolve into a congealed mass of economic priorities. Undeniably, material anxiety was inseparable from most facets of daily life. This was, however, markedly different from subjugating humanity to such concerns. Indeed, my inclusion of the destitute within the working-class culture of bereavement consolidates the argument that material circumstances were not inimical to sensibility. Vincent's argument rests on a tenuous equation between the absence of a verbal language for grief and the absence of feeling. Again, my thesis has argued that linguistic fluency was not necessary, or even desirable, for the expression of loss, sympathy, condolence or commemoration. Rather, grief was articulated, firstly, through the social rites of mourning and, secondly, via personal and abstract symbols and signs. That these did not always concur with shared definitions of grief did not belittle their significance.

Vincent emphasises that the working classes did not experience 'pure' grief.⁹ As a concept for measuring working-class responses to death, however, the notion of

⁸ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 56-61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

'pure' grief is of limited use. Not only does it assume that those in wealthier circumstances indulged in unfettered emotion, it implies that *pure* emotion was an ideal model of grief. I have questioned both these assumptions: grief rarely, if ever, operated in isolation from the multiple losses occasioned by death, however wealthy or destitute the bereaved were. Moreover, my analysis has contested proscriptive models of good grief. For many, the management of bereavement and the flexibility of its expression was a positive response to death; it facilitated the negotiation between loss and pragmatic necessity and ensured that the mourner did not remain defined completely in relation to the dead. Most people formulated some understanding of resolution and restitution. Crucially, however, such perceptions were flexible. Hence, it is the *inflexibility* of Vincent's notion of pure grief which diminishes its relevance. e/

It is this reluctance to recognise the fluidity of responses to death that lies at the heart of crude stereotypes of working-class responses to death. My analysis has illustrated that a loosely shared notion of the decent burial was not tied to fixed definitions of the respectable grave and consumer goods. In the same way, antipathy to the pauper grave extended beyond a preoccupation with social stigma. Expressions of grief were not limited to the social rites of burial as signifiers of status. Rather, individuals used shared rites of burial to *negotiate* personal meanings of loss, change and dignity. Likewise, the commemoration of the dead was not confined to the cemetery but had an elasticity which enabled the bereaved to remember in abstract and domestic ways. Indeed, grief had a timeless quality. Whilst many memories could precipitate sadness (notably, invasive images of the deceased in sickness and pain), many others took the form of fond, reassuring and joyous monologues. Again, I emphasise that it was the mutability of grief and remembrance and the personal inflections onto seemingly ordinary, indifferent or resigned lives that represented the dynamics of a culture of bereavement.

My argument that the experience of grief among the late-Victorian and Edwardian working classes was typified by diversity calls for recognition of the individual within shared cultural understandings of bereavement and identity. Indeed, this thesis flies in the face of perceptions of the working classes as the undifferentiated *masses* in the years preceding the Great War. Yet the privatisation of death and grief are typically perceived as growing out of the aftermath of that war. As chapter one illustrated, death became, to some at least, the great taboo of the twentieth century. People have increasingly died alone in hospital whilst their corpses have subsequently been removed to the sterile (in a hygienic and emotional sense) mortuary. Furthermore, public representations of grief are contained within subdued and modest mourning rituals, the epitome of which is cremation.¹⁰ As Cannadine notes, the contrast between the ‘Victorian Golden Age’ of ostentatious mourning and more modest forms embodies a ‘beguilingly symmetrical argument’.¹¹ Yet his objection to this neat symmetry lies in the nostalgia associated with the pre-war culture of grief. Cannadine turns this around and argues that the best time to die and grieve is in the twentieth century: the horror of the first world war collapsed excessive displays of grief and fostered a more sincere and egalitarian culture of bereavement.¹²

Of course, the First World War had a massive impact on the experience of bereavement, especially for those who lost one or more relatives to the conflict. Firstly, such deaths made no distinction between the rough and the respectable, the poor and the wealthy. Secondly, most bereaved families were left to confront their grief in the absence of a corpse and, therefore, of rites of mourning and commemoration. The impetus to create national symbols of remembrance for these absent cadavers testifies to the significance vested in the ownership of the deceased and the cultural representations of mourning for the negotiation and expression of

¹⁰ Peter Jupp and Tony Walter, ‘The Healthy Society: 1919-1998’ in Jupp and Gittings, Death in England, pp. 256-82.

¹¹ Cannadine, ‘War and Death’, p. 187.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 189.

grief.¹³ As Cannadine notes, however, the Victorian culture of excess was perceived as inappropriate: the deaths of soldiers were not only horrific, bereavement became 'a more universal experience than ever before'.¹⁴ Likewise, notions of hell receded as no clergyman would dare suggest that those who lived through 'hell on earth' had not gone to heaven.¹⁵ Hence, responses to grief during the First World War stimulated cultural representations which minimised national, material and religious difference to emphasise the universality of human experiences of loss.¹⁶ Shaved of commercial excess, however, the universalism of grief reinforced the personal tragedy of loss. Indeed, one of the most tenacious gestures of remembrance to derive from this culture, that of silence, drew a massive public together in an individual moment of contemplation.¹⁷

My thesis questions whether the post-war culture of bereavement, with its refraction of private loss through public rite, represented a break with the pre-war culture of death. Indeed, the circumstances of war appear to underline the arguments I have posited for an understanding of pre-war responses to death. The absence of a corpse rendered customary rites of mourning obsolete. Hence, families were forced to improvise. That they did so on a massive scale indicates the significance attached to the ownership of the dead and cultural representations of loss as personal forums for negotiating and, ultimately, resolving grief. The desire to secure some form of memorialisation to the deceased also reiterates my argument concerning the need to claim an identity for the dead. This not only signified a gesture of respect towards the deceased, the recognition of bereavement within shared social rites enabled mourners to move towards the sphere of the living once those obligations were fulfilled.

¹³ See for instance, Winter, *Sites of Memory*, Wilkinson, 'Changing Attitudes to Death in Two World Wars' in Howarth and Jupp, *The Changing Face*, pp. 149-63 and Cannadine, 'War and Death', pp. 217-26.

¹⁴ Cannadine, 'War and Death', p. 217.

¹⁵ Walter, *The Revival of Death*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁶ That Winter's analysis of cultural 'sites' of mourning and remembrance during and after the First World War takes an international perspective indicates the globalisation of representations of grief. Winter, *Sites of Memory*.

¹⁷ Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Oxford, 1994).

In conclusion, therefore, I would suggest that the privatisation of death and grief was not a post-war phenomenon: the universality of human experience was, and is, tempered by the limits of empathy and individuality. Moreover, changes in material culture and public languages of loss do not necessarily reflect changes in the impact of bereavement. Rather, they alter the ways in which that impact is articulated. Thus, as Lindsay Prior notes, death was never taboo in the twentieth century; it was talked about in different ways (notably, in discourses of medicine, legality and individual disaggregation).¹⁸ To this end, my thesis has explored grief as a diverse and complex experience which adopted a multitude of cultural representations. The material culture of the funeral rendered bereavement socially visible; yet the meanings invested in this culture were fluid - in both the mindscape of the self and the external manifestations of grief between individuals. Overall, in shifting my analysis to consider languages of loss which were abstract, flexible and intimate, I have re-written a narrative of the working-class culture of death in a vocabulary of love, loss and humanity.

¹⁸ Prior, The Social Organisation, pp. 4-12.

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