

THE STANDARD OF GRIEF: MOURNING IN
VICTORIAN FICTION AND LIFE-WRITING

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Bachelor of Arts, English

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Stillwater, Oklahoma

2019

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While writing this thesis, I have received a great deal of support and assistance.

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Lindsay Wilhelm. I appreciate your continuous encouraging feedback that made me feel capable and proud of my work.

To my committee members, Dr. Elizabeth Grubgeld and Dr. Cailey Hall, your support in the wings meant more than you know. Knowing that I could reach out to you both at any moment gave me the confidence to complete this project.

I couldn't have finished this project with out the support of my family and friends, so thank you for lifting me back up every time I stumbled.

To my mom, this is all for you.

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Date of Degree: MAY, 2022

Title of Study: THE STANDARD OF GRIEF: MOURNING IN VICTORIAN FICTION
AND LIFE-WRITING

Major Field: ENGLISH

Abstract: Throughout the nineteenth century, upper class Victorians established standards for certain styles of dress and mannerisms during mourning, which eventually applied moral value to the performance of funerary rituals through the pursuit of a “good” death. Instead of allowing mourners to express their grief in a manner that alleviated personal turmoil, societal emphasis on achieving a good death and the religious strictures that go with it took focus away from the dead and placed it onto the living. In fiction, deathbed scenes were influenced by the idea of a good death and often took Evangelical conceptions to an extreme. This project examines examples of mourning in fiction and in life-writing to highlight the way popular novels suppress dissonance by resolving grief too quickly or too easily, in a way that cannot be reproduced in real life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. THE STANDARD OF GRIEF: MOURNING IN VICTORIAN FICTION AND LIFE-WRITING	
Mourning and The Good Death	1
Death in <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>	16
Death in Life Writing: A Case Study.....	29
Minnie Benson and Tess Durbeyfield: A Comparison of Grief	38
Conclusions.....	52
REFERENCES	55

CHAPTER I

THE STANDARD OF GRIEF: MOURNING IN VICTORIAN FICTION AND LIFE-WRITING

Mourning and The Good Death

One writes, that ‘Other friends remain,’
That ‘Loss is common to the race’—
And common is the commonplace,
And vacant chaff well meant for grain.

That loss is common would not make
My own less bitter, rather more:
Too common! Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break.
—Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*

In some ways, dying is much easier for the deceased than for those left behind. In a brief moment, consciousness ends and the silent dead are the only ones who can tell us what happens next. In Alfred Tennyson’s long poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.*—one of the most famous expressions of Victorian mourning—the poet insists on the difficulties of loss despite its frequency or omnipresence. The opening lines in part IV of the poem suggest that although death is “common to the race,” it does not lessen the narrator’s pain. These lines also capture the social aspects of grief and mourning: as people offer placating clichés after his dear friend’s death, Tennyson must contend with socio-cultural

expectations as well as his inner emotions. Since death was so prevalent, the Victorians developed elaborate funerary and mourning rituals and incorporated these practices into their day-to-day lives for months, and in certain cases, years. These rituals were based on evangelical notions of propriety, piety, and living a “respectable” life. Exacerbated by a high death rate, dying and mourning infiltrated many aspects of life from dress to literature, and the practices involved with dying gained a sense of pageantry in their standardization.

It is this notion of “pageantry” that bookends the main questions of this thesis. Throughout the nineteenth century, the upper classes established standards for certain styles of dress and mannerisms during mourning while also applying moral value to the performance of funerary rituals. Homogenizing what it looks like to mourn undermines what is meant to be accomplished through the practice. Instead of offering outlets for the expression of grief, mourning and funerals became theatrical shows that focused more on the attention of the living rather than honoring the dead. In this culture of mourning, the performance of one’s grief must meet certain hegemonic standards before it can hold social value. The first concern of this thesis is to question how this inversion came to be and the effects it had on popular fiction. From there, I will examine the difference in the way death is written about in novels as compared to depictions in various forms of life-writing, like journals and letters. This contradiction hinges on the way in which death was romanticized. Authors often romanticized death, dying, and the afterlife in literature and popular media, and those depictions crucially depart from the examples of mourning we find in life-writing. The contrasting narratives, I argue, reflect an incongruity between the way society wanted people to mourn and the reality of being in mourning. In this thesis I

will first use Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) as a model for the quintessential Victorian deathbed scene. Then I will examine the journals and letters that chronicle Ada Lovelace's untimely death as a contrast to Dickens' sentimental depiction. In the final section, I will compare two mothers who lose their children—one case from life and one from literature—in order to suggest how social standards for mourning create a sense of dissonance for those struggling to adhere to the protocols for grief that are upheld in fiction.

As Tennyson's poem makes clear, death was an ever-present feature in Victorian life. While the mortality rate varied considerably according to one's class, occupation, and region, life expectancy was generally low in the mid-nineteenth century. In *Death, Heaven, and the Victorians* (1971), John Morley cites a report by *The Lancet* in 1830 that stated the mortality for people who lived in cities was forty percent higher than the general population; that year, the average expected life span for a laborer living in London was a shockingly low twenty-two (7). The high death rate had many causes, including infectious disease, poor living conditions in crowded, smog-filled urban areas, and poverty. English cities were notorious for their poor air quality, due to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, and sewage often spilled uncontrolled into streets and water sources. In an illustrative pamphlet from 1866, Reverend Henry Moule describes the deplorable state of sewage systems and their impact on health:

The cess-pool and privy vault are simply an unnatural abomination. People boasting of civilisation and cleanliness are accustomed to it, and therefore they still to a great extent endure such a mode of removing filth. With the one object of getting offensive matter out of sight, they form many treasure-houses of bad

smells and noxious gases, so many sources of disease and death; and, at the same time, was the most natural and effective fertilizer of the soil.

The water-closet, used in connection with the cess-pool, has only increased these evils. It affords convenience, but the evil of noxious gases is increased and brought nearer home, and the water causing the excreta more readily to percolate the subsoil, frequently thus poisons the neighbouring well. (4)

Moule is particularly concerned about the proximity of sewage and refuse to people's homes, which exacerbates the spread of waterborne illnesses like cholera. While he is specifically focused on conditions in Dorchester, his account is applicable to many other populous places in England. Infectious disease and disgusting conditions directly contributed to the increased mortality rate.

Given the death rate, it is perhaps no surprise that the Victorians developed such elaborate rituals around dying, funerals, and mourning. This was also a period when hegemonic notions regarding death and the afterlife rooted in Evangelical Christianity influenced medicine and medical treatments. From the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, doctors' focus lay with palliative care and easing pain or physical suffering. In *Death in the Victorian Family* (1999), Pat Jalland argues that "religion and medicine often co-operated in the Victorian period, when Christian doctors shared with the families they treated many of the same aspirations for the 'good death'" (77).

Although there was a decline in avid evangelicalism amongst the general population, the way people wrote and thought about death, its meaning, and the afterlife were still lensed through religion.

Even before the funeral, evangelicalism powerfully shaped popular conceptions of how to die well and achieve a so-called “good death.” In *Narrative of a Good Death: The Evangelical Deathbed in Victorian England* (2015), Mary Riso delineates the interconnections between evangelicalism and the wider society. She discusses the nuanced ways religion manifested itself in various facets of identity: “the interweaving of faith with the broader culture was subtle and fulfilled many dimensions [including] philanthropy, masculine and feminine ideals of character, social structures and the notion of respectability” (Riso 3). In order to have a good death, the dying must have subscribed to Christian ideals in their actions, views, and in the way they presented themselves. Importantly, achieving a good death also relied on the action of the mourners, who were expected to adhere to accepted standards for behavior in order to properly honor the dead. Both the dying and those who were mourning were expected to conduct themselves in a “respectable” way. Riso describes this idea of “respectability” as a status more easily obtained than middle-class rank: the idea of being respectable “was characterized by personal responsibility, determination, self-discipline, thrift, generosity of spirit and sacrifice” (Riso 5). Respectability could not be separated from “the energy and optimism of the industrialized world, or from assuming the responsibilities that came with living in such a society” (Riso 5). The demands of respectability extended even to the point of death. In order to have what was perceived as a good death, the dying person must have embodied these characteristics in life and maintained them on their deathbed.

Jalland also writes extensively about the impact religion had on death and mourning rituals. She depicts the ways death was often meant to be viewed as the final chapter in a life well-lived, and how often this was not the case, as she demonstrates in

her analysis of primary texts such as newspaper editorials, private journals and diaries, and letters. As G.M. Young, an English historian, observed, Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century “had imposed...its code of Sabbath observance, responsibility, and philanthropy of discipline in that home, regularity of affairs” (qtd. in Jalland 19). The word “imposed” suggests that these expectations spread beyond those who were practicing Evangelicals and shaped more widespread societal values. These customs of discipline, self-control, and piety influenced and transformed a wide variety of Christian sects such as the Church of England, Baptists, Presbyterians, and the Quakers, which meant that large swathes of Evangelical Victorians invested in these ideas about the good death, mourning, and the afterlife (Jalland 19-20). The requirement to maintain respectability on all fronts in life carried over to death, and therefore, dying correctly was a cause for celebration and the final hurdle for one to enter heaven.

In both fictional depictions of death and recollections of real deaths captured in life writing, the procedures and protocols for a good death appear to be relatively similar. In “Deathbed Scenes in Victorian Literature,” Margarete Holubetz explains what was expected of the dying:

As in real life, most nineteenth century fictional deaths take place at home, amid a circle of mourning relatives and friends, who expect a properly moving scene of conscious farewell and tender adieu and who are ready to store the last words of the dying person in their fond memories; and the moribund themselves wished their friends never to forget their words, nor the circumstances of their dying. Such scenes of formal adieu were considered indispensable to a graceful death not only in fiction but also in life. (16)

A deathbed scene was a final chance for the dying and the bystanders to say their piece. In these rooms, the dying individual repeats the appropriate verses, bestows forgiveness or wisdom, and completes the penultimate step of a good death (the final steps are carried out by the mourner during funeral procedures and months of mourning). As Holubetz suggests, these expectations were found in reality and fiction alike; as I discuss later, characters such as Charles Dickens' Little Nell and Thomas Hardy's Tess, as well as real people like Minnie Benson and Ada Lovelace, use the deathbed as a stage for the spectacle of divinity.

While the overt sentimentality of such scenes might seem treacly to a modern reader, it is hard to overstate the importance of religious experience to notions of the good death. Consider, by contrast, several literary examples of a "bad" death, in which dying sinners face isolation, horrendous pain, and intense psychological distress. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for instance, Heathcliffe descends into madness and dies alone of starvation. Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White* (1859) gives the villainous Sir Percival Glyde a fiery death comparable to the flames of Hell. In both cases, fictional sinners are given deaths that both reflect their behavior in life and foretell their punishment in the afterlife. Needless to say, this comparison breaks down in practice: in real life, people die horrible death regardless of their moral status, and not everyone is guaranteed a chance to die surrounded by loved ones in a halo of light. As I suggest in the analysis portion of this thesis, literature perpetuates and amplifies a dissonance between expectation and reality—a dissonance that becomes clear in depictions of real death in life writing.

The desire to be “respectable” went beyond the individual seeking a good death, extending also to those who were mourning. In order to properly mourn, individuals adhered to strict guidelines regarding dress and behavior in the months after a loved one died. As Morley points out in *Death, Heaven, and the Victorians*, mourning entailed a dramatized pageantry of dress that fell primarily on women: “it is not surprising that the state of mind called ‘mourning’ has also its peculiar costume, nor is it strange that, since the persons of women bore signs of wealth and servitude, it was on them that the external signs of grief were hung” (63). When considering the similarities between mourning dress and the term costume, the societal focus shifts from the dead to those who mourn. Instead of allowing mourners to express their grief in a manner that alleviated personal turmoil, societal emphasis on achieving a good death and the religious strictures that go with it took focus away from the dead and placed it onto the living.

To reiterate Morley’s observation, rules of mourning disproportionately affected women insofar as most mourning codes relied on visual components, especially dress and jewelry. In “Mourning Clothes and Customs,” a scathing opinion article in the 1889 edition of *The Woman’s World* magazine, Lady Florence Wallace Pomeroy, Vicountess Harberton, protests the inauthenticity of mourning and popular practices. Writing under the name F.W. Harberton, Lady Harberton discusses the many shortcomings of the funeral industry at the time, such as how the standard practices make the poor poorer by forcing them to hire unnecessary services, the wastefulness of requiring new mourning attire, and the egoism of expecting those uninvolved with the family to expend themselves to observe mourning protocols. Harberton is particularly critical of the gender inequality inherent in mourning practice: “...so trifling are the alterations made in a

man's dress on this account," she writes, "that practically the whole burden of mourning trappings would seem to have devolved upon women" (419). This account acknowledges how the burden of mourning fell more heavily onto women. Women were assigned the task of being chief mourner visually through their dress, while masculine attire changed minimally, if at all, in comparison.

Full Victorian mourning dress was intended to depict the depth of one's grief and sadness. The black garments were free of any decoration; there was little to look at or focus on beside the matte black swathes of fabric. Black crape—a silk fabric that was heat-treated to produce a crimped or crispy appearance—was a common feature of mourning attire, often added as trim to dresses, bonnets, and veils and paired with coal-like jet jewelry (Morley 64, 66). Dress codes and other mourning protocols applied most stringently to widows, but sisters, mothers, aunts, and other female relations were also expected to wear full mourning attire directly after a death of a loved one. The length of time one was expected to wear mourning dress depended on degree of relation: mourning periods were two years for widows, one year for the mourning of a child or of a parent, six to nine months for grandparents, and six months for siblings. Intricate rules about crape, silk, and fabric colorations applied for more distant relatives; in Morley's book, the full list of what to wear, and for how long, takes up nearly five pages (Morley 68-69). After a certain period, softer black silk fabrics were acceptable, then grays and lavenders accompanied with gold or silver jewelry could be worn. As mentioned above, widows abided by the strictest dress codes, which Jalland outlines:

[Widows] were required to wear full black mourning for two years—non-reflective black paramatta and crape for the first year of deepest mourning,

followed by nine months of dullish black silk, heavily trimmed with crape, and then three months when crape was discarded.... Widows were allowed to change into colours of half-mourning, such as grey and lavender, black and white, for the final sixth months. (300)

Jalland's detailed description of the steps of mourning attire echo Harberton's sentiments. The requirements for good mourning excluded impoverished individuals since several variations of dark, heavily trimmed, clothing were the standard to adequately express grief and purchasing these articles of clothing would be out of the question for many families. Again, these financial burdens fell most heavily on women, especially in the case of widows. For a widow, mourning appearances were kept for two years, and this does not include additional mourning protocols if another family member or close relation also died.

Rules about mourning dress, which filtered from royal court trends to wider society, were based upon what was considered the "appropriate" amount of time to work through one's grief given the closeness of the relationship. The aesthetics of mourning dress were also designed to project these feelings of grief. Morley recounts a description of a widow's mourning dress as "black bombazeen, of such a lusterless, deep, dead, somber shade, that gas itself couldn't light her up after dark, and her presence was a quencher to any number of candles" (qtd. in Morley 64). The woman in question reportedly wore mourning dress for forty years following the death of her husband, and her attire reflects her own desolation as the void-like fabric seems to absorb any light. The description of the widow's dress indicates the way in which proper mourning was

supposed to consume the mourner. In other words, her attire was understood to express outwardly her emotional state.

In addition to representing a widow's internal grief, mourning dress was a symbolic enactment of a widow's shifting social status. Potential suitors would immediately recognize widows clad in the darkest of materials as off limits or unready to wed. The gradual lifting of mourning attire over the course of two years allowed for a respectable and proper amount of time for a woman to mourn her husband before remarrying. And new widows had more to consider than emotional preparedness to love again or the contemplation of a new husband; since marriage was such a vital aspect of womanhood for the upper and middle classes, the widow also had to reconcile a symbolic death of an essential part of her identity. A marital union was a cornerstone in a woman's life, and many women were taught how and prepared to be a wife even from a young age. There were few other options for women to make financial gains other than an advantageous marriage, and when that was lost, many women did not receive complete monetary settlements. Jalland argues that "widowhood, as the end of marriage, was a devastating experience, entailing the loss of the central role of wife, which defined the identity and sense of worth of so many women" (230). Not only does the widow lose her loved one, but she also undergoes an upheaval of her own identity, again reflected in mourning dress.

Of course, societal expectations surrounding mourning dress and conduct did not always coincide with the wishes of the mourner. An example given in Harberton's essay "Mourning Clothes and Customs" depicts a scenario when gendered mourning standards seemed to contradict mourning's ostensible function as an expression of genuine grief.

Harberton recounts the story of a young couple who entered the mourning period after the husband's father died. The wife had never met her father-in-law and their families were never acquainted. Months after the funeral, the couple was invited to a local party, but they were still in the last stages of what was considered to be deep mourning for a close relative. It is unclear who made the decision, but it was determined that the husband was allowed to attend the event, but the wife would stay home "on account of her mourning being so deep" (Harberton 419). In this anecdote, which Harberton includes as an example of the absurdity of mourning protocols, the requirements of a proper way to mourn impede on, and even triumph over, a woman's autonomy. Her example demonstrates a discrepancy between the mourner's actual state of grief—it seems unlikely that the woman in this anecdote would grieve over a man she had never met—and the mourning performance expected of the mourner according to the strictures of the good death.

Conversely, these strictures also inhibited masculine expressions of grief. In the case of masculine mourning, Harberton describes men "mourn[ing] by proxy" (419). This is both a reference to the more relaxed mourning attire requirements and also the fact that many men were not given a personal outlet for expressions of grief. Consider a man who feels that extravagant mourning attire is the only way to adequately show the depth of his grief and sorrow to those around him. However, dictums involving ways to "properly" mourn obstruct the expression of his feelings. According to Victorian mourning codes, there was no way for men to exhibit their grief outwardly at the same visual scale that women could. The edicts passed down on how to be a good mourner and correctly express grief keep those who need to grieve in a certain way—both men and women—

from articulating their needs. This is hinted at in the party example from Harberton's "Mourning Clothes and Customs." Harberton's account of this event does not explicitly state the nature of the husband's relationship to his father—but in any case, the mourning rules automatically presume that his wife must be the one with deep emotional grief, and require the woman to sacrifice her social health despite her not knowing her father-in-law in any capacity. Not only do mourning protocols require her to withdraw from society for arbitrary reasons, but they also leave her husband, the son of the deceased, to attend the party alone, and presumably without any support, which could be equally damaging psychologically.

With the high prevalence of death during the period and the ritualization of mourning practices, the grieving process becomes more of a pageant of sorrow rather than a true expression of an individual's loss. The focus shifts from the deceased to the living mourners and to whether or not those who are grieving can adequately perform the mourning tasks—if they can even afford to properly mourn their loved one. Emphasis is placed on adherence to a socially determined visual standard, and, in this way, mourning becomes a performance of one's grief, or, at the very least, an activity that can be done a correct or preferred way. The performative nature of mourning is also clear in the peculiar mementos that Victorian mourners carried with them, such as vials of the dead loved one's blood and jewelry made from their teeth or woven hair. These mementos also emphasize the materialism of Victorian mourning since these objects were easy-to-spot status symbols.

The visual aspects of the good death and appropriate mourning were closely tied to Victorian notions of physical beauty. Diseases such as tuberculosis resulted in pale

skin, red lips (from coughing up blood), feverish cheeks, and a slim, waifish figure. These were all traits that, not coincidentally, marked beauty in the period. Many popular accounts of the disease romanticized those of its effects that enhanced traits that were already considered beautiful. Jacob Steere-Williams highlights the way various diseases were portrayed in popular culture of the period in his book *The Filth Disease: Typhoid Fever and the Practices of Epidemiology in Victorian England* (2020). One of the main issues Steere-Williams addresses is the question of “why some problems of health and the environment are feared and framed as public health problems of immediate concern, while others are neglected, downplayed, or (as in the case of Victorian tuberculosis), romanticized by the public, policy-makers, and the media” (8). We might not consider the sputtering bloody coughs, sweaty pale skin, or rattling breathing that coincides with a deadly illness as particularly romantic, but deathbed scenes, especially those involving dying women, frequently idealize the physical experience of death. As I will discuss in the context of Charles Dickens’s *Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), deathbed scenes in fiction often describe dying as a transcendent occasion: the weak, but still beautiful, woman reaches her pale, thin arm to stroke the face of those near her as she releases her last breath, and her position as an angelic figure is solidified as her spirit transcends into the afterlife. In glamorizing death, Victorians further muddied what it means to die and how others are affected. Just as the insistence on a certain way to properly mourn strips away the humanity of grief and replaces the emotion with a materialistic representation—a burden that falls disproportionately on women—depictions of death uphold unrealistic expectations about how someone (again, often women) should conduct themselves in their final moments.

For the Victorians, the good death was the natural conclusion to a life well-lived, a reward for one's own piety and perseverance. In fiction, deathbed scenes were influenced by the idea of a good death and often take Evangelical conceptions to an extreme. Jalland argues that "death scenes in Victorian fiction tended to be more melodramatic and sentimental than those in Evangelical tracts" (24). These deathbed scenes both expressed and reinforced widespread values and sentiments surrounding death, mourning, and grief. Of course, these dramatized moments did not necessarily accord with lived experiences of death in this period. In journals and diaries, death is often shown as slow, gruesome, and agonizing. In some cases, the expected emotions surrounding mourning are replaced with joyful exaltation, which to a modern reader might feel obscene or absurd. These crosscutting pressures—the social performance of mourning, evangelical expectations of the good death, and the psychological trauma of grieving loved ones—created the conditions for cognitive dissonance. We can detect this dissonance in both fictional and nonfiction accounts of death, but it is particularly pronounced in life writing. In the examples I will look at here, individuals writing about death seek to answer the question of *why* the death occurs; this questioning often involves profound reflections on faith, God, and the afterlife. In fiction, death has intentional meaning—as the climax to a plot, a means of character development, etc.—but in real life, people struggle to find meaning when it is happening before their eyes. As they transcribe the events into a journal format, they are attempting to assign meaning where they cannot readily find it. In some ways, mourning protocols make it more difficult for Victorian mourners to face death, their emotions, and their grief. The standards cause dissonance as the mourner attempts to uphold them and mourn correctly, which is an

unattainable goal. As I will repeatedly argue, fiction often suppresses that dissonance by resolving it too quickly or too easily, in a way that cannot be reproduced in real life.

Death in The Old Curiosity Shop

Many of the literary depictions of death that we find in Victorian fiction uphold the rules for a good death and for mourning. In *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (1984), Garrett Stewart suggests that these infamous scenes are unique to the Victorian period, and Victorians essentially invented the iconic sentimental death bed scene (9). Prior to the nineteenth century, deathbed scenes were more often concerned with the fallout of a death rather than the actual proceedings. He cites early eighteenth-century works such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *A Journal of a Plague Year* (1722) as examples of novels that recount enormous amounts of death, but do not prioritize "the psychology of death as an introspective moment" (9). There are stacks of corpses, but the deaths are little more than side events. They are labeled and charted, but the individual deaths lack any sense of sentimentality or ritualization. In Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), to take another example, Tristram's grief over Yorick's death is shown across two entirely black pages reflecting both black mourning dress and an isolating silence. Instead of narrating the main character's inner dialogue, which would fit well within a novel that purports to narrate the main character's "life and opinions," Sterne leaves readers in silence for those two pages where sentiment is conveyed but not spoken. The novels of Jane Austen rarely deal with death at all. Main characters may have brushes with death, but they are never killed off. Moreover, the prospect of death in her novels often entails economic uncertainty, raising questions of

dowries, family houses, land, and inheritance rather than the contemplation of personal loss and the afterlife. Stewart argues that the way eighteenth century novelists treat sentimental narration “contrasts tellingly with the Victorian metaphoric treatment of death not as an irrevocable end but as a life-defining experience capable of being caught in the act” (9). Victorian deathbed scenes present death as the extension of the individual’s life and a hint of what is to come beyond death. The death itself and the surrounding proceedings are emblematic of the dying person’s morality and goodness, as well as those around them.

In Victorian novels, the overt sentimentality of deathbed scenes creates an unrealistic depiction of what death might look like. Deaths in novels often have a purpose that gives readers closure and even a sense of peace knowing that the death brought about change, taught a lesson, or reassured one’s faith. One of the best examples of this—and by far the most famous sentimental deathbed scene of the Victorian period—occurs in Dickens’s aforementioned *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The novel follows “Little” Nell Trent and her unnamed grandfather, who owns the titular curiosity shop; after her grandfather gambles away all of their money, the pair is forced to go on the run from the moneylender, the dastardly Daniel Quilp. After months of fleeing Quilp and his henchmen, Little Nell eventually falls ill and dies as a result of the strenuous adventure. The discovery of Nell’s body is a scene of both confusion and sentimentality. At first, the men who find her—her grandfather, the former shop assistant Kit, the school teacher Mr. Marton, and the grandfather’s unnamed estranged brother—believe Little Nell to be asleep. The grandfather assures them that she has been in a “good and happy sleep” and

cautions the trio to refrain from waking her (Dickens 422). But upon closer inspection, the group finds that she is, in fact, dead:

No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.... She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell was dead. Her little bird—a poor slight thing the pressure of a finger would have crushed—was stirring nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child mistress was mute and motionless forever.

Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imagined in her tranquil beauty and profound repose. (Dickens 424)

This scene comes as a shock for the characters who discover Nell as well as the reader, all of whom are persuaded to believe that Nell is simply in a deep restful sleep. Dickens repeatedly states that she is dead to confirm this, almost as if he needed to convince himself of his lovely, angelic character's death as he repeats this line four times in the space of half a page. In the rest of the passage, the descriptions of Little Nell's body emphasize her cherubic and beautiful qualities. She is portrayed as if she descended from heaven rather than recently ascended; in addition to the narration of her visage, the adjectives used to describe her reiterate her "gentle, patient, noble" nature. The last half of the deathbed scene also highlights the effects of death. Now that Nell has died, she is considered to be free from earthly cares. She no longer suffers from any physical or mental affliction, but she is eternally happy. Her death establishes her perfection in life and reaffirms in a very visible way her reward in the afterlife.

As the trio and the grandfather move closer to Nell's body, they glorify her death further by suggesting that she is perhaps better off dead. The grandfather takes her hand in his, presses her palm to his lips, and observes that "it was warmer now," which suggests that in death, she is warmer and more full of life (Dickens 425). Paradoxically, death restores the rosininess to her cheeks and the warmth to her body. Mr. Marton, eyes filled with tears, implores the men of the room to "think what earth is, compared with the World to which her young spirit has winged its early flight; and say if one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it" (Dickens 425). Although everyone present is truly shocked by Little Nell's death and they freely admit what good she has brought to the world, none would wish to bring her back to life. This is in part because everyone, including the characters and presumably the reader, assumes that Nell is in heaven, and her existence there is more desirable than the impoverished life Nell lead on earth. But another reason that they consider Nell's death fortunate is because she has already fulfilled her role in the plot of the novel. Her beauty, kindness, and meekness leave a mark on all she encountered.

According to the ideal of the good death, the dying person participates in their own death by leaving those around them with a poignant and meaningful farewell. Although Nell's death is an iconic example of a sentimental deathbed scene, this is one aspect that seems to be missing. Since Nell's body is discovered after she has died, she does not get the opportunity to bestow wisdom or forgiveness to her surviving friends and family. However, Dickens still completes this last rite of the dying by having her friends reiterate her good example. As the trio prepares to enter Nell's quarters, they are interrupted by her grandfather. The group begins to discuss all of Nell's saintly qualities

and reminisce about her exemplary conduct in life. Mr. Marton speaks of her loyalty as she remained dutifully by her grandfather's side: "Think of her; think of all the sorrows and afflictions you have shared together, of all the trials, and all the peaceful pleasures you have jointly known" (Dickens 423). In thinking of Nell, the grandfather is reminded of his late daughter and how Nell, "...in all goodness, [is] like her mother" (Dickens 423). Musing about her "mild and quiet" nature and considering Nell's goodness, the grandfather and his estranged younger brother reconcile right outside of her chamber door. Their reconciliation does not come to fruition due to her saintly final words but through the example of her consistent kindness and virtue. Even though she has already died, Nell still bestows a final enlightenment on those around her through the goodness, purity, and morality of her character. Everyone present in her death chamber promises to live up to the traits that she displayed in life. She is almost Christ-like in the way she repairs wounded relationships and initiates spiritual renewal through the sacrifice of her own death. Her death completes her role in the plot, and the other characters could not have completed theirs without it.

Although Nell's death is arguably the most important one in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, she is not the only character to die. The villainous Quilp is another major character who dies during the course of the novel, and it would be helpful to examine how Dickens' makes an example out of his death, too. In contrast to the neat and pretty Nell, Daniel Quilp is described as small of stature with twisted stubby legs, large bushy eyebrows and greasy hair, scheming as he rubs his grimy hands together and pipe smoke coils around his forehead (Dickens 21). Over the course of the novel, he lends Nell's grandfather money for his gambling debts and takes his odds-and-ends shop when the

grandfather cannot pay. After lecherously desiring Nell, tormenting his wife, and framing Kit for robbery, Quilp dies by drowning in the Thames. Dickens describes his death, and the state of his corpse, in terms that contrast with Nell's angelic death:

...the resistless water bore him down before he could give it utterance, and, driving him under [the ship], carried away a corpse.

It toyed and sported with its ghastly freight, now bruising it against the slimy piles, now hiding it in mud or long rank grass, now dragging it heavily over rough stones and gravel...it flung it on a swamp...and left it there to bleach.

And there it lay alone...The place the deserted carcass has left so recently, a living man, was now a blazing ruin. There was something of the glare upon its face. The hair stirred by the damp breeze, played in a kind of mockery of death—such a mockery as the dead man himself would have delighted in when alive—about its head, and its dress fluttered idly in the night wind. (402-403)

Quilp's corpse is brutally battered by a nearby ship, and the adjectives used to describe the scene are grotesque. Words like "slimy" and "rank" foreshadow the body's imminent decay, as if it has already started to rot and decompose. Additionally, Dickens switches from using the pronoun "he" to "it" when referring to Quilp's body. This small change in personal pronoun effectively strips the corpse of what little humanity Quilp had in life. This also solidifies that Quilp has not likely earned a place in heaven.

The scene of Quilp's desecrated corpse contrasts starkly with descriptions of Nell's body after her death is confirmed. Her body remains unchanged: "And still her former self lay there, unaltered in this change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that same sweet face...there had been the same mild lovely look. So shall we know the angels

in their majesty, after death” (Dickens 425). The use of words like “same,” “unaltered,” and “unchanged” confirms that she looks indistinguishable in death from as she did in life (so much so that those who discover her think she is still sleeping). Where Nell’s body is perfectly preserved, Quilp’s body immediately rots, and the lack of specific gendered pronouns metaphorically reinforces its decomposition. Although it is impossible to determine how long Nell has been dead, her body is akin to that of an angel: purest perfection. The descriptions of Quilp’s death and the treatment of his body shortly after reflect his villainous personality throughout the novel.

The way that others react to Nell’s and Quilp’s respective deaths are also drastically different. Quilp’s death is marked with terror and isolation, while Nell’s emphasizes the care those close to her provide her body and the personal connections she made while alive. Quilp’s isolation worsens in his final moments. As he drowns, a lost couple walks near the river bank and he thinks, “they were all but looking on, while he was drowned; that they were close at hand, but could not make an effort to save him” (Dickens 401). The human connection he needs is close at hand, but ultimately fails him. The irony of Quilp seeing the couple but the couple not noticing him amplifies his acute isolation. Importantly, he is also alone after his death. When his body washes up on the swampy riverbank, the narrator makes the short and concise declarative sentence: “And there it lay alone” (Dickens 401). Stripped of all humanity, his corpse is left to decay without anyone to care for it. In the novel’s epilogue, his body is eventually found by an unnamed character, and there is a brief investigation in which his death is ruled as a suicide. In keeping with this verdict, his body is buried at a crossroads without religious ceremony, a stake in his heart.

While it may seem that Nell also dies alone, Dickens shows Nell receiving care in the days before and after her death. Her death came as a shock when her body was discovered, but Mr. Marton, Kit, the great uncle, and the grandfather knew her death was imminent. In her final days, the men read to her, tell her adventure stories, and listen to her reminisce about her friends who could not be with her; in these scenes, there is no evidence of her illness, and she is only described as being beautiful, quiet, earnest, and of completely sound mind (Dickens 426). The days and hours leading up to her death are filled with companionship, unmarred by the unpleasantries, like pain or delirium, an illness can inflict on the dying individual. When no one else is present, the narrator makes this comment about her final moments: “For the rest, she has never murmured or complained; but with a quiet mind, and manner quite unaltered—save that she every day became more earnest and more grateful to them—faded like the light upon a summer’s evening” (Dickens 426). Her final moments alive are picturesque, and she retains her dignity in death insofar as she is described as maintaining her appearance, her purity and morality, and also control over her mental faculties. Nell still acts as if she were perfectly healthy, and this awards her a death akin to a fading sunset. After her death, friends and acquaintances bring her flowers and other small tributes; it is also revealed that a small waifish boy, who could sense that her death was near, stood guard outside her bedroom in the snow on the night that she died, so Nell was never really alone at all (Dickens 427). In fact, the entire town participates in mourning for Nell and attends her funeral, and the grandfather is beside himself as he notices not one person is without black crape or mourning ribbons (Dickens 427). The conclusion of Nell’s life reflects descriptions of her

character and is marked by a sense of serenity, beauty, and intimate togetherness across the community.

I would argue that the comparison between Quilp's and Nell's respective deaths invokes a problematic ideal: namely, that bad people die horribly and good people die peacefully. This attaches a simplistic morality to pain and death. Since Quilp is truly evil and has no redeeming qualities or remorseful thoughts, he faces a death that reflects the isolation and terror he caused in life. Because Nell is kind, thoughtful, and quiet, her death reflects many of the same attributes and is a peaceful experience that spiritually rejuvenates those around her. Jalland even suggests that novels, specifically *The Old Curiosity Shop*, could have been models for Evangelicals as they looked for "'signs' of salvation, or even for deathbed miracles, and found them in abundance, as in the famous death of Little Nell" (37). *The Old Curiosity Shop* was wildly popular when it was originally serialized, and if readers conflated the deaths on the page with ones that occurred in their real lives, then this would uphold an unrealistic understanding of what it meant to die.

Not only was *The Old Curiosity Shop* popular, it also garnered visceral emotional responses from the public. Importantly for my interpretation of the good death, however, her demise is also foreshadowed throughout the novel. As Stanley Tick notes in "The Decline and Fall of Little Nell" (62), Dickens gives very little physical description of Little Nell, even though she is the novel's main character. When she is first introduced, she is described as simply a "pretty little girl," and the narrator occasionally reiterates that she is "slight" or "small" (Dickens 6). Her grandfather, however, is afforded lengthy descriptions: each tendril of his long gray hair is scrutinized, each wrinkle in his

hollowed face is carved in accurate detail, and the effects of his age are effusively pronounced. Other featured characters are also described with attention to detail, but Little Nell remains neutral or even, as Tick argues, “allegorical” (Tick 65). Throughout the novel, Dickens uses words like “weak,” “delicate,” and “pale” to describe her features. She is primed as a specter from the opening pages of the novel—clearly beautiful, but inherently ghost-like and impersonal.

In addition to her ghostly descriptions, Nell also has a unique interest in the grim and macabre. For example, as Nell and her grandfather roam the countryside, they seek refuge in a church for the night. In the morning, Nell wakes and ventures out into the yard with another small local child. She feels a “curious kind of pleasure in lingering among these houses of the dead” as she passes from grave to grave, reading the inscriptions on “the tombs of the good people” (Dickens 101). She feels at ease in the graveyard and finds comfort in being surrounded by the tombstones. Upon seeing a chapel in the morning light, Nell remarks about the pastoral beauty of the cattle grazing, the children playing, and the glorious blue sky: “...all, everything, so beautiful and happy! It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing nearer Heaven” (Dickens 314). Nell’s reaction to the scene around her upends our expectations. Although we usually see life and death as occurring in that order—life, followed by death—she imagines life springing out of death. This is true in many ways, but when we consider Nell’s eventual fate, this reversal of the typical order of things also foreshadows her own death. As I have established, her death happens peacefully—even beautifully—and it has positive benefits for those around her deathbed. This early association between death and

life prepares readers to make the same connections—especially since this is the perspective of the idealized main character.

Nell's conclusions about the afterlife are solidified in another scene in a different graveyard with a different local child. She and the child speak to Mr. Marton about some of the more neglected tombstones scattered throughout the churchyard after Nell expresses the fear that those who occupy the graves have been forgotten. Her friend sagely states:

There is nothing. . .no, nothing innocent or good, that dies, and is forgotten. Let us hold that to faith, or none. An infant, a prattling child, dying in its cradle, will live again in the better thoughts of those who loved it, and will play its part, through them, in the redeeming actions of the world, though its body be burnt to ashes or drowned in the deepest sea. There is not an angel added to the Host of Heaven but does its blessed work on earth in those that loved it here. Forgotten! Oh, if the good deeds of human creatures could be traced to their source, how beautiful would death appear; for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection, would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves! (Dickens 321)

Nell immediately agrees with her friend's assessment, and this speech alleviates her fears. By now, signs of Nell's illness are making frequent appearances through small coughs, bouts of fatigue, and flushed, but still beautiful, cheeks, so the connection between her friend's speech and Nell's impending death is clear. She is comforted by the fact that no one who is truly "good" can ever be forgotten, because they will live on through the people they have encountered and touched. This is exactly Nell's fate. Although she does

die, the occasion is never too sad because of how many lives she changed with hers. Certainly, her friend claims that even those who suffer from presumably bad deaths—those whose bodies are “burnt to ashes” or “drowned in the deepest sea”—are awarded access to the afterlife as long as they were good while alive, which encompasses a wider range of acceptable deaths. But her friend also reinforces the fact that deaths are good insofar as they leave a more harmonious society in their wake. The good death is a beautiful act of charity and affection, and it seems as if one can benefit more people dead than they can alive. Framing death in such a way prepares readers to take on the same views when Nell’s death ultimately occurs.

It is this notion of preparedness that makes literary death so vastly different from the realities of death. As I have stated, readers are covertly prepared with allusions and symbols that anticipate Little Nell’s untimely death. From her ghostlike description to her connections with graveyards, readers can expect that Nell will meet an end that seems fated for her. Death in real life is not always so carefully prefaced. Often death happens suddenly and without warning; mourners must come to terms with the death of their loved one with little to no preparation. Even in cases with prolonged illness, the complicated emotions that occur at the close of someone’s life cannot be well-rehearsed.

In a novel, death and its emotional and physical implications for mourners are wrapped up within a finite space. After Nell’s death, the community that came together to mourn the girl observes her grave with tear-filled eyes, and then they continue with their individual lives (Dickens 428). The grandfather mourns deeply; he experiences the “blank that follows death—the weary void,” which highlights the emptiness he feels without Nell’s presence (Dickens 429). He even slips into delusions as he ignores his

newfound brother and returns to Nell's grave, lies beside it, and murmurs "She will come again tomorrow," before he dies as well (Dickens 430). There is no doubt that eloquent authors can capture the ways in which death is empty, painful, and even agonizing. But the fact remains that they must capture these emotions in the prepared, conditioned world of the novel—a space that cannot adequately compare to incessant grief in real life. The grandfather's mourning from Nell's funeral to his own death lasts a little less than three and a half pages. After that, there is no other mention of Nell or the impact she had on others except for when a grown Kit tells his children about her. Kit recounts the story of Little Nell to "teach them how she had gone to Heaven, as all good people did; and how, if they were good, like her, they might hope to be there too, one day" (Dickens 437). Kit uses her life and death as a moral example for his children, so that one day they can be rewarded like Nell was.

Although her virtues are handed down, other details about Nell begin to fade out of memory. At first, Kit would look at the place where his friend had lived, but, over time, "he soon became uncertain of the spot, and could only say it was thereabouts, he thought, and these alterations were confusing" (Dickens 438). This process of forgetting is very condensed in the novel: in the space of ten pages Nell dies, people grieve, and people forget. Still, while the details of her life and the pain of her loss have been lost, her spiritual and moral example lives on. Nell's life and death teach another generation how to be good, kind, and moral so that they can be awarded a good death and a place in heaven alongside her.

Death in Life Writing: A Case Study

Although individuals might aspire to give their loved ones a good death (or die a good death themselves), sometimes death cannot be so procedural. When this occurs, mourners struggle to reconcile the ways in which tradition suggests that they present their feelings with how they actually feel. While Jalland points out that the Victorians “recognized that most deaths would fail to emulate the stereotypical ideal,” I argue that this failure to live up to the ideal nonetheless results in inner turmoil that we can detect in nonfiction accounts of death (59). Even though common sense says that these rules and rituals apply best to a certain set of criteria, this does not stop individuals from wanting and willing the death to be considered a “good” one regardless of the circumstances. The social pressure to die a certain way eclipses common sense in these times of intense emotion and grief. This is especially apparent in records of the 1852 death of Lady Ada Lovelace, who spent her final months agonizing about the afterlife. In the course of her prolonged illness, her mother also attempted to impose religion on her ailing daughter, and her husband came to the devastating realization that his aspirations for his wife to have a good death were impossible.

The only child of Romantic poet Lord Byron and his wife Annabella, Ada Lovelace was an accomplished mathematician whose work on algorithms is considered vital in the history of computing. Morally, Lovelace was a “free thinker who was uncertain of the existence of an afterlife and whose unorthodox life was scarcely unblemished by Christian standards” (Jalland 61). In her 1841 correspondence with Andrew Crosse—an early scientist who experimented with electricity and electro-crystallization—Lovelace describes her unorthodox views of God and religion:

Perhaps you have felt already, from the tone of my letter, that I am more than ever now the bride of science. Religion to me is science, and science is religion. In that deeply-felt truth lies the secret of my intense devotion to the reading of God's natural works. It is reading Him, His will—His intelligence: and this again is learning to obey and to follow (to the best of our power) that will! For he who reads, who *interprets* the Divinity with a true and simple heart, then obeys and submits in acts and feelings as by an impulse and instinct. He can't help doing so. At least, it appears so to me. (Kölbing 157-158)

In her missive, Lovelace speaks directly regarding her view on religion. For her, divine truth is found in the study of nature and its works. Instead of reading a biblical text, Lovelace purported to “read” the natural world and its workings. In those mechanics, she found divinity. She also valued a “*logical & well balanced* turn of mind rather than [a] highly speculative or imaginative [one]” and felt that “the intellectual, the moral, the religious seem to me all naturally bound up and interlinked together in one great harmonious whole” (qtd. in Stein 126, 144). Lovelace's mathematical way of viewing the world allowed her to see nature's cycles and patterns. She recognized that the precision and beauty of the natural order were awe-inspiring to the point that some higher being must have set it in motion, but she found it difficult to rationalize the existence of a singular, personal God. She confessed as much in a letter to her mother: “I don't exactly know what I do or do not believe,” Lovelace told Annabella, “How can one? These are not matters upon which we can get at certainties” (qtd. in Jalland 62). Lovelace thus cycled between a form of deism, agnosticism, and non-practicing Christianity at various points throughout her life (Stein 217). To an extent, her struggles to define her beliefs

speak to the debates about science, evolution, and creationism going on in this time, as well as her own mathematical studies.

These doubts about God and the afterlife continued to plague Lovelace almost a decade later, as she lay dying of suspected cervical or uterine cancer. Racked with intense pain and fatigue, Lovelace ailed for over a year before she finally died at age thirty-six. Due to the prolonged nature of her illness, she had ample time to consider the afterlife, though she was even more disturbed by the prospect of a long and drawn-out death. In a letter to her mother written in February 1852, Lovelace confides that “what most disturbed me, at the time when I certainly apprehended a fatal termination, was the idea of the *length* of illness and suffering there would be. Dying by inches in a horrid way, is a dreadful fate, and did appall me when it seems impending” (Jalland 61). As we will recall, a good death is meant to be relatively quick and painless, but with enough time for conveying farewells, apologies, and bits of wisdom. Those experiencing the good death, or those witnessing it, would find comfort in the promise of a Christian afterlife. In her letter, Lovelace expresses her fear of a slow death, which almost certainly involves extended pain and agony. Faced with this fear, Lovelace began to rethink her previously unorthodox beliefs.

Lovelace’s repentance was not unprompted, however. Her mother Annabella Byron had idiosyncratic and deeply-held religious views that Lovelace’s biographer, Dorothy Stein, describes as an “eclectic mixture of unfocused Christianity, mesmerism, and spiritualism” (246). At the time of her daughter’s illness, it seems that Annabella believed her daughter was dangerously close to losing her chance at a good death, although Stein depicts Annabella’s motives as ultimately self-serving. Stein describes

Annabella's journal, really a series of letters, as an account in which "minute descriptions of Ada's deteriorating physical state alternated with technical discussion of mesmeric matters, self-conscious attempts to gird herself for battle, and self-congratulatory reports of her speeches and triumphs" (227). Taking advantage of Lovelace's weakened state, Lady Byron took control over her daughter's life for the duration of her illness and persistently urged her to recant her heterodox views. She recounts her zealous mission in her journal: "I have found my daughter on the brink of the grave. My one object will be to make myself the medicine of Christian influence, elevating and cheering" (qtd. in Jalland 62). Lady Byron's statements embody a rushed version of the hegemonic standards for death and mourning as she attempts to secure her daughter a good death through a late and hasty conversion that will hopefully undo Ada's sins. She asserts that she will be the "medicine of Christian influence," which suggests Christian faith can somehow provide a type of healing equivalent to medicine. It is possible that Lady Byron felt that religious conversion would, in fact, cure her daughter's cancer, but I would suggest that her intention was rather to give her daughter the sort of death that was considered necessary for entering into heaven. Her "medicine" is intended to "elevate and cheer," not necessarily heal. Lady Byron's goal is to "cheer" her daughter into the afterlife, which suggests making the death a joyful occasion. To "elevate" Ada, reiterates Lady Bryon's original mission of recouping a good death for her daughter. In other words, Lady Byron means to convert her daughter or instill in her some of her own personal Christian zeal in order to make up for her allegedly sinful life.

Annabella's approach to her daughter's death reveals how having proper ways to mourn and standards for a good death lead to expressions of grief that come across as

cruel, uncaring, and even counter-productive. Annabella experiences a kind of dissonance as she hyper focuses on religious conversion in Lovelace's last months. The dissonance occurs as her focus shifts from caring for her daughter on her deathbed and trying to ensure her well-being to securing a good death for Lovelace despite her own wishes. While her intention was to ensure that her daughter would enter heaven, Lady Byron's overbearing insistence on conversion actually created more misery for Lovelace. She usurped her daughter's deathbed and foisted her own internalized fears and ideals onto a woman who was weak and in pain. On November 27, the day Ada died, Annabella wrote in her journal:

For some hours the last agonies.... Faintings & fierce pains alternating—I think this may last all night but it *is* Death—like nothing that has come before... I am there constantly but only *physical* relief is sought.... Since I wrote this I went & told her the Truth—to believe & trust in God as her support & only hope or words of that kind... (qtd. in Stein 248)

Even when writing about her daughter's final hours, Lady Byron could not resist inserting herself and her goals into the description. She makes it clear that she performs her duty as a model mourner as she never leaves Ada's side, but she also highlights her dissatisfaction with Ada's inability to ask for anything but "physical relief," as opposed to the religious succor that Annabella wants to give her. She is unhappy that Lovelace only requests painkilling medication rather spiritual relief through prayer. In Annabella's fervent rush to find personal consolation in her daughter's salvation, she forgets the other important facets of a good death, which require reflection, patience, and compassion.

While Annabella's journals and letters touted (perhaps inaccurately) her success at converting Lovelace on her deathbed, Ada's husband, William King-Noel, Earl of Lovelace, also kept a journal chronicling his wife's final months. In it, he reproduces language and imagery often found in literary deathbed scenes, like that of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. For example, he emphasizes Lovelace's "calmness, fortitude, and resignation" when faced with her death (Jalland 63). This description in many ways obscures the reality of Ada's late-stage illness and censors her physical pain, which grew so severe that her doctors could not adequately manage it. As her illness progressed, even round the clock dosages of morphine and other opiates could not consistently blunt her suffering; it was reported that she would be fast asleep one moment and "absolutely torn awake by agony" the next (Jalland 89-90). Describing such agony as visions of calmness and resignation obscures Lovelace's actual emotional and physical suffering. In the context of Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop*, we can see how King-Noel's rendition seeks to reproduce literary depictions of death that occlude the real pain, suffering, and fear of death behind idealized scenes of religious forbearance.

By August 1852, Lovelace's disorientation and pain had worsened, and she ceased writing in her journal and sending letters. That same month, under the presumption that she was in her the final weeks of her illness, King-Noel once again wrote that "it was so angelic, the character of her beauty so pure, and disengaged from bodily elements that she was quite fit to pass away from among us into a high sphere" (qtd. in Jalland 63). King-Noel labels Lovelace's agony as "angelic" and "her beauty so pure," echoing similar terms found in deathbed scenes in popular fiction. With terms like "angelic" and "pure," King-Noel symbolically baptizes her and washes away her sins

with his narration. While his sanitizing of her death was undoubtedly well-intentioned, his likening of her pain to picturesque novelistic scenes has the effect of denying her authentic emotions and physical pain. When sentiments like these are parroted in this way, it reinforces this idealistic portrayal as the expected standard. Additionally, King-Noel comments on her ability to be “disengaged from bodily elements” while dying. This statement not only completely contradicts the abundant documentation of Ada’s physical pain, but it also favors a “mind-over-matter” mentality that, again, sweeps the physical experience—and perhaps the most gruesome part—of Lovelace’s illness out of sight. Writing about Lovelace’s experience in such a way suggests that King-Noel was experiencing dissonance as he faced his wife’s imminent death. He seeks to depict her as *he* wishes her to be.

King-Noel’s idealized version of Lovelace’s prolonged pain and agony abruptly ended before her death. There are a few possibilities for this cessation. Around the same time that King-Noel’s journal ends, Lovelace was suffering from “convulsions day and night, with little consciousness and the loss of her sight” (Jalland 63). She seemed poised on death’s doorstep, but, remarkably, she lived on for several more excruciating months. While it is impossible to say for certain, it hardly seems coincidental that King-Noel’s diary should end at this moment, when the reality of her agony could no longer be denied. It might have been difficult to continue writing positive renditions that emphasize beauty and peace when faced with watching a loved one deteriorate for months seemingly without end. Even though his account suggests a desire to view his wife in ideal and picturesque terms, there may have been a point where the reality of her death was simply too much to bear. Furthermore, at this point in her illness, Lovelace was rarely conscious

and no longer able to perform the role of an angelic dying woman, so certain elements of the good death were no longer within reach. The reality of her prolonged illness thwarts her husband's desire to project onto her placating, sentimental notions of death.

The other potential reason for the abrupt conclusion of King-Noel's journal involves Lovelace's admission of infidelity. By this time, Annabella had commandeered her daughter's deathbed by isolating Ada from close friends and other visitors, and she was forcing her version of religious redemption on a heavily medicated woman. Annabella promised absolution from the pain in the afterlife if Lovelace confessed her sins and repented, and Lovelace eventually confessed to having an affair with her friend and fellow scientist John Crosse (John was the son of Andrew Crosse, to whom Ada had explained her view of divinity in nature). Jalland suggests that this may explain why King-Noel stopped writing of his ailing wife (63). Even though he attempted to redeem Ada with a respectable death, he was disappointed nonetheless. For the second time—the first being her failing mental faculties and extreme pain—Ada fails to uphold the standards of a good death. Not only was she physically incapable of demonstrating the Christian forbearance expected of her, but she had also proven herself to be an unfaithful wife. Again, while we cannot divine the reasoning behind King-Noel's hiatus, this situation draws attention to the gulf between, on the one hand, lived experiences of illness and death, and, on the other hand, unrealistic mourning standards. Over and above the horrendous pain that made Lovelace's death unpalatable and therefore aesthetically bad, this confession further consigned her to a bad death because it lacked the redemptive closure expected of repentant sinners on their deathbeds. During moments of clarity, Lovelace was "haunted by fears of being buried alive, and by guilt of her adultery, which

her mother had so deliberately intensified” (Jalland 64). Ada’s confession did not reward her with repentance and peace but instead continued to terrorize her.

As previously mentioned, Lovelace eventually became too weak to continue her correspondence, and her journal tapers off several months prior to her death. In one of her last few notes, Lovelace expresses some religious faith, perhaps elicited by her mother’s influence, as she discerns a “faint gleam of hope” about the existence of an afterlife and an omnipotent God (qtd. in Jalland 62). Whether or not Lady Byron’s conversion efforts on her daughter’s deathbed resulted in a genuine change of heart, these belated alterations in Ada’s religious views reflect the dissonance involved with death in the Victorian period, suggesting that Ada’s final months were modified to suit interests that were not her own. Jalland argues that Lady Byron and King-Noel produce “versions of [Lady Lovelace’s] death prepared for their own particular purposes,” and that “these two accounts demonstrate the manufacture of self-interested literary representations of the deathbed, as well as the fear of both writers that Ada would not die a Christian death” (62).

Lovelace was a brilliant mathematician and scientist, and she held unconventional personal beliefs about the intricacies of nature and God. In her letters and journals, she acknowledged the trials of her prognosis and expressed valid fears of prolonged pain. But her frank approach to death was hijacked by her mother’s and husband’s conceptions of what her death should look like. Both Lady Byron and Lord Lovelace had their expectations of how a good death is achieved, and their continual insistence on a certain type of death encouraged Lovelace to alter her original views. Jalland uses their narratives to establish Ada as an example of a tumultuous bad death, but I would argue

that their narratives also highlight the conflict that individuals experience when confronted with the realities of death after being primed with idealized versions. Lovelace, her mother, and her husband all experience dissonance and suffering at the deathbed due to the unattainable nature of a prescribed good death. The varying views on death surrounding Lovelace's last months emphasize the gulf between social expectations surrounding death and its reality. By any standard, Lovelace's death was tragic—she endured months of constant, debilitating pain followed by more months of intermittent consciousness. But the insistence that there was a right way to die only inflamed the agony of her death. It was the notion of a good death that drove her mother to isolate her from her friends and proselytize her on her deathbed, and which inspired her husband to deny, even in his own journals, the authenticity of her suffering. Paradoxically, it seems, the ideals of the good death made it impossible for her to die well.

Expressions of Joy: Minnie Benson and Tess Durbeyfield

The contrast between Little Nell's cherubic passing and Ada Lovelace's tumultuous death bed experience shows the gulf between how death is represented in fiction versus in life writing. Little Nell's death falls in line with the edicts of a good death, and while Lovelace's family tries to assert the same for her, her death failed to measure up to those standards. These two cases represent extremes on the spectrum of good and bad deaths. In this section, I will look at two examples of death and mourning that fall somewhere in between those extremes. I will first discuss the real-life case of Minnie Benson and the death of her son, and then examine Tess, from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and compare the forms of joy these women experience following the deaths of their children. A comparison of two mothers whose children die

suddenly highlights the ways in which grief and mourning are resolved concisely and quietly in fiction, whereas those emotions are less contained in reality. In both cases, bereaved mothers experience a kind of cognitive dissonance following their children's deaths, their emotions heightened and complicated by religious and social ideals of the good death. In particular, both mothers seek meaning in their children's deaths. The difference between their experiences lies in the resolution of those emotions: in Minnie Benson's life writing, grief cannot be so easily confronted as it is in Hardy's novel.

Expressions of grief can take on many forms including expressions of joy that might seem out of place to an outside observer. We can find an example of this kind of mourning response in the case of Minnie Benson, whose reactions after the death of her eldest son perplexed her social circle. Benson was married to the Bishop Edward Benson, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1883. According to contemporary accounts and her children's writings, Benson was an intelligent woman and an excellent mother: many of her surviving children, including social reformer Mary Benson, Egyptologist Margaret Benson, and head of Magdalene College Arthur Benson, made significant contributions to British culture in the late nineteenth century (Chapman). Her family and friends were thus mystified when Benson proclaimed the death of her first child Martin a joyous occasion, an outlook she maintained until her dying days. In this section, I will examine under what circumstances this response can come to fruition and how Benson upholds the standards of Victorian mourning almost too perfectly, resulting in expressions of grief that others found absurd.

Martin Benson died while away at school on February 9, 1878, of what was likely meningitis. Martin was a promising eighteen-year-old who, like many of his siblings,

excelled in his studies; he was apparently devoted to his faith and described as personable, well-liked, and envied by his siblings (Goldhill 636). In “A Mother’s Joy at Her Child’s Death: Conversion, Cognitive Dissonance, and Grief,” Simon Goldhill interrogates the ways in which Benson expressed joy after the death of her son and explores the reasoning behind her literal adaptations of scripture. One example of her joy can be found in a letter transcribed by David Newsome in *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal* (1961). Within an hour of Martin’s untimely death, Benson wrote to his former nurse:

Dearest Friend and Mother Beth,

Be comforted for Martin. He is in perfect peace, in wonderful joy, far happier than we could have ever made him. And what did we desire in our hearts but to make him happy? And now he will help us out of his perfect happiness. He died without a struggle—his pure and gentle spirit passed straight to God his Father, and now he is ours and with us more than ever. Ours now, in a way that nothing can take away.

...One is so sure now, that sin is the only separation, and that sting is taken out of death by Jesus Christ.... We cannot grudge him his happiness. (188-189)

The first few lines of the missive are reminiscent of traditional sentiments that follow death wherein the deceased are proclaimed to be “in a better place,” free of ailments, aches and pains, or any of the emotional or economic turmoil that life can bring. This also echoes what I point out in Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in which Nell’s friends remark on the fortunate aspects of her death. Instead of feeling sad over Nell’s death, the

mourners rationalize that she is truly better off in heaven than on earth, where she experienced pain, poverty, and illness. This sentiment offers comfort to the mourner in the promise that the dead are “in perfect peace” in the afterlife, at one with a paternal, loving God. Martin, his mother insists, is far happier there than he ever could have been alive.

The next line— “and what did we desire in our hearts but to make him happy?”— functions as both a reminder and an inquiry. Benson uses this line to remind herself, as well as the nurse, that happiness can and will be found in the afterlife; however, the line still ends as a question. The inclusion of the question mark, though in part rhetorical, also indicates a faltering step, an uncertainty about her own desires concerning Martin’s fate. If they wanted Martin to be happy, and he is now happy in the afterlife, then they must have wanted his death, which gives Minnie permission to celebrate. At the same time that Minnie attempts to rationalize the reasons she and the nurse could be happy after Martin’s death, she also claims he is theirs in a way “that nothing can take away.” The addition of this line also suggests that she wants to keep him close. This conveys the complex and conflicting emotions she is experiencing: she wants to celebrate the fact that her son is reunited with God, but she also does not want to lose him. Instead, she focuses on the gift of his memory. They can hold on to their memories of his goodness in life and his forbearance in death, as well as the sure knowledge of his eternal happiness in heaven. Benson also claims that his example will “help” those left behind, which, again, reminds us of Little Nell’s exemplary death in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Nevertheless, Benson expresses lingering uncertainties about her attitude toward Martin’s death, almost as if she is trying to convince herself that she prefers things this way. Now that Martin is

dead, nothing can take the memory or spirit of her child from her, and he is allowed to live on forever as the perfect ideal.

In her letter, Benson also states that Martin died peacefully and without a struggle. This description awards him a good death as he easily passed over to the afterlife, but this statement—reminiscent of King-Noel’s journal records of his wife Ada Lovelace’s death—also glosses over some of the unromantic or unsentimental realities of Martin’s final moments. According to eyewitness accounts, Martin’s death was drawn out over a few weeks where he would feel well and then suddenly relapse into bouts of delirium. In his final relapse, which lasted for a few days, he was often delirious and his eyes remained unfocused; he also suffered from aphasia—the inability to speak—and could only grunt to express his desires (Newsome 186-187). These gestures and vocalizations were subject to the interpretation of those attending to him. Bishop Benson wrote that Martin seemed to sign the letter “B” into his mother’s hand, and she immediately assumed that he wanted the bread and blood of Christ (Newsome 187). Although Martin apparently did relax after she brought him bread and wine, he refused to consume it, so the Bensons left the wine glass on his bedside table and were satisfied that their son had still received the “Lord’s Blood with the happiest look” (Newsome 187). In Victorian deathbed scenes from novels such as *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the dying person remains in their right mind throughout their illness, so they can communicate with their loved ones; their final expressions of forgiveness and wisdom give their death meaning. Regardless of whether or not Martin wanted to take the sacrament, this incident shows the Bensons’ eagerness to assign meaning to their son’s incomprehensible gestures, in keeping with those ideals of the good death.

As his death neared, Martin's delirium worsened to where he was seeing figures around the room—the Bensons took these to be angels waiting to take their son to heaven—and his breathing became more belabored, until he eventually died (Newsome 188). None of these details are reflected in Benson's letter to Beth. Of course, this could be to spare the nurse the sorrow of having to envision her young former charge in his final moments, but this omission also solidifies Benson's narration of events as truth. According to Benson, Martin's death was peaceful and angelic; this is how she wants to remember her son in his final moments. Interpreting the mark her son may or may not have made in her hand and changing the narrative of his death in such a way benefits the living and allows her to invest a sense of meaning or purpose in a death that was, to all outward appearances, painful and senseless.

Religious ideals surrounding the good death further complicated Benson's grieving process, as the fervor of her faith resulted in a form of performed mourning that was abnormal to those around her. Even Benson's husband Edward, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, could not find the same comfort in religion that Benson did. In fact, Edward Benson's faith was shaken by the death of his son. His personal diaries are filled with questions about the reasons for his son's untimely death. The following passage elucidates how profoundly Martin's death changed Edward's views of divine Providence:

It has come as such an interruption not to ambitions, not to pride, I trust, not to hopes of comfort only—But his path seemed ever to run on so completely in God's own way: we thought all *God's* plan for him was running on so sweetly towards some noble God's work.

It has changed all my views of God's work as it is to be done both in this world and the next, to be compelled to believe that God's plan for him really *has* run on sweetly, and rightly for him and for all—and yet—he is dead. 'One's views of life change very quickly,' he said to me the last hour in which he spoke to me. My sweet boy thou hast changed mine. (qtd. In Newsome 192)

It is revealing that a man who would become the Archbishop of Canterbury would find his faith so severely shaken on the death of his son. The Bishop, unable to fathom what kind of God would consign the promising Martin to an early death, is forced to “change all [his] views of God's work.”

Bishop Benson's outlook following Martin's death vividly contrasts with that of Minnie Benson. Both react in polar opposite ways: while Bishop Benson begins to question his faith (albeit only privately, in his journals), Minnie clings to religion and asserts that her child is safer and happier in the afterlife. As we can see in her letter to Martin's old nurse, she conveyed this to others by insisting on her own joy at Martin's death. Goldhill acknowledges how reading Benson's letter from a modern psychological lens might suggest this missive as a coping method, since it might seem absurd for a mother to actually express joy when mourning her son. But Benson never deviated from her elation, and “to everyone, including herself in both retrospect and in the moment, Benson sincerely rejoiced in the death of her son” (Goldhill 637). Goldhill attributes Benson's reaction to her Evangelicalism, which she had acquired in part from her intense friendship with one of her mentors, a woman named Mrs. Mylne. In the course of what Goldhill describes as Benson's “conversion,” Mrs. Mylne asserted that Benson's misery was directly caused by her own sinfulness (645). As part of her conversion, she was

required to keep personal diaries in which she listed her own shortcomings and sins. Those entries were often used as sermons on personal morality and points of criticism. Under Mrs. Mylne's tutelage, Benson began to understand "her poor housekeeping, her erotic feelings for other women, and her harsh and ambivalent feelings for her husband as interlinked vectors of the same moral and spiritual failing" (Goldhill 645).

As Goldhill further explains, we can better understand Benson's motivations through the framework of Biblical literalism. Biblical literalism was a central conflict within Evangelical Christianity: in Goldhill's words, "a performed contest over how the Bible is to be read, comprehended, and made the basis of a lived ethical existence" (641). In brief, literalism takes the language of the Bible as literal truth, not subject to allegorical or metaphorical interpretation. In this tradition, scriptures that command believers to rejoice—"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4) and "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (James 1:2-3)—are to be taken literally. The former verse requires disciples to default to joy, and it emphasizes this with the repetition in the second verse. The latter espouses a similar message, that trials that test one's faith in God, like the death of a child, should be counted as joyful experiences. Goldhill points out that Benson herself ascribed to Biblical literalism, believing in the self-sufficiency of scripture as it is written without necessarily needing further interpretation or situational application. As a devout Evangelical, she took the word of God in regards to mourning and grief literally. For example, a verse that states "Blessed *are* the dead who die in the Lord from now on" (Revelation 14:13) would suggest that the dead are literally better off than the living. It is no surprise that she internalized these verses so fervently since her

conversion to Evangelical Christianity often used verse for shame and punishment. Benson's reactions to her son's death, however unorthodox in practice, are correct according to her understanding of scriptural instructions.

Goldhill describes this conflict as a disturbance, because Benson's reactions highlight the awfulness of not being able "to recognize the negotiated social tropes by which we live...Benson vividly reveals the tensions of Christian mourning at the normative center of social form" (652). Benson actively rejoicing in the death of her first-born son highlights the disunion between Evangelical notions of death derived from the Bible and social standards for the "proper" way to mourn. She glosses over her son's pain and disorientation on his deathbed in order to establish his good death, and then embodies the joyfulness under trial that is expected of the good Christian. But while those in mourning might expect fluctuations between grief, hope, and despair, Benson's mourning registers as an outlier because she does not waver from joy. The dissonance between Biblical injunctions to rejoice in the face of setbacks and her real grief over her son's death manifests itself in a form of mourning that bystanders noted as idiosyncratic. In his memoir *Our Family Affairs* (1920), E.F. Benson, the Bensons' other son, noted the great difference between his mother and father's respective reactions following Martin's death. According to the memoir, Minnie claimed that Martin's death had awarded her "a couple of hours of the most wonderful happiness she had ever experienced," and that when her surviving son saw her again "there was no shadow on her" (Benson 75). By contrast, even so many years later, E.F. Benson remembers his father's face as "the face of a most loving man stricken with the death of the boy he loved best, who had been nearest his heart, and was knit into his very soul" (Benson 75). By drawing attention to these two

contrasting descriptions, I do not mean to suggest that Minnie loved her son less than her husband did. Rather, I want to highlight the divergence in their mourning styles. Bishop Benson, who would go on to write poetry about his son, followed what we might consider a more conventional emotional trajectory from grief to resignation, while Minnie never wavered in her joy. This joy, which struck others as odd, speaks to a deep conflict between religious strictures, social norms surrounding the good death, and the emotional strain of grief.

To offer another view of a mother in mourning after experiencing the death of her child, I turn to Thomas Hardy's 1891 novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which features a young mother who experiences a similar sense of maternal dissonance after the death of her child. In the first half of the novel, Tess is sexually assaulted by her cousin Alec and later becomes pregnant. She is unwed and has little monetary means and no social support network to aid her in raising the baby. Under these circumstances, one might assume that the death of her child would be some sort of relief, since Tess would then be free of her burden. But she does gradually learn to love the baby, albeit in a complicated way. Her internal contradiction is clear from her first interactions with the child. At first mention, Tess is caring for her infant "with a gloomy indifference that was almost dislike; then all of a sudden she fell to violently kissing it some dozens of times, as if she could never leave off, the child crying at the vehemence of an onset which strangely combined passionateness with contempt" (Hardy 70). Given the circumstances of his conception, her child is an emotional, financial, and social burden, but Tess's maternal side compensates for the brief lapse as she showers the baby with kisses. Even though she resents her child to a degree, she cannot help but love it.

As time passes, Tess overcomes the social expectation to be ashamed over the birth of her infant. Eventually, what Hardy describes as “common-sense” illuminates her and she shirks the feelings of shame and indignity as an unwed mother and accepts her role as parent (71). As she shakes off the stigma of these sexual mores, Tess begins to “dress herself up neatly as she had formerly done.... [bear] herself with dignity, and [look] people calmly in the face at times, even when holding the baby in her arms”; the narrator notes that it becomes her “soul’s desire” to raise and provide for her infant (Hardy 71-72, 72). Tess initially views her baby with an ambivalent mixture of indifference, contempt, and instinctual affection, until she regains a sense of dignity and self-worth. Only then does she devote herself wholeheartedly to raising her child.

But just as Tess comes into her own as a mother, her baby becomes ill and dies. When Tess knows that her child’s death is imminent, she begins to panic as any mother would: Hardy describes Tess’s frantic behavior as she rushes around her home in terror and rocks herself back in forth on her bed in distress, her heart pounding more intensely as her infant’s heartbeat grows softer (73). Much of her distress is brought on by religious tension, as she is worried about the state of her infant’s soul since he has not been properly christened. In other words, Tess is tormented by the idea that her son will not have a good death. After her father refuses to allow a parson to come and baptize the child, she decides to hastily christen the baby herself. As she gathers the necessary materials—a candle, water, and her siblings as witnesses—her face shines so brightly that it “might have shone in the gloom surrounding her” (Hardy 73). Tess, when given the opportunity to secure her child with a good death, radiates joy in a way that reminds us of

Little Nell's deathbed transformation into an angel. Tess becomes sublimely beautiful as she stands before her siblings, holding her dying infant:

Her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white night-gown... The kindly dimness of the weak candle abstracted from her form and features the little blemishes which sunlight might have revealed—the stubble-scratches upon her wrists, and the weariness of her eye—her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with a touch of dignity which was almost regal. (Hardy 74)

She is described as angelic in her billowing white nightgown, and her skin is perfected in the soft candlelight. Readers are reminded of her beauty, which reaches its pinnacle during her attempt to secure a good death for her infant. Interestingly, the dying infant is a secondary character here; the baby is not given any descriptive characteristics. The language used to describe Nell's transcendent death is similar to that used to describe Tess, not the ailing baby. It is Tess who is symbolically baptized and spiritually elevated through the death of her child.

Surrounded by her siblings in the dark shanty, Tess christens her child on her own and dubs the infant Sorrow. The narrator does not repeat the words she uses, but describes them as a fervent outpouring of sublime religious feeling. She “poured from the bottom of her heart” a prayer that is so profound that “the ecstasy of faith almost apotheosized her.” Her apotheosis is reflected in her physical beauty, including her glowing, rosy cheeks and her pupils that “shone like a diamond” (Hardy 74-75). The description suggests she has gone through an ecstatic religious vision, and God has

spoken through her. But the vehemence and passion with which she speaks is also disturbing for her siblings, who are particularly struck with the change in Tess's appearance. She is so different that "she did not look like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering and awful, a divine personage with whom they had nothing in common" (Hardy 75). Tess's appearance shifts from beautiful to awesome. As she performs the christening, she takes on a knowledge that seems beyond her capabilities and power; this is especially marked because, as a woman, she is not allowed to conduct sacraments according to church doctrine. Tess's sudden religious ardor and control unsettle her younger siblings. Like Minnie Benson, Tess's response to her child dying is unexpected. While those around Benson acknowledge that her joy was unorthodox, Tess's siblings are fearful of the intensity of her emotion.

After the makeshift christening, Tess is filled with feelings of serenity. The act of christening her baby brings her comfort and peace. While she questions whether or not her unqualified baptism was truly effective, she does not continue to dwell on her infant's death; the narrator notes that the "calmness which had possessed Tess since the christening remained with her in the infant's loss," and "she had no uneasiness now" (Hardy 75). Both Tess and Minnie find solace in the fact that they believe their children secured a good death. Benson experiences exuberant outright joy at the thought of her son being with God, while Tess finds peace in the knowledge that her child's soul is safe in the afterlife.

As I have already hinted, one uniting factor between these two instances of grief hinges on the way the two mothers—one real, one fictional—do not follow the expected behaviors of mourning. In a culture that expects women to walk a fine line between

expressing grief outwardly and keeping those emotions within the bounds of propriety, Benson and Tess subvert these expectations in different ways. In some ways, Benson is an ideal mourner: she finds comfort in Christianity and attempts to give her son a good death, at least in her recollections. At the same time, Benson's outright joy set her apart from mainstream expectations of mourning and became a source of tension between herself and her husband. Goldhill explains that Benson experiences

a joy that is recognized as impossible by her husband, by the normative discourse of the day, and by the experience of other mothers from the same religious milieu who experience overwhelming loss. All could agree on the eternal happiness of heaven—but only to Minnie, the convert, did such a promise efface in joy the despair and grief at loss. (651)

Tess, as I've argued, also highlights the fault lines between lived experiences of grief and socially acceptable ways to mourn, but these fault lines are more quickly resolved.

Although Tess's siblings briefly express their discomfort after her outburst of grief and emotion during the christening of her baby, that moment is sequestered away in the dark and dusty corner of her home rather than performed in public. She also finds peace and contentment after the death of her child, but she does so in a much more palatable way. Her grief after Sorrow's death is quiet and resigned; her only other outburst of emotion occurs when she is unsure if the local vicar will give her infant a proper burial in the churchyard: Tess "seize[s] his hand" and speaks with strong emotion when making her case as to why her infant deserves the right to a burial (Hardy 76). Besides this one instance, Tess mourns inwardly. She takes note of the child's birthday, and otherwise holds "so aloof of late that her trouble, never generally known, was nearly forgotten in

Marlott,” save for the moments where reflection and tragedy briefly passed across her eyes and face (Hardy 77). As a fictional character, Tess is saved from the emotional anguish that a mother may experience at the death of her child. Her infant’s death and her subsequent expressions of grief, like the death and mourning of Dickens’s Little Nell, serves a purpose for the plot of the story: these experiences contribute to Tess’s growth as a character, and the sexual assault later creates a rift between her and her husband Angel. But Sorrow himself, and Tess’s feelings of sorrow over his death, make up a relatively short portion of her arc. Once Sorrow has played his role in the drama of the novel, he effectively disappears. By contrast, Minnie Benson’s grief, however joyous, followed her for the remainder of her life.

Conclusions

These representations of death and mourning, both in fiction and in life writing, reveal a sense of dissonance created by the conflicting social and religious expectations surrounding the good death. The rigid protocols for mourning in this period, which fell most heavily on women, often made it difficult for Victorian mourners to express grief in intuitive and authentic ways. These protocols, along with the ideal of the good death, imposed often unattainable expectations on those who were dying as well as their loved ones. This is evident in the examples of Ada Lovelace and Minnie Benson. In fiction, however, it is much easier to be a perfect mourner and achieve a perfect death. Even in novels that do acknowledge the dissonances of mourning, such as Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, these discrepancies are resolved in a way that real life cannot reproduce.

In pursuing this project, I have attempted to fill a gap in Victorian literary scholarship. While there are many valuable historical studies of Victorian mourning rituals, and also many literary studies of death in Victorian fiction, there is little work that directly compares deathbed scenes in life-writing and fiction. My research also points to additional areas of inquiry. One particular limitation of this initial study is the consideration of genre. Writers who usually fall into an unsentimental category, like Elizabeth Gaskell or George Eliot, still had to confront the deathbed in their fiction. Closer analysis of the language and relationship with religion in those deathbed scenes could yield very different conclusions from what I have established. I have also not engaged with shifting cultural attitudes toward religion. Evangelical Christianity, as I have discussed, played an important role in Victorian standards for dying, grief, and mourning, but there was a notable decline in religious fervor in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Jalland 339). It stands to reason that expectations for mourning would have also changed. Since the majority of the text discussed in this thesis—excluding *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—were written in the mid-nineteenth century, a closer study of similar but later texts would make for an intriguing comparison. Such a study might produce a divergent perspective on death and mourning.

For now, however, I would return to where I started—with Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop*. In the epilogue to that novel, after Little Nell and her grandfather have died, the narrator describes how details of Nell's life have faded out of the memories of those she knew. The novel's final line offers an eloquent depiction of the brevity of a literary death, and it can be used to illustrate the issues literary depictions of death pose for real-life understandings of grief and mourning. Dickens concludes: "Such are the

changes which a few years bring about, and so do things pass away, like a tale that is told!” (438). For me, this line illustrates the difference between fiction and life-writing. It compares death and its aftereffects to a story that has a clear ending. Based on the examples of Minnie Benson and Ada Lovelace, we know that death and grief are not so easily and neatly resolved. Fiction upholds standardized notions of how to properly grieve and mourn all within a finite space, while non-fiction and life-writing reveal the gulf between what is expected and what is done, and in doing so unveil how unwieldy grief really is.

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