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EXPLORING THE MOTIVES BEHIND OBSESSION WITH DEATH IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Death is an inescapable reality of life and we all have to confront it in one time or another. A realization of the fact that death is approaching towards us often presents before us a rare and wonderful opportunity to reflect on our past and fills our minds with speculations about how we might or should have led it. It is impossible to or record or retrieve first-hand experiences of death but through art which hold several important aspects of life in concentrated manner keeping its essence intact we can imagine and recreate a world much like ours and derive experiences from the imaginary actions of the characters involved in there. So Victorian age presents us with such a promising opportunity to delve deep into the existence of that time to find how death formed a vital apart of literature of that age. The theme of death appears from time to theme in the works of many great writers from different countries across the globe. The thought of continuity of our existence even beyond the cessation of biological processes in our earthly bodies also form one of the most fascinating themes which has been explored in a variety of ways by various authors belonging to different ages and most of these works tell some stories which are peculiar in their own ways but nevertheless important to know more about the cultural, social, and psychological realities of their time. Our work will deal with Victorian literature to see how far this fascination and all-consuming obsession for death have penetrated deep into the fabric of the culture and influenced its development.

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INTRODUCTION

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, So do our minutes hasten to their end; Each changing place with that which goes before, In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 60)

Death is perhaps the most pure experience that one living being is capable of feeling because in those

few precious moments that lead up to the actual climactic departure from our mortal remnants, one feels the rare complex emotion of both joy and sadness balanced in a perfect harmonious equilibrium which can never again be recollected or retrieved once the actual moment has passed. Whether there is any joy or only sadness or vice-versa is a matter of great debate and various conflicting viewpoints have formed the basis of

actions in many great works of art. Some saw death as a golden gate leading to a newer and fuller life: while some envisaged death as the great exterminator of our beautiful worldly existence after which there is only an eternal sleep. In one place Shakespeare has said about death that "'tis common; all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity". (Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, scene 2, line 72) and in 'Julius Caesar' "That we shall die we know" (Act III, scene 1, line 99) but again in Hamlet in Act III later he writes:

"To die:—to sleep:

No more; and, by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wished." (Act III, scene 1, line 60)

Thus attitudes towards death can vacillate in various ways and in Victorian age this vacillation was present in its most extreme form. Victorian age was obsessed with death. This obsession often veered on the verge of morbidity, gloom and obscenity. This obsession with death was reflected in various forms of literature at that time which included but not restricted to theology, philosophy, fictional works and poetry. Extravagant and lengthy death bed scenes, various forms of long elegies, elaborate mourning rituals – all these served to strengthen that culture of obsessive glorification of death in various forms. S Michael Wheeler observed that a remarkable high proportion of the lyric poetry of the period, particularly by women writers, addressed the themes of death and dying, bereavement and mourning. Death is undoubtedly one of the most elemental aspects of life and many forms of art as well as literature deals with this theme of death in various ways but Victorian culture was particularly obsessed with death and in various types of works that were produced during this period had scenes of death present in them in different episodes. The long, elaborate and costly funeral processions, specific sets of mourning dresses and jewelry which were to be worn only in time of mourning and the existence of a set of strict social, cultural codes for expressing sorrows - all these point toward a culture which was obsessed with death and morbidity and even used the occasion to mark their social status out. The mourning of Queen Victoria over her loss of

Price Albert was another such example which seemed to have been admired and adopted by the common folks at that time and she was the model, 'the exemplar of chronic grief'. The high rates of mortality during that period was mostly because of lack of cure for some mortal diseases, hazardous working environment, accidents and the ascendance of industrial and material culture. This obsession with death also symbolizes the rising tides of insecurity when the apparently complacent culture of Victorian age was forced to face the unsettling power of modernity. The cultural and religious certainties which previously used to provide them with roots to cling to have begun to appear too weak to sustain or support them any longer. Science on the other hand, which often accompany modernity came to the forefront and attempted to strip death of its glory and with processes like naturalization, rationalization, and medicalization started to look deep into the causes and cures for death and disease and this naturally raised concerns for violating the integrity of corpse by their scientific interventions. This culture can thus be termed as a necroculture. The need for a respectable funeral, following appropriate and morally righteous codes of conduct in observing funeral and mourning ceremonies, and thus trying to make death look beautiful or memorable point toward their attempt to fuse the two contradictory forces of mortality and morality forcedly. Thus analyzing representations of death and bereavement in some major works during Victorian period will help us to uncover various facets of society's belief and attitude towards life as a whole. Unlike many critics like Hotz who have focused mainly on corpse and its role in Victorian society or have worked on actual examples of death in Victorian age our aim here would be to focus on death and its representation in literature of that age. We shall start by analyzing various aspects of death with which the Graveyard poets, the Romantic poets and the Gothic writers during 17th and 18th century have dealt with and then move towards analysis of grand narratives and masterly works of various Victorian masters to see how they have dealt with the sensitive issues of death and mourning in their works.

Death in Graveyard Poetry, Gothic Fiction and Romantic Woks:

William Lyon Phelps has said about the works of Graveyard poets that their poetry dealt with "the joy of gloom, the fondness for bathing one's temples in the dank night air and the musical delight of the screech owl's shriek." But the works of Graveyard Poets were created as a reaction against some predominant emotion which was prevalent during 17th century which was that of melancholy. The themes of darkness, tombs, sight, smell, sound of death, deathly images, spirits and ghosts all these formed themes of those poets. Melancholy arose in 17th century out of constant contemplation about next life, glorification of death and portrayal of it as a doorway to a more everlasting form of second life, detachment from this world and preoccupation with death. But Graveyard poets then almost aestheticized our emotional response towards death and various other forms of finer emotions associated with death like tenderness, tearfulness, solitude and contemplation and even adopted an optimistic view to life. Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1743) along with Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1745), Thomas Gray's "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*" (1751) are some finest specimens of graveyard poetry. Gothic fiction on the other hand did not deal with death and after life as some all-consuming, all-controlling and predominant themes rather their love for supernatural, portrayal of dark and gloomy setting like castles with secret corridors or underground passages, haunted houses, ancient buildings with intricate architecture etc, intense emotional experiences, tales related to damsels in distress and heroes etc form their major themes. During Romantic Period many writers have looked upon death as a regenerative process through which our soul gets transformed into a new life after death. But some like Keats were opposed to this view and often expressed their apprehension about death as the exterminator of all that is associated with life, nature or dynamicity. Keats in "Ode to a Nightingale" has risen from concerns about the destructive effects of old age and death towards that of acceptance of death as part of a grander natural process. He says that "for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death / Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme". William

Blake in "The Sick Rose" offered a lamentation about death where the sick rose symbolically represents a sick man. Blake imagines how both the rose and the human being will succumb to the worms in the end. Romanticists viewed nature as an ultimate and perfect expression of man's emotion and life. Death, though is an inevitable part in the entire natural process of creation and destruction is often portrayed by many writers as the harbinger of a bitter end to man's life, his aims, ambitions while many view it as a process which brings man to a more complete and perfect form of existence in life after death. In 'Grecian Urn' Keats imagines how the Urn perfectly captures the whole beauty and never-fading grandeur of some perfect moments of unsatiated ecstasy but comments that it is still is "a cold pastoral" which can hardly grasp the intense, elusive moments of trembling passionate ecstasies. Keats thus viewed death as a way to achieve immortality or eternal existence by escaping from the shackles of destructive mortality. Wordsworth in his 'Intimations of Immortality' visualizes death as a return to a form of life which is more meaningful, more real and more satisfactory than the one associated with our mundane fleeting materialistic fleshly life. Death, according to Wordsworth is a form of perfection, a process by which one can submerge himself in the eternal truths of nature and the universe beyond. Blake in 'The Lamb' used the animal imagery to symbolize the promise for an eternal life which is God's promise to mankind. These all viewpoints toward death helped to form the bedrock on which the Victorian outlook and philosophy towards death and destruction was erected.

Death in Victorian Writings: According to Herbert F. Tucker and Gerard Joseph, Victorians were obsessed with death because "they couldn't help it. They didn't know any better" (110). They viewed death as an art, an art of dying to them was representative of some concentrated essence of life itself and it also held a promise to arrive at a more illuminated form of life after the end of the present form. Eva, St. Clare and Marie's angelic daughter and also referred to as Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's immortal work 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is presented as an absolutely perfect child, a symbol of innocence and

strong morality and a pure Christian. During her death she is surrounded by her near and dear ones and sees no sadness, feels no pain and fixes her gaze upwards: "a glorious smile passed over her face, and she said, brokenly, — 'O! Love, — joy, — peace!' gave on sigh, and passed from death unto life!" (Beecher Stowe, 113). Such scenes smack of strong sentimental elements and in the novels of Dickens we too can come across such numerous incidents of sentimental representation of death. Jenny's little son in 'Bleak House', Paul Dombey in 'Dombey and Son' and Nell Trent in 'The Old Curiosity Shop' are all Dickensian children characters who share one thing in common- they all die as a result of illness. Jenny's baby boy is forced to face the sorrows through the departure of his mother while Paul Dombey and Little Nell all face the challenges of life with maturity beyond their age. But death is not always presented in a glorified and sentimentally refined form, there were many exceptions like for example the Alfred Tennyson's 'Maud' and Charlotte Brontë's 'Villette' were accused of being excessively morbid and thus unpalatable to the taste of general audience of that time. Morbidity with the publication of these works emerged as a thematic and formal element in the literary exercise of the period. Brontë's 'Villette' deals with the struggles of a poor and plain lady Lucy Snow who struggle to earn some livelihood and to find some love in her life. The novel 'Villette' is different from other works in many ways as in the fictional narrator Lucy's insistence in withholding several pieces of information from her readers and her appearing hostile to the audience and her resistance to a traditional closure. She decides to leave the readers in darkness as to her actual end and never tells whether her story ends with a perfect marriage or she continues to live as a desolate spinster or in a much more unsettling manner whether she decides to live happily ever after as a spinster. The death of Jenny's baby boy in Dickens' 'Bleak House' surrounds the readers with a palpable feeling of hopelessness, dejection, sadness and vulnerability. Ada, when she discovers that the child of Jenny has died suddenly feels a shock running through her veins and we, the readers also feel that sensation and we can almost feel the sudden arousal of maternal instincts and extreme

levels of grief in a mother when she sees the death of the child of another mother. This scene is heart-breaking in its very essence. "Ada, whose gentle heart was moved by its appearance, bent down to touch its little face. As she did so, I saw what happened and drew her back. The child died" (Bleak House, 123). Ada exclaims in utter grief how her heart is breaking into thousand infinitesimal pieces: "The suffering, quiet, pretty little thing! I am so sorry for it. I am so sorry for the mother. I never saw a sight so pitiful as this before! O baby, baby!" (Bleak House, 123). Lord Tennyson in 'Crossing The Bar' emphasizes on the need of accepting and embracing death rather than treating death as a fearful act which alienate us from the world of living. The sandbar symbolically represents the boundary between life and death. The sea represents death itself and the journey represents the long. Slow voyage from life to death. The safe, secure harbor from where the poet sets out for a journey stands for life. The images of flood, sea, God as the "Pilot" all point towards the need for accepting death as a blissful and desired end to this mortal, unreal existence:

For tho' from out our bourne of time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar. (Crossing The Bar)

Tennyson differs from others in his treatment of death in that he looks upon death as part of a divinely ordained natural process and he deals with it in a deeply personal way. 'Ulysses' is about a great hero of ancient times who is determined to drink life to its lees despite the coming of old age and beckoning of death and 'Tithonus' is concerned with the weariness of leading a tired and exhausted existence on earth when all that he wants to do is to stop linger and languish and leave the world silently by riding the chariot of death. 'The Two Voices' deals with the dilemma which one is forced to confront when one attempts to commit the act of suicide. The untimely death of his friend Arthur Hallam at age twenty-two prompted Tennyson to write 'In Memoriam'. The consistent application of a quatrain that uses iambic tetrameter with an 'abba' rhyme scheme expresses the constancy of Tennyson's grief and links the

stanzas together to form a unifying, elegiac whole. He here meditates profoundly on grief which results from death of his friend and muses whether he too should die to join his dear friend in the realm after death. However the poem proceeds with Tennyson gradually getting ready to accept the harsh reality of death which forms part of natural cycle of life. He consoles himself by saying that he still can find certain sense of satisfaction and pleasures in the sensory experiences of this living, breathing world. In 'In Memoriam' Tennyson ends with the possibility of achieving a reunion with his friend after his death and he even thinks that the death of his friend has taken place to help him transcend above the mundane plains of grief and sorrows. The speaker-poet in "Break, Break, Break" (1834) envisages death even in sunsets while in "Mariana" (1830) the woman longs for death because her love has abandoned her. The lady in "The Lady of Shalott" courts her own tragic death when she goes about in Autumnal winter in a thin, white dress. In a similar vein the charge men 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' accepts their death gloriously and gleefully by charging headlong towards the Russian cannons. Robert Browning's poems contemplate on death an influence which not just puts an end to our regular day-to-day life, rather it assumes a deciding role in determining various choices that individuals make before their death. Poems like 'Love Among the Ruins' and 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' treat the melancholic aspect of death which the poet feels is necessary to establish some kind of equilibrium between the joys of death and the melancholic part. On the other hand, poems like 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', 'Prospice' and 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' teach us to find strength in acceptance of death. Again there are other type of poems like 'Porphyra's Lover', 'My Last Duchess', 'Caliban Upon Setebos' and 'The Laboratory' which consider death as an unavoidable and omnipresent punishment. The poem 'Porphyra's Lover' begins when the beloved Porphyra is already dead. The speaker wants to stop the passage of time by killing her and also to capture the one blissful but fleeting moment for eternity. The images of rural simplicity and modern way of life are placed side by side to produce an unparallel impression. The arrival of a rosy-cheeked girl, the

burning fire, a cottage by the riverside are all images taken from rural simple ways of life where Porphyra intrudes with her defiant passionate nature when she starts taking off her wet clothes and begins to cress her lover passionately. In 'My Last Duchess' it is only death that allows the Duke to assume an absolute and complete control over her vivacious and indecorous wife. In Thomas Hardy's "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave" the speaker wonders who is digging the earth above him.

The Good, Bad and Not-so-Good Deaths:

There were various modes and ways to die in Victorian Age based on which it was decided whether it was a good or bad death. Good death was one where a person used to die a slow, natural death and where he could have enough time to establish contact with God and could be guided by the emotions of obedience and remorse. Pain and suffering had to be endured with grace, patience and solemnity because that was how God intended her life to come to close. Death-bed scenes naturally used to represent more of Christian ideals than historical reality. In the portrayal of Little Nell's death by Dickens, in the descriptions of death from diseases by the Bronte sisters in their novels we get a glimpse into the prevalent Victorian attitude towards death which was romanticized and idealistic and where sufferings before death were thought of as instruments of purification which one's soul had to go through to achieve that final bliss during salvation. Bad deaths were sudden, accidental deaths which left the victim with little or no time to prepare for the ultimate spiritual salvation. The medieval 'Ars Moriendi' texts started gaining huge popularity during this age because they contained useful information regarding how to die properly and these texts showed almost always an idealization of deathbed and never presented any historical records about the ways the real people actually died. Those who had committed suicide were denied an appropriate Christian burial. This is what is mentioned in 'Wuthering Heights' when Heathcliff says: "[Hindley's] body should be buried at the cross-roads, without ceremony of any kind" (163). An idealized version of pure Christian death on the other and can be seen in the description of Eva's deathbed scene in Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's

Cabin': She did not hear. "O, Eva, tell us what you see! What is it?" said her father. A bright, a glorious smile passed over her face, and she said, brokenly, —"O! Love, — joy, — peace!" gave one sigh and passed from death unto life! "Farewell, beloved child! The bright, eternal doors have closed after thee; we shall see thy sweet face no more. O, woe for them who watched thy entrance into heaven, when they shall wake and find only the cold grey sky of daily life and thou gone forever." (Beecher Stowe 113)

Victorians considered their earthly realities and the pains and sufferings that they had to endure during their period on earth as probation for eternity and were always inclined to idealize, glorify and reaffirm the redemptive effects that such sufferings have on their life after death in their works. The deathbed scene of Little Nell from Dickens' 'The Old Curiosity Shop' appeared as one of the most intensely tragic scenes to the audience at that time. 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 529)

The description of Little Nell's death was unique in that Nell died a calm, serene and collected death with her deathbed well prepared to help him journey smoothly from this world to the next and no other character other than Nell perhaps deserved this type of beautiful, grand and peaceful death. Death opened to him new vistas of unforeseen and unearthly splendors. The mourners through their silent, sympathetic suffering grief achieved transformation like Nell. Little Nell was "pretty little girl" (4), "spiritual, so slight and fairy-like" (13), and from her birds never flew away. In death Nell achieved some sort of angelic transformation and looked more beautiful than even when she was alive: "She was 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. [...] And still her former self lay there, unaltered in its change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that same sweet face; it had passed like a dream through haunts of misery and care ... So shall we know the angels in their majesty after death". (Dickens 528-29)

Little Paul's tragic end on the other hand, as we find in 'Dombey And Son' was of a different note. Paul was destined to suffer, he was weak from his birth and though was only a six year old child yet showed a maturity which was well beyond his years. He wanted to make others happy around him and took great care to ensure that no one was worrying about him. He spoke to himself: "I am great deal better, thank you! Tell papa so!" (Dickens, 208) The river was a symbol of solace and happiness for him: "His fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the river, which he knew was flowing through the great city; and now the thought how black it was, and how deep it would look, reflecting the hosts of stars — and more than all, how steadily it rolled away to meet the sea." (Dickens, Dombey And Son, 207) There was always a pure love between him and his older sister. The scene where the brother and the sister were parting from each other beautifully depicted their love and oneness for each other: Sister and brother wound their arms around each other, and the golden light came streaming in, and fell upon them, locked together. „How fast the river runs, between its green banks and the rushes, Floy! But it's very near the sea. I hear the waves! They always said so! (Dickens, Dombey And Son, 211) Paul's death is different from that of Little Nell as the former was destroyed by an inexorable, selfish and all-consuming love from his father. His father loved him mainly because Paul was the sole heir to his company Dombey and Son. Paul's readiness to accept death is unbelievable. The scene when he is about to leave this world also speaks volumes of this sense of acceptance of things like death in a calm, peaceful and often stoical manner as they always mean to open up before one a brighter, better and more perfect world: He put his hands together, as he had been used to do at his prayers. He did not remove his arms to do it; but they saw him fold them so, behind her neck. „Mamma is like you, Floy.

I know her by the face! (Dickens, *Dombey And Son*, 211)

In 'A Christmas Carol' Tiny Tim also achieved a good death despite being a poor, sickly but sweet boy with no fortune. Dickens appealed to his reader's emotions with his sentimentalization of death scenes and tragedies of life but he could also used to play on their fears of bad death and its possible consequences. When Marley's spirit talked to Scrooge, his business partner when Scrooge asked him why all the spirits should wander on earth: "It is required of every man ... that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world ... I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it ... would you know," pursued the Ghost, "the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was as heavy and as long as this even Christmas Eves ago. You have labored on it since. It is a ponderous chain!" (Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 25) If a man did not behave properly with his fellow beings during his lifetime he would be condemned to walk on earth for all his time after death. It can be argued that writing about death regularly was necessary for Victorians to give tongue to their feelings of separation, suppression, displacement and absence which and resulted from the destabilizing effects of an industrialized culture. Death, as we know can never be truly our own; we can experience it by identifying ourselves with the representation of deaths of others. As Professor Marc Redfield has pointed out that the novels of Brontë, Dickens, and Collins render anxieties about mortality inseparable from questions of language and representation. Jolene Zigarovich in his book 'Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel' argues that the Victorian Novels offers us an extended commentary on the need to accept and recognize the intricate relationship between writing and death. In 'Wuthering Heights' the disturbing ideas of self-tormentation, ruination and malevolence find concrete expression through the character of Heathcliff. Heathcliff's destructive influence on his

own son and many characters around him like on Hareton and Hindley Earnshaw, on the young and the old Catherine, on Edgar and Isabella Linton are matters of great importance while analyzing Heathcliff's journey to his final destruction of self and ego. After Hindley's death Nelly comments about Heathcliff's character and disposition: "He maintained a hard, careless deportment, indicative of neither joy nor sorrow; if anything, it expressed a flinty gratification at a piece of difficult work successfully executed" (Brontë, *Wuthering heights*, 165). Heathcliff and Catherine's passion for each other was lethal because it was compounded with jealousy, anger, hatred and could only bring them unhappiness, anguish, ruination and finally death. At the time of Catherine's death Heathcliff was present and his determination to destroy himself completely became clearer than before. After Catherine's death, Edgar "refrained from going anywhere where he was likely to see or hear of Heathcliff. Grief, and that together, transformed him into a complete hermit ... [as he] spent a life of total seclusion within the limits of his park and the grounds" (Brontë 162). Catherine's death was definitely an example of bad death as she was unprepared due to her illness, was unconscious when she passed out and came back from the world of dead to haunt the *Wuthering Heights*. We can here cite a quote from Shakespeare's *Richard III* which expresses that idealistic Christian belief about the definition as to what constitute a bad death:

'Tis a vile thing to die, my gracious lord,
When men are unprepared and look not for it.
(*Richard III*, Act III, Scene II, Line 61)

Catherine wanted to die partly because she wanted to punish Edgar Linton but she was not always conscious of her death even while she came very near to her end: "And I dying! I on the brink of the grave! My god! Does he know how I'm altered?" continued she, staring at her reflection in a mirror hanging against the opposite wall. "Is that Catherine Linton?" (*Wuthering Heights*, 112) Cathy was wild, savage and uncontrollable and so could not receive God's grace. Even Heathcliff asked her "are you possessed with a devil," he pursued, savagely, "to talk in that manner to me when you are dying?" (142) Heathcliff died immediately after Cathy's

death but he, by no stretch of imagination can be said to have committed suicide; it was as if he was gifted with the blissful opportunity to reunite with Cathy's spirit after leaving this cold, cruel world. On his deathbed Heathcliff even cursed the doctor and Nelly for they were trying to cure him while Heathcliff was hell-bent on starving himself and staying sick: Mr. Heathcliff was there – laid on his back. His eyes met mine so keen and fierce, I startled; and then he seemed to smile. I could not think him dead: but his face and throat were washed with rain; the bed-clothes dripped, and he was perfectly still. The lattice, flapping to and fro, had grazed one hand that rested on the still; no blood trickled from the broken skin, and when I put my fingers to it, I could doubt no more: he was dead and stark! (277) Emily Bronte, we may conclude has clearly refused to accept the conventional categorization of death according to the established traditions of her time. She has instead shown preference for a more unconventional and unusual type of death in her portrayal of a possible reunion between Heathcliff and Catherine in a heaven of their own even though in the eyes of the world they would be nothing more than two fallen spirits.

The deaths in 'Wuthering Heights' are much different from the blissful, peaceful and idyllic deaths in Dickens. The deaths in Dickens are accompanied by some major recurring elements like detachment from materialistic possessiveness during deathbed, gathering of near and dear ones when one is nearing his or her end, a comforting place full of caring human beings and finally attainment of spiritual solace during the final moments of one's life. Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), Richard Carstone (and, in contrast, Lady Dedlock) in *Bleak House* (1852-53), Mr. Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), and Johnny in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) are all examples of such characters who attain what we term a peaceful, appropriate and Christian death. The setting of Smike's death is idyllic and graceful: "On a fine, mild autumn day, when all was tranquil and at peace, when the soft sweet air crept in at the open window of the quiet room, and not a sound was heard but the gentle rustling of the leaves, Nicholas sat in his old place by the bedside,

and knew that the time was nearly come. So very still it was, that every now and then he bent down his ear to listen for the breathing of him who lay asleep, as if to assure himself that life was still there, and that he had not fallen into that deep slumber from which on earth there is no waking". (*Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens, 862-63)

Nell's death is described with a solemnity and reverence which is unmatched in anywhere else: "There, upon her little bed, she lay at rest. The solemn stillness was no marvel now.... Her couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. "When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always." (*The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens, 542)

Lady Dedlock and Richard Carstone's deaths stand in sharp contrast to each other. Lady Dedlock tried to escape from the ignominy because she had given birth to Esther Summerson out of wedlock and consequently she could not get a comfortable place to part ways with this world but she meets her end on "on the step at the gate [of the graveyard], drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere" (*Bleak House*, Dickens, 756) Richard in 'Bleak House' was surrounded by all his beloved ones: his wife Ada, Esther, Esther's future husband and the guardian of Ada, Esther and Richard. Mr. Dorrit died with satisfaction of having not only Little Dorrit around him but also his brother Frederick with whom she had just reconciled. Another idealistic trait is that of having little or no concern for material acquisition of wealth during one's end as in 'Nicholas Nickleby' Smike died with only a lock of her beloved's hair wrapped in ribands. During his final days Mr. Dorrit gradually started to eliminate all his materialistic acquisition. Also the death scenes in Dickens' novels contained references to spiritual solace as when in 'Nicholas Nickleby' during his deathbed Smike recalled Nicholas' promise that they would meet each other again in sometime future and also when Smike is dying he sees "beautiful gardens, which...were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light

upon their faces; then whispered that it was Eden—and so died” (864) Nell is transformed after death “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” (542). She became a representation of angelic majesty. The death of Tiny Tim’s, as Nell’s is highly idealistic but shows the need of placing one’s faith firmly on the benevolence of God and the purity of children.

But as we have already seen in reference to ‘Wuthering Heights’ not everybody got a chance to die peacefully, harmoniously and blissfully while staying engrossed in contemplation of God. The deaths in Gissing’s ‘The Nether World’ are such examples of horrific deaths. James Thompson in his long poem ‘The City of Dreadful Night’ represented the city of London as the city of death and destruction in Dantesque manner by making circular journey through the city at night. Gissing in ‘The Nether World’ presented the picture of London with vivid and relentless realism. Shooter’s Gardens in ‘The Nether World’ is the bottom-most pit of Clerkenwell’s slums and appears in some of the most harrowing scenes in the novel which acts like a symbol of death and despair: “The slum was like any other slum; filth, rottenness, evil odors, possessed these dens of superfluous mankind and made them gruesome to the peering imagination”. The novel abounds in images of death, despair, pessimism and an all around bleakness. Bob Hewett died after being struck down by a cart while the police were chasing him and thus met an accidental or ‘bad’ death. Mrs. Candy also died as a result of incessant and heavy drinking which almost tantamounted to committing suicide. Jane and Sidney resigned themselves to a life of penury and hopelessness even without the company of each other. Michael Snowdon’s plans turn into a fiasco and everything seemed darker than ever before and all his hopes for Jane died out: “She, no saviour of society by the force of a superb example; no daughter of the people, holding wealth in trust for the people’s needs”. In Hardy’s ‘Tess of the D’Urbervilles’ Tess did not deserve a good death according to the Victorian conventions. But the problematic question which arises while considering her case is whether Tess should be considered a good woman because

most of her sufferings ensue as a result of her bad luck or misfortunes or a bad woman because of all that happened to her. Tess blamed herself for her bad fortunes and attributed all her sufferings to inescapable fate. She grew up with a fatalistic belief in the power Providence which can neither be changed nor challenged: “Tess’s own people down in those retreats are never tired of saying among each other in their fatalistic way: ‘It was to be.’ There lay the pity of it” (74) But on a closer look we can find that ,any of those tragic events except the murder of Alec D’Urberville seemed to have happened to Tess because she was either in a dreamlike state or was asleep as when Alex raped Tess she appeared to be laying asleep: “the obscurity was now so great that he could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. Everything else was blackness alike. D’Urberville stooped; and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly ... But where was Tess’s guardian angel?” (73-74) Despite all that happened to her it is really very hard to imagine Tess as an impure, indecorous woman who deserve punishment in after life as a result of her misdeeds especially after all the sufferings she had gone through in her earthly life. D’Urberville on the other hand deserved punishment in afterlife because unlike Tess he pursued his bad deeds deliberately. Tess’ only fault was her beauty. Murdering Alec is the only action that Tess committed deliberately and consciously and it was the only action which would determine her fate or lock her into her nemesis of the present. She even rejoiced in the fact that she could finally consciously do something which would set her free. Tess’ fate can be compared to her baby Sorrow’s. None of them had done anything bad of their own choice yet they had their fates sealed. In Hardy’s own words: “the baby’s offence against society in coming into the world was forgotten by the girl mother; her soul’s desire was to continue that offence by preserving the life of the child. However, it soon grew clear that the hour of emancipation for that little prisoner of the flesh was to arrive earlier

than her worst misgivings conjectured. And when she had discovered this she was plunged into misery which transcended that of the child's simple loss. Her baby had not been baptized." (Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 92) Tess's death is undoubtedly tragic and horrible yet Hardy has described it in such words that the impression of a serenity and quietude is unmistakably conspicuous before the readers: "Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.

"Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess. And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength, they arose, joined hands again, and went on". (397-98) In another novel 'The Great Expectations' by Dickens we find that the character Magwitch was forced to act cruelly and horribly out of dire necessity. Magwitch explained that how from his early childhood he was surrounded by people who used to lecture him about how wrongdoings might lead one to the path of damnation yet none of their talks could fill his empty stomach and he was imprisoned even as a child but still could not stay out of the path of evil. Magwitch, unlike Pip had no benefactor no helping hand to take him out of his constant degeneration and degradation. Magwitch is forced to bow down in court but he had his faith in God as the supreme judge of all and when he was suffering in prison due some injuries and realized he was about to die, his faith still stayed strong and he thought of them as God's way of relieving him from going through further agonies in prison. Not all deaths in Dickens' novels are expected and idyllic ones, as for example Nancy's death is unexpected and horrific to read. Sikes allowed his anger to get the better of him and beat the love of his life to death on the belief that she had betrayed his gang. But this act of Sikes can never be dismissed as an act carried out in a fit of passion. It was to a great

extent premeditated and Sikes was harboring suspicion and anger for Nancy and he did this act in cold-blood for which there is evidence in the novel in the passage when he walked into his house. But Nancy could utter her final prayers to Heaven just before Sikes shot her: "She staggered and fell, nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead; but raising herself, with difficulty, on her knees, drew from her bosom a white handkerchief – Rose Maylie's own – and holding it up in her folded arms, as high towards heaven as her feeble strength would allow, breathed one prayer for mercy to her Maker." (*Oliver Twist*, 311) Sydney Carton in 'A Tale of Two Cities' and Fagin in 'Oliver Twist' had one thing in common. They both were sentenced to death at the end of the novels. Carton resigned to his fate so that that the love of his life Lucy may have her future with her love Darnay. In prison during his final days Carton came in touch with an innocent girl who was never afraid to die but wanted support and was weak. Carton was like a guardian angel sent to look after the seamstress. But Fagin was never ready to die and was sentenced to crime that he did not commit. Most of his times was spent in contemplating how he would meet his end. So unlike the deaths of Carton or Jenny's baby son or Paul Dombey who we believe will all be free after death the death of Fagin came to us as tragic and sensational for he had no way out to escape it. But the bravery of Carton, the impending madness in Fagin's eyes in his last moments, the excruciating grief which one feels when he confronts the deaths of Jenny's baby, little Nell Trent or little Paul Dombey are all powerful enough to impel us to reflect on our own life and the way we have chosen or are going to choose to live it.

Conclusion: Shakespeare in 'The Tempest' writes "He that dies pays all debts". (Act III, Scene II, Line 131) But the variety of works and different ways of handling death scenes found in them point toward the fact that this is not always true. Characters like Tiny Tim, Nell or Eva die peaceful, ideal deaths while characters like Scrooge, Magwitch, Tess, Heathcliff and Cathy die restless deaths as a result of their defiant or unconventional attitudes. Victorian novels, though they deal with death in an obsessive

manner in the end they teach us about how to live our lives. Talking in length or dealing extensively about death is a very sensitive practice even in the field of imaginative art of writing fiction: "To write of death is for the novelist to speak of something that cannot talk back, that must be worded from without, from this side of its arrival" (Stewart, 55) The tension which result from the conflicting roles played by different types of attitudes to death and afterlife during Victorian era help us to look into our own way of life more closely and analyze it to finally arrive at some conclusion as to whether we should live our life according to the norms and traditions of our society or lead a different, divergent type of life which may face an uncertain end. Undoubtedly all these depend to a large extent on our belief or disbelief in the existence of afterlife and other such metaphysical thoughts which accompany it, but even while rejecting the concept of afterlife we should not come to believe that works in our present world have no consequences on our life after death because a man's life truly is judged by his 'life' after death, or more specifically the life he leads in the hearts of the others when his physical presence does not stay anymore. Thus our life goes on and along with it the thoughts which give our dreamlike existence a shape and a form. Still, death remains the only way to tell whether we are dreaming or are awake.

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