

Death and Mourning in Victorian Literature and Culture

4 credits course

Queen Victoria's long reign was steeped in mourning for Prince Albert, setting the tone for a century that seemed obsessed with death and dying. From melodramatic death scenes in novels, sensational accounts of murder and suicide in the newspapers, to the trend of "spirit photographs" that purportedly captured ghosts on camera. In this course, we will read poetry, novels, and prose that deal with mortality, mourning, and thoughts of inevitable doom. How did Victorians imagine life after death, and was death a necessary part of life? Why was death so often imagined in connection with young women? How did male and female voices imagine death and mourning? At what point, if ever, did mourning cross from customary to excessive and dangerous? Topics we will touch on include the material culture of mourning, spiritualism, the intersections of sex and death, social anxieties about murder and suicide, and the relationship between death and plot. Our primary readings will include poetry from the period, as well as Tennyson's long elegy, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Brontë's *Villette*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Goals:

1. Close read a wide range of Victorian texts (poetry, fiction, journalism)
2. Practice applications of narrative and psychoanalytic theory
3. Trace the theme of death and mourning as it intersects with questions of genre and gender

Course requirements and grades:

Attendance (mandatory)

Active participation in class discussions and timely submission of short exercises (15%)

A midterm in-class exam (25%)

A final paper (7-10 pages) (60%)

Required reading: *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, *Villette*, *Great Expectations*, *Carmilla*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Poetry and prose excerpts will be distributed in class or by email.

Secondary readings:

Backgrounds: *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, *Death in the Victorian Family*, *Victorian Suicide*, *Elegy for an Age*

Psychoanalysis: Freud, *Mourning and Melancholy*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

Narrative theory: Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*.

Unit 1: Romantics: desire and death

Wordsworth, Lucy poems ("Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known," "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower," "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"), "Ode: Intimations

of Immortality”

Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode to Melancholy,” “When I have Fears,”
“Bright Star”

Unit 2: Tennyson, “the saddest of all English poets”

Backgrounds: An elegiac age

Tennyson “Break, Break, Break,” “Mariana,” “Ulysses,” “Tithonius,” “The Lotos-Eaters,” *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, “Crossing the Bar”

Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*

Unit 3: The death of a beautiful woman

Backgrounds: Coventry Patmore, “The Angel in the House”; the separate spheres; fallen women

Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott,”

Browning, “My Last Duchess,” “Porphyria’s Lover,” “Andrea del Sarto”

Poe, “Ulalume,” “The Raven,” “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Philosophy of Composition”

Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

Unit 4: The Rossettis: The mourner and the mourned

Dante Gabriel Rossetti “The Blessed Damozel” (poem and painting), “Beatrice,” “Jenny,” “Sudden Light”

Christina Rossetti: “In the Artist’s Studio,” “When I am dead, my dearest,” “Echoes,” “Birthday,” “Goblin Market” with DGR’s illustrations

Unit 5: The mourning woman

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Mother and Poet,” “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”

Charlotte Bronte, *Villette*

Unit 6: Death imagined

Emily Dickinson, “I felt a funeral in my brain,” “I heard a fly buzz when I died,” “Because I could not stop for death,” “I died for beauty,” “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” “There’s been a death in the opposite house,” “It was not death, for I stood up”

Unit 7: Communities of death

Carlyle, “Signs of the Times”

Friedrich Engels, *Conditions of the Working Class in England*

Elizabeth Gaskell, excerpt from *Mary Barton* (first chapter)

Charles Dickens, excerpt from *Bleak House* (Jo’s death)

Unit 8: Excessive mourning

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

Photography, spirit photographs and other relics

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*

Unit 9: The Beauty of decay

Swinburne, "The Garden of Proserpine," "The Leper," "The Triumph of Time"

Hopkins, "Binsey Poplars," "Spring and Fall," "Carrion Comfort"

Wilde, "The Harlot's House"

Unit 10: The undead

Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, "Green Tea"

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Vernon Lee, "A Wicked Voice"

Pater, "The Mona Lisa"

Barbara Gates, *Victorian Suicides*

Schedule is subject to change.