"TOO HEAVY IS THE LOAD": REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND SUICIDE IN 19TH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

by

Amber Heather Hastings-Truelove

A thesis submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature

In conformity with the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

(April, 2017)

Copyright ©Amber Hastings-Truelove, 2017
Abstract

As British alienists and sociologists in nineteenth-century Britain sought to understand suicide as a disease of the mind, coroners, jurors and lay people became increasingly sympathetic to those who ended their own lives. This sympathy, however, was often tinged with spiritual, philosophical, and moral valuations of a suicide’s life. These judgements were especially pronounced when the suicide was a woman. Speculation on female suicides almost always involved questions of romantic entanglements, pregnancy or moral improprieties. After their deaths, their lives and motivations were interpreted by legal and medical professionals who (re)created their narratives to fit social and cultural expectations. The literary and visual images of the suicidal woman from this period are coded with conflicting messages of life and death, resistance and submission, and eroticization and redemption. The literature I have chosen to focus on, Amy Levy’s dramatic monologues “A Minor Poet,” and “Xantippe A Fragment,” George Eliot’s realist novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, and Bram Stoker’s Gothic novel *Dracula*, allow for a cross-genre exploration of the cultural encoding of female suicide in multiple literary genres. These texts feature ambiguous suicides, meaning that the deaths of these characters are not explicitly connected to suicide, and that critics have most often attributed these deaths to causes other than suicide. However, by ignoring the possibility of suicide encoded in these texts, critics have often overlooked the agency of these characters’ actions. The characters become victims of circumstances rather than active participants in the narratives of their death. To pay attention to these ambiguities allows us to reconsider or reclaim the tensions in these texts and see these characters as both victims of and active agents in the circumstances which lead to their deaths. They become liminal figures existing on the boundaries of multiple sites of categorization that collapse the binaries of the Victorian angel in the house and the fallen angel.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisory committee, my co-supervisors Drs. Maggie Berg and Shelley King, and my second reader Dr. Brooke Cameron, for their support and their insightful comments and questions which helped to shape this dissertation. I would also like to thank my colleagues Drs. Denise Stockley and Laura Kinderman for their mentorship and unfailing emotional support. This project would not have been possible without the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

A big thank you to all of the friends and family who have provided emotional support throughout this process. In particular, I would like to thank my parents, Brian and Sharlyne Truelove for always being there for me when I’ve needed them, and my in-laws, John and the late Else Hastings for their unerring belief in my abilities, I would also like to thank my brother, Michael Truelove for his support. Many, many people have offered me words of encouragement and support, including my colleagues in the Office of Health Sciences Education, and at the Centre for Teaching and Learning, but special mention needs to be given to Genevieve Normandin Walker, Cole Walker, and Robert Foley for their years of friendship and for allowing me to be an Aunt to their beautiful children. A special mention is also reserved for Julia Savage and Ian Maness for going above and beyond with food deliveries during my final stretch of writing, and Dr. Laura Lutke for her friendship and support, which also, coincidently, often included meals.
Dedication

This work is dedicated with love and gratitude to the memory of Christopher William Hastings who encouraged me to follow my academic dreams.
Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that all of the work described within this thesis is the original work of the author. Any published (or unpublished) ideas and/or techniques from the work of others are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

(Amber Heather Hastings-Truelove)

(April, 2017)
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................................................ iii

Statement of Originality ............................................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures ............................................................................................................................................................ vii

Chapter 1 Introduction: Gender and Suicide in the Victorian Period ................................................................. 1

Chapter 2 The Appropriation of Female Suicide Narratives in Amy Levy’s “A Minor Poet” and “Xantippe A Fragment” ........................................................................................................................................... 29

Chapter 3 Drowning in Ambiguity: George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss .............................................................. 59

Chapter 4 Suicide, Moral Contagion and the Female Death Wish in Bram Stoker’s Dracula ................................ 98

Chapter 5 Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here? .............................................................................................. 135

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................................................... 139
List of Figures

Figure 1 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1851), oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London ........................................ 26

Figure 2 Gustave Doré, *Glad to Death’s Mystery: Swift to be Hurt* (also known as *The Bridge of Sighs*) (1850) engraving, Victoria and Albert Museum, London ................................................................. 44

Figure 3 George Frederic Watts, *Found Drowned* (c 1850), oil on canvas, Watts Gallery, Compton 45

Figure 4 Unknown Artist, *The Leap from the Window* (1849-56), Illustration for G. W. M. Reynolds’s *Mysteries of the Courts of London*, n. S. 2 (1): 25 ........................................................................................................ 65

Figure 5 Unknown Artist, *Eliza's Attempted Suicide* (1868), Illustration for Dion Boucicault's *After Dark; A Tale of London Life* ................................................................. 65

Figure 6 Title-page illustration, Charles Selby’s *London by Night* (1886), from *Dick's Standard Plays*, no. 721 ................................................................................................................................. 67

Figure 7 George Cruikshank, *The Drunkard’s Children no. 8* (1848), folding Book, British Museum, London ................................................................................................................................. 68

Figure 8 Paul de La Roche, *The Young Martyr* (1855), oil on canvas, Delaware Art Museum ........ 69

Figure 9 John Atkinson Grimshaw, *The Lady of Shalott* (1878), oil on canvas, Private Collection 69

Figure 10 Hablot K. Browne, *The River* (1850), illustration for chapter 47, “Martha,” in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* ................................................................................................................................. 70

Figure 11 Augustus Leopold Egg, *Despair [Past and Present, 3]* (1858), oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London ................................................................................................................................. 72
Chapter 1

Introduction: Gender and Suicide in the Victorian Period

‘Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?’ Death - was the obvious reply. ‘And when,’ I said, ‘is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?’ From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious – ‘When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world - and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.’

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), 643

Edgar Allan Poe’s remarks in The Philosophy of Composition are indicative of the ways in which the suicidal woman was interpreted during the Victorian period. While numerous feminist critics have recognized the problematic nature of Poe’s claim that “the most poetical topic in the world” is “the death . . . of a beautiful woman,” it is a useful way to begin thinking about the complexity and ambiguities inherent in discussions of female suicide. In situating my examination of Victorian literary representations of women and suicide within the socio-historical context of nineteenth-century Britain, I am mindful of Elisabeth Bronfen’s reading of Poe’s statement in which she suggests that it seems as necessary to stress the fundamental difference between real violence done to a physical body and any ‘imagined’ one (which represents this ‘dangerous fantasy’ on paper or canvas without any concretely violated body as its ultimate signified), as it is necessary to explore the way in which these two registers come to be conflated and confused. (59)

1 See for example, Beth Ann Bassein’s Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature, and Bram Dijkstra’s Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de Siècle Culture.
While the texts discussed in the following chapters are not necessarily representative of the lived experience of suicide within the nineteenth-century context, the often beautifully rendered artistic representations of female suicide responded to medical, legal, social, and cultural beliefs about suicide, while also helping to shape and create those beliefs. Additionally, Poe’s claim that it is “beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover,” is also particularly relevant to my discussion of suicide. Poe situates the power inherent in crafting a narrative, in telling one’s story, in a third-party figure, that of the “bereaved lover.” The woman who has died has no authorship in the way that her story will be told. When a death is a suicide, coroners, jurors, medical personnel, family and friends are those who have the final say in how a suicide is understood, effectively overwriting any attempts, through suicide notes or other artifacts, of a suicide to self-author his or her narrative by imposing a single, authoritative interpretation of his or her actions.

More recent writings on suicide have managed to escape narrative authority by resisting this impulse towards interpretive appropriation. In 2005, for example, Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature issued a special volume in honour of The Feminist Legacy of Carolyn Heilbrun. Heilbrun, an author, educator and literary scholar, had taken her life in 2003. This collection of essays, first presented as a series of special events at the 2004 Modern Language Association Convention, can be seen as an attempt to honour and memorialize her work, while also trying to understand her death. The collection of essays featured in this journal approach womanhood and suicide through a variety of theoretical perspectives and across a range of historical periods, from medieval to contemporary, from the position of women in the academy, to fictional heroines in poetry and prose. Connecting them all is an attempt to create reason or meaning from a sudden absence in the feminist landscape of academia.

To study suicide is to try to understand something that many people find incomprehensible. Margaret Higonnet argues that suicide sets a limit, it provides an ending, but it
also opens a gap which raises questions about the construction of the self as well as narrative constructions. This gap, she argues, “invites us to bridge it with new, or alternate, texts” because “suicide provokes narrative, both a narrative inscribed by the actor as subject, and those stories devised around the suicide as enigmatic object of interpretation” (“Frames” 230). In the essays honouring her life, Heilbrun is both the subject and the object of her suicide, and yet has no control over how this action will be interpreted. Ultimately, suicide is something that someone does to him- or her-self, but that happens to someone else: it is those left behind who shape the narrative with compassion, sympathy, anger, shame or judgment.

A series of essays concerning the suicide of a modern academic woman may seem a strange place to begin a study of female suicide in the nineteenth century, but the Tulsa collection establishes an idea that is central to this dissertation. An underlying current throughout the collection is the ambiguous narratives that reconstruct Heilbrun’s life after her death. Looking at the suicidal female academics in Heilbrun’s mystery novels, which she penned under the pseudonym Amanda Cross, Nina Auerbach argues that these women, and Heilbrun herself, existed on the periphery of the academy, never fully accepted or rooted in their roles, and locked into an ostensibly nurturing mentoring system which, “while promising security and support... hobbles our freethinking selves, draining our memories and our dreams” (268). Molly Hite looks at Heilbrun as a feminist role-model, articulating the problems with the idea of the literary mother and the ambiguity and rancor that literary daughters often direct towards the mother figure. Examining Heilbrun’s non-fiction monograph, *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty*, Gail Holst-Warhaft traces the tension inherent in Heilbrun as a loving wife, and as a wife who is determined not to outlive her husband, whatever pain that may cause. In each of these cases, the authors read Heilbrun into her texts, positioning her life within a network of contradictions that have no resolution. In these essays, Heilbrun is constructed as both nurturing and isolated, literary mother and resented mother figure, loving wife and selfish woman: she is not either/or any of
these things, but rather exists in and/both. This conception of and/both recognizes the complexities of Heilbrun’s life, and her potential motivations for her final action. A woman’s suicide, and the woman who commits suicide, is ultimately something that defies any kind of easy categorization and resists any form of straightforward narrative. This collection of essays, when taken together, resists categorization or closure by refusing to reduce Heilbrun’s life to easy binaries or dichotomies. By understanding Heilbrun as a complex individual with conflicting roles and motivations, this collection invites narrative possibilities for interpreting her death rather than imposing a single, authoritative reading of her life.

In my study of suicidal women in Victorian literature, I want to re-examine nineteenth-century narratives of female suicide using a similar form of resistance to closure (the and/both) to those found in the essays honouring Heilbrun’s life. The literature that I’ve chosen as my focus, Amy Levy’s dramatic monologues “A Minor Poet” and “Xantippe A Fragment,” George Eliot’s realist novel *The Mill on the Floss*, and Bram Stoker’s Gothic novel *Dracula*, provide the opportunity for a cross-genre exploration of the ways that suicidal women, while not always obviously present in the texts, are often presented as liminal figures that resist the Madonna/whore dichotomy in which female characters are often conceptualized. These texts feature ambiguous suicides, meaning that the deaths of these characters are not explicitly connected to suicide, and that critics have most often attributed these deaths to causes other than suicide. However, by ignoring the possibility of suicide encoded in these texts, critics have often overlooked the agency of these characters’ actions. The characters thus become victims of circumstances rather than active participants in the narratives of their death. In the context of their ambiguous deaths, these characters are both suicides and not suicides. My reading uses the and/both model demonstrated in the *Tulsa* collection of essays as a way of understanding these texts which allows us to embrace narrative ambiguities in the lives of these characters to reconsider or reclaim the tensions in these texts and see these characters as both victims of and
active agents in the circumstances which lead to their deaths. We can understand these characters as liminal figures existing on the boundaries of multiple sites of categorization that collapse the binaries of the Victorian angel in the house and the fallen angel.

The past thirty years have seen only an intermittent exploration of suicide as a nineteenth-century social problem. Despite the large number of bodies of suicides, and those contemplating suicide, which are strewn across the pages of the English literary canon, there has still been relatively little scholarly research on suicide from a cultural/historical or literary perspective, and most of what has been done occurred in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Important monographs contributed to the study of the history and culture of suicide or suicide and literature include Olive Anderson’s seminal work *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (1987), and Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy’s *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (1990). Later scholars are indebted to Anderson’s work which provides a detailed historical analysis of contemporary statistics of suicide that situates them within the broader regional, social, and cultural concerns that shaped the experience of suicide. MacDonald and Murphy’s study takes a more cultural/historical approach to the study of suicide. It relies less on statistical data, and more on evidence derived from popular culture as it traces the trajectory of changing attitudes towards suicide, particularly its increased secularization across the Early Modern period, by mapping the changing political, religious and social climates in which suicides occurred.

Following from these studies, Victor Bailey’s “*This Rash Act*: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City” combines the methodologies employed by Anderson and MacDonald and Murphy, but on a slightly narrow scale. Bailey combines statistical analysis with representations of suicide in popular culture to investigate the experience of suicide in Kingston on Hull across a period of 62 years. In *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (1988), Barbara Gates explores a number of Victorian cultural assumptions about suicide, including the displacement of concerns about suicide onto feminine or monstrous bodies. Gates traces changes in these
assumptions from the death of Lord Castlereagh in 1822, to the death of Eleanor Marx in 1898. My own study follows Gates in its reliance on a range of historical sources, literary, medical and visual, to situate the experience of suicide in literature within historical social and cultural understandings of the experience of suicide. Gates’s position that Victorians “seem to have deeply feared suicide” (xiii) is a useful way of thinking about how literature constructed female suicides in particular. The female suicide was to be feared because she disrupted categories of knowing; she was both fallen and redeemed, rebellious and passive, and, in the ambiguities that so often surrounded her death, she was a suicide, and yet not a suicide. The female suicide needed to be controlled because she needed to be contained, to have her actions interpreted by a medical authority who could fragment and reconstruct her narrative to fit within acceptable social roles. The idea of where the suicidal woman fits within society has more recently been taken up in Kelly McGuire’s *Dying to be English* (2012), which marks a renewal of interest in suicide, and particularly the relationship between gender and suicide, by interrogating the connection between the novel, suicide, gender and national identity and the ways that these concerns “intersect with women’s status as private beings” (xiii) within larger narratives of national identity in the eighteenth century.

In addition to these broad studies constructing a history of suicide, a handful of articles take a narrow focus on women and suicide, including those in the *Tulsa* collection of essays. Howard Kushner’s article “Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective” (1985), challenges the statistical analysis of suicides which position women as protected from suicide because of their gender. By combining completed suicides with estimates of attempted suicides, Kushner argues that “there is not now, nor has there ever been so far as anyone can demonstrate, any gender-specific difference in suicidal behaviour” (546). In “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought” (1993), Kushner examines and challenges the cultural narratives which suggested that women were at greater risk of suicide in urban
spaces. Kushner’s work serves as a useful reminder that the Victorian mythology which feminizes suicide had no basis in historical fact. Rather, these narratives were socially constructed and associated with madness in ways that, as Elaine Showalter suggests, “differentiated between an English malady, associated with the intellectual and economic pressures on highly civilized men, and a female malady, associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women” (7).

Approaching the study of suicide through the lens of literary analysis, a series of articles by Margaret Higonnet, “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century” (1985), “Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide” (1986) and “Frames of Female Suicide” (2000), examines the ways that female suicidal characters authored by women writers differ from those written by male authors in the construction of identity. She suggests that “women tend to treat the suicides of their own sex as if they were somehow not definitive, and they tend to minimize the physical anguish of death” (“Representations” 114). My own readings of female suicide are indebted to Higonnet’s understanding of the way that narratives of female suicides seem to resist closure through the lack of definitiveness. However, my reading breaks from hers in my examination of both female and male writers whose works contain female suicides, and in my understanding of this resistance to closure as something which prevents a single authoritative interpretation of a character’s actions.

In the field of Victorian visual culture, L. J. Nicoletti, in “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London” (2007), examines the way that visual representations of female suicides became associated with particular spaces in London (St. Paul’s Cathedral, Waterloo Bridge and Blackfriars’s Bridge, and the London Monument especially) in ways that connected female suicides to these “emblems of the nation” (9). This association with sites containing a vivid history of patriarchal power, however, effectively silenced the suicidal woman. In “Downward Mobility: Victorian Women, Suicide, and London's “Bridge of Sighs” (2004), Nicoletti looks at the ways that images of drowning women were influenced by the publication of
Thomas Hood’s “The Bridge of Sighs” (1844), and the ways that this influence shaped future images of the suicidal woman. Victorian artists, Nicoletti argues, “left the woman's body unscathed because Victorian art and literature constructed suicide as a redemptive act for unchaste women” (19). To think back to Poe’s claims in the epigraph which opens this chapter, if the death of a beautiful woman is “poetical,” then the suicide of a beautiful woman is both beautiful and redemptive. The paradox, of course, is that the only way that this redemption can be achieved is by her death permanently removing her from the society in which she has now been redeemed.

Despite what may be a lack of twentieth- and twenty-first century academic scrutiny of the issue of suicide, both the prevalence of self-harming actions in literature and the debates in journals and periodicals of the period suggest that Victorians were concerned with finding the causes and meanings of suicide, and with attempting to mitigate its effects. Emile Durkheim’s influential work *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, for example, first published in 1897, seeks to identify those groups or populations of society who are most vulnerable to suicidal impulses. As a sociological study, Durkheim’s work represents an obvious and scientific attempt to intervene in the discussions and debates surrounding issues of self-harm. With the rise of asylums and the increasingly important role of alienists (early practitioners of psychiatry) within these structures, the study of suicide became increasingly medicalized and regulated by the authority of male doctors and medical professionals. The narratives of women who chose to end their lives were interpreted and created by those whose lives were lived, so to speak, in a completely different sphere.

An array of tensions and contradictions, such as that between the female suicide and the men who interpreted her story, confront anyone interested in the study of suicide. At the centre of

---

2 See Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* for her discussion of the way that asylums became a patriarchal space with male doctors occupying the role of authority/father figure.
these tensions lie issues of responsibility. Are individuals responsible solely to themselves, and therefore able to divest themselves of their bodies as they see fit, or should the responsibility to others – family, community, state, god – take precedence over whatever hardships an individual may be facing? The very topic of suicide is one that continues to make people uncomfortable; it is not quite taboo, but it continues to be stigmatized through the moral and ethical judgments that are made following a suicide. Should the act of suicide be treated with sympathy and understanding, or is it an act of desperation, or a measure of someone’s selfishness? Do we approach it as a form of victimization, or should there be some form of punishment attached to the action that might function as a deterrent? In the literature discussed in this dissertation, these tensions become even more fraught because of the ambiguity that surrounds the deaths themselves. By not explicitly stating that the deaths of these characters are suicides, these texts further confound expectations in how we should respond to them. The characters are both victims and criminals (suicide was a criminal act in Britain until 1961), they are desperate, selfish, and yet, also deserving of sympathy and understanding. Because they resist falling into either of the binaries, these women upset the sharply defined gender roles which were the basis for Victorian social organization.

The ambiguous female death that cannot be definitively categorized disrupts ways of thinking about suicidal actions. To understand the destabilizing presence of the female suicide, it is useful to understand some of the broad shifts that have occurred in the way that the Western world has thought about suicide. Our current understanding of mental health which situates suicide within a medical model is a relatively recent development. The term “suicide” was not introduced until the mid-seventeenth century – the Oxford English Dictionary cites 1656 as its first usage. Prior to this time, someone who acted to take his or her own life was referred to as a self-muderer. While the term “suicide” may be an improvement, in that it seems to reflect a movement away from the moral judgements associated with murder, Thomas Szasz points out
that this shift also “reflect[s] a major cultural-perceptual shift: from perceiving voluntary death as an act for which the actor is responsible, to receiving it as a (perhaps) happening for which he may not be responsible; and from seeing persons as possessing souls and free will, to seeing them as possessing minds that may become ‘unbalanced,’ resulting in the loss of free will” (3-4). For Szasz, the linguistic shift from self-murder, signifying action and responsibility for one’s own actions, to suicide, coincided with a transition in ways of thinking about suicide that ends with our current understanding of suicide “as a happening or result,” which we “attribute … to mental illness, and view the agent as a victim (‘patient’)” (4). In trying to reclaim suicide as an individual act of agency and free will, Szasz completely disallows any connection between mental illness and suicide which is a problematic limitation to his argument. Yet, his focus on the suicide as an active agent in his or her own end of life decisions provides a useful way of thinking of suicide which is not limited to a medical understanding of the subject. Since our current medical understanding of suicide has its roots in the nineteenth century, Szasz’s argument provides an opportunity to think about suicide in terms of agency and free will at a time when early psychology was just beginning to understand it as a result of illness. It serves as a useful reminder to be open to multiple interpretive possibilities when reading acts of self-harm.

Szasz’s examination of suicide also draws attention to the fact that the experience of suicide is culturally constructed. Szasz traces the shifting lexicon of suicide from Ancient Roman, Greek and Early Modern definitions to the more recent use of suicide. The earlier categories, which all contained verbs – “to grasp death,” ‘to seize death,” to “act with one’s own hand” – Szasz suggests indicated “choice, planning, and self-determination” (3). The introduction of suicide as a noun, Szasz argues, marks the beginning of a cultural submission to medicine as the cultural authority on suicide. No longer seen as the conscious action of a rational individual, suicide began to be culturally understood as an action which was committed while someone was not in their right mind. The meaning of suicide, and how it is interpreted by friends, family,
coroners and jurors, can change drastically depending on the context in which it occurs, and is
dependent on contemporary understandings of gender, race, sexual identity, modernity and
morality for explanations.

Victorian perceptions of their social culture were influenced not only by Christian ideals,
but also, at least in the upper, more educated classes, by the early Greek philosophers. “Classical
literature – philosophy, mythology, and history,” argues Frank Turner, “provided a means for
achieving self-knowledge and cultural self-confidence within the emerging order of liberal
democracy and secularism” (xii). Early representations of the act of suicide, then, would be
familiar to Victorians, although they would be put to cultural use in ways that “contributed both
to the devising of new myths, and to the sustaining of old values in novel guises” (Turner 3).
Given the influence of ancient thought on Victorian culture, I would like to turn momentarily to
look first at classical understandings of suicide, as well as early Christian thought on the subject.
Classical understandings tended towards viewing suicide as a masculine action, a heroic sacrifice.
Cultural explanations for self-harm included prescribed judgments for suicides, or exceptions and
justifications for their actions. In book IX of the Laws, for example, Plato argues that the man
who “slays the nearest and dearest of all” thereby “violently robbing him of his Fate-given share
of life” (9.873c) should be buried in an isolated area, without any form of headstone or
identifying marker (9.873d). For Plato, the man who deserves this fate is one who has taken his
life owing to his own “sloth” and “unmanly cowardice” (9.873c). This conception of suicide sees
it as an indication of other vices. Perhaps influenced by the Pythagorean philosophy which
“forbade men to depart their guard or station in life without the order of their commander – that
is, of God” (qtd in Colt 145), Plato’s idea of a “Fate-given share of life” suggests that an
individual’s body is not his own, but is rather in service to a higher power. The suicides that need
to be posthumously punished are ones that have already demonstrated their inability to live up to
societal expectations of manhood by abandoning their service. In an equivocal move, however,
Plato does provide exceptions to his prohibitions on suicide, noting that when suicide is “legally ordered by the state,” when a man is “compelled” to it by “intolerable and inevitable misfortune” or when he has fallen “into some disgrace that is beyond remedy or endurance” (9.873c), then these punishments should not be applied. It is only when the individual has failed to ‘be a man’ through some internal failing rather than external forces, that this form of judgment should be applied.

For Stoic Seneca, however, the sorts of judgments and exceptions provided by Plato were unnecessary. In his estimation, suicide was always a personal choice which should be made based on the quality and not the quantity of one’s life. In many ways anticipating the current debates surrounding medically assisted dying, Seneca argues that death is a “privilege” and is not to be feared because it is a question of “dying well or ill” (54). This position eliminates the possibility of moral judgment by placing the value of life solely within the purview of the individual. Cicero echoes Seneca’s position, but qualifies it by outlining when it is appropriate or inappropriate to end one’s life:

When a man’s circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is appropriate for him to remain alive; when he possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is appropriate for him to depart from life…. Even for the foolish, who are also miserable, it is appropriate for them to remain alive if they possess a predominance of those things which we pronounce to be in accordance with nature (qtd in Cholbi).

In general, according to Michael Seidler, the Stoics excluded certain reasons for committing suicide; e.g., Seneca noted how some men hang themselves in front of their mistress’ door, some die to escape slavery or arrest, and some are simply too bored and fed up with life to go on living. He did not, however, approve of any of these, nor of the "lust for death" (libido moriendi) that appeared as frequently
during the early days of the Roman Empire. Epictetus also enjoined that one should not give up one's life irrationally, faint-heartedly, or on some casual pretext, and recounted how he spent the better part of one day talking a friend out of starving himself to death after the latter had simply decided to end it all for no apparent reason, and was going to glorify his irrational decision for its own sake. (433)

For the Stoics, then, suicide was not only an individual act, it was also an action which needed to have a basis in rational thought. While Plato argues that suicides should be punished because of their failure to society, Seneca’s view on the matter eliminates social concerns entirely.

With the rise of the early Christian church, the notion of rational masculine suicides was rejected, and replaced with a prohibition against suicide on the grounds that it was a sin. The one possible exception wherein suicide might be permissible was if it served to protect a woman’s chastity. St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, for example, both considered whether suicide for women was a more honorable choice than allowing themselves to be raped. The early church fathers were almost unanimous in their approval of women who chose to take their lives to avoid being raped, or following a rape to avoid living with shame and dishonour. Located within their arguments is the fundamental belief that women are either virgins or whores, Marys or Magdalenes. Jerome, for example, argues that “although God is able to do all things, he cannot raise up a virgin after the fall” (qtd in Messina-Dysert 16). For a woman, when the choice was suicide or rape, suicide was her only means of receiving salvation.

St Augustine, discussing women who were honored by the Catholic Church for choosing to drown themselves rather than lose their chastity, suggests that there is a difference between “mortal fear” and “heavenly instinct,” and that if these women acted out of “obedience” to a higher power, then their actions were justified (65). While his argument is heavily qualified (he consistently points out that he does not have enough evidence to say for certain that these women were following the directions of a higher power), he does not outright deny the possibility that
God might have guided these women to their deaths. He is also quick to point out, however, that if these women were following God’s will, then they are the exceptions to general prohibitions against suicide. Perhaps fearing that other young women may seek martyrdom by emulating the actions of these holy women, St. Augustine provides the reminder that “every one that shall resolve to sacrifice his son unto God shall not be cleared of guilt in such a resolution, because Abraham was praised for it” (65). The ambiguity with which St Augustine addresses the tension between suicide as sin and suicide as a possible act of God is an interesting one since his personal and religious principles seem to be at odds. On the one hand, if these women are now viewed as holy martyrs, then it must be because God ordered these women to end their lives. On the other hand, positioning these women as exceptions who should not be emulated suggests that he sees a loss of virtue as a lesser sin than suicide. Thomas Aquinas is the exception from his church brethren, arguing that a woman “commits no sin in being violated by force, provided she does not consent, since without consent of the mind there is no stain on the body” (emphasis retained 69).

By the nineteenth century, church leaders were no longer advocating for women to end their lives to avoid rape, but the underlying beliefs that motivated claims like Jerome’s, that women’s worth was located within their physical bodies in the form of an intact hymen, continued to influence the way that Victorians thought about female suicide. In many ways, these early beliefs about suicide find their echoes in the nineteenth century. Until 1823, it was not uncommon for a suicide to be buried at a crossroad, and the importance of women’s chastity and virtue in relation to female suicides can be found in nineteenth-century literary and visual representations of seduced and fallen women. Higonnet suggests that “rape has been affiliated with the breakdown of a woman’s identity” (“Representations” 109). “If woman is taken to be a commodity,” Higonnet argues, “rape means total devaluation: reified, then stolen, she has no essence left to justify her continuing existence” (“Representations 109). As a result of “this

---

3 Abel Griffiths, a twenty-two year old law student who took his own life after murdering his father, is the last known suicide in Britain to be buried at a crossroad (Gates 6).
ambiguous identification of women with their bodies, “suicide serves magically to purge the assaulted body, in a sense displacing responsibility for the violation” (“Representations” 109). This ambiguous positioning of female suicide as a means of redemption is echoed in the Victorian period in literature, art, and newsprint which commodifies the image of the female suicide for public consumption. Her death, rendered by her own hand, and understood as an admission of her loss of chastity, becomes a form of redemption which cleanses her of sin while sanitizing her image to be reintegrated into the social sphere.

Tracing the connection between women’s suicides and nationhood in the eighteenth century, McGuire argues that “in the medical discourse of the day, suicide represents a feminine condition, a sign of a weakened mind or body, while religious discourse similarly attributes the act to a lack of spiritual fortitude, or a feminine openness to temptation or an external tempter” (12). In the literature of the Victorian period, the external tempter who leads women astray is far more likely to be a young nobleman than an incarnation of the devil, and the feminine openness is by this time an openness of a sexual nature which threatens to undermine Victorian morality. Angela Leighton suggests that for women, “moral law” rather than “civil law” became an area in which women could wield power. This power, however, was predicated on a woman’s sexual purity. Within the dichotomies of Victorian thinking about women’s sexuality, “angel or demon, virgin or whore, Mary or Magdalen,” Angela Leighton argues “the struggle between good and evil, virtue and vice, takes up its old story on the scene of the woman's sexual body” (110-111). Women, then, can only ever be one of either of these things. Leighton’s conceptualization of these dichotomies as a struggle, however, recognizes that both impulses, angelic and demonic, co-exist in every woman even if she is only ever identified by her success in this struggle. To read the female body as complete, rather than fragmented into these separate parts, means bringing these tensions to the forefront of discussions of female suicides.
The trope of the fallen woman in literature, predicated on binaries of virginal and fallen, is by now well established, and was grounded in Victorian social thought. “This binary opposition,” according to Carla Fusco, “was supposed to give a presumably correct orientation to a society which was both obsessed with and terrified by sex” (55). Yet, the narrative turn which so often meant the death of the fallen woman bore little resemblance to the actual experience of female suicides. Anderson has shown “that although the first thought of coroners and juries at an inquest on a girl was always to establish whether she had been pregnant, only once in the inquest papers,” she notes, “did this prove to have been so” (58-59). Rather than mirroring reality, authors distorted it in ways that adhered to beliefs about the differences between the genders. Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth, for example, is both a fallen woman, and a ministering angel. She exposes herself to the illness that kills her because of her insistence on nursing her seducer back to health. Yet, the novel suggests that it is circumstances, rather than her own actions, which end her life. Mr. Davis even claims that “I have killed her” (361), taking responsibility and agency away from Ruth’s decision. If, following Durkheim, we understand suicide as “any death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim himself” (42), then Ruth’s refusal to leave Mr. Bellingham’s room for the three days she nurses him can be viewed as a suicidal action. The tension that arises from Ruth’s illness lies in the three conflicting narratives of her death: murder, natural causes, or suicide. If we read Ruth’s death within either of the first two categories, then she is a passive victim. If, however, we read her death as a suicide, then her active refusal to leave Bellingham’s side becomes an intentional act of atonement for her fallenness.

For Victorians, there was a strong connection between fallen women and suicide. Drowning or poison was seen as the logical end for a woman who transgressed normative behaviour roles prescribed for her gender. In literature and visual culture, suicide became indelibly associated with women, and most explicitly with fallen women. While this association
may be partially explained by a return to Poe’s argument for the affective resonance that is produced when confronted with the death of a beautiful woman, it does not explain why these artistic representations of suicide were almost a complete inversion of actual Victorian suicide rates which showed that men completed suicide far more often than women. In medical discourses of the day, contemporary writers engaged in a certain amount of mental gymnastics to account for women’s lower suicide rates. For some, like Reverend J. W. Horsley, the chaplain at Clerkenwell Prison, the answer was that women, the “impulsive female sex” (241), were attempting suicide more frequently, but he determines that this is attention-seeking behaviour, rather than serious attempts at suicide. Looking at the number of people who were remanded to Clerkenwell for attempted suicide between 1868 and 1877, Horsley finds 746 males to 1,307 females which leads him to suggest that “hysterical girls make demonstrations on the Embankment, and a pail of water over their finery would often be more efficacious a deterrent or cure than the notoriety they gain (and perhaps seek) by apprehension” (256). To understand Horsley’s claims, we need to remember that suicide during this period was a criminal act, and that persons apprehended in a suicide attempt would be brought before the magistrate. The magistrate would often remand them to prison for a fortnight, or longer, depending on whether there had been previous attempts. Horsley kept detailed notes from his work at the prison, and based on his observations from 1885 of 300 attempted suicides sentenced to Clerkenwell, he found that 117 were men, and 183 were women. While he admits that some of this difference can be accounted for by male suicide attempts being more likely to end in death, because of men’s greater physical and mental force, and that the “sham attempts of silly girls may help to swell the record against their sex” (242), he nonetheless finds suicide to be a “specially female crime” (241). There are more male suicides, according to this logic, because men’s greater strength makes them more likely to succeed. He implies that men accomplish what they set out to do, thereby making the number of male deaths greater, while women are less resolute, and more frivolous in their
attempts. The picture that emerges from Horsley’s claims is that suicide is a “female crime” because more women than men are being remanded to Clerkenwell for the crime of attempted suicide. However, if more women are being remanded because their attempts are unsuccessful, then it must be because they are less determined in their actions.

Other rationalizations for women’s lower suicide rate suggested that women were psychologically more capable of enduring physical and emotional pain, and that “a woman having fewer needs and a lower degree of sensitiveness is better adapted than a man to support not only moral suffering, but even physical privations, such as insufficient food, absence of comforts, and so on” (Lombroso 272). Examining the physiognomy and behaviours of female criminal offenders, Caesare Lombroso argues that it is men’s greater pride and depth of feelings, especially feelings of responsibility, which place them at a greater risk for self-harm. In his construction of these gender differences, Lombroso turns what are ostensibly negative characteristics and unwillingness to compromise which make the “sterner sex often prefer death” (272) into admirable qualities. At the same time, women’s resiliency becomes conflated with weakness and immorality because “a woman, with her weaker moral sense, will have recourse at last to the facile relief offered by prostitution” (272) to overcome financial hardships. A young woman who became a prostitute, however, posed a different kind of threat to the Victorian social order in the form of physical danger due to venereal diseases, as a moral threat to the middle-class family (Allen 63). This threat, according to Michelle Allen, lies in the mobility of the prostitute: “as a figure of social transgression, the prostitute thus forged ‘the link between slum and suburb, dirt and cleanliness, ignorance and civilization, profligacy and morality’” (63). The connection between the fallen woman and the prostitute is in the river as a shared final destination. “When a sexually suspect woman makes her figurative fall,” Allen argues, “she comes to a halt quite literally on the banks of the river, the lowest point in London in both geophysical and social terms” (64). For the fallen woman, “prostitution was widely considered to be a way-station
between seduction and suicide” (Braun 11). If the inherent threat of the prostitute or the fallen woman is in her ability to move between, and to exist between, the social boundaries of Victorian society, then this threat is continued in the liminal spaces occupied by the female suicide.

Female suicides who took their lives after their lovers deserted them were characterized by an excess of passion, according to Lombroso. Drawing a distinction between the prostitute and the fallen woman, he suggests that “love being, even in the normal woman, a very important element, even though as a rule she does not feel the sentiment with excessive intensity. . . for the passionate woman it must necessarily constitute almost her whole existence. To separate her from her lover is to kill her” (282). The “excessive intensity” with which the “passionate” or fallen woman feels love is something that is a part of her physical makeup rather than something which develops from specific environmental or social circumstances. While the desertion of a lover may be the catalyst for a fallen woman to end her life, it was because she was a passionate woman that she took a lover at all. In both Horsley’s argument and Lombroso’s, women’s lower suicide rates are used as evidence to support gender stereotypes that saw women either as the weaker and more superficial of the sexes who lacked the fortitude to end their lives, or as overly emotional and passionate examples of fallen womanhood.

Yet if women’s lower suicide rates could be counterintuitively attributed to a weaker moral compass, those who did end their lives were not immune to this same characterization. While the literature of the day often presented a romanticized view of female suicide, playing on the trope of the poor, seduced young woman, some essayists were adamant that women who ended their lives by suicide, were, at best, morally ambiguous in other areas of their lives. They were the ones who, when alive, were “the sort of women who . . . drink [intemperately] – the low population of our cellars and rookeries – and the outcast class” (Harriet Martineau, Once a Week, 1859). If women resisted the causes that drove some men to suicide – physical pain, financial and
social reversals – then it was because of their own moral weakness. If they ended their lives, then it was due to intemperance or sexual immorality.

Horsley was not alone in his belief that women’s vanity could act as a deterrent for self-harm. In 1864, *The Spectator* published an article on “The Probable Increase in Suicide” which recounted a fictitious anecdote in which Sir Charles Napier ended an epidemic of suicide in the river Scinde by proclaiming “that the body of the next woman who died should be hung up by one leg naked in the market-place.” By *The Spectator*’s account, “suicide ended. The women could face death, but they wanted dead or alive to look decent, and that being impossible when dead preferred to keep alive” (958). This satiric anecdote of female suicide, most likely a play on Napier’s actual prohibition of the Hindu practice of Sati, the custom which dictated a widow immolate herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, reduces women’s suicides to something worthy of mockery, and easily ended by appealing to the their vanity by making the prospect of posthumous desecration so unpleasant that it would act as a deterrent.

The *Spectator*’s anecdote, however, also speaks to the anxiety surrounding the changing relationship between punishment and suicide which took place across the Victorian period. Until 1961, suicide was a criminal act, and there were legal and financial ramifications when someone ended his or her life, including desecration of the body, and burial in unconsecrated ground, usually at a crossroad. Financially, all movable goods of the deceased were forfeit to the crown, ultimately punishing a suicide’s family. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, according to MacDonald, the legal penalties for those found guilty of suicide were rigorously enforced (“Secularization” 57). While the enforcement of punitive legal reactions to suicide lessened in the latter half of the eighteenth century and continued to lessen across the Victorian period, the legal process for determining a suicide remained the same. Following the discovery of a violent death, the coroner, generally a man of some standing within the community, was called in. The coroner, in turn, would gather men from the community to serve as a jury. Their purpose was twofold:
primarily, to determine the cause of death, and secondarily, to determine the state of mind of the deceased. To determine whether a death was a suicide, juries were called upon to determine an individual’s state of mind at the moment of death: in essence, to determine motive and intention. Was the individual of a melancholy frame of mind? Did he or she just undergo a failure in love?

If juries determined that a death was in fact an act of self-harm, then they had two possible choices in returning their verdict: either felo de se, or non comos mentis, essentially a ruling of insanity which would prevent punishment (“Popular Press” MacDonald 37-38). Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was rare for jurors to return a verdict of non comos mentis (“Secularization” MacDonald), suggesting that those responsible for interpreting the act were willing to inflict posthumous punishment on the body of the deceased, and to inflict hardship on the deceased’s family.

By the nineteenth century, jurors were showing an increased reluctance to subscribe to the dichotomy of either suicide or insanity. A verdict of felo de se, while meant to be a deterrent for others considering suicide, inflicted financial punishment on grieving families. A verdict of non comos mentis carried a different punishment in the form of societal stigma. While there was certainly a fear related to hereditary insanity (one need only look to Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre as an example), there was also a recognition that a verdict of non comos mentis could make it difficult, if not impossible, for female relatives of the deceased to secure their futures through marriage. A few centuries earlier, in cases where it was difficult to determine between an accident, murder, or suicide, coroners and jurors would have been more likely to return a felo de se verdict. Now, however, jurors were increasingly returning an open verdict, essentially a loop hole which allowed them to circumvent the existing dichotomy in cases where there was any ambiguity about intent. In cases of drowning, or overdosing, this ambiguity was particularly relevant. Since suicide is a matter of intent, a verdict hinged on how someone ended up in the water; did they enter voluntarily or did they slip and fall in? Overdoses presented
similar problems of intentionality. Doses had yet to be standardized, and the chemical compounds could differ greatly from one pharmacist to another, making it impossible to tell if an overdose was intentional or accidental. These means, favoured by women, were more likely to have an open verdict returned at trial. Even coroners’ reports, then, could position women in a liminal position as they were not suicides, yet also not accidental deaths.

With a series of burial acts beginning with 4 Geo. 4, c 52 in 1823, suicides could no longer be buried at a crossroad, although their internment in a cemetery could take place only between the hours of nine and midnight. With subsequent burial acts between 1852 and 1880, those found guilty of felo de se could be provided with a Christian burial, including religious service. Although the bodies of suicides were no longer subject to desecration, in many ways, the bodies of female suicides became contested sites for multiple, and often conflicting, narratives. In the case of Margaret Moyes⁴, for example, cultural beliefs about seduced women and unwed mothers were at odds with the grief and financial hardships that were actually experienced by the young woman. In 1838, twenty-three-year-old Moyes, a young woman from a lower middle-class home, paid her sixpence to ascend the London Monument, and threw herself from the top. In the coroner’s inquest which followed her death, it became clear that her father was ill, and the family had seen a severe reversal in their fortunes which would mean that Moyes would need to go into service. While family and friends testified that this had been weighing on her, the coroner continued to ask about the lodger who was staying with the family, and the nature of his relationship with Moyes (Times Sept 13, 1839). Despite evidence suggesting financial motivations for Moyes’s actions, the coroner seemed determined to make Moyes’s death fit the social narrative prescribed for fallen women. The public attention garnered by Moyes’s case was akin to “that of Victorian murder cases” (Gates 38) as accounts of her death were publicized in newspapers, broadsides and pamphlets across the city.

⁴ Margaret Moyes’s suicide is discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.
While newspaper accounts often sensationalized female suicides and attempted suicides, popular literature, such as Thomas Hood’s “Bridge of Sighs,” romanticized and purified the drowned woman. The poem is thought to be inspired by the trial of Mary Furley, who after being abandoned by her husband, abused in the workhouse, and unable to find work as a seamstress, attempted to drown herself and her child. While a passing boatman rescued Furley, her son was not recovered. She was charged and convicted of murder, and sentenced to hang. Public outcry from the case which was overwhelmingly sympathetic to Furley, resulted in the verdict being changed to transportation to Australia rather than execution (“Downward Mobility” Nicoletti 11). Hood’s poem, however, leaves out any mention of infanticide, and instead focuses on the suicide of a young woman. Throughout the poem, the speaker insists that her body be treated “tenderly” (5) and without judgment: to “make no deep scrutiny / into her mutiny” (21-22). The popularity of the poem cemented the association between the fallen woman and Waterloo Bridge in the Victorian imagination.\^6

Visual representations of female suicides, as with literary ones, are often associated with water; yet in these visual images, the reality of the drowned body is effaced by images of beauty, tranquility and peaceful repose, even when they are tinged with despair. One of the popular fictional suicides that was reinterpreted by Victorian artists was the death of Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Gertrude’s account of Ophelia’s death is an ambiguous one, casting doubts about whether or not Ophelia’s entry into the water was intentional:

> There is a willow grows aslant a brook  
> That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.  
> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make

\^5 A detailed analysis of “The Bridge of Sighs” is provided in chapter 2.  
\^6 See L. J. Nicoletti “Downward Mobility: Victorian Women, Suicide, and London's “Bridge of Sighs.” Olive Anderson, Barbara Gates, and Michelle Allen all suggest that “The Bridge of Sighs” is one of the first literary texts to help to shape the mythology of female suicide in London. See also Ron Brown’s *The Art of Suicide* for the way “the poem defines suicide as weakness (and woman), suicide as evil, and suicide as an effect of sin” (154).
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
Bur our cold maids do dead men’s finders call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down the weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (4.7.137-154)

This final image of Ophelia occurs off-stage in Shakespeare’s drama and is recounted by Queen Gertrude whose description of Ophelia’s death is ambiguous at best. On one hand, Ophelia “fell in the weeping brook,” which would imply an accidental rather than intentional death. Yet, she also passed some time singing, which would imply that she had time to help herself out of the water before her clothes became saturated. Barbara Smith argues that “according to the prevailing religious and cultural beliefs, there would be no hope of salvation for a suicide” (111). The ambiguity surrounding Ophelia’s death and whether she suffered from madness, becomes a rejection of “the simplistic rigidity of canon and civil law, and allows Ophelia salvation” (96-97) rather than damnation. The ambiguity in this case allows for a sympathetic reading of Ophelia that foregoes judgment.
In the nineteenth century, however, sympathy for the woman who found herself at “The Bridge of Sighs” was well established in literature, so the ambiguity we find in the literature must signal something other than a way to avoid casting undue judgment onto a woman’s death. An additional possibility presents itself in the similarities between Ophelia’s death and in the way that nineteenth century suicides are treated in literature. Aside from the ambiguities surrounding Ophelia’s death, whether she is a suicide or not, the way that her death is described by Gertrude raises questions about Ophelia’s chastity. The long purples and crow-flowers that Ophelia weaves into her garland were commonly associated with fertility, while the “grosser” names given to them by “liberal shepherds” are “priest’s-pintel’ (penis), ‘dog’s cullions’s (testicles), and “fool’s ballachs” (footnote 1740). That Ophelia fell from the willow, an “emblem of mourning and of forsaken love” (footnote 1739) while trying to hang a garland made from these particular flowers, prefigures the ambiguity associated with female suicides in the Victorian period. Both Ophelia and Victorian literary suicides resist being understood as either virgin or whore. The ambiguity which surrounds the deaths themselves creates a space in which these two dichotomies can exist simultaneously even as these characters resist being categorized as belonging to either side of the binary.

Perhaps the best known nineteenth-century image of Ophelia is John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (figure 1), which was first exhibited at the Royal academy in 1852. In Millais’ painting, the woman’s garments are almost mermaid-like in their capacity to keep the young woman afloat, lending her a mythological quality that merges the elements of water and air. A mermaid, according to Joshua Cohen, is “an equivocal figure, suggesting both innocence and sexual potency. . . . She is, in essence, a symbol of female sexuality at the threshold of sexual experience” (57). This liminal space between sexual experience and innocence is one that is mirrored in Millais’s painting. Ophelia’s body lies open to the viewer, her arms floating on each side as if ready to receive a lover as her chest floats above the water line. The hair flowing freely
around her head is ambiguous in its reference to either promiscuity or youthful innocence. The clear expression of despair on her face does nothing to detract from the beauty of the image, and in fact adds to it a sense of vulnerability. In the space between innocence and experience, or perhaps more accurately in the space within both innocence and experience, the image of Ophelia invites viewers to inscribe their own narrative interpretations on her body.

Figure 1 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1851), oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London.

Across the century, the body of the female suicide was a contested site onto which were inscribed various narrative interpretations of her actions. She was a sympathetic character who was held up for judgment; she was a chaste young woman with sexual experience; and she was an insane woman who was resistant to suicidal actions. The liminal position occupied by the suicidal woman disrupts the Victorian binaries of either chaste or fallen woman, and reasserts agency into an act that typically positioned her as a victim of circumstance, rather than an active participant in her own demise. On the surface, the texts discussed in the following chapters share little in common, although all can be read as engaging in wider cultural discourses of suicide –
particularly female suicide – which were circulating during this period. They range from the realist fiction of George Eliot to the supernatural fantasy of Bram Stoker. They include novels and poetry whose publication dates range from the 1860s to the 1890s; yet, despite these marked differences, each text can be read as an attempt to understand the experience of suicide. Part of understanding this experience involves being willing to expand the narrative of suicide beyond the limits of the physical action. Many of the texts explored in this dissertation do not have a clear depiction of the physical action of self-harm per se, yet they engage with characters who implicitly or explicitly express views that can be understood as the desire not to be, or a longing for an end to life. When I first conceived of this project, my working thesis was that suicide offered a means of resistance or rebellion for women. In a period that was only beginning to make clear parallels between suicide and mental illness, acts of self-harm could be read as political acts that provided a voice for the half of the population which was continually silenced. However, as the project took shape, it became apparent that the reality was far more complex than my original theory. While there are certainly moments of resistance in these works, they are moments that are effaced by the cultural narratives written by coroners, doctors and lawyers. Instead, I would suggest that by couching the deaths of these female characters in ambiguity by refusing to clearly identify them as suicides, these texts invest these characters with a liminality which collapses the Victorian binaries of the idealized chaste woman and the fallen woman. They exist at the intersection of life and death, resistance and submission, and eroticization and redemption.

In the next chapter, I examine the way that Victorian culture understood suicide in gendered terms, and the ways that narratives of female suicides were appropriated and reinterpreted in ways that reinforced gender stereotypes. I argue that Amy Levy’s dramatic monologues “A Minor Poet” and “Xantippe A Fragment” challenge the appropriation and reinterpretation of female suicide narratives by destabilizing the dominant cultural narratives of gender and suicide.
Chapter three turns to representations of female suicide in Victorian visual culture to contextualize my reading of Maggie Tulliver’s death in George Eliot’s realist novel *The Mill on the Floss*. I explore the ways in which water and drowning were connected to the fallen woman, suicide, and redemption in the Victorian imagination. Using the preponderance of images associating fallen women with water as a starting point, I explore the way that the water imagery in the novel becomes a way to understand Maggie’s liminal position in the novel as both a fallen and unfallen woman, and explore her drowning at the end of the novel as both an act of fate, something which she could not avoid, and also as an act of agency.

In chapter four I turn to the Gothic genre in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* to examine the relationship between moral contagion, madness and suicide. In my reading of the novel, I shift the perspective away from the physical threat that Dracula poses, and instead foreground the psychological aspects of the novel which allow us to understand the ways that Lucy and Mina as liminal figures occupying a space between life and death during their transition to vampirism are both the willing recipients of Dracula’s contagion, and also the potential vehicles by which it spreads.

In each of these chapters, I explore the ways in which ambiguity, either in a character’s means of death, or in the intentionality of a character’s death, can allow us to productively reconsider Victorian texts from a perspective that resists categorizing female characters within Victorian dichotomies of virtuous or fallen womanhood. I suggest that the ambiguous terms in which these deaths are couched provides us the opportunity to recognize the ways that suicide is encoded in Victorian texts, and the ways that this encoding of suicide positions female characters as liminal figures in these narratives who exist on the boundaries of multiple sites of categorization.
Chapter 2

The Appropriation of Female Suicide Narratives in Amy Levy’s “A Minor Poet” and “Xantippe A Fragment”

I have neither a voice nor hands, nor any friend nor a foe;
I am I – just a Pulse of Pain – I am I, that is all I know.
For Life, and the sickness of Life, and Death and desire to die;
They have passed away like the smoke, here is nothing but Pain and I.

Amy Levy, “Felo De Se With Apologies to Mr Swinburne” (1881)

The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy 1861-1889

As we can see from the introduction, Victorians were very invested in creating explanations for suicide which reinforced the status quo. This was especially true when it came to female suicides whose narratives and images were often appropriated and reinterpreted by coroners, doctors, journalists and artists, in ways that confirmed gender stereotypes. This chapter opens by establishing the context of public narratives presenting suicide within and against which Amy Levy wrote before turning to two monologues “A Minor Poet,” and “Xantippe A Fragment” (1881) which challenge the public appropriation of narratives of female suicide. In “A Minor Poet,” the male speaker’s narrative is over-written by his friend’s explanations following his death, while in “Xantippe,” the female speaker is given agency to tell her own story prior to her death. The male speaker in “A Minor Poet” provides detailed reasons and justifications for his actions which make it clear that his death is intentional, yet, the reasons that he provides are elided by the public narrative given by his friend. Xantippe’s death is depicted in far more

---

7 I use the term appropriation throughout this chapter to indicate the ways in which female suicide narratives were taken up and reinterpreted to reflect commonly held views of gender and suicide.
equivocal terms; however, Levy’s ambiguous construction of Xantippe’s death—is it suicide or natural causes?—allows her speaker to control her own narrative. By looking at these two dramatic monologues we can see the ways that cultural constructions of suicide direct the gendered responses of suicidal speakers, while also destabilizing the dominant cultural narrative. Whereas the minor poet is essentially placed in a feminized position by the end of the poem, Xantippe’s death underscores her liminal position as she is a victim of social expectations who writes her own ending.

In the epigraph that opens this chapter, the speaker, identified as a suicide by the title of the poem, articulates the experience of suicide following his death. The speaker “weary of women and war and the sea and the wind’s wild breath” (5), now finds himself “caught in the Circle of Being and held in the Circle of Pain” (13). The argument supported by the poem is that the pains of life which lead a person to suicide do not end after the act has been committed; rather, the pain continues, but without any physical means to excise it. The dead cannot “wail” or “shriek” or “tear [their] hair” or “clutch a human hand” (24-26). In offering this imagined discourse of a suicide, Amy Levy adopts a genre that emerged as a dominant poetic form in the Victorian period: the dramatic monologue. Most widely associated with Robert Browning, whose explorations of highly wrought subjectivity at a moment of crisis in poems such as “My Last Duchess” (1842) and “Porphyria’s Lover” (1836) helped define the characteristics of the form, the dramatic monologue enabled poets to represent extreme states of mind in intimate detail. It should come as no surprise then that despite the taboos and cultural anxiety associated with felo de se, Victorian poets undertook the challenge of representing the suicidal speaker.

In most instances, suicidal male speakers in dramatic monologues articulate their reasons rationally, echoing the ancient stoics who suggested that when the world was no longer a joyful place, the rational man would choose to leave it on his own terms. In the dramatic poem “Empedocles on Etna” (1852), for example, Matthew Arnold takes as his speaker the philosopher...
Empedocles who justifies his death as a freedom moments before he throws himself into the volcano, while the speaker in Alfred Tennyson’s “Despair” (1881) berates a clergyman for saving him from drowning after the speaker attempts a double suicide with his wife. In both poems, the male speakers are active agents in their ends, or attempted ends. In the final lines of “Despair,” the speaker makes it clear that the clergyman has given him a temporary reprieve, but has not actually saved him, telling him that “You needs must have good lynx-eyes if I do not escape you at last / Our orthodox coroner doubtless will find it a felo-de-se, / And the stake and the cross-road, fool, if you will, does it matter to me?” (“Despair” stanza XXI). Justifying his actions as a crisis of faith and an inability to believe in God any longer, the speaker and his wife chose suicide as rational responses to lives that no longer have meaning. In this representation, the male speaker justifies his action as a final act of hope, saying “Ah God, should we find Him, perhaps, perhaps, if we died, if we died; / We never had found Him on earth, this earth is a fatherless Hell—” (stanza IX). The speaker’s actions become a final prayer which may redeem his lost faith.

If male suicides are granted agency and reason for their actions, female suicides are rendered silent as the reasons for their actions are interpreted by others. Given this, the position of the speaker’s wife in “Despair” is both typical and troubling. Since, from the beginning of the poem, she is already drowned, we have only her husband’s version of their actions. In recounting the moments leading up to their suicide attempt, the speaker recalls:

‘Lightly step over the sands! the waters—you hear them call!
Life with its anguish, and horrors, and errors—away with it all!’
And she laid her hand in my own—she was always loyal and sweet—
Till the points of the foam in the dusk came playing about our feet.
There was a strong sea-current would sweep us out to the main. (stanza IX)

We never hear the voice of the wife, and his claim that she is “always loyal and sweet” raises troubling questions as to whether this was a clear, decisive action on her part, or whether she was
simply loyally following her husband’s plan for them. Rather than being an active participant in her death, she is literally being led into the water by “her hand.” Like Arnold and Tennyson, Levy employs the dramatic monologue to explore the mind of the suicide during the moment of crisis; however, rather than emphasizing the silencing and the appropriation of the female voice, Levy’s work, I would argue, challenges the appropriation and agency in suicide narratives by allowing Xantippe to narrate her own story and by including a second speaker’s monologue in “A Minor Poet” which reinterprets the primary male speaker’s actions.

**Women Writers’ Use of the Dramatic Monologue: Recent Feminist Scholarship**

While the dramatic monologue is a form most often associated with male poets, with Browning and Tennyson often being credited with its development in the 1830s, more recent scholarship has examined the ways that women writers have shaped the dramatic monologue with their own innovations and to suit their own needs. In “Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique” (2003), Glennis Byron argues that women poets often used the dramatic monologue as a form of social criticism. Byron suggests that whereas with poets like Browning “the speaking ‘I’ is explored as primarily subject to forces within itself,” with female poets, like Augusta Webster, “the focus is on the ‘I’ as subject to forces outside itself” (86). The emphasis on exteriority rather than interiority in relation to the speaker provided a way for women poets to “exploit the doubleness or discursive splitting that is considered characteristic of the dramatic monologue” and to reproduce it not only “through the split between poet and speaker, but more importantly through the speaker’s internalization of the ideology that defines her” (88). This doubling, according to Byron, becomes a way to explore the social conditions which create the speaker. In Levy’s poems this exploration of social conditions focuses on challenging the ways that gender directed the experience of suicide by disrupting the boundaries between the masculine and feminine subjects. The minor poet (who is male) is

---

8 See Glennis Byron’s “Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critics” for an overview of the debates about the development of the dramatic monologue.
feminized following his suicide; he retains his masculine agency in the act of suicide, but his narrative is appropriated for gossip in the public domain. While Xantippe’s death is more ambiguous than the minor poet’s obvious suicide, her confinement within the feminine space of her home surrounded by her hand-maidens, grants her the conventionally masculine privilege of being able to tell her own story, and to shape the public narrative of her death.

Kate Flint, in “. . . . As a Rule, I does not mean ‘I’: Personal Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet” (2002), claims that a “major distinguishing feature” of Victorian women poets is their “readiness to inhabit the voices, the subject positions of others” (157). This positioning of the woman poet, argues Flint, “can allow her to express her sense of being objectified, letting her speak out from a position traditionally associated with silence” (160). When the poet inhabits a male speaker, however, Flint suggests that “the adoption of a male voice often signifies a challenging of assumptions of patriarchal power” (164). I would suggest that in “A Minor Poet,” Levy’s use of a masculine speaker poses a direct challenge to the way that cultural representations of male suicide were granted agency in ways that were denied female suicides through the introduction of a second speaker at the end of the poem. Although both speakers are male, Tom, the second speaker, essentially feminizes the minor poet by appropriating and reinterpreting his narrative. Conversely, Levy’s female speaker Xantippe challenges assumptions associated with cultural myths of feminine behavior.

Alicia Ostriker, in “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking” (1982), clarifies what is at stake in Levy’s treatment of Xantippe. Women poets, she notes, often used historical subjects as a form of “revisionist mythmaking:

    whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with
new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. (72)

In her definition of revisionist mythmaking, Ostriker suggests that the use of myths and legends contains a “double power” since it exists “objectively in the public sphere” thereby conferring authority on those writing about a private self, and at the same time, “myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation – everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable” (72).

One of the critics to look at Levy’s treatment of the dramatic monologue, Cynthia Scheinberg draws on Robert Langbaum’s influential work, *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), to reexamine a critical approach which focuses primarily on male poets, suggesting that reader identification with a poetic speaker is not universal, and that sympathy or judgement for a speaker is dependent on a reader’s culture, experience and gender. In “Recasting ‘Sympathy and Judgment’: Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue” (1997), Scheinberg argues that “rather than splitting the reader's capacities for sympathy and judgment, dramatic monologues by both men and women work to reveal the contingency between powers of poetic sympathy and moral judgment,” and that “this relation between personal sympathy and moral judgment has everything to do with the aesthetic judgments that have historically worked to classify much Victorian women's poetry as didactic, sentimental, and without formal complexity” (179). Looking at Levy’s “A Minor Poet” and “Xantippe” in particular, Scheinberg identifies the absence of sympathy between speakers and auditors that is predicated on the absence of identification with the speaker, and which causes auditors, and by extension readers, to miss “the larger point that the speaker attempts to make” (180). While I agree with Scheinberg’s assessment that the auditors in these poems often miss the speaker’s larger points, I would question whether this necessarily results in a lack of sympathy for the speakers. In “Xantippe” in particular, I would suggest that sympathy is not necessarily predicated on
understanding. Xantippe’s maids may misunderstand the larger critique she makes about the position of women in their society, but they nonetheless accept her narrative without trying to influence or change it.

In looking at the ways that female poets have exploited the conventions of the dramatic monologue, we can understand the ways that Levy’s poems use male speakers and a female historical figure to complicate the very gendered dynamics that shaped the experience of suicide in the nineteenth century, and blurring the boundaries between culturally accepted interpretations of male and female suicides. In order to understand the force of Levy’s challenge, I turn first to an examination of the complicated relationship among genre, gender, and agency in the Victorian construction of suicide before undertaking a more detailed analysis of these monologues.

**Containing Female Transgression: Genre, Death, and the Victorian Cultural Construction of Suicide**

The interpretive narratives that Victorians imposed on those who ended their lives were different for each gender, and across the nineteenth century the experience of suicide was understood differently for men and women. While male suicide could be attributed to social, political or economic setbacks, female suicide was more often attributed to deviant sexual behaviours or reversals in love; at the very least, this was the first possibility explored by coroners and jurors. Suicide, like murder and other sensational exploits, was eagerly consumed by the Victorian public. So frequent were reports of suicide in Victorian media that the public appears to have become practiced readers of their narratives. As Anderson points out, Victorian views of suicide were not at all homogenous, though they did reflect specific categories:

Four different genres of suicide were very familiar: the sad, the wicked, the strange, and the comic. Each was associated with certain stock character types . . . For each type there was an appropriate vocabulary and iconography, conveying, as required, sentimental or charitable pathos, didactic moralizing, prurient or gruesome sensationalism, bizarre
interest, ironic humour, or vulgar farce. To some extent the nature of the occasion settled which vocabulary was used. (195)

I would suggest that the genres most often associated with female suicides were those that were sentimental or invoked charitable pathos, which was often combined with didactic moralizing. In the construction of the interpretations surrounding female suicides, and the association of female suicides with fallen women, there is often a tension between the desire to sympathize with a woman who was often perceived as a victim of circumstance, and the desire to use her death as a lesson to other young women about the dangers of sexual impropriety. “Male suicide,” according to Anderson, was most often shown simply as the fitting end of a villain or a weakling” (197). This may be because, as we have seen with “Empedocles on Etna” and “Despair,” the masculine speakers express rational reasons for their actions, and more importantly they are completely unrepentant of the choices they make. If female suicides were perceived as victims, then the agency granted to male suicides made their actions theirs, and theirs alone. In many ways, the context in which a particular suicide occurred would shape the lens through which it was interpreted. As Anderson suggests,

> very often . . . the tone of the discussion reflected a decision to regard a particular death as belonging to a particular genre of suicide; and this decision necessarily rested chiefly upon how the circumstances surrounding the deed were interpreted, and hence reflected not only run-of-the-mill moral and religious notions, but also popular psychological and medical ideas, and current emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. (196)

The connection between suicide and genre which Anderson notes is a useful one as it suggests that suicides did not occur in a cultural vacuum; rather, the experience of suicide was informed and shaped by the culture in which it occurred. The range of genres Anderson identifies speaks to the complexity of the issue, and the range of interpretive responses that could follow someone’s suicide.
Changing understandings of suicide towards the end of the century reinforced gender differences while also suggesting that modern women who were more active in public life were putting themselves at risk for self-harm. By the end of the century, suicide, in the minds of doctors and the general populous, was firmly entrenched in medical discourses, which meant that “medicine rather than the law came to be viewed as the most effective means by which to prevent suicides” (Laragy 739). While suicide remained a criminal act in Britain until 1961, a series of legislative reforms from 1823 to 1882 reduced the penalties associated with it, and eliminated many of the posthumous punishments that had been inflicted on suicides in earlier periods. In tracing the shift from suicide as a legal issue to suicide as a medical issue, Georgina Laragy notes that

in 1823 it became illegal to bury those found felo de se at a crossroads with a stake through their heart. In 1872 it was no longer legal for the state to confiscate the goods of a felon. Two further pieces of legislation in 1880 and 1882 ensured that those found felo de se could be buried in a consecrated ground, during the day, without police surveillance and with whatever prayers the relevant religious authorities permitted. (734-735)

The relaxation of the legislation surrounding suicide coincided with religious, secular and medical beliefs that suicide was a symptom of urbanization and modernity. Kushner explains that “to the extent that modern urban life was identified as the cause of suicide, traditional familial values were presented as the best protection against self-destruction” (“Suicide and Gender” 467). Since men were more active in urban life, it stood to reason that they were more prone to committing suicide, while women, sheltered in the domestic space of home and hearth, were protected from the ills of civilization. By the same logic, women who engaged in manly pursuits, who actively pursued activities outside of the home, were considered more likely to commit suicide. In “Insanity Suicide and Civilization” (1883), M.G. Mulhall explained the comparative suicide rates in five countries by saying that “the higher percentages for women are in the two
countries where they take an active part in business life” which “may serve as a caution to prevent them from taking part in politics, or matters best suited for men” (907). In this respect, the suicidal woman was doubly silenced. Her suicide removed her rebellious presence while also rendering her a blank slate onto which narrative interpretations of her suicide could be superimposed.

To return to Anderson’s categories of genre, I would note that even within the categories she identifies – “the sad, the wicked, the strange, and the comic” – (195) the boundaries between them were often fluid as the distinctions between sadness and wickedness were often collapsed, particularly when the suicide was a woman. One such “genre” of suicide is that of the young woman who has transgressed sexual mores and chooses death, rather than continue to live with her shame. The public’s desire to attribute female suicides to sexual impropriety had its basis in facts that were reinforced by the newspaper accounts of the day. At a time when women’s sexuality was viewed as needing to be protected and policed, it should not be surprising that when faced with a woman’s suicide, the default for coroners and juries was to look to her behaviour first when trying to find an explanation. As Anderson points out, “it was platitudinous that what protected women from suicide was their passive, secluded lives; as Durkheim wrote in 1897, ‘woman kills herself less . . . because she does not participate in collective life in the same way’” (56) as men. Women who committed suicide might then be perceived as those who did participate in collective life by taking ownership of their own sexuality. Considering the precarious position that women could find themselves in if they were seduced and abandoned, it is perhaps understandable that at least some young women might begin to see death as the preferable option.

Coroners and juries, ironically the same people who might censure a woman’s indiscretions during her life, could often times be surprisingly sympathetic to her plight after her death. On Friday, December 30, 1881, The Times reported the suicide of “Miss Emma Cummins, 23, late a barmaid in the service of Messrs. Spiers and Pond, at the Criterion, in Piccadilly” (9).
Cummins, who had accepted an offer of £25 per month for 12 months to live with Lieutenant Ponsonby, fell ill and was abandoned by him. In the letter that she left for her sister, she “distinctly charged her death on Lieutentant Ponsonby on account of his cruelty in seducing and then abandoning her” (9). When called to testify, the Lieutentant gave a different version of accounts than had been given in Cummins’ letter, but nevertheless the jury found that

Emma Cummins committed suicide while in a state of unsound mind, and that at the time the deceased was in a state of mental excitement and such unsoundness of mind produced by the miserable and unfortunate condition in which she was left by Lieutenant Henry Ponsonby, with whom she had arranged to live . . . The said jurors desire further to express their intense feelings of disgust and abhorrence of his conduct towards the deceased, as they consider him guilty of her seduction and subsequent suicide, and they are further of opinion that the said Lieutenant Henry Ponsonby, although not legally, is morally responsible for causing the death of said deceased, and that he is worthy of severest censure. (9)

The outrage of the jury and the coroner who said that “the inquiry has been one of the [most] painful it has ever been my province to preside over” (9) suggests that Victorians viewed suicide not only as a mental illness, something that occurred internally, but also as something that could be directly connected to, and blamed on, external causes. In the case of Cummins, the jury seems to overlook the circumstances under which she agreed to live with Ponsonby in the position of a kept mistress, and instead place her in the position of a victim deserving of sympathy. Arguably, however, it is only because she took her own life that the coroner and jurors are willing to grant her sympathy. Alive, and as a fallen woman, Cummins may have faced censure for her behavior.

The desire to read female suicides as victims of male malfeasance ignores other possible interpretations of their actions, including those that might grant them some agency in their decisions. The spectacle of Margaret Moyes, perhaps the most well-known female suicide of the
period, provides an apt example of exactly the kind of interpretation of female suicide that Levy’s text resists. As Gates points out, Margaret Moyes’s suicide was an “open statement of despair, committed in the most public of places, and drawing the attention of those who loved hangings and murder trials” (39). Moyes’s note provided no explanation for her actions, leaving the coroner, jury, and the public free to shape her narrative as they pleased, saying only that “you need not expect to see me back again, for I have made up my mind to make away with ----- Margaret Moyes” (Gates 40). As Gates astutely notes, the absence of the reflexive pronoun “myself” positions Moyes as both the subject and the object of the note. She is the person committed to engaging in this action, yet she is also the object that will be acted upon.

On September 11th, 1839, twenty-three year old Margaret Moyes arrived at the British Monument, chatted with the porter and told him she was waiting for friends. After about 20 minutes she ascended on her own. Her fall from that height caused horrible damage to her body which was almost gleefully recounted in news articles and broadsides. The anonymous writer of the Copy of Verses on the Melancholy Death of Margaret Moyes who Committed Suicide by Throwing herself off the Monument on Wednesday, September 11. 1839, provides an explanation for her actions noting that

This maiden’s mother had been dead,

Two years we have been told,

Her father with sickness long confin’d,

Beside he’s very old;

Which plung’d the family in distress,

That to service she must go,

That so afflicted her youthful mind,

Caus’d this dreadful scene of woe. (25-32)
As Gates suggests, the fact that Moyes was the daughter of a baker, and that she was concerned about having to go out to work suggests that she had been raised as a middle-class young lady, one who was trained to run a household rather than work in someone else’s home. While her father’s illness and the family’s reversal of fortunes certainly provide a motivation for her actions, the inquest reported in The Times shows how difficult this possibility was for the coroner to accept. During the testimony of Mr. Bowen, a close friend of the family, the jury became fixated on the army captain who was lodging with the family. One juror asked “do you think he had any intimacy with the deceased?” (5). Despite Mr. Bowen’s adamant rejection of this explanation, the coroner continued this line of questioning with Moyes’s sister, ignoring her claim that Moyes’s actions were caused by “her despondency of late, because of father’s illness, and her fear that he would die” and that having to go out in the world “affected her”; the coroner asks “did your sister have a sweetheart?” When her sister responds in the negative, he asks “did she ever tell you so or allude to it?” and follows that up with “you don’t know of any thing having passed between the captain and the deceased?” (5). The coroner’s refusal to accept the testimony of multiple witnesses who all corroborate that Moyes did not have a sweetheart, and was not romantically involved with her lodger, speaks to a systemic cultural belief that a woman’s psychological wellbeing was inextricably connected to her interpersonal relationships, especially those of a sexual nature. The coroner’s refusal to accept either Mr. Bowen’s word or Moyes’s sister’s account of the events leading up to Moyes’s death suggests a tendency towards gendered stereotypes, at least for those in a position of power, when it came to explaining self-harm. That the writer of the Copy of Verses focuses on Moyes’s circumstances rather than her gender may suggest a disconnect in perceptions of suicide between those who pass judgment on the event (doctors, coroners) and a more sympathetic populous. The widely-disseminated narratives of Cummins and Moyes attest to the practice of publicly interpreting suicide and of constructing the woman as sexual victim.
The appropriation of the female suicide narrative was not limited to coroners or jurors, and their practice of interpreting female suicides, as we saw in Tennyson’s “Despair,” was also prevalent in fictional literature. Thomas Hood’s “The Bridge of Sighs” (1844), perhaps one of the most well-known poems on the subject, reinforces the association between female suicide and immorality. The poem is thought to be inspired by the trial of Mary Furley, who after being abandoned by her husband, abused in the workhouse, and unable to find work as a seamstress attempted to drown herself and her child. In it, the poem’s speaker reflects on the sight of her body after it has been pulled from the water. Hood’s poem ostensibly falls under the genre of sad suicide as the speaker implores witnesses to

Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care;
Fashion'd so slenderly
Young, and so fair! (5-9)

Yet this sadness and plea for a sympathetic response is tempered two stanzas later when the speaker urges readers to think “Not of the stains of her / All that remains of her / Now is pure womanly” (18-20). By introducing the young woman’s transgressions into the narrative of the poem, the speaker explicitly reinforces the idea that her “stains” are the reason for her death. Yet it is through her death that the speaker is able to imagine her redemption. By the self-sacrificial act of drowning, the woman is returned to a “pure” state.

The poem continually juxtaposes the woman’s unnamed transgressions with calls for sympathy and a belief that the water has acted as a purifying agent which has washed away her sins:

Make no deep scrutiny
Into her mutiny
Rash and undutiful:
Past all dishonour,

Death has left on her

Only the beautiful. (21-26)

The characterizations that the speaker makes about the woman, that she has been “rash and undutiful,” and has committed “mutiny” (presumably against the expected or acceptable ways for a woman to behave), position her as having contributed to the circumstances which leave her no alternative beyond ending her life. Hood appropriates Furley’s narrative, altering and refashioning it in a way that requests sympathy for the “undutiful” drowned woman, even as it asks us to remember that it is only by her death that she can once again be redeemed as “beautiful.”

Illustrations for Hood’s poem emphasized the association between beauty and female suicide, while also depicting her in ways that created an uneasy tension between sympathy and judgement. In Gustave Doré’s Glad to Death’s Mystery: Swift to be Hurt (otherwise known as The Bridge of Sighs) (Figure 2), a young woman stands on the abutment of a bridge, outside of the railing. The wind blows her flowing hair back from her face and swirls her dress, revealing the outline of her legs as her left arm rests protectively over her stomach, hinting at the circumstances which have driven her to the bridge. The city looms ominously in the background, while the height of the bridge is emphasized by a lone bird flying far below. Doré’s image creates tension between sympathy with the woman’s plight and the spectacle of her eroticized image bathed in the moonlight breaking through the clouds.
Figure 2 Gustave Doré, _Glad to Death’s Mystery: Swift to be Hurt_ (also known as _The Bridge of Sighs_ (1850), engraving, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The tension between sympathy and judgement, or sympathy and eroticisation, that is seen in Doré’s painting and in the illustrations in the introduction to this dissertation, is often mediated by the idea of redemption connected to the woman’s death. In George Fredric Watts’s painting _Found Drowned_ (figure 3), c 1850, a lone woman is depicted as having washed up on the banks under a bridge, her arms stretch out on either side of her, forming a cross. The blurred grey and black background of the city, with a single star in the night sky, is seen through the archway of the bridge. The obscurity of the background stands in stark contrast to the woman’s body, bathed in a pool of light which illuminates her pale face. Framed by the archway of the bridge, the woman becomes both specter and spectacle, placed on display for the visual consumption of the
viewer. In the image of the female body, “sympathy mingles with sexual desire, as saturated clothes allow the artist to highlight or expose the female form” (Brown, 154). While the water may purify the woman and erase her sins, this redemption, paradoxically, can only occur through the artist’s sexualisation and commodification of her image.

![Image of George Frederic Watts, Found Drowned (c 1850), oil on canvas, Watts Gallery, Compton.](image)

**Figure 3 George Frederic Watts, Found Drowned (c 1850), oil on canvas, Watts Gallery, Compton.**

The appropriation of female suicides in Victorian visual and literary culture was shaped by, and reinforced, social and cultural understandings of gender in complex and often contradictory ways. As we have seen in this section, the association between suicide and the fallen woman often created tension in depictions of suicide between sympathy for women who were perceived as victims of circumstance and judgement of women who had transgressed social morals. Female suicides, both real and fictional, became interpretive battlegrounds on which sympathy and judgement, purity and eroticisation, passivity and agency all vied for narrative dominancy. In the next section, I turn to Levy’s “A Minor Poet” to explore the way she challenges the appropriation of female suicide narratives through the introduction of a second speaker at the end of the poem who overwrites and reinterprets the minor poet’s justifications for suicide.
Reimagining Agency and Appropriation: “A Minor Poet” and Male Suicide

The appropriation and reinterpretation of suicides that I have outlined above was almost exclusively applied to female suicides. This may be because of the much narrower scope of motivations ascribed to women’s suicide. As Victor Bailey found, women’s suicides were “frequently a response to the disruption of personal attachments, whether to lover, husband, or child, upon which they were emotionally dependent” (208). In the narratives of the day, this emotional dependency was often connected to female virtue. The young woman seduced and abandoned, became the primary lens through which female suicides were interpreted. Male suicides, however, were accorded a much broader range of potential reasons for their actions. Bailey suggests that male suicides “were said to be victims of powerful social or physical calamities, their self-esteem and independence threatened by unemployment, business failure, or severe illness” that was commonly interpreted as “an act of opposition to forces, whether material or physical, that menaced male pride, performance, and independence” (208). I turn first to a discussion of Levy’s “A Minor Poet,” to examine the way that she initially confirms, then overturns the Victorian cultural construction of male suicides by feminizing her speaker through the appropriation of his narrative by the introduction of a second speaker at the end of the poem.

In “A Minor Poet,” the title poem of Levy’s second collection *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884), the speaker, alone in his apartment, is in the middle of his third suicide attempt and addresses the absent Tom Leigh, a friend who had interrupted him during his first attempt. Dramatic monologues often imply the presence of an auditor, yet in “A Minor Poet,” it is readers who replace the absent Tom. While the speaker’s words are addressed to Tom, they are words he will never hear. As readers, we have access to both sides of the conversation, the speaker’s narrative and Tom’s subsequent interpretation of his death. The emphasis from the beginning of the poem is on the speaker’s individuality and his sense of exceptionalism, that his values do not match those of the rest of society. The speaker recalls that Tom

. . . lectured me a lecture, all compact
Of neatest, newest phrases freshly culled
From works of newest culture: “common good”;
“The world’s great harmonies”; “must be content
With knowing God works all things for the best,
And Nature never stumbles.” Then, again,
“The common good,” and still, “the common, good”;
And what a small thing was our joy or grief
When weigh’d with that of thousands. (10-18)

The absent Tom becomes the voice of social custom against which the speaker rails. Tom’s argument for the community, for the “common good” draws together philosophy, Christianity and Darwinism. While the speaker accuses Tom of using phrases from “works of newest culture,” Tom’s argument is instead grounded in texts that have withstood the passing of time such as Pope’s “Essay on Man” and The Bible. In both of these texts, the focus is on an individual’s connection to his community and to a higher being. For Pope, the individual cannot be separated from his or her social context, because “God and nature link’d the gen’ral frame, / And bade self-love and social be the same” (316-317). Tom’s argument is predicated on the belief that a person’s life is not in fact his or her own, but rather is something given by God to benefit the rest of humankind. A person is meant to work for the common good of the community, rather than indulging in willful, selfish or individualistic behaviours. The dual phrasing of “the common good,” and “the common, good,” creates a twofold censure of the speaker’s actions; not only is he depriving the community, the “common good” of the benefits that he may be able to offer it, he is also isolating himself from the common experiences of humankind.

The poem creates a tension between Tom’s insistence on an individual’s place within the community and the speaker’s insistence on individual freedom, even if that freedom is at odds

---

with the community. Unlike Hood’s poem, which positions the young woman as being rejected by her family and her community, which leaves her isolated and alone, Levy’s speaker rejects a community that will still welcome him. Alone in his apartment, the speaker focuses on his life as an individual experience which can never be connected to forces outside of himself:

I am myself, as each man is himself—
Feels his own pain, joys his own joy, and loves
With his own love, no other’s. Friend, the world
Is but one man; one man is but the world.
And I am I, and you are Tom, that bleeds

When needles prickle your flesh (mark, yours, not mine). (21-26)

The speaker’s concern with individual experience negates Tom’s appeal to the “common good” (11), as it suggests the impossibility of a collective understanding of human experience. In the introduction to *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry notes that “for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty,’ while for the other person it is so elusive that ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt’” (4). While Scarry is referring to physical pain, rather than emotional, I would argue that the two, in Levy’s writing, are analogous in their inability to be communicated to another person. The speaker emphasizes the individual nature of pain when he points out to Tom that “When needles prickle your flesh,” it is Tom and no one else who feels the consequences of that action. In “A Minor Poet,” this is made literally clear by the fact that the speaker is alone in his apartment. He is able to address Tom only in absentia, and even then struggles to articulate both his pain, and his longing for the “Love, beauty, sunlight, nameless joy of life” (133), that he feels he has been denied.
For Levy’s speaker, the isolation that he struggles against and the lack of “Love, beauty,” and “sunlight” in his life is directly related to his inability, and his refusal, to become part of a larger community. The speaker sees himself as “a note / All out of tune with in this world’s instrument” (51). He cannot form part of a larger instrumental whole, because his individuality strikes a discordant note. The speaker locates himself in the same kind of liminal position that I argue is associated with ambiguous female suicides, although he associates it with his (failed) poetic aspirations. He identifies himself as

A base thing, yet not knowing to fulfil
Base functions. A high thing, yet all unmeet
For work that’s high. A dweller on earth,
Yet not content to dig with other men
Because of certain sudden sights and sounds
(Bars of broken music; furtive, fleeting glimpse
Of angel faces ‘thwart the grating seen)
Perceived in Heaven . . . (52-59)

The speaker, then, who dwells on earth, is an amalgamation of baseness and highness, yet is unable to fit himself into any of these categories. He exists on the boundaries of these categorizations, at once part of, yet separate from others. Unlike female suicides, however, who are placed in this liminal position because they have transgressed social norms, the liminal male speaker is the one who places himself in this position through his refusal to be content with his lot in life. He endeavors to be a “high thing,” yet recognizes that he ill equipped to meet this goal. At the same time, he also refuses to be content with a life of mediocrity, to “dig with other men.”

The association between the male suicidal speaker and female suicides is reinforced through Levy’s introduction of Tom, a second speaker in the epilogue who appropriates and interprets the speaker’s death. Scheinberg, discussing the interplay between speaker and auditor
in Levy’s dramatic monologues, points out that Tom fundamentally misinterprets the meaning that the minor poet has tried to assign to his death. Scheinberg argues that “because the minor poet voices language that is so far from the dominant Victorian epistemology of "the common good," his words are necessarily not heard and the significance of his action actually rewritten to suit his reader's beliefs” (“Sympathy and Judgement” 183). Tom suggests that

... I sometimes doubt

If they have not, indeed, the better part –

These poets, who get drunk with sun, and weep

Because the night or a woman’s face is fair. (195-198)

Through his partial romanticisation of the suicidal figure, Tom attributes his death to an excess of poetic melancholy while he simultaneously “regurgitates,” as Holly Laird notes, “one of the most common Victorian judgments of [male] suicides, that they are narcissistic, or in Victorian parlance, ‘self-centred’” (94). Tom associates the poet’s excessive emotionality with primarily pleasant occurrences – the sun, the fairness of a woman’s face – yet the poet remembers only fleeting pleasures, “brief hints of melody” (166) in the otherwise “jarring discord” (165) of his life. In reinterpreting the minor poet’s death in terms that fit the genre of the self-centered suicide, Tom renders the minor poet silent by overwriting the reasons he provides for his actions.

The silence of the minor poet is reinforced through the remains of “Poems half-writ” (182), and “the scattered pages of a tale, / A sorry tale that no man cared to read” (185-186) that Tom finds in the poet’s apartment. Scheinberg suggests this passage confirms that the poet “never finishes nor publishes his projects,” and argues that since there was no suicide note, and the speaker seems to have never published any of his work, “the very status of the monologue the reader has just read is called into question, suggesting we had access to a voice of the poet never before recorded, except, perhaps to Tom himself in conversation with the poet” (Women’s Poetry and Religion 216). While the minor poet’s death is not ambiguous in the same way as female
suicides – he definitely ends his own life – his lack of definitive motivations committed to paper allows the narrative the reader has just heard to be over-written by Tom.

By ending the poem with Tom’s words, rather than the speaker’s, the poem mirrors the medical and legal systems which attempted to provide meaning to suicides. Although Tom rejects the reasoning of the “women” who say he “died for love” and the “men” who posit that he died for “lack of gold, or cavilling” (200-201), he nonetheless situates the poet within his own worldview. While Tom has “no word at all to say” (202) about the various theories circulating about the speaker’s demise, he surmises that

... I had deem’d him more philosopher;

For did he think by this one paltry deed

To cut the knot of circumstance and snap

The chain which binds all being? (204-207).

By referencing the “chain which binds all being,” Tom returns the poem to the speaker’s rumination on and rejection of the ‘common good,’ and draws attention to his utter misreading of the poet’s actions. As Scheinberg suggests, “Tom’s final assertion that there is a ‘chain which binds all being’ is exactly the concept that the minor poet’s philosophy at the start of the poem rejects” (Women’s Poetry and Religion 217). The minor poet, much like female suicides, becomes a blank slate onto which interpretations of his death can be written. With Tom’s appropriation of the poet’s suicide, the poet becomes reinserted into a communal narrative which alive, he had fundamentally rejected.

Reimagining Agency and the Rejection of Appropriation: Xantippe

Turning from the feminization of the minor poet through Tom’s appropriation of his narrative, I now turn to Levy’s female suicidal speaker in “Xantippe,” who is able tell her own story and thereby control the public narrative of her death. In choosing a historical figure as her speaker, Levy “adopts a common strategy of Browning's and Tennyson's” (“Sympathy and Judgement” 180). Deborah Epstein Nord suggests that “Xantippe” is one of Levy’s most feminist
poems by giving voice to “the rejected and ridiculed wife of Socrates, famous for her legendary shrewishness and slow wit” who “reveals what it was like to be married to the ‘high philosopher’ who ‘Deigned not to stoop to touch so slight a thing / As the fine fabric of a woman's brain’” (749). Levy, then, uses a strategy associated with male poets to create a space in which to reimagine and reclaim Xantippe’s story in a way that resists appropriation.

In choosing to read Xantippe’s death as a suicide, I follow Karen Weisman’s interpretation in “Playing with Figures: Amy Levy and the Forms of Cancellation” (2001). For Weisman, both “A Minor Poet” and “Xantippe” blur the boundaries between elegy and dramatic monologue. Weisman’s argument, however, is dependent on reading Levy’s own suicide into the poems, as they “become elegies, of a sort, for both their subjects and their suicidal author” (60). While I agree with Weisman that Xantippe’s death can be interpreted as an act of suicide, I would also suggest that her death is far more ambiguous than Weisman’s article would have us believe. It is in this ambiguity, and in Xantippe’s position as a rebellious woman, that the coded references to suicide become clear. By reading these poems against one another, we can clearly see the differences between masculine ideals of suicide which privilege rational thought followed by action, and the encoding of female suicide which situates Xantippe at the boundary between victim and rational, active agent of her own future.

While the minor poet’s death is clearly a suicide, Xantippe’s death is far more ambiguous. The poem opens to Xantippe asking “What, have I waked again? I never thought / To see the rosy dawn, or ev’n this grey, / Dull, solemn stillness, ere the dawn has come” (1-3). These lines could be interpreted as an aging Xantippe recognizing that her death is near; however, Xantippe’s surprise could also be read as a coded reference to her having ingested something which should have prevented her awakening. This ambiguity situates Xantippe in a liminal space as her death can be read as caused either by suicide or natural causes. Reading her death as a
suicide, however, introduces the possibility of agency into a life in which “hope [had] died out” (235) and only bitterness remained.

While Xantippe is initially alone, she is quickly joined by her maids, the auditors who will bear witness to her final moments, and who are charged with understanding Xantippe’s story as a cautionary tale as she says “the gods forgive me! Sorely have I sinned / In all my life. A fairer fate befall / You all that stand there. . .” (273-375). Unlike many fictionalized female suicides whose sins are of a sexual nature, Xantippe’s transgression, like the minor poet’s, is to believe herself an exception to social rules. While the minor poet’s exceptionalism is tied to his rejection of community, and a desire for independence, Xantippe’s is located in her desire to belong to a specific community: her husband’s community of scholars from which she is excluded because of her gender. While the minor poet actively rejects the community to which Tom imagines he belongs, Xantippe’s desire for education makes it impossible for her to find companionship with other women, or with male scholars:

![poem](image)

With her marriage to Socrates, Xantippe imagines that she has found access to the higher knowledge which she seeks. She imagines being “guided by his wisdom and his love, / Led by his word, and counselled by his care” which would “lift the shrouding veil” (88-90), yet she finds that Socrates “Pregnant with noble theories and great thoughts” (117) sees his wife as nothing
more than a “goodly household vessel” (124). The liminal position that Xantippe occupies outside of any community is the source of her bitterness, and the shrewishness by which she is remembered in history.

Xantippe’s shrewish behavior, however, has its roots in the way that she has been treated by her husband and by the intellectual community of Athens. While bringing wine to Socrates, Xantippe pauses on the edge of his gathering to spy on the masculine community from which she has been excluded, only to find that Perikles has found a woman that Socrates deems worthy of inclusion in his teachings. Speaking of Aspasia, Socrates claims that she

```plaintext
. . . hath a mind,
I doubt not, of a strength beyond her race;
And makes employ of it, beyond the way
Of women nobly gifted: woman’s frail –
Her body rarely stands the test of soul;
She grows intoxicate with knowledge; throws
The laws of custom, order, ‘neath her feet,
Feasting at life’s great banquet with wide throat. (165-172)
```

Positioning Aspasia as the exceptional woman that Xantippe desired to be, Socrates suggests she is a woman “beyond her race” who is able to dedicate body and soul to higher planes of philosophical thinking without turning into a monstrous parody of femininity who uses knowledge to destroy everything in her path. The irony, of course, is that because Aspasia comes from “realms afar” (164) there is a good chance that she has not been subjected to the exclusionary practices that limit women’s education in Athens. The poem implies that what Socrates views as Aspasia’s exceptionalism is merely the result of her access to education.

Xantippe’s lack of education, however, also prevents her from being able to articulate her outrage in ways that will allow her to be heard or understood by this community. When
confronted with her husband’s respect for Aspasia’s intellect, and his disregard for women in general, Xantippe emerges from her hiding place at the boundary of the masculine community to argue against Socrates’ view of women:

By all great powers around us! can it be
That we poor women are empirical?
That gods who fashioned us did strive to make
Beings too fine, too subtly delicate,
With sense that thrilled response to ev'ry touch
Of nature's and their task is not complete?
That they have sent their half-completed work
To bleed and quiver here upon the earth?
To bleed and quiver, and to weep and weep,
To beat its soul against the marble walls
Of men’s cold hearts, and then at last to sin! (178-187)

Xantippe’s outraged argument is grounded in feeling rather than in philosophical thought. Her exclusion from this community of male intellectuals makes it impossible for her to employ their language in her argument. While the minor poet grounds his argument in reason, Xantippe appeals to feelings, noting the bleeding, quivering and weeping that are women’s destiny within the current social organization of Athens. Within this cultural construct, it is inevitable that women sin; kept confined and caged, a woman’s soul will eventually rebel, thereby reaffirming the practice of keeping them excluded from greater participation in civic life.

Like those of the minor poet, Xantippe’s words are disregarded because her argument is grounded in a fundamentally different philosophical framework than that of her auditors. While the minor poet constructs his argument for suicide based on individuality over community, Xantippe’s argument for inclusion is based on emotion rather than philosophical reasoning. Due
to this difference, her appeal is met with “Plato’s narrow eyes and niggard mouth” (193), and Alkibiades’ “laughing lips” and “contemptuous shrugging up” of “Soft, snowy shoulders” (200-203). The response from Socrates, filled with the “weight of cold contempt” (211), however, is the one that provides the final, crushing blow to Xantippe’s hope of ever gaining entry into this community as he says

I thank thee for the wisdom which thy lips
Have thus let fall among us: prythee tell
From what high source, from what philosophies
Didst cull the sapient notion of thy words? (206-209)

Socrates dismisses Xantippe’s argument, and Xantippe herself, by demanding that she use the language that she has been denied. Having been prohibited from learning the philosophies which would have legitimized her claims, Xantippe is left humiliated and silenced.

The reception, and (to return to the way that jurors appropriated the narratives of female suicides) hearing that Xantippe’s story is given when she tries to articulate her feelings to Socrates and his students is very different from the hearing it receives within the confines of the domestic space when surrounded by female community. In the final moments of her life, Xantippe rejects the isolation and bitterness which have characterized her life, telling her maids that “Oft have I chidden, yet I would not chide / In this last hour; – now all should be at peace” (10-11). Her death allows her to access and appreciate female companionship, and it is within the confines of a female community that she is able to tell her story. Although Xantippe is still somewhat distrustful of this female community, anticipating that her story may be misinterpreted, the potential for misinterpretation is very different than the appropriation that characterizes Tom’s misreading of the minor poet’s death, or Socrates’ complete dismissal of her narrative. As Xantippe finishes recounting the events of her life she addresses the maidens directly saying

You weep, you weep; I would not that ye wept;
Such tears are idle; with the young, such grief

Soon grows to gratulation, as, “her love

Was withered by misfortune; mine shall grow

All nurtured by the loving,” or “her life

Was wrecked and shattered – mine shall smoothly sail.”

Enough, enough. In vain, in vain, in vain! (266-271)

Reading this passage, Scheinberg suggests that Levy creates the appearance of sympathetic auditors, only to undercut this sympathy with the realization that “even other women will not identify with her experience, on the contrary, will work to differentiate themselves from her misfortune” (“Sympathy and Judgment” 181-182). While it is true that Xantippe’s repeated cry of “in vain” suggests her own concern with her inability to transmit her feelings to her audience, I would argue that the women’s tears are in fact a form of sympathetic engagement with Xantippe’s narrative, a sympathy that is independent of any potential to misunderstand her meaning. The crux of Xantippe’s narrative is that all women who have higher aspirations than being a household object will find themselves like her at the end of her life. She offers her story as a cautionary tale, but because the maidens are young and without her life experiences, she recognizes that she gives this message “in vain” since they will be unable to see themselves in her story. The inability of the maids to grasp Xantippe’s message, however, does not mean that they misinterpret the story itself. Their tears signify that they have heard her story, and that they do experience sympathy for her circumstances. Whether the maids can generalize Xantippe’s experiences to their own is not as important as the fact that they have heard and responded to her story.

Both the minor poet and Xantippe occupy liminal spaces that exist at the boundaries of communities. It is through the liminality of these speakers, however, that Levy is able to challenge cultural attitudes which appropriated the narratives of female suicides, reducing women
who took their own lives to empty slates on which coroners, jurors and medical professionals could inscribe their own interpretations for these women’s actions. In Levy’s innovative inclusion of Tom, the second speaker at the end of “A Minor Poet,” she makes transparent the ways in which this cultural appropriation occurs. The minor poet, despite having provided reasoned, rational arguments for his suicide, is rendered silent at the end of the poem as Tom, and the larger public discussion of his death, ascribe meaning and motivations to his actions that we, as readers, know are inaccurate. Following his death, the minor poet is feminized as he is subjected to the same cultural processes that were typically applied to female suicides. In the end, he is rendered silent and written out of his own narrative. In “Xantippe,” the death of Levy’s speaker is depicted in far more ambiguous terms which blur the boundaries between suicide and natural causes, and by extension complicates issues of consent. It is because of this ambiguity, however, that Xantippe is able to tell her own story to a community of sympathetic female auditors. In the absence of male figures who have medical or legal authority to pass judgement on suicides, Xantippe’s ambiguous death creates the opportunity for her to tell her own story. While Xantippe’s maids may misunderstand the lesson that she tries to impart with her story, it is a misinterpretation of how it applies to them, rather than a reinterpretation of her narrative.
Chapter 3

Drowning in Ambiguity: George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*

With George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, we turn from the lyric suicidal speakers in Amy Levy’s dramatic monologues to a realist representation of the difficulties of interpersonal relationships in a rural, lower middle-class family in Victorian England. The novel follows the female protagonist, Maggie Tulliver, from childhood to young adulthood as she struggles to assert her independence in a family that has very clear expectations for women’s behaviour. At every stage of her life, Maggie oscillates between the categories of rebelliousness and submission as she struggles to accept culturally normative female roles. In the novel’s refusal to place her definitively in either category, Maggie comes to occupy a liminal space. As her individual desires conflict with the desires of her family, Maggie is both rebellious and submissive, defiant and contrite. This equivocal state of liminality is nowhere more significant than in the novel’s treatment of her death. Like the deaths of the other female characters discussed in this dissertation, Maggie’s drowning is presented ambiguously; while most critics treat the death as an accidental drowning, it is never clearly articulated whether her death is accidental, an act of fate or circumstance, or intentional. However, given the Victorian cultural association of water with the suicidal fallen woman, I will argue that the coded iconography of suicide embedded in the novel situates Maggie’s death at the boundary of suicide and circumstance, which in turn, allows us to understand her character as both virtuous and fallen.

Part of the challenge with undertaking a study of suicide in literature is the complexity with which it appears in texts in often subtle ways. Characters do not always explicitly express a desire for the end of life, or connect physical action to their desires; nonetheless, their texts are permeated with signs and symbols that would signal a subtext of suicide to Victorian readers. In many ways, George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* (1860) represents a distinctly mid-Victorian way of
talking about suicide in that references to self-harm are signalled in coded and oblique language.
The drowning of the novel’s main character, Maggie Tulliver, is not openly referred to as a suicide, nor do any other characters in the novel take their own lives, yet the novel is permeated with water imagery which draws on the visual iconography of female suicide with which most Victorians would have been familiar. By following Maggie from early childhood to young adulthood, the novel becomes a cautionary tale connecting Maggie’s unconventional femininity to her inevitable ending of being ‘found drowned.’

Agency or accident: critical responses to the end of the novel

Critical responses to *The Mill on the Floss* fall into two categories: those that read Maggie’s character as rebellious and unrepentant, and therefore needing to be excised from the text as a type of the fallen woman, and those who read her instead as inevitably a victim of circumstance and social ostracism. Critics such as Nina Auerbach and Neil Hertz conclude that Maggie’s passionate nature cannot be contained and thus Eliot writes her out of the novel. In “The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver” (1975), Auerbach interprets the novel through the lens of the Gothic, positioning Maggie as witch, vampire and siren who feeds off others in her insatiable desire to be loved. She is a “woman whose primordially feminine hunger for love is at one with her instinct to kill and to die” (171). Arguing that “Maggie’s recurrent pattern of action is to enter worlds and explode them” (157), Auerbach suggests that “the defaced dolls, shattered card houses, and spoiled hopes with which Maggie's life is littered” carry the novel from “respectability down toward Gothicism” (158-159). Given the way that Auerbach reads Maggie’s destructiveness, it is not surprising that she regards Maggie’s behaviour during the flood as intentionally luring her brother out of a situation of relative safety inside the house to the dangers that lie in the flood waters, thereby ensuring that he will never again leave her.

In “George Eliot’s Life-in-Debt” (1995), Hertz examines the nature of authorship and obligation in the interconnectedness of “authority, indebtedness, emotional attachment, and
dangerous passion” (63) in the novel. In his reading, Maggie, as a superfluous sister characterized by concealment and illimitable want, is not merely a passionate character, she is “allegorized as Passion herself, as a figure at once of the natural and of the superfluous, a supplementary force as potentially dangerous as a flood, a messenger from the land of debt, the sort of natural disaster that invariably leaves its mark” (68). For Hertz, “that is why she must be destroyed like an IOU, buried, however equivocally, with whatever tokens of affection and honor, before the novel can end” (68). In both Auerbach’s and Hertz’s readings of the end of the novel, Maggie acts with independence and agency; this agency, however, is located within the realms of passion, rebelliousness, and sorcery which ignore the circumstances which influence her actions.

On the other side of this dichotomy between agency and accident, critics have positioned Maggie as a victim of circumstance whose death is an inevitable forgone conclusion. Drawing Hertz’s reading of indebtedness into a more explicitly economic reading, Deanna Kreisel argues in “Superfluity and Suction: The Problem with Saving in The Mill on the Floss” (2001) that Maggie is the victim “not so much of her self-denial or of her appetites alone, as of her confusion of the two; the economic imperatives of the novel require and bring about her elimination and that of her threatening desires and even more threatening self-abnegation” (99). Reading Maggie as being as extreme in her hunger for more as she is in her self-denial, Kreisel locates Maggie’s expulsion from the text in reasons that are beyond her ability to control. Maggie’s existence, according to Kreisel, questions Victorian economic assumptions related to saving and demand which “the ruling ideology of Victorian economic thought is not prepared to consider or countenance” (89).

Like Kreisel, Helen Emmit reads Maggie’s death as inevitable. In “‘Drowned in a Willing Sea’: Freedom and Drowning in Eliot, Chopin, and Drabble” (1993), Emmit argues that from the beginning of the novel, Maggie’s end is predetermined and “fated, unlike that of the true suicide, who steps in and foils fate” (318). Katherine Hanley makes a similar claim in “Death as
an Option: the Heroine in Nineteenth-Century Fiction” (1981), noting that Maggie’s death is “unconsciously sought throughout the novel and consciously welcomed when its inevitability is realized” (197). These readings, however, fall into the same binaries as Auerbach’s and Hertz’s readings. For most critics, Maggie can be either a rebellious, threatening presence, or a victim of fate, but not both.

The one critic who addresses Maggie’s death as suicide is Elizabeth Ermarth, who, in “Maggie Tulliver’s Long Suicide” (1974), argues that The Mill on the Floss could be interpreted as a novel about the complete submission of Maggie’s autonomy to the whims and emotional blackmail of her family. She suggests that Maggie learns to resist asserting her own will, because every time she tries she is punished with the withdrawal of affection by family members. Thus, according to Ermarth, Maggie learns to submit to the will of others and never develops a sense of her own authority. The price that Maggie must pay for “feminine affection and ‘feminine’ self-sacrifice is suicide” (601), since “human death comes not only with the deprivation of oxygen but with the deprivation of mental, imaginative, and emotional life” (601): all the things that Maggie forsakes in an effort to be the kind of woman her family wants her to be. “Maggie’s literal drowning,” according to Ermarth, “is merely physical corroboration of the more important disaster” (601). She makes a strong case for the way that Maggie is unable to “mobilize the inner resources that might have saved her because ‘years of denial’ have made repression her instinctual response (587).

In contrast, I would assert that while Maggie is motivated by a need for love and affection, this need does not negate her own personality. In fact, it is the tension that exists between her acts of rebellious independence and submissive self-denial that shape the ambiguity surrounding her death. Given the Victorian cultural associations of women and suicide, we can see the ways that Maggie’s death positions her as both the suicidal fallen woman who casts herself on the waters, and as a passive victim of circumstances.
Drowning women and the Victorian Imagination

Throughout the nineteenth century, bodies of water – rivers, lakes, ponds – are the final destinations for those, particularly women, who have transgressed societal strictures. As Olive Anderson notes, “in the iconography of the day any young woman depicted as lingering near deep water was immediately understood to be deserted or ‘fallen’, and contemplating suicide” (197). In her assessment of suicide during this period, Anderson outlines the differences between men’s and women’s chosen means of self-harm, and the cultural narratives which often accompanied these means. She points out that

The age-old contrast between male and female suicide depicted suicide as an escape from sexual dishonour for women, but from worldly dishonour for men; now it was emphasized and elaborated and given a distinctive emotional, moral, and symbolic twist. Among women, suicide by drowning was shown as the reluctant last resort of the seduced and abandoned (and therefore starving and despairing); whereas among men, suicide by shooting, throat-cutting, or hanging was presented as the quickly chosen escape of the proud, the weak, or the wicked from financial ruin, disgrace, or retribution. (196-197)

This polarized view of men’s and women’s reasons for and means of suicide, was the primary interpretive narrative for intentional end of life throughout the century. The dominance of this gendered understanding of suicide can be seen in newspaper accounts, criticism, literature and visual culture from the period. Given the liminal position of both virtuous and fallen woman that Maggie occupies by the end of The Mill on the Floss, and that her death is caused by drowning, it is useful to understand the way that Victorian culture constructed and shaped the visual narrative of drowning women.

10 See Caesare Lombroso and William Ferrero’s chapter on suicide in The Female Offender for his discussion of the differences between male and female suicides. See also Olive Anderson’s Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England, and Victor Bailey’s “This Rash Act”: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City for their discussions of the ways suicide was understood in terms of gender differences.
While there are occasionally other visual representations of female suicides during this period, including a “Suicide on a Railway,” from the *Illustrated Police News* in 1877, featuring a decapitated woman, the preponderance of images involve drowning and can usually be categorized into two main themes: either falling women, or despairing women near bodies of water. These images visually capture the liminal position of the female suicide; the falling women are caught between air and water, forever suspended between the two, while the images of women next to the water depict a moment of expectation as the water becomes the threshold between life and death. Within the first category of falling women, illustrations by unknown artists for written works as diverse as G. M. W. Reynolds’ Penny Dreadful *Mysteries of London* (1846) and Dion Boucicault’s drama *After Dark* (1868) illustrate this point. *The Leap From the Window* (Figure 4) and *Eliza’s Attempted Suicide* (Figure 5) feature women who remain suspended in the air, caught in the act of falling, but never actually hitting the ground. Rather than drowning, a more passive means of suicide, the “soaring [of women] is — for a moment — an act of autonomy or self-assertion” because “symbolically, flying signifies raising oneself, both in terms of status and in terms of morality” (Gates 142). The collapsing of binaries that blur the boundaries between falling and soaring reinforces the liminality of the female suicide. The act of falling becomes an act of redemption wherein the falling woman is at once fallen and virtuous. While Maggie’s death in *The Mill on the Floss* is a result of drowning rather than falling, in the moment of her death she returns to a pre-sexual state of childhood innocence in which she is permanently reunited with Tom “living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together” (542). Although it is clear that this idealized moment was never, in fact, a part of Maggie’s childhood, it is provided at the moment of her death as a form of consolation and redemption.
While the idea of redemption is present in many depictions of female suicide, other images also attempted to approximate a ‘real’ experience of suicide. Stage dramas from this period reinforced the visual relationship between women and falling, dramatizing suicides on stage, while also using the suicidal moment as title illustrations to advertise the play. Michael Booth argues that “in order for the dramatization of urban social problems such as poverty, homelessness and drink, to hold the attention of the London working- and lower-middle class audiences – who knew these things well from first-hand experiences of them – at least a surface realism had to be created” (219). The real experience, or at least the “surface realism” that was created in dramatizations of these social issues, included some representation of female suicide. Charles Selby’s London by Night (1886) (Figure 6), like a number of plays including Edward Stirling’s The Bohemians; or, the Rogues of Paris (1843), W. T. Moncrieff’s Scamps of London
(1843), and Dennery and Grangé’s *Les Bohémiens de Paris* (1843), brought the suicidal female directly to theatre audiences. As stage production and set construction became more advanced, there was greater opportunity to provide realism in the form of the suicidal woman to London audiences (Booth).\(^{11}\)

Illustrations of falling women emphasized the liminality of the female suicide by visually locating her equidistant between the ground and the sky. In the title illustration for the 1886 production of *London by Night*, for example, Louisa almost seems to be floating rather than falling. Her upper body, with her arms stretched out to the sides, suggests crucifixion and the associated redemption. Her lower body, however, is sexualized. With her skirt billowing behind her, the front is pressed against her body, outlining her curves. With her body arched backwards, it is difficult to tell whether the slight protrusion of her abdomen is a result of body positioning, or if it is a sign of an illegitimate pregnancy. Her hair, already falling loose, or loosened by her fall, streams out behind her, adding to the suggestion that it is her sexual impropriety which has led her to this end.\(^{12}\) For those who had not already seen the play, the layers of meaning apparent in the image of Louisa’s fall would immediately identify her as a fallen woman.

---

\(^{11}\) However, these theatrical advancements were not without risk to the women playing the part of the suicidal character:

On Monday night, during the first performance of the *Bohemians of Paris* at the Surrey Theatre, Mrs. R. Honner met with a most unfortunate accident. In the first act she has to jump from a bridge to the stage, a height of nearly fifteen feet, and in doing so she missed the mattress that should have broken her fall. Mrs. Honner was so seriously injured as to render it uncertain when she may be able to appear again. (qt. from *Pictorial Times* 1843 in Meisel 139).

To authentically approximate the ‘real’ London meant putting an actress at risk by imitating the falling/fallen women from which these plays drew their inspiration.

\(^{12}\) Drawing on the connections Thomas Laqueur makes between sexuality and the social body, Galia Ofek, in *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* argues that “while a girl’s loose hair denoted innocence and virginity, on ‘attaining maturity, or on her marriage’, she had to ‘put it up’: her hair was assigned a new value which marked her new conjugal and parental obligations” (7-8).
The title page for *London by Night* which echoes George Cruikshank’s *The Drunkard’s Children* no. 8 (Figure 7) is a perfect example of the visual liminal space occupied by falling/flying women. Cruickshank, a reformed alcoholic and Charles Dicken’s first illustrator (Fitzsimons) created a folding book which follows the lives of a brother and sister through their decline into criminality, the brother’s transport, and the sister’s decision to end her life. The moon, shown through the archway, illuminates the two men in the top right corner who bear witness to the scene. The whiteness of the girl’s dress stands out against the stone of the bridge. Her body language, her torso bent backwards at an awkward angle, and her hand covering her face suggest uncertainty in her decision and emphasizes this as a final desperate choice. Directly
above the girl’s suspended body, there is a mark on the stone in the shape of angel. The black jacket and white skirt of the girl is the opposite of the black body and white wings of the angel facing away from the falling girl. This opposition adds a layer of ambiguity to the image as the angel figure could be interpreted as passing judgement on the girl by turning away from her as she is in the process of ending her life. Its very presence in the image, however, could also suggest that the young woman is not being denied a chance to find peace, despite her final actions.

The second category of female suicides, those in or near water, include Paul de La Roche’s *The Young Martyr* (figure 8) and John Atkinson Grimshaw’s *The Lady of Shalott* (figure 9). Just as Maggie, the socially perceived fallen woman, finds her final end in the waters of the Floss, the women in these images occupy a visual space that signals their fallenness, yet is also suggestive of redemption. In both paintings, the women are dressed in white, signifying innocence or virtue, and their white dresses stand out against the darkness. In Grimshaw’s painting especially, the white dress stands out against a red background, almost as if the world
around the Lady of Shalott’s boat is burning, creating a visual hell in which she is the only purity. While the young woman in de La Roche’s painting may not necessarily be a suicide, the way her body is posed and the halo which is the light source of the picture are similar to the ways that women’s drownings were often depicted. As a means of death, martyrdom occupies an ambiguous space in the context of this dissertation as it blurs the boundaries between suicide as an act of agency, and murder which situates the deceased as a victim. In her examination of the legacy of Christian martyrs, Joyce Salisbury notes that for some early Christians there was little difference between suicide and martyrdom as some people would seek out persecution in order to affirm their faith. Salisbury draws on the early writings of Tertullian who “argued that God was the author of persecution, using it as a way to create his beloved martyrs” (118). Therefore, early Christians “were to embrace the opportunity to die for their faith, even if it meant volunteering” (118). I include the image of The Young Martyr within a discussion of suicide because the image exemplifies not only the ambiguity that is present in determining whether we read the death as a suicide or not, but also in the way that it positions the young woman as both active agent and victim.

Right: Figure 8 Paul de La Roche, The Young Martyr (1855), oil on canvas, Delaware Art Museum.
Left: Figure 9 John Atkinson Grimshaw, The Lady of Shalott (1878), oil on canvas, Private Collection.
Women gazing longingly at the water was a way for both novelists and artists to provide a coded reference to suicide by emphasizing hopelessness and despair. Hablot Browne’s illustration for Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (Figure 10) shows the fallen Martha staring at the water with her foot already partially submerged while David and Mr. Peggotty approach from behind her. In the text that accompanies the image, Martha repeats “Oh, the river!” several times before explaining “I know it’s like me! . . . I know that I belong to it. I know that it’s the natural company of such as I am! . . . I can’t keep away from it. I can’t forget it. It haunts me day and night. It’s the only thing in all the world that I am fit for, or that’s fit for me” (580). For the fallen woman struggling with the choices that she has made, or has been driven to make, the water becomes a final refuge.

![Figure 10 Hablot K. Browne. The River. Illustration for chapter 47, "Martha," in Charles Dickens' David Copperfield (1850).](image)

As a final example of the Victorian impulse to visually link fallen women to water, I turn to Augustus Leopold Egg’s *Past and Present, no. 3, Despair* (1858) (Figure 11) for the way that it blurs the distinctions between sympathy and judgement that so often surrounded the female suicide. *Past and Present, No. 3* is the third image in a triptych which, when viewed together, detail the destruction of a family following the wife’s affair. The first picture shows the family in the drawing room in the moment the wife’s adultery is revealed. The center picture (originally
displayed as a flanking image) is a night five years later which shows the two daughters alone following their father’s death. The older child comforts the younger one as she stares out the window at the moon. The third, and final image, shows the mother sheltering under the archway of a bridge, staring longingly at the water. The small legs that peek out from under her cloak suggest that this child may have been the result of her adultery. Clearly connecting the woman’s current circumstances with previous sexual indiscretions, the artist has placed directly behind her a poster advertising two plays at the Haymarket Theatre, Victims and The Cure for Love.

According to the Tate Gallery, where these pictures are currently displayed,

when the set of pictures was first shown at the Royal Academy in 1858, the drawing-room scene was hung between the other two. They were exhibited with no title, but with this subtitle, ‘August the 4th - Have just heard that B - has been dead more than a fortnight, so his poor children have now lost both parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been!’

(Tate Gallery)

The moon that shines through the archway the woman is sheltering under connects her to her daughters who are viewing the same moon from their garret window. In John Ruskin’s Academy notes from 1858, he notes that “the same little cloud is under the moon. The two children see it from the chamber in which they are praying for their lost mother, and their mother, from behind a boat under a vault on the river shore” (qtd on Tate website). Given that the two daughters are now left without either parent, there is a suggestion that while the mother’s willing choices led her to this end, the daughters may end up in similar circumstances due to necessity.
Figure 11 Augustus Leopold Egg. Despair [Past and Present, 3] (1858), oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London.

The predominance of female suicide in visual culture, especially in cases where it was romanticized or sensationalized, contributed to concerns about the decline of morality in the arts which increasingly saw instruction replaced with sensationalism. In 1863, J. N. Radcliffe voiced the concern that literature, particularly the new genre of the sensation novel, was being influenced too heavily by French writers, and was contributing to a rise in “Wertherism” in England. For Radcliffe, the “Werther school of fiction” was characterized by “the morbid exaggeration of feeling; the scepticism by which man panders to his sensuality; the tendency to confound vice and virtue, and unsettle the fundamental notions of reality; and the habit of invoking suicide as a legitimate means of escape from evils of our own creation” (594). Citing Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s wildly popular Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) and Aurora Floyd (1863), Radcliffe suggests that the threat posed by these novels is located in the laissez-faire attitudes of its
characters in their discussion and contemplations of suicide. While neither of these characters
terminates her life, Radclifffe fears that England’s young people could be “infected with these
infamous teachings” (603). A contemporary of Forbes Winslow, author of The Anatomy of
Suicide (1840), Radclifffe echoes Winslow’s discussion of imitative, or epidemic suicide as
Winslow suggests that

the most singular feature connected with the subject of suicide is that the disposition to
sacrifice life has, at different periods, been known to prevail epidemically, from a
perversion, as it has been supposed, of the natural instinct of imitation . . . Persons whose
feelings are not thoroughly under their command, who act from impulse and not from
reflection, are very prone to be operated upon by the cause referred to. (Winslow 108)

The fear of epidemic suicide, or suicidal contagion13, expressed by Winslow and Radcliffle is one
shared by many social critics. Isaac Parrish, in 1837, expressed similar concerns about newspaper
reporting of suicides, and advised editors to “prevent the narration of the circumstances connected
with the death of this unfortunate class” (259). Even today, the “Suicide Awareness, Prevention,
and Support” website provides guidelines for media reporting on suicide specifically to prevent
“contagion” (Media Guidelines). Victorians concerned with the ways that suicide was represented
in newsprint, drama and the visual arts were now finding themselves having to contend with
literary depictions of self-harm that were increasingly portraying suicide in ways that could pose
a threat to those in possession of minds that were already predisposed to melancholia,14 or what
we would now understand as depression.

13 The concept of suicidal contagion is explored in greater detail in chapter 4 in relation to Dracula.
14 While much of the criticism surrounding writing about suicide was directed towards newspapers, the idea
that suicidal ideation could be transmitted through turns of phrase in print could easily extend this criticism
to literary depictions of suicide. Emile Durkheim, for example, argues that “suicide is very contagious. This
contagiousness is specially common among individuals very accessible to suggestion in general and
especially to ideas of suicide; they are inclined to reproduce not only all that impresses them but, above all,
to repeat an act toward which they have already some inclination” (97). William Farr, superintendent of the
statistical department of the Registrar General’s Office argued that “no fact is better established in science
than that suicide . . . is often committed from imitation. A single paragraph may suggest suicide to twenty
persons; some particular, chance, but apt expression, seizes the imagination, and the disposition to repeat

73
In many ways, *The Mill on the Floss* can be located on the cusp of this transition towards more overt depictions of suicide in literature outside of the genres of sensation or Gothic fiction which were more typically prone to sensationalizing suicide. Herminia Barton, for example, at the end of Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), martyrds herself for the sake of her daughter, and, according to the narrator, to help usher in the “church of the future” (page 165), while Little Father Time, in *Jude the Obscure* (1895), takes the lives of his younger siblings before ending his own. There are no literal suicides in Eliot’s novel, and yet, the association made between Maggie and water is deeply encoded with iconography related to beliefs about women and drowning.

**Maggie Tulliver and the trouble with water**

The association between suicidal women and water is activated in the first chapter of the novel. The narrator pauses on the bridge to take in the landscape, and thinks “I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks their heads far into the water here among the withes” (10). As the narrator turns back towards the mill, he or she notes “that little girl is watching too: she has been standing on just the same spot at the edge of the water ever since I paused on the bridge” (11). In Victorian visual representations of suicide, Waterloo Bridge and Blackfriars Bridge in London are often used as the setting for depictions of suicidal women.  

Anderson notes that young women (who always particularly favoured drowning) had learnt from innumerable novelettes and ballads as well as many well-publicized real-life examples to make for the Regent’s Canal, the swing bridges over the Docks, the stretch of the Thames between London and Westminster Bridges, or Hampstead and the Highgate ponds. (115)

---

the act, in a moment of morbid excitement, proves irresistible. Do the advantages of publicity counter-balance the evils attendant on one such death? Why should cases of suicide be recorded at length in the public papers, any more than cases of fever?” (301-302). Olive Anderson, in her history of suicide, notes that “so detailed and nation-wide was the reporting of a good suicide that the press was routinely blamed whenever a rash of imitations occurred, and continually rebuked for titillating a public taste which in reality was very deep-rooted indeed” (215).

15 For examples of images of this kind, see John Everett Millais, *Bridge of Sighs*, 1858; Lord Gerald Fitzgerald’s, no 9 in *Passages from the Poems of Thomas Hood*, 1858; and Gustave Doré’s *Bridge of Sighs*, 1878.
This association was so pervasive that in 1861, *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper* claimed that “in real life a girl standing at a riverside in the early morning might attract casual joking calls of ‘What, are you going to drown yourself so early?’” (quoted in Nicoletti “Morbid Topographies” 9). There is a strong association between women and water in the nineteenth century, which on one hand becomes almost a self-fulfilling prophecy, and on the other becomes such a stereotype that female drownings, and attempted drownings, become fodder for ridicule. In this opening scene, the narrator and Maggie form the base of a triangle with the water as the third, and focal point at which both their attentions are connected. This triangulation associates Maggie with the narrator’s love of “moistness” while also creating a tableau wherein Maggie, even as a child, assumes the layers of meaning associated with being a young woman lingering too near the water.

Eliot certainly did not shy away from difficult subjects, and *Adam Bede* (1859), published the year before *The Mill on the Floss*, addresses the class imbalances which can lead a young woman into seduction, pregnancy, and finally to infanticide and transportation. In that novel, Hetty Sorrel’s murder of her child is described by her in minute detail from her prison cell, as are her thoughts of suicide and her inability to follow through with the act. Why then, is reference to suicide so coded in *The Mill on the Floss*? One answer can be found in the different circumstances of the main characters. Hetty is unequivocally a fallen woman, a young woman seduced and abandoned by a man of a higher social standing. The horrifying details of her struggle with suicidal thoughts and the details of her infanticide are not gratuitous elements included to sensationalize or romanticize her actions. In the context of the novel they evoke sympathy for the despair of an abandoned young woman who, isolated, alone and afraid of society’s judgment, commits a horrifying act in the desperate hope that it will allow her to return home without shame. Unlike Maggie, or the other female characters under discussion in this dissertation, Hetty’s death is unambiguous. She choses to sacrifice her child, rather than herself,
and while the novel may evoke sympathy for her plight, she is not granted the same liminality that characterizes female suicides.

Unlike Hetty’s fall, Maggie’s fall in *The Mill on the Floss* is far more complicated. She is perceived as a fallen woman, and treated that way by St Ogg’s society and by her family, with the exception of her mother and her aunt Glegg, even though, in the strictest definition of the term, she remains virtuous. While it was common practice for fallen women to be excised from novels either through intentional acts of suicide, or through actions which place their lives in danger (consider Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth Hilton nursing her former lover before succumbing to illness, Thomas Hardy’s Tess Durbeyfield murdering Alec D’Uberville and her execution at the gallows, or Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier’s final, ambiguous swim), which is Maggie’s eventual fate, the novel is as deliberate in its coded references to suicide as it is in its refusal to allow for an easy categorization of Maggie as a fallen woman.

One way to understand the ambiguity surrounding Maggie’s character is through Eliot’s understanding of realism. In *Adam Bede*, Eliot’s narrator takes pains to articulate a definition of realism that is often assumed to match Eliot’s own views on the subject.  

The narrator in that work speaks directly to a readership imagined to be predisposed to the ideal, rather than to the real, and who believed that “the highest vocation of the novelist [is] to represent things as they never have been and never will be” (238). The narrator resists the ideal, choosing to create flawed characters because

these fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people whose movements of goodness

---

16 Moira Gatens, for example, in “Cloud-Borne Angels, Prophets and the Old Woman’s Flower-Pot: Reading George Eliot’s Realism alongside Spinoza’s ‘beings of the imagination’” (2013), reads chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* as Eliot’s “best known rumination on realism” (2).
you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. (239).

For the narrator in *Adam Bede*, creating clear ‘good’ or ‘bad’ characters does a disservice to readers who will rarely encounter such clear-cut types in real life; instead, it is the flawed characters in fiction that are the ones who are most able to stimulate compassionate thinking towards real-life friends, relatives and acquaintances, all who are inevitably flawed in some way.

To position Maggie as a flawed character worthy of compassion, the narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* can neither depict her as entirely virtuous, nor entirely fallen. Because Maggie exists equally between these two categories, her death is not described as an intentional choice. She is not one of the young women throwing themselves off Waterloo Bridge, and yet, there is an inevitability to her drowning. During Maggie’s visit with Lucy, the narrator uses the river as a metaphor for Maggie’s destiny, saying that “we must wait for it [her destiny] to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home” (418). While Maggie’s destiny, like the river, may be full, it does not give any indication of what this fullness entails, or whether her destiny will be full of good things, or full of heartache. That it is rapid could be interpreted as a life that moves quickly from one objective to the next, but it may also indicate the rapidity with which Maggie will reach her “final home.” By drawing a parallel between the sea and heaven, and the river as the means to reach a “final home,” the narrator implies that water will naturally be Maggie’s final destination. The novel draws on culturally understood references that connect women to water and to suicide to create ambiguity about Maggie’s destiny and her eventual death.

Maggie’s affiliation with the fallen woman becomes clear in her connection to the Floss, which often mirrors her emotions (Emmitt 318). Indeed, the Floss is a constant companion to both Maggie and Tom Tulliver as they are growing up, and the constantly changing nature of the river often mirrors the turbulence in Maggie’s own emotional character. Maggie’s emotional
make-up ebbs and flows in predictable directions, much as the tides at the mouth of the Floss. In her youth, she vacillates between explosive outbursts of impulsive rebellion in an effort to exert her own will, and contrition for her outbursts. Maggie “rushed into her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done, with all the detail and exaggerated circumstance of an active imagination” (69). When Maggie cuts her hair as retribution for her Aunt Pullet’s comment that “the gell has too much hair” (67), she “had thought beforehand chiefly of her own deliverance from her teasing hair and teasing remarks about it, and something also of the triumph she could have over her mother and her aunts by this very decided course of action” (69). Maggie’s triumph is regrettably short lived, and once Tom laughs at her, she realizes that with this act of rebellion she “should have to hear and think more about her hair than ever” (69). While Maggie’s impulsive action is an attempt to exert her own will, and to silence her detractors, she is unable to think through the possible consequences of her actions. When these consequences become apparent, her “transient power of defiance” (74) ultimately fails her.

While the intensity of Maggie’s emotional vacillations lessens as she gets older, this tension remains constant into her adulthood as she rebelliously exerts her own will, only to be overcome with contrition and repentance following her rash actions. Although as she matures, she is better able to articulate her anger without relying on physical demonstrations, like the cutting of her hair, or running off to join the “Gypsies.” Following Tom’s confrontation with Philip about the clandestine meetings Philip has been having with Maggie, she says with “vehemence” that “I don’t want to defend myself . . . I know I’ve been wrong – often, continually. But yet, sometimes when I have done wrong, it has been because I have feelings that you would be the better for if you had them” (360). Maggie, far more clearly than her brother, recognizes the key differences between the siblings. While Maggie is guided by her emotions, Tom is guided by what he sees as irrefutable facts. Philip is the son of the man who ruined his father, and he has a physical
deformity; these facts, in Tom’s eyes, make him unfit company for Tom’s sister. Maggie’s reliance on her emotions to guide her actions is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, her sincere desire not to hurt anyone, and her own emotional need for companionship, leads her into clandestine meetings with Philip. On the other hand, her emotional reactivity is also the means by which Maggie creates and maintains attachments with others.

It is the emotions which “flow” through Maggie which allow her to navigate her relationships. When Mr. Tulliver goes downstairs for the first time after his illness, Maggie, “with all her keen susceptibility, yet felt as if the sorrow made larger room for her love to flow in” (273). Comparing Tom and Maggie in this moment, the narrator remarks that Tom “suffered the most unmixed pain” (273) in that moment because a “true boy” would rather “perform any round of heroic labours, than endure perpetual appeals to his pity for evils over which he can make no conquest” (273). For Maggie, it is the tension between sorrow and love, and her ability to hold the two emotions simultaneously, which mitigates her own pain and allows her to have a more compassionate response to her father’s pain. Even though in Maggie’s darkest moments she “rebelled against her lot,” and “fits of anger and hatred” towards her parents and Tom “would flow out over her affections and conscience like a lava stream and frighten her with the sense that it was not difficult for her to become a demon” (299), her ability to move with the flow of her emotions eventually brings her back towards compassion and love towards her family. The emphasis on the flow of Maggie’s emotions, both good and bad, draws attention to the very fluidity of Maggie’s nature which is emphasized by the connections the narrator, and other characters, make between Maggie and water which foreshadow her eventual fall from grace.

Unlike Tom, who arguably could be associated with the stability and the solidity of the earth with his unwavering certitude in his beliefs in right and wrong, Maggie defines right and wrong in terms of context and relationship, making them much more fluid and nuanced. Tom, as his family is fond of pointing out, has inherited the Dodson family traits, and “the Dodsons were
a very proud race, and their pride lay in the utter frustration of all desire to tax them with a breach of traditional duty or propriety” (285). The Dodsons had “a wholesome pride in many respects, since it identified honor with perfect integrity, thoroughness of work, and faithfulness to admitted rules” (285). Tom’s understanding of right is dependent on inherited norms. He does not have to think about whether something is right or wrong, he only has to follow prescribed dictates. So, while Tom is willing to give up his childhood friendship with Bob over his perception of him as a cheat, or to hate Philip because of Mr. Wakem’s treatment of Mr. Tulliver, Maggie struggles between doing what is objectively right according to others, and her own prioritizing of interpersonal relationships. While Tom may feel some sense of loss over ending his friendship with Bob, albeit a loss that is centred on experiences rather than emotions, he is clear that “I’d do just the same again,” as “that was his usual mode of viewing his past actions; whereas Maggie was always wishing she had done something different” (57). Indeed, when Maggie considers continuing her friendship with Philip, despite her brother’s objections, she is torn between duty and empathy. She thinks that it was so blameless, so good a thing that there should be friendship between her and Philip; the motives that forbade it were so unreasonable – so unchristian! – But the severe monotonous warning came again and again – that she was losing the simplicity and clearness of her life by admitting a ground of concealment, and that, by forsaking the simple rule of renunciation, she was throwing herself under the seductive guidance of illimitable wants. (338)

Due to this tension in Maggie’s thoughts, and the contradictory currents which try to pull her in multiple directions, it is inevitable that she finds herself in socially precarious positions when she enters St. Ogg’s society.¹⁷ Maggie’s impulse to show “kindness to Philip” (338), and her instinct

¹⁷ Upon Maggie’s first introduction to Stephen, and her inability to receive his compliments as an expected part of social conversation, the narrator suggests that Maggie “was so unused to society that she could take nothing as a matter of course, and had never in her life spoken from the lips merely, so that she must
to “submit” to her brother and his direction to her “not to speak to [Philip] again” (319),
emphasises the contradictory tensions in Maggie’s character. Her need to have “books, converse,
[and] affection” (338), is at odds with her desire to preserve her relationship with her brother.

For Maggie, these contradictory impulses were more easily managed in her childhood,
when she could entertain her own desires, and then, afterwards, contritely reconcile with her
family. She could impulsively give in to the flow of her own desires, and then channel these
emotions outwards to others to repair the damages caused by her outbursts. When Tom’s rabbits
die because Maggie forgets to feed them “because they did not come into my head” (34), Tom’s
vengeance is swift, telling her that “you’re a naughty girl, and you shan’t go fishing with me to-
morrow” (40). Initially, Maggie hides in the attic, entertaining thoughts of never coming down,
and of how “Tom would be sorry” (41) when she died of starvation. These childish musings,
drawn from her emotional reactivity, centre on her own desires – to make Tom “sorry” for being
mean to her. Yet, when she hears Tom’s steps on the attic stairs, she is overcome by a desire to
make things right between them. Because she lacks the maturity which brings with it the human
ability to “learn to restrain ourselves” and to “keep apart when we have quarrelled . . . showing
much firmness on one side and swallowing much grief on the other” Maggie could “rub her cheek
against his, and kiss his ear in a random, sobbing way” (42-43) which reached out to “the tender
fibres in the lad that had been used to answer to Maggie’s fondling” (42-43). For Maggie, this
unrestrained outpouring of emotion becomes a way to repair her relationship with Tom. The
desire for reconciliation is so strong that it is impossible to articulate it with language; it only
through a physical demonstration that Maggie is able to demonstrate the depths of her remorse.

As Maggie gets older, however, unrestrained physical responsiveness is no longer an appropriate

necessarily appear absurd to more experienced ladies, from the excessive feeling she was apt to throw into
very trivial incidents” (392). Likewise, when Maggie tries to account for her strange reactions to Stephen,
the narrator tells us that his admiring glances and the tone of his voice “could have had no perceptible
effect on a thoroughly balanced mind, who had all the advantages of fortune, training and refined society”
(400), intimating that Maggie, having had none of these benefits, was particularly susceptible to Stephen’s
charms.
way for her to release her emotions. For Maggie, the young woman who once promised Philip that “I shall always remember you, and kiss you when I see you again, if it's ever so long” (194), the inability to expel excess emotions through physical contact increases the tension she experiences between her self(ish) desires and her need for approval. The first volume of the novel detailing Maggie’s childhood takes pains to craft an association between Maggie’s emotional and rebellious behaviour, her desire for acceptance, and the threat that water represents for a young woman ruled by these conflicting desires. In many ways, Maggie’s unbiddable nature is an affront to her mother, who wishes for a more feminine, quiet and submissive child, someone like Maggie’s cousin Lucy, to whom her mother often uncharitably compares her. In her exasperation at her daughter’s tomboy ways, Mrs. Tulliver uses the water that Maggie is drawn to as a threat:

‘Maggie, Maggie,’ continued the mother, in a tone of half-coaxing fretfulness, as this small mistake of nature entered the room, ‘where’s the use o’ my telling you to keep away from the water? You'll tumble in and be drownded some day, an’ then you'll be sorry you didn’t do as mother told you” (16).

That Maggie’s mother uses drowning as a threat reveals her own fears about the safety of a daughter who will not follow conventional feminine standards of behaviour. The novel implicitly draws a parallel between Maggie’s refusal to conform to expectations, and the fallen women who have violated social rules and turned to the river as a means of escape.

This parallel is reinforced by the fact that Maggie’s childhood behaviour not only calls into question her emotional stability, but also her mental stability. Given that women’s emotionality, and even their physicality, was thought to make them especially prone to certain kinds of madness\(^\text{18}\), Maggie’s childhood behaviour can be read through the lens of contemporary

\(^{18}\) In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter argues that “despite their awareness of poverty, dependency, and illness as factors, the prevailing view among Victorian psychiatrists was that the statistics proved what they had suspected all along: that women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control. In contrast to the rather vague and uncertain concepts of insanity in general which Victorian psychiatry produced, theories of
understandings of female madness. The concept of moral insanity, as described by James Cowles Prichard in 1835, is broad enough to encompass any deviation from expected roles and behaviours, even without any accompanying neurological abnormalities. He defines moral insanity as “consisting in a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination” (6). Maggie’s emotionality during her childhood and her vacillation between reactivity and repentance also have roots in the eighteenth century in Thomas Sydenham’s theories of hysteria. Drawing from Sydenham’s understanding of the “Inordinacy of the Spirits” (312) which results in rapid mood swings in hysterics, Caesare Lombroso suggests that for hysterics, “their sensibility is exalted by the most futile causes . . . Their impulses are not wanting in intellectual control, but are followed with excessive rapidity by action” (221). Maggie is certainly prone to a “rapidity of action” when she feels that she has been wronged. From venting her frustrations on the fetish she keeps in the attic, to running away to join the “Gypsies,” as she sees them, Maggie often reacts without considering future consequences. Her extreme behaviour, of a type that Lombroso, towards the end of the century will associate with female criminality, calls Maggie’s character into question in ways that were also used to describe women who were, in the common refrain, ‘found drowned.’

Maggie’s efforts to follow ascetic principles of self-denial and renunciation of personal desires can been seen as an attempt to control her passions as she tries to navigate her family’s social and economic decline. Forbes Winslow suggested that regulating passions, or “keeping them within just bounds” could be achieved by forming “a proper estimate of the things of this

______________________________

female insanity were specifically and confidently linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle – puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause – during which the mind would be weakened and the symptoms of insanity might emerge. This connection between the female reproductive and nervous systems led to the condition nineteenth-century physicians called ‘reflex insanity in women.’ The ‘special law’ that made women ‘the victim of periodicity’ led to a distinct set of mental illnesses that had ‘neither homologue nor analogue in man’” (55).
life, and the relation of our present to a future state of existence, and of the influence which our actions this world will have upon our happiness hereafter” (Winslow 193). The problem for Maggie, however, according to the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss*, is that she tries to navigate this regulation without “the aid of established authorities and appointed guides – for they were not at hand, and her need was pressing” (304). In her attempt to accept her current social situation, Maggie turns to Thomas à Kempis as a source of solace (306). However, lacking formal education, or educational guides to help her navigate the nuances of these texts, Maggie’s passionate embracing of the tenets in these books leads her to perform self-denial, wearing it like a mask. Her adherence to ascetic principles is often accomplished with “exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity” because “her own life was still such a drama to her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity” (305). This pattern of behaviour may be what prompts Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to note that Maggie is “most monstrous when she tries to turn herself into an angel of renunciation” (491). It is when Maggie tries to deny her own desires that the tensions between the various aspects of her personality are closest to the surface. In her attempt at total renunciation, Maggie disrupts the precarious balance in the opposing forces of her personality. As Gilbert and Gubar recognize, Maggie is “both a Satanic inflictor of pain who pushes her pretty cousin Lucy Dean into the mud and a repentant follower of Thomas à Kempis who associates love with self-inflicted martyrdom” (492). The problem with Maggie’s unquestioning acceptance of Thomas à Kempis’s teachings is that

She had not perceived – how could she until she had lived longer? – the inmost truth of the old monk's out-pourings, that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly. Maggie was still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it. She knew nothing of doctrines and systems, of mysticism or quietism; but this voice out of the far-off middle ages was the direct communication of a human soul’s belief and experience, and came to Maggie as an unquestioned message. (303)
Her performance of asceticism stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the value of the teachings. While she is able to act accordingly, and renounce the things she once found pleasurable, like reading and music, Maggie never willingly submits to suffering, and is always tempted by opportunities that promise pleasure.

Given Maggie’s overly performed attempts at asceticism, it is not surprising that when she is reintroduced to Philip, who promises access to literature and music, the tenuous restraint she has imposed on herself becomes strained to the breaking point. Through Maggie’s conversations with Philip it becomes apparent that her asceticism has become a way for her to avoid having to live. She has, in fact, embraced a kind of living death that masquerades as virtue and foreshadows her actual death. The exchange between Maggie and Philip when he attempts to lend her *The Pirate*, is telling. While her initial response is pleasure to have access to literature “other than “*The Bible*, Thomas à Kempis and the Christian Year” (306), Maggie quickly rejects Philip’s offer:

“No, thank you,” said Maggie, putting it aside with her hand and walking on. “It would make me in love with this world again, as I used to be; it would make me long to see and know many things – it would make me long for a full life.”

“But you will not always be shut up in your present lot: why should you starve your mind in this way? It is narrow asceticism – I don’t like to see you persisting in it, Maggie. Poetry and art and knowledge are sacred and pure.”

“But not for me – not for me,” said Maggie, walking more hurriedly. “Because I should want too much. I must wait – *this life will not last long.*” (emphasis mine 318)

As Philip correctly identifies, Maggie’s rigid adherence to self-denial can be viewed as a “long suicide” (342), in that she is marking time rather than experiencing life. Maggie’s insistence that she not be exposed to anything that would make her want to enjoy life, paired with her claim that “this life will not last long,” also suggests a more somber reading of their exchange. At seventeen,
Maggie certainly has many more years of life ahead of her, and while her life on earth may be short compared to her anticipated afterlife, which is most likely what she means by that statement, it nevertheless carries an uncomfortable undertone when spoken by a young woman who has recently faced many hardships, and who is alone in the woods with a young man whom she knows she is not supposed to meet.

The tension between Maggie’s desire for pleasure and her self-imposed restraint becomes untenable in the face of Lucy’s desire to make Maggie’s visit with her a pleasant one. Given Lucy’s determination to provide Maggie with pleasure during her stay, it is somewhat ironic that what gives Maggie the greatest emotional reward is Stephen’s admiration of her physical appearance. After their first outing, Maggie is “conscious of having been looked at a great deal, in rather a furtive manner, from beneath a pair of well-marked horizontal eyebrows, with a glance that seemed somehow to have caught the vibratory influence of the voice” (400). Maggie, who has deprived herself of art and beauty, conflates her joy at having music in her life again with her pleasure at being the object of beauty admired by Stephen. Just as she had been with Philip, Maggie is startled to find herself an object of admiration. When Philip tells her that she is “much more beautiful than I thought you would be,” Maggie is taken by surprise because, as the narrator explains, “girls are so accustomed to think of dress as the main ground of vanity, that in abstaining from the looking-glass, Maggie had thought more of abandoning all care for adornment, than of renouncing the contemplation of her face” (312). While it is Philip who first awakens Maggie to the possibility of her being beautiful, her response to his compliment, a kind of nostalgia for a childhood friend, is very different from her response to Stephen’s gaze. While she did not think “distinctly of Mr Stephen Guest” or dwell on the “indications that he looked at her with admiration,” she engages in a kind of fairy-tale dream in which she feels “the half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read, or had ever woven in her dreamy reveries”
(400). All the youthful pleasures that Maggie has denied herself become intertwined with the promise in Stephen’s gaze. It is worth noting that while Maggie, with her youth and inexperience, is not consciously making a connection between Stephen and pleasure, she does realize that she is in uncharted, and perhaps threatening, territory and tries to rely on her habit of renunciation to help her navigate these new feelings. What she finds is that “no prayer, no striving now, would bring back that negative peace” (400). Without a more fulsome understanding of Thomas à Kempis’s teachings, Maggie’s performance of asceticism is unable to withstand the pleasures that are promised by her reverie. There is a sense of hopelessness in her realization that the mask of asceticism which allowed her to conform to social expectations is now inaccessible. Having never experienced this kind of admiration while growing up, Maggie is at a loss as to how to handle finding herself the object of masculine desire.

Maggie’s conflation of Stephen’s attention with beauty and pleasure marks the end of her asceticism and the awakening of her own sexuality. Tracing the allusions to Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling” in Eliot’s novel, Tammy Amiel Houser argues that Maggie’s corporeal body is a disruption in the text. Maggie’s body transgresses race and gender norms, while also interrupting the Bildungsroman genre. Maggie’s body develops at a different pace than the “narrative of psychic amendment or social adjustment” (560). Her body, according to Houser, “turns her into a beautiful and attractive woman, [but] her mind remains estranged from the image of conventional middle-class femininity” (560). The differences in Maggie’s physical, mental and emotional maturity leave her ill-equipped to handle Stephen’s admiring glances, and even less prepared to cope with his romantic pursuit. No longer willing, or able, to renounce worldly pleasures, Maggie is transfixed by Stephen’s gaze which “made [her] face turn toward it and look upward at it, slowly, like a flower at the ascending brightness” (460). The comparison of Maggie to a flower emphasises her growing sexuality which is coming into bloom through her proximity to Stephen;
however, this blooming sexuality, like her adherence to ascetic principles, happens without the guiding influence of family or education to help her come to terms with these new feelings.

While Maggie is connected to fallen women even during her childhood through references to her rebellious temperament and to water, it is in her introduction to Stephen that this connection becomes most pronounced. Adding yet another layer to Maggie’s ambiguous identity, her visit with her cousin Lucy casts her as the femme fatale, the ‘other woman’ who comes between her cousin and Stephen. While Maggie is undeniably attracted to Stephen, she is also jealous of her cousin, one of the happy people towards whom she feels anger. The constant comparisons made between Maggie and her cousin in her formative years have conditioned Maggie to dismiss the possibility of her own attractiveness, and she thinks, “as if I, with my old gowns, and want of all accomplishments, could be a rival of dear little Lucy, who knows and does all sorts of charming things, and is ten times prettier than I am” (345). While Maggie rejects Philip’s suggestion that she will “avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy” (345), she nonetheless expresses a desire to “avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones” (345) who have their happiness carried away by “blond haired women” (345). The fictional “blond haired women” become surrogates for Lucy on which Maggie can exact revenge. Much like the fetish doll of her childhood, these fictionalized versions of Lucy become a safe way for Maggie to direct her anger without jeopardizing her relationship with her cousin.

Maggie’s adult rivalry with Lucy, with Stephen’s affections as the prize, is a repetition of Maggie’s childhood rivalry with Lucy for Tom’s affections. In both cases, this rivalry is one-sided, as there is never any indication that Lucy is aware of Maggie’s resentment, and one of her initial concerns is that “Stephen and Maggie were not going to like each other” (392). Just prior to a childhood visit to Aunt and Uncle Pullet’s, Tom clearly points out Maggie’s inadequacies in relation to Lucy. When Tom claims that “I like Lucy better than you: I wish Lucy was my sister”
(93), Maggie impulsively storms off, knocking down his pagoda and inciting his wrath. When Tom punishes Maggie by showing a preference for Lucy, Maggie begins to implicate Lucy in Tom’s prolonged “unkindness” believing that without Lucy’s presence, Tom “would have got friends with her sooner” (106). Having no other way of venting her frustrations, Maggie pushes Lucy into the cow pond. Maggie’s actions, and her uncharacteristic refusal to repent immediately following her action because she “was glad to spoil their happiness” (108), can be viewed as an attempt to equalize her relationship with Lucy. While Maggie is dark-haired, dark-complexioned, “gypsy”-like (at least this is the comparison made by her family), and unable to keep her clothes clean, Lucy is blonde-haired, light-complexioned, and “no accidents ever happened to her clothes, and she never looked uncomfortable in them” (92). By pushing her into the mud, Maggie remakes Lucy’s image, making her, in physical appearance anyway, into one of the “dark-haired lonely ones” (345). Maggie’s revenge on Lucy for stealing Tom’s affections, the greatest punishment she can think of in the moment, is to make Lucy more like her.

In this childhood foreshadowing of the Lucy, Maggie, Stephen love triangle, Lucy is positioned as the transgressive female presence in ways that mirror Maggie’s association with the fallen woman. Lucy ends up in the mud only because she was tempted by Tom to disobey their elders. Lucy, who had “never before been exposed to such severe temptation . . . trotted by [Tom’s] side timidly enjoying the rare treat of doing something naughty” (107). Just as, years later, Maggie will follow Stephen down to the river, Lucy willingly disobeys rules to follow Tom down to the pond. Although Lucy does not enter the water willingly, she is nonetheless visibly marked by her transgression, and faces similar social ostracization by being kept “at the door” and not being allowed “off the oilcloth” (109). While the consequences for Maggie are far more severe, this childhood incident suggests that water represents a particular kind of danger for women that is related to succumbing to temptations provided by men. Lucy’s entrance into the mud, especially because it is involuntary, draws attention to the ease with which a woman can
fall, and that the suggestion of fallenness does not distinguish between women of different ages and social classes. Lucy, like Maggie years later, does not technically ‘fall’ sexually. Yet she still must face social consequences for her actions.

While Lucy’s ‘fall’ is facilitated by Maggie pushing her into the muddy water, Maggie’s is brought about by a combination of Stephen’s insistence and her own passivity. In the chapter aptly titled “Born Along by the Tide,” Maggie is described in terms that erase any sense of her own agency. Maggie never verbally agrees to go on the boat trip with Stephen, and she finds herself “being led down the garden among the roses, being helped with firm, tender care into the boat, having the cushion and cloak arranged for her feet, and her parasol opened for her (which she had forgotten), all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will” (484). Once in the boat, Maggie is passively swept along by the river’s current past the village of Luckreth, the physical point of no return at which she and Stephen would need to disembark to make it back to St. Ogg’s before nightfall. From the moment that Stephen brought Maggie down to the river, she “was hardly conscious of having said or done anything decisive” (487). The somnambulistic state that Maggie is in throughout this episode raises questions regarding her complicity and culpability in her own downfall. At almost every point in the novel until now, Maggie has responded to situations in active, decisive, and predictable ways. She impulsively responds to situations in ways that assert her own agency, and then actively repents to repair damaged relationships. In this defining moment, however, Maggie becomes almost completely passive, yielding entirely to Stephen’s plans. In Maggie’s moment of passive yielding, the narrator creates a connection to her later drowning, explaining that “all yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance – it is the partial sleep of thought – it is the submergence of our own personality by another” (emphasis mine 487). The “submergence” of Maggie’s personality into Stephen’s not only anticipates her eventual submergence into the waters of the Floss, it also emphasizes her inability to resist Stephen any more than she can resist
the currents that direct her boat at the end of the novel. Complicating this narrative of passivity, however, is the acknowledgment that Maggie found “an unspeakable charm in being told what to do, and having everything decided for her” (487). On the surface the “submergence” of Maggie’s personality complicates her narrative by removing her agency, and by extension, any culpability for her actions. Yet, the “unspeakable charm” of succumbing to complete passivity returns Maggie to the position of fallen woman as her enjoyment makes it impossible to view her as only a victim.

Maggie’s dream-like passivity, complicated as it is with the tension between complicity and victimhood, can be understood in terms of the vacillations between rashness and repentance that have characterized her emotions throughout the novel. Maggie’s passive yielding to Stephen’s plan is a variation on Maggie’s habitual impulsive yielding to selfish desires. Her passivity allows her to live only in the present moment, and to believe, however temporarily, in the existence of a life “in which all affection would no longer be self-sacrifice” (489). Maggie’s affection for Stephen, however, does necessitate some form of sacrifice. To continue her relationship with Stephen, Maggie must sacrifice her relationships with Tom, Lucy and Philip. To preserve these relationships, the sacrifice must be her relationship with Stephen. In Maggie’s predictable emotional reaction following an impulsive act, she seeks solace and direction from the relationships that have the most claim to her loyalty. Maggie’s reassertion of her agency is, quite literally depicted as her waking from a dream. In this dream, Maggie

was in a boat on the wide water with Stephen, and in the gathering darkness something like a star appeared, that grew and grew till they saw it was the Virgin seated in St Ogg’s boat, and it came nearer and nearer till they saw the Virgin was Lucy and the boatman was Philip – not, not Philip, but her brother, who rowed past without looking at her; and she rose to stretch out her arms and call to him, and their own boat turned over with the movement and they began to sink, till with one spasm of dread she seemed to awake and
find she was a child again in the parlour at evening twilight, and Tom was not really angry. From the soothed sense of that false waking she passed to the real waking, to the plash of water against the vessel, and the sound of a footstep on the deck, and the awful starlight sky. (491)

Conflating Lucy and Tom with the mythology of the Virgin and the boatman, Maggie equates her current circumstances with a literal drowning from which Lucy and Tom will be unable, or unwilling, to save her. Placing her brother in the position of the boatman, rather than Philip, is in keeping with Maggie’s desire to see Tom as “the natural refuge that had been given her” (503), even though it is his judgment she values and fears most. The boatman’s power to save victims in times of flood, however, comes from his emotional responsiveness to a woman in distress. He ferries the Virgin across the river because her “heart needs it” (149). When Tom is placed in that role, Maggie unconsciously realizes that her brother is fundamentally incapable of that generosity of spirit. In this, Maggie’s unconscious is more astute than her waking consciousness which clings to the hope that she might be forgiven providing she returns to St Ogg’s without consummating or continuing her relationship with Stephen. The dream-drowning that Maggie experiences awakens her from her passivity to the very real possibility that the damage she has done to these relationships by her actions is permanent and that she will be neither rescued nor forgiven.

Although Maggie ends her relationship with Stephen before it has been consummated, she nonetheless finds herself in the position of the fallen woman. Despite the fatal consequences portended in her dream, Maggie is still shocked when Tom refuses to provide her a refuge in his home, because he needs the “world [to] know that I feel the difference between right and wrong” (504). For Tom, Maggie’s actions with Stephen form a pattern of behaviour which identify her as a woman of loose morals. For Tom, Maggie’s secret meetings with Philip, followed by her
behaviour with Stephen means that “I can’t believe in you anymore” (504). Tom, retreating into “cold inflexibility,” judges Maggie according to what he sees as irrefutable factual evidence:

He went to see you at my aunt Moss’s; you walked alone with him in the lanes: you must have behaved as no modest girl would have done to her cousin’s lover, else that could never have happened. The people at Luckreth saw you pass – you passed all the other places: you knew what you were doing. You have been using Philip Wakem as a screen to deceive Lucy – the kindest friend you ever had. (504).

Tom interprets the verifiable facts of Maggie’s conduct – that Stephen came to see her, that they walked together, and that they passed Luckreth and other locations – as evidence of Maggie’s lack of morality. Tom’s rejection of her, in turn, provides ammunition for the “world’s wife” and contributes to Maggie being cast out of St Ogg’s society. While Maggie has not actually ‘fallen’ – a fact confirmed in a letter from Stephen to his family – social perceptions, her brother’s rejection, and the ambiguity of her relationship with Stephen, nonetheless place her irredeemably in that category.

In the ambiguity surrounding Maggie’s character – her rebelliousness and submissiveness, and her desire for and renunciation of pleasure – the flood waters can be interpreted as reinforcing her status as a fallen woman, while also functioning as a form of divine intervention. The flood provides a way to read Maggie’s death as both an intentional action, a suicide, and a passive surrendering to circumstances beyond her control. At Maggie’s lowest moment, alone in her room in Bob’s house, without employment and tempted to return to Stephen, she affirms her willingness to “bear it, and bear it till death,” but she also, for the first time, seems to recognize the cyclical nature of her emotions which have led her into her present circumstances, asking “O God, am I to struggle and fall and repent again?” (536). This moment is an epiphany of sorts for Maggie, as she recognizes a pattern of behaviour that she is unable to break free from. Crying out to God, she
fell on her knees against the table, and buried her sorrow-stricken face. Her soul went out to the Unseen Pity that would be with her to the end. Surely there was something being taught her by this experience of great need; and she must be learning a secret of human tenderness and long-suffering, that the less erring could hardly know? ‘O God, if my life is to be long, let me live to bless and comfort –’

At that moment Maggie felt a startling sensation of sudden cold about her knees and feet; it was water flowing under her. (536)

Maggie’s concern that she learns something about “human tenderness” from her experiences would seem to reinforce her virtuousness since her experiences may lead to more compassion for others. Yet, the qualifying “if” in relation to the longevity of her life can be read as an unspoken desire that her end will not, in fact, be at some far distant moment in the future. That her prayer is cut off as just she asks to “live to bless and comfort” mirrors the literal shortening of her life. These moments of qualification, and her plea to the “Unseen Pity” coincide with her sudden awareness of the flood waters, suggesting a divine response to the request that Maggie has left unspoken. The flood provides an opportunity for redemption through self-sacrifice.

That the flood is both self-sacrifice and redemption becomes clear when Maggie’s boat becomes unmoored and she is left to drift on the current. This moment is a penultimate (albeit slightly premature) death scene for Maggie, and “in the first moments [of drifting] Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading: it was the transition of death, without its agony – and she was alone in the darkness with God” (538). This peaceful passing away from the harshness of life, the fulfilment of Maggie’s prayers, is immediately followed by her realization that “she was driven out upon the flood: – that awful visitation that of God which her father used to talk of – which had made the nightmares of her childish dreams” (538). In the ambiguous positioning of Maggie as a
fallen/unfallen woman, the flood promises both judgement and redemption; it is both a thing of nightmares, and the promise of a transition away from the agony that her life has become.

The ambiguity of the ending makes it a contested battle-ground for literary interpretations. Critics often read Maggie’s end as either a form of punishment for her rebelliousness, and the need to excise her from the text, or as a kind of wish fulfilment that effaces Maggie’s own agency. In a novel rife with tensions and conflicts, however, Maggie’s death can be read as a combination of redemption, wish-fulfillment and suicide. The flood appears as an answer to her prayers, and it provides her with an opportunity for self-sacrifice and redemption. As she navigates the flood waters to reach her brother, she becomes aware of “floating masses . . . that might dash against her boat as she passed, and cause her to perish *too soon*” (emphasis mine 540). The addition of “too soon” seems to suggest an intentionality on Maggie’s part. Her intention is to die in the flood, but it cannot happen until she has reunited with her brother. The irony of course, is that by forestalling her own death to rescue Tom, Maggie facilitates his death, as well as her own. In her final moments Maggie is Tom’s saviour and his destroyer, or as Nina Auerbach puts it, Maggie’s “primordially feminine hunger for love is at one with her instinct to kill and to die” (171). She is both the fallen woman sinking passively beneath the waves, and the failed hero sacrificing all to try to save her brother. The novel suggests that from the moment that Maggie enters the river, her death is a forgone conclusion. The ambiguity in the ending comes from whether we read her actions as intentional, as a form of self-sacrifice that redeems her from her fallen position, or whether her death is the fulfilment of her destiny.

---

19 Critics like Neil Hertz and Nina Auerbach conclude that Maggie’s passionate nature cannot be contained and needs to be excised from the novel. Hertz goes so far as to claim that Maggie is “allegorized as Passion herself, as a figure at once of the natural and of the superfluous, a supplementary force as potentially dangerous as a flood, a messenger from the land of debt, the sort of natural disaster that invariably leaves its mark” (68). Building on Hertz’s economic reading, Deanna Kreisel argues that Maggie is the victim “not so much of her self-denial or of her appetites alone, as of her confusion of the two; the economic imperatives of the novel require and bring about her elimination and that of her threatening desires and even more threatening self-abnegation. It is, after all, not the unrestrained, sexual waters of the flood that kill her, but rather the giant pieces of industrial machinery broken free of their moorings and rushing down the river. Helen V. Emmitt suggests sees Maggie’s death as wish-fulfilment and liberation, but reads it as ‘fate’ rather than suicide because Maggie’s actions lack intentionality.
which would position her as a victim of fate. I would suggest that it is both. While Maggie is a victim of social perceptions and the flood waters, the actions that place her in the position of victim are intentional. She enjoys having Stephen take charge, so she passively drifts down the river to her ruin just as she passively floats on the flood waters before actively taking up the oars to find her brother.

As I have argued, the Victorian association between women and water is a complex one. Bodies of water are locations of escape, of ending, and of redemption, yet, water in urban areas, particularly the Thames, was horribly contaminated which “transformed water from a substance that was traditionally associated with purity, into a polluted and corrupting substance associated with social decline and disease” (Broad 14). Water as a pure source that is corrupted and rendered impure by contamination made it a particularly attractive metaphor which writers could employ when doing away with their fallen heroines. While there is no indication in Eliot’s novel that the Floss is polluted, at least under normal circumstances, the violence of the flood turns machinery and other debris into a “fatal fellowship” (542) which makes safe navigation of the waterway impossible for Tom and Maggie. Much as Maggie finds it difficult to navigate life in St Ogg’s following her perceived fall, and is unable to extricate herself from the currents formed by social mores, Tom, one of the most dedicated adherents to social customs, cannot turn the boat out of the way of the impending disaster. While Maggie is unable to rescue Tom, the impulse toward self-sacrifice which leads her to make the attempt provides her with the forgiveness and redemption that she desperately craves. The energy, emotional and physical, which Maggie expends in trying to get to her brother is akin to the emotional outpourings of her youth that would always lead to reconciliation following her fights with Tom. Tom’s recognition of her as “Magsie” (541) becomes a form of redemption for Maggie, as it signifies his forgiveness, and returns her to the pre-fallen innocence of her childhood. In her final moments, Maggie is both the rebellious, independent hero who tries to save her brother, and the innocent martyr who is
sacrificed for violating social expectations and exceeding the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour.
Chapter 4

Suicide, Moral Contagion and the Female Death Wish in Bram Stoker’s Dracula

Assume, at starting, a territory perfectly free from that pest [the vampire]. How does it begin, and how does it multiply itself? I will tell you. A person, more or less wicked, puts an end to himself. A suicide, under certain circumstances, becomes a vampire. That specter visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Carmilla, 1872, 82

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we see that those buried within the areas of graveyards with poorer soil compositions are generally social outcasts such as suicides, adulterous women and murderers.

Matthew Beresford From Demons to Dracula: The Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth 33

Why the Gothic?

At first glance, a chapter dealing with vampires may seem an odd choice within a work looking at the experience of suicide in the nineteenth century. No doubt some critics would suggest that a chapter of this sort would be better suited to a study of Gothic literature. Yet, the Gothic’s interest in the repressed, in the things that lurk deep within the human psyche, makes it a particularly appropriate vehicle for the treatment of suicide in the novel. As Glennis Byron points out, “the Gothic exposes and explores the desires, anxieties, and fears that both society and the individual, in their striving to maintain stability, attempt to suppress; it is interested in the exploration of what is forbidden, in the dissolution of certainties, categories; above all, it is associated with transgression” (Dracula 2). As we have seen in the previous chapters, transgression and the ambiguous deaths of female characters – suicide or accident? – are closely connected; because of the ambiguity of their deaths, these characters occupy a liminal position
between virtue and falleness and eroticization and redemption. In the case of Lucy and Mina in
_Dracula_, the Gothic’s “dissolution of certainties” and “categories” can be carried to its extreme
limits by situating these characters between life and death and heaven and hell. While much of
Gothic literature is littered with villains who seek this form of escape, vampire tales are
especially well suited to a study of suicide as they explore the darkest corners of the human
psyche as something that is both internally and externally located, but also as something that has
the potential to be transmitted to others through a process of moral contagion. In _Dracula_, I
would suggest that in their liminality, Lucy and Mina are both the recipients of this contagion,
and also the potential vehicles by which it spreads.

As the opening epigraphs to this chapter suggest, there is an established history that
connects vampirism, suicide and female transgression. Baron Vordenburg, who is the resident
vampire expert in _Carmilla_, suggests that the combination of wickedness and suicide is enough to
trigger a transformation to vampirism. In his qualification of “more or less” wicked, however, the
Baron is decidedly vague about what forms of transgression may result in a vampiric
transformation. In turn, this deliberate vagueness allows readers to bring their own social,
cultural, and individual beliefs about suicide to their reading of the novel; pickpockets or
blasphemers may be risking their return as a revenant, but so too might fallen women, or women
who refuse to adhere to socially prescribed female roles. As Beresford suggests, adulterous
women are invariably linked to suicide through their shared final resting places in the least
desirable areas of graveyards.

20 Mr. Hyde, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s _The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde_ (1886), commits
suicide to escape punishment for his crimes, while the title character in James Malcom Rymer’s _Penny
Dreadful, Varney the Vampire_ (1847), throws himself into a volcano when he finds that immortal life
promises nothing but pain and misery. Harriet Brandt, in Florence Marryat’s _The Blood of the Vampire_
(1897) takes her own life when she realizes that she drains the life force of anyone who becomes close to
her. In Oscar Wilde’s _The Picture of Dorian Gray_ (1890), Dorian’s actions cause the suicides of Sybil
Vane and Alan Campbell before he ends his own life by destroying his portrait.
In an early examination of the relationship between suicide and the monstrous in *Victorian Suicides: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (1988), Barbara Gates suggests that fantasy fiction involving vampires and other monsters offered Victorians a safe way to explore feelings of “alienation and estrangement” as “people who did not believe that they bore monsters within eagerly sought stories of monsters without. They preferred to feel subject to dark, external forces rather than search for them as inner demons as we post-Freudians do today” (101). The mesmeric properties of the vampire provide an explanation for circumstances that defy logic or reason, while also raising questions of female agency. I would argue that for Lucy and Mina, the mesmeric properties of Dracula do not compel them to act in certain ways, but rather create possibilities whereby they may act on their own unconscious desires. While Gates suggests that “the monstrous or uncanny . . . is not subject to acceptable Victorian codes of behaviour” which allows “death-wishing” to be “displaced far enough from home” to be “fully depicted, discussed, and examined” (103), the examples that she provides are all men. I would argue that in *Dracula*, the “death-wishing” behaviour of Mina and Lucy is far more subtle, ambiguous, and coded than it is in texts like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), or James Malcolm Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire: or, the Feast of Blood* (1847).

While vampires by their very natures occupy a liminal space between life and death, I would argue that the female vampire, or those undergoing a vampiric transition, occupy a doubly liminal position. In *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (1992), Elizabeth Bronfen argues that female revenants, or the deceased doubling of the once living self, occupy “the interstice between two forms of existence – a celebration and a triumph over death” and call “forth two forms of anxiety, i.e. the anxiety that death is finitude and the anxiety that death may not be the end” (294). In Bronfen’s argument, it is only through the achievement of a second death that this anxiety can be reconciled as a reassertion of stability between the categories of living and dead. In between the moments of first and second death, however, the female revenant,
or, I would suggest, those who are in transition between mortal and vampire, occupy a liminal position between life and death. Since the transformation from mortal to vampire is not an instantaneous one, we can understand the period of transition as one which is doubly liminal; during this transformation Mina and Lucy are both alive and not alive. In Bronfen’s reading of Dracula, the liminality of the vampire also “serves as a central trope for western attitudes toward death” so that the novel “represents not only an ambivalent desire for/fear of sexuality but also the same ambivalence toward mortality with the theme of sexuality put forward to veil that of death” (313). My reading of the novel follows Bronfen’s in exploring the tensions between death and desire that are made possible when Lucy and Mina occupy spaces between life and death. However, I would add an additional layer of liminality to these characters which is only made visible when we read them as suicides, as both active agents (indeed, willing participants) in their interactions with Dracula, and as his passive victims.

The complicity of Mina and Lucy in their encounters with Dracula and the tension in the novel between death and desire is also taken up by Charles Prescott and Grace Giorgio in “Vampiric Affinities: Mina Harker and the Paradox of Femininity in Bram Stoker’s Dracula” (2005). They suggest that Lucy’s and Mina’s oscillations between revulsion and desire for Dracula represent deviations from normative gender ideals, a deviation for which Lucy is punished, while Mina is eventually reincorporated within strict patriarchal ideals of femininity. They suggest that “although Mina would like to understand herself as the ideal Victorian woman described by Van Helsing, her affinity with the vampire becomes legible through her ambivalence about the “New Woman,” her passionate friendship with Lucy, and the uncanny moments when her gender performance comes into question” (487). She exists as much outside of acceptable boundaries as Dracula does, thereby threatening masculine British dominance as much as he does, although in vastly different and more subtle ways. For Prescott and Giorgio, there is an affinity between Mina and Dracula which “defies all familiar categories” (504). In their analysis
of Mina drinking from Dracula they focus on the indeterminacy of an action which runs counter to their ideological view of Mina. They recognize that “the vampire is about seduction and intent, not force and rape” which positions Mina as an active participant in the encounter as she “reluctantly admits her own complicity: ‘strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him’” (504). While Lucy’s and Mina’s moments of complicity with Dracula are certainly moments of transgression, they are moments of transgression which can only occur when they are within hypnotic states and liminally located between sleep and wakefulness. In its conflation of death and desire, the novel complicates ideas of female agency, and places both Lucy and Mina in the role of the fallen woman. For Lucy, who wonders “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her” (91), and who has blood transfusions from them all, there can be no redemption. Mina, however, whose deviations from socially expected norms are less severe and who is “so little an egoist” (226), can be reintegrated into a space that privileges wifely and motherly devotion.

In more recent work on the relationship between suicide and the Gothic, D. M. R. Benyon-Payne argues in her 2015 dissertation The Suicide Question in Late-Victorian Gothic Fiction: Representations of Suicide in their Historical, Cultural and Social Contexts that “contemporary research does not address the incidences of suicide in late-Victorian Gothic fiction, nor does it acknowledge the emergence of suicide as a Gothic trope” (55). She goes on to demonstrate that late-Victorian Gothic fiction frequently connected theories of degeneracy to its suicidal protagonists, such as Jekyll/Hyde and Dorian Grey. She further argues that these male characters can be situated in “contemporary debate[s] about suicide being a symptom of uncontrollable degeneracy – alongside murder and immorality – and thus necessary” (62) as a means of controlling degeneration. In her discussion of gender and the Gothic, Benyon-Payne locates female suicides within debates about the perceived threats posed by the New Woman. She finds “inherent contradictions in nineteenth-century perceptions of the desired female role and in
her suicide itself” (154). She suggests that “female suicides in the[se] . . . novels serve as a warning to the era’s women as each suicide shows a potential consequence to a wronged or ‘fallen’ behaviour (154). While Benyon-Payne’s work is a welcome addition to the study of suicide in literature, it looks exclusively at texts that depict obvious female suicides as either active agents or victims. By focusing instead on the more ambiguous female suicides, I would argue that my work enlarges the scope for recognizing suicide as a trope in Gothic literature, and provides an opportunity to examine the liminal space occupied by female suicides who are both active agents and victims of circumstance. The remainder of this chapter will return briefly to the ways that Victorians understood female madness as anything that deviated from culturally prescribed female roles before turning to a broader discussion of the relationship between vampirism, contagion and suicide and the way that these themes are encoded in Lucy Westenra, Jonathan Harker, and Mina Harker.

Transgression and Insanity

With the rise of asylums and the increasingly important role of alienists (early practitioners of what would develop into the field of psychiatry) within these institutions, the study of suicide in nineteenth-century Britain became increasingly medicalized and regulated by the authority of male doctors and medical professionals. With an increase in asylum construction following the Lunacy Act and the County Asylums Act in 1845 there was also an increase in the number of women committed to these asylums. Treatments for the insane were founded on William Tuke’s moral treatment which was predicated on socializing patients to be reintegrated into society, and focused on labour, amusements and a proper diet (Restoring Perspective). At the basis of this socialization, of course, were nineteenth-century ideals of family

---

21 See Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* for her discussion of the way that asylums became a patriarchal space with male doctors occupying the role of authority/father figure.

22 Taken together, these Acts created the Lunacy Commission to focus on legislation for the care of insane persons, while also requiring all counties of England and Wales to provide for those deemed insane.
values, and understandings of appropriate gender behaviour. Records show that women committed to these asylums were often those who deviated from prescribed gender norms. Elaine Showalter notes that

during the decades from 1870 to 1910, middle-class women were beginning to organize in behalf of higher education, entrance to the professions, and political rights. Simultaneously, the female nervous disorders of anorexia nervosa, hysteria, and neurasthenia became epidemic; and the Darwinian ‘nerve specialist’ arose to dictate proper feminine behavior outside the asylum as well as in, to differentiate treatments for ‘nervous’ women of various class backgrounds, and to oppose women’s efforts to change the conditions of their lives (18).

Implicit in the moral treatment’s aims to re-socialize women to what was regarded as their proper place in Victorian social structures is a concern that this particular form of perceived insanity – a deviation from prescribed female roles – could be communicable to others through a process of moral contagion. The ambiguity which enshrouds the overdetermined figure of the female suicide – an individual who is at once rational and insane, angel and demon – makes her, in some ways, a perfect metaphor for contagion. By refusing to stay within the limits of acceptable female behaviour, on the one hand, and being overly constrained by these limits on the other, the suicidal woman is always at once a possible threat and a possible victim, one who can infect others with her immorality and her discontentment with women’s social position, and one who risks being infected by the immorality of others.

The concept of moral contagion in relation to female suicide is central to Bram Stoker’s Dracula. Published in 1897, the same year as Durkheim’s influential work Suicide: A Study in Sociology, Dracula uses the Gothic genre to interrogate a particularly gendered understanding

23 Sensation novels also participated in this discourse, although they relied on the association between women and insanity their use of asylums in their plots. Wilkie Collins’ The Woman in White (1859), featured the forced committal of Laura Fairlie to an asylum by her husband in a plot to gain her inheritance,
of the social phenomenon of suicide. In this reading of *Dracula*, Lucy’s dual consciousness of an awake, daytime self that rejects Dracula and a night time, unconscious self that welcomes his embrace, suggests her split between a conscious desire to live, and an unconscious desire to die. The vampire operates as a vehicle for allowing these unconscious desires to surface, but they are not his creation. He merely reveals a longing to die that is already present in Lucy, and to a lesser degree in Mina. The Gothic’s ability to “tap deep-seated, sometimes repressed, desires and anxieties, coupled with its fixation on literal and symbolic transgressions” (Davison 126), provides a way to subtly interrogate Victorian assumptions that women were protected from suicide or suicidal impulses so long as they remained within the limits of Victorian domesticity. It is within domestic spaces that both Mina and Lucy become awakened to a desire to die, and it is within these spaces that they become at once the victims of this form of moral contagion, and the vehicle by which death spreads within domestic spaces.

**Vampires, Suicide, and Moral Contagion**

What scholars have overlooked in their approach to *Dracula* and other nineteenth-century vampire texts is the close association between vampirism and suicide. Paul Barber, listing a number of ways that various cultures thought that a person could be doomed to return following death, notes that the “universal category is the suicide” (30). Suicide as a return, as an unease, as an inability to rest, is the common thread that binds together the distinct vampire mythologies of various cultures. Barber explains that “it is partly because of their potential for returning from the dead or for drawing their nearest and dearest into the grave after them that suicides were refused burial in churchyards” (30). The sense, then, is that suicide represents a very real physical danger to the deceased’s family and friends. The sad, lonely, depressed or

---

24 In her discussion of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Gothic story “Olalla” Benyon-Payne notes that “it becomes apparent that the mother is of vampirical nature, as ‘bestial’ and driven by blood-lust as Hyde” (63).
isolated individual who ends his/her life carries that loneliness forward, transformed into an aggressive desire to reconnect with family and friends, drawing them, in turn, towards an early grave. The vampiric disease - which often originates with a suicidal action – is also a contagious action, an infection spread to family and friends with potentially deadly consequences.

Concerns about the spread of diseases in the nineteenth century led to the formation of the sanitarian movement in an attempt to limit their transmission. Hand in hand with the desire to lessen the spread of physical disease, however, was the desire to limit the spread of immoral influences. If physical disease could be transmitted through proximity, then it stood to reason that immoral vices could be communicable as well. Those who engaged in activities such as gambling, drinking or petty thievery could all be considered carriers with the ability to infect those who came too close or who spent too much time in their vicinity. The metaphor of contagion can be extended still further to encompass any actions which may elicit imitation. Olive Anderson suggests that “a number of the first generation of British sanitarians had absorbed the new continental statistical, epidemiological approach to suicide as an epidemic disease and hence a problem of public health” (345-346). Drawing from William Farr’s “third official report of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages, published in 1841,” Anderson suggests that the “sanitarians’ strategy for the reduction of suicide” (346) consisted of two parts. The first part exposes the underlying mind/body connection perceived by the Victorians by “encouraging outdoor exercise, ‘occupational hygiene’, ‘the regulation of the mind’” and, specific to fears of imitation and contagion, “less publicity for ‘detailed, dramatic tales of suicide, murder and bloodshed!’” (346). The second part provides concrete advice on how to combat the threat of suicidal imitation through “the creation of an environment from which all tempting facilities for suicide had as far as possible been removed, so that suicide was both less easy to think of and to carry out” (346). The desire to censor potentially inflammatory writings and to alter the
environment in ways that would limit suicidal thoughts and actions suggests that imitation and contagion were very real Victorian concerns in relation to suicide.

The power of imitation to infect those who were susceptible to its influence can be seen in Athena Vrettos’ examination of illness in the Victorian period. Vrettos looks to the 1881 performance of Sarah Bernhardt in Moscow in *La dame aux camélias* as an example of the way the power of suggestion or action could cause an immediate imitative effect. When Bernhardt’s character, who is dying of consumption, coughs on stage, there follows an outbreak of coughing from the audience. Vrettos reads this incident as revealing “a fundamental permeability not only between body and mind but also between self and other,” which suggests “the possibility of a kind of mental or neurological contagion comparable to epidemics of organic disease” (84). In 1863, Ray Isaac, one of the founders of forensic psychiatry, cautioned that “intimate association with persons affected with nervous infirmities, such as chorea, hysteria, epilepsy, insanity, should be avoided by all who are endowed with a peculiarly susceptible nervous organization, whether strongly predisposed to nervous diseases, or only vividly impressed by the sight of suffering and agitation” (cited in Vrettos 86). It would seem, then, that not only were some people stronger carriers of these kinds of emotional transmissions (actors and actresses especially were thought to be able to solicit imitable responses), but also that a certain percentage of the population was particularly susceptible to these forms of suggestion. Drawing heavily from Vrettos’ work, Allan Conrad Christensen points out that “any situation that demonstrates the largely involuntary susceptibility of a human being to influences coming from without may imply the ubiquitous contagion mechanism” (19). In other words, contagion may operate on many levels and extend beyond the bounds of physical infection. Thoughts, emotions, ideas, anything that can permeate the boundaries between self and other, that can influence an individual to perform certain actions, can be considered contagious.
For Benjamin Richardson, author of *Diseases of Modern Life* (1876), the combination of emotional contagion and susceptibility to imitative impulses could actually cause some forms of insanity. Richardson argues that “an emotional contagion combined with an imitative impulse leads to certain phenomena of mental disease, the results of which are exceedingly disastrous” (256). His recounting of a soldier who hanged himself in his sentry box, and the number of suicides which followed, ending only once the sentry box was destroyed, dramatizes the way that certain objects or places come to be invested with a psychological pull that is almost impossible to resist for those who were considered to be “very accessible to suggestion in general and especially to ideas of suicide” (97 Durkheim). Richardson suggests that this form of imitation is not uncommon, noting that “our monument in the city, our Duke of York’s Column, our Suspension Bridge at Clifton, are so many equivalent sentry-boxes that have tempted the suicidal to imitate the suicide” (257).

With increasing urbanization across the nineteenth century, there was also increasing risk of encountering triggers for suicidal imitation. In earlier periods, the risk of suicidal contagion would have been limited to the immediate geographical area and the surrounding community. As communication and the spread of information became easier with new technologies, the risk of imitative actions increased exponentially. The rise of newspapers in the eighteenth century helped to secularize the experience of suicide by placing “stories about suicide in the same context as tales of other natural calamities” and avoiding “supernatural figures” while showing a “reluctance to invoke old religious and folkloric beliefs about the causes of suicide” (MacDonald “Suicide and the Rise of the Popular Press” 51-52). This “permitted readers to judge the meaning of the deaths they recounted for themselves” (51-52). By the mid nineteenth century, however, newspapers were increasingly under attack for participating in the spread of suicidal imitation. As Anderson points out, “the nation-wide publicity given by the press to outstanding sensations or ‘human interest’ stories wherever they took place was repeatedly shown to be baneful and
regretted, and not only by epidemiologists concerned about moral contagion” (372-373). The belief that an act such as ending one’s own life, or merely reading about someone ending his or her life, could have wide-reaching ramifications, adds a texture to vampire literature from the period that has heretofore been overlooked in critical scholarship. If the mythology about the making of a vampire originates from behaviours deemed deviant or otherwise socially alienating\textsuperscript{25} (criminality, suicide, unclean living), then we need to recognize that these are the same behaviours that could be deemed contagious through social proximity.

The vampire, by definition, is a creature of contagion; it maintains its life and reproduces through the transmission of the vampiric infection. By their very nature, as Bronfen recognizes, vampires are in a liminal position as they “are simultaneously present in the tomb and in some spiritual realms” (295). “They are dangerous,” according to Bronfen, because “they appear between all pure classifications and unambiguous concepts” (295). The vampire needs to feed off the blood of humans to survive, and while this sometimes results in the death of the food source, the possibility of death is not the only source of the fear associated with vampirism. Death is perhaps not the worst to be feared, rather, it is contamination, the reproduction of the vampiric cells that contain the curse/disease of the undead, that makes the vampire a creature of horror. Many of the rituals that were associated with the burial of suicides were actually attempts to contain and prevent the spread of this ‘disease.’ As Matthew Beresford notes, crossroad burials were meant to prevent the possibility of a revenant’s return and thus prevent contagion. He points out that “even as far back as the Roman period there is evidence of the dead being buried at

\textsuperscript{25} Montague Summers suggests that “the Vampire is one who has led a life of more than ordinary immorality and unbridled wickedness; a man of foul, gross and selfish passions, of evil ambitions, delighting in cruelty and blood” (77), while Carol Senf notes that “according to folklore in many East European countries, one sure way to become a vampire was suicide” (20). In the mythology of the creation of vampires, there is no distinction made between “wickedness,” “evil ambitions,” “cruelty,” and suicide. Thus, the transgressive behaviours that the suicide had demonstrated while alive, coupled with his or her suicide as the means of death, become the mechanism through which the vampiric turn occurs. As Laurence Rickels observes, “the suicide that was the candidate for a vampire’s comeback most likely to succeed culture by culture and time and again. The suicide is always the one checkout guaranteed to return with a vengeance” (3).
crossroads; the reason for this, it is thought, is that if dead criminals or social outcasts were to come back to life, they would be unable to find their way back to their village or town and cause further horror” (11).

The association between suicide and burial practices was one that changed considerably across the nineteenth century. With a series of burial acts beginning with 4 Geo. 4, c 52 in 1823, suicides could no longer be buried at a crossroads, although their interment in the cemetery could only take place between the hours of nine and midnight. With subsequent burial acts between 1852 and 1880, those found guilty of felo de se could be provided with a Christian burial, including religious service. According to Anderson, the burial act of 1880 brought about a number of significant changes for the interment of suicides:

First, this Act made it lawful at any burial whatsoever for any form of orderly religious service to be performed in the churchyard by someone other than a clergyman of the Church of England. Secondly, it made it lawful for the clergy of the Church of England, in any case where the Burial Office was prohibited by the rubric and in any other case at the request of the relatives or friends, to use at the burial a consolatory service of portions of the Prayer Book and scripture prescribed or approved by the bishop of the diocese. Thus not even those adjudged felo de se need now be buried silently, nor need they (thanks to a short, separate act of 1882) be buried privately at night; it was now permissible, although not obligatory, for a clergyman to read a consolatory service at such funerals. (275).

These changes to burial legislation constitute an indication of changing Victorian attitudes towards suicide that no longer saw posthumous desecration and insult to a suicide’s corpse as an effective way to deter other potential suicides. While on the surface these changes suggest a victory of science over superstition as burial in consecrated ground with funerary services may indicate that Victorians no longer feared a suicide’s supernatural return, the popularity of Gothic
novels like *Dracula* suggests that there may have been lingering anxieties about the relaxation of burial legislation.

The fear inspired by the vampire has always been focused on the physical aspects of its contagious nature, and the damage it could do if it found its way back to the community. A lack of understanding about the scientific processes of decomposition in pre-industrial societies, combined with a lack of understanding in how disease spread, can account for numerous firsthand accounts offering proof of an exhumed body’s vampiric activities. In Barber’s examination of the mythology of vampiric contagion in pre-industrial societies, he identifies a belief in vampirism as a way for these societies to understand epidemics of disease, and to have a sense of control over the outcome. Once one person fell ill and died, vampirism became a way to understand subsequent deaths, and killing the vampire, the first one to succumb to an illness, was a way to try to prevent further deaths. When the body of that person was exhumed to verify their vampiric state, Barber suggests that almost any variability in the corpse could be taken as proof. Barber, turning to Elmwood Trigg’s discussion of Romani beliefs, quotes Trigg’s claim that “‘if, after a period of time [the body] remains incorrupt, exactly as it was buried, or it appears to be swollen and black in colour, having undergone some dreadful change in appearance, suspicions of vampirism are confirmed.’ Note that what is being said here is that if the body remains as it was, then it is a vampire, whereas if it changes – then it is a vampire” (112). With the increased medical knowledge at the end of the nineteenth century, however, it seems likely that a greater understanding of the processes of decomposition and the spread of illnesses would replace such superstitious explanations of the body’s rate of decay. If the physical characteristics of a corpse could be explained by scientific examinations and theories, then to what do we attribute the lingering horror of, and fascination with, the vampire? What if we focus instead on the moral and psychological aspects of vampirism rather than the physical? I would suggest that when we shift

26 See chapters 12 and 13 in Paul Barber’s *Vampires, Burial and Death.*
our focus from the physical threat of the vampire, to the moral and psychological threat he (or she) poses, we can begin to see the ways in which a vampire’s victims are in fact complicit in their transformation. They are not merely overpowered and overwhelmed by Dracula’s physical strength; instead they are drawn into collusion with him as they willingly, and actively work with him towards their own demise.

**Dracula and the Desire to Die**

On June 12, 1897, the reviewer for the fiction supplement in *The Academy* opened his review of *Dracula* by remarking on the public’s taste for what he refers to as “horrors.” He goes on to suggest that “one sees, of course, the same thing in journalism. Crimes, floods, fires, ‘horrid details of all kinds sell more editions of an evening paper than far more important and edifying matters” (11). While the reviewer does not explicitly state suicide as one of the “horrid details” included in the evening papers, it would not be out of place on the list of disasters that certain kinds of readers were eager to read about. What is particularly interesting about this review is the way that fiction and reality seem to blend into one another. The reviewer’s condemnation of journalistic practices occurs within a review of a fictional novel about a supernatural entity. While overall the review is a positive one (although the reviewer is slightly more impressed with the first half of the novel then the latter half), his observation that the story is a “curious compound of realism and sensationalism” (11) points to a general uneasiness about the porousness of the boundaries, the liminality, between these genres of realism and sensationalism, and by extension, between two distinct epistemological views of the world: reason and rationality on one hand, sensation and emotion on the other. Like the vampire, the novel itself occupies a liminal position by refusing to adhere to a single genre. The description of the novel as “one long nightmare, full of mad-house imaginings, vampires, and everything that is likely to keep nervous people from sleep at night” (11) suggests a connection between temperament and contagion: that “nervous people,” or those with a nervous temperament, could risk being adversely affected by
reading the novel. Interestingly, the reviewer does not focus exclusively on the supernatural
horror in Dracula, but also points to the “mad-house imaginings” as being something that may
cause insomnia in certain personality types.

Like The Academy reviewer, the reviewer for The Athenaeum agrees that the first part of
the novel is the strongest, although for different reasons. He suggests that “the earliest part goes
best, for it promises to unfold the roots of mystery and fear lying deep in human nature” (June 26,
1897 835). While Harker’s journal makes it clear from the beginning that the Count is something
other than human, there is less emphasis on the supernatural earlier in the novel than there is later
in the story. For both of these reviewers, the power of the novel, and a large part of its horror,
does not come from the feeding habits of a supernatural creature, but rather from its exploration
of the human psyche. The crux of both reviews is that Dracula is at its scariest when the
supernatural elements are least visible and the psychological turmoil is most prominent.

Dracula, for all his superhuman strength and animal affinities, relies most often on his
ability to enter into and influence the minds of his victims. For Dracula, physical compulsion
seems secondary to his hypnotic ability to place his victims under his control. While physical
contact is necessary for the death/change to take place, Lucy is lost long before the moment of her
death/rebirth. These characters, Lucy particularly, are drawn to Dracula in their moments of
unconsciousness. While awake and fully conscious, both Mina and Lucy are repulsed by the
vampire: they reject what he offers and express horror at what he is. In their moments of
unconsciousness, however, they embrace the death that he offers. When rational, conscious
thought breaks down, Dracula becomes an incredibly attractive, and erotic, character to them. It is
in these moments that physical contagion becomes conflated with moral/psychological contagion,
and we see the ambiguity shared by Mina and Lucy as longing for both life and death.
Lucy Westenra, Hysteria and Moral Contagion

While the final outcomes for Lucy and Mina are very different, the endings for both characters can be located in Victorian discourses of moral contagion, hysteria and suicide. The hysteric symptoms that Mina and Lucy experience, according to contemporary medical theories, identify them as having deviated from prescribed ideals of womanly behaviour. Addressing the increase in the number of female hysterics at the end of the century, Elaine Showalter notes that “doctors had noticed that hysteria was apt to appear in young women who were especially rebellious. F. C. Skey, for example, had observed that his hysterical patients were likely to be more independent and assertive than ‘normal’ women, ‘exhibiting more than usual force and decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger’” (qtd in Showalter 145). These observations about hysterical women could easily be ascribed to Mina at the beginning of the novel, and while Lucy certainly does not fit into any of these categories, the novel suggests that as the object of admiration for multiple men, she does not quite fit into the idealized category of a virtuous young woman either. Each woman, in her own way, occupies a liminal position through resistance and conformity to Victorian ideals of womanhood. Mina is a strong, independent woman who can take control in a crisis, yet she is also a caregiver and nurturer. Lucy is the young middle-class woman about to be married, and she is also the promiscuous woman with the blood of four men in her veins. Since both characters occupy multiple identities in the novel, why is Lucy punished and Mina rewarded? The easy answer is that Lucy, now a ‘fallen woman’ following her blood transfusions, must be excised accordingly. A slightly more nuanced response is that, in keeping with Tuke’s moral treatment for insanity, both Lucy and Mina are provided with opportunities for social reintegration. Lucy has the promise of respectability as the wife of Arthur Holmwood, while Mina is eventually reintegrated into the group hunting Dracula. When the success of these reintegration programs is tested, however, only Mina is able to resist the lure of additional temptation. The moment Lucy entreats Arthur to “kiss me!” (197) she proves herself
to be unreformed, and unreformable; more importantly, she reveals herself as a potential contaminating agent, driven to infect those around her.

_Visual_ is a novel rife with encoded references to suicide, and to Lucy’s susceptibility to suicidal contagion. It is Mr. Swales, a figure who mocks the dead and the prescribed conventions of mourning, who first draws Lucy’s attention to the grave of George Canon, “who died, in the hope of a glorious resurrection, on July 29, 1873, falling from the rocks at Kettleness” (99). By dating the headstone before the burial act of 1880, the novel draws attention to the debates leading up to the changes in ecclesiastical burial practices which create ambiguity about the manner of burial that George Canon may have received. Van Helsing later confirms that George would have been denied burial prayers, and suggests that he was buried in an unconsecrated portion of the churchyard. When discussing the limitations of the vampire, Van Helsing points out that while the vampire “can do as he will within his limit, when he have his earth-home, his coffin-home, his hell-home, the place unhallowed, as we saw when he went to the grave of the suicide at Whitby; still at other time he can only change when the time come” (279). That Dracula can “do as he will” when he is in close proximity to George’s grave means that George is buried in unhallowed ground. Dracula’s ability to use the grave as a source of power reinforces the association between vampires and suicide, and calls into question whether the “resurrection” the elegy on the tombstone refers to is in relation to the return of a revenant rather than to the spirit rising to a heavenly reward.

As Swales points out the hypocrisy of the headstone erected by George’s mother, noting that her son “committed suicide in order that she mightn’t get an insurance she put on his life” (100), Lucy’s reaction seems oddly disconnected from the story he tells. Rather than

---

27According to Anderson, from 1853 onwards there was a substantial increase in the number of people who held life insurance policies, and companies typically included “a clause whereby suicide voided the policy” (266). In rare cases where suicide was not explicitly mentioned in the policy, Anderson points to the ruling in _Horn v. the Anglo-Australian and Universal Family Life Assurance Company_ in 1861 that [ruled] such contracts were voided only when death was caused by the felonious act of the assured, and not when the
commenting on the impulses that would drive a young man to take his life, or on the animosity between the mother and son, Lucy instead focuses on how this long dead suicide has the power to directly affect her life. She bemoans this new knowledge, saying, “it is my favourite seat, and I cannot leave it; and now I find I must go on sitting over the grave of a suicide” (100). Tellingly, despite Lucy’s reservations about what the grave contains, she is not only unwilling, but apparently unable, to forgo the pleasure of her “favourite seat.” She seems to exhibit a strange compulsion in her inability to envision herself sitting elsewhere. This fascination with the grave, and particularly with George’s manner of death, encodes a warning that could be easily read by anyone familiar with debates relating to suicide and imitation. As Durkheim points out in his 1897 sociological study *On Suicide*, “perhaps no other phenomenon is more readily contagious. Not even the homicidal impulse is so apt to spread” (132). While objecting to the knowledge of the corpse beneath her, Lucy phrases this objection in absolute terms; she “cannot leave it” and she “must go on sitting” there. There is a compulsive element to her phrasing which seems to exist below the level of her own consciousness, and yet indicates her eventual complicity in her vampiric transformation. While her phrasing suggests something which is beyond her control, it also encodes her susceptibility to suicidal contagion.

In a novel that blends the psychological with the supernatural, it is notable that it is Mr. Swales who both relates the tale of the suicide to Lucy, and who tries to reassure her “that he won’t harm ye, my pretty” (100) following this revelation. Swales is set out from the first as a debunker of the supernatural, claiming that “these bans an’ wafts an’ boh-ghosts an’ bar-guests an’ boggles an’ all anent them is only fit to set bairns an’ dizzy women a-belderin’” (97). We must remember, however, that with the arrival of Dracula Swales is proven wrong in his refusal to countenance the existence of the supernatural. His misinformation, or at least the unreliability of assured was insane” (267). Since Gordon’s mother was unable to collect on her son’s life insurance policy, the jury would have had to bring in a verdict of *felo de se* rather than *non compos mentis*, thereby eliminating any ambiguity about the manner of his death.
his proclamations regarding death and things that cannot be explained, taints the reassurance he offers to Lucy.

In his desire to demystify and to demythologize the dead Swales overlooks the ways in which knowledge of the suicide might actually harm Lucy. Relying on his own experience, he tells Lucy that “I’ve sat here off an’ on for nigh twenty years past, an’ it hasn’t done me no harm” (100). Swales’s reassurance comes from a particularly gendered point of view. He generalizes his own masculine experience, and seeming insusceptibility to suicidal ideation, to Lucy’s. My reading separates the psychological from the supernatural; thus, while Swales is immune to the psychological ramifications of being in close proximity to the grave of a suicide, his life is ended at this location, making him subject to external physical forces rather than internal psychological ones. Following the ship-wreck, Mina writes that “Mr. Swales was found dead this morning on our seat, his neck being broken. He had evidently, as the doctor said, fallen back in the seat in some sort of fright, for there was a look of fear and horror on his face that the men said made them shudder” (121). Mina’s use of “our seat” to designate the location, however, reinforces the psychological connection between these characters and the suicide beneath it. The reality is that Lucy does have something to fear from the suicide, just not in the way that Swales anticipates. As Vrettos points out, there is a tradition, dating back into the eighteenth century, of seeing women as particularly vulnerable to emotional stimulus. She suggests that “eighteenth-century medical treatises frequently asserted that imaginary emotions and desires contracted through reading sentimental poetry and novels had the power to provoke nervous illness, particularly in susceptible young women” (24). The story of Geordie, then, seems likely not only to capture Lucy’s imagination, but also have potentially adverse effects. Mina certainly recognizes Lucy’s receptive emotionality, saying that “Lucy is so sweet and sensitive that she feels influences more

---

28 Swales draws attention to the empty graves of sailors, and refers to the elegies on the tombstones as lies (98-100).
acutely than other people do” (121) and that “I greatly fear that she is of too super-sensitive a nature to go through the world without trouble” (122).

As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, Victorians associated female transgression with female insanity, and Lucy’s refusal to leave her seat on a suicide’s grave not only identifies her as being susceptible to contagion, but it also suggests that she is not quite the vision of idealized femininity that she may appear. The most common diagnosis for women’s madness was hysteria because of its strong associations with the feminine. As Elaine Showalter suggests, hysteria’s “vast, unstable repertoire of emotional and physical symptoms – fits, fainting, vomiting, choking, sobbing, laughing, paralysis – and the rapid passage from one to another suggested the lability and capriciousness traditionally associated the feminine nature” (129). I would add to this list Joseph Breuer’s theory of auto-hypnoid states in hysteric which he suggests are often characterized by “alternating rapidly with normal waking states “and “on account of the dream-like nature of their content, they often deserve the name of ‘delirium hystericum’” (216) Breuer suggests that “what happens during auto-hypnotic states is subject to more or less total amnesia in waking life (whereas it is completely remembered in artificial hypnosis)” (216). Breuer’s addition to the symptoms of hysteria apply perfectly to Lucy’s experience with Dracula as it explains her revulsion of him when she is fully conscious, and her attraction to him while she is in a somnambulistic or hypnoid state. Lucy is unique because, according to Van Helsing, she is “something different from all recorded . . . She was bitten by the vampire when she was in a trance, sleep-walking . . . and in trance could he best come to take more blood. In trance she died, and in trance she is Un-Dead, too” (239). I would suggest that Lucy’s sleepwalking state allows her desires to come to the surface; however, Lucy’s sleepwalking starts prior to Dracula’s arrival, meaning that he is not responsible for bringing these desires to the surface; they are longings which she is only able to act on when she is freed from conscious constraints.
Though Lucy’s sleepwalking precedes both Dracula’s arrival and the knowledge of who is buried in the grave, it begins shortly after Mina’s arrival on July 24th. Mina first mentions it in her journal two days later, and within a week records Lucy’s reaction to finding the grave of the suicide. Thereafter Mina’s journal accounts of her stay with Lucy are increasingly filled with references to the graveyard, and particularly to “our seat” (121). This focus on the grave of the suicide corresponds to a worsening of Lucy’s symptoms. In analysing Lucy’s symptoms – “difficulty in breathing satisfactorily at times, and of heavy, lethargic sleep, with dreams that frighten her, but regarding which she can remember nothing” – Dr. Seward comes to the conclusion that since there are no apparent physical causes for her ailments, “it must be something mental” (147). As Lucy’s fixation on the grave continues, it manifests itself through her sleepwalking. Through her unconscious movements Lucy becomes an active agent in her own demise. Her longing for freedom, to escape the confines of her bedroom, propels her towards Dracula and the living death and erotic potential that he offers. As Elizabeth Bronfen suggests, Sleepwalking Lucy . . . immediately responds to the desire or call of the Other. . . She enacts a desire for death that is located in her unconscious, even if her conscious self cheerfully anticipates the return of her future husband. This conjunction is made explicit by the fact that Lucy is waiting for Arthur to take him to her seat on the churchyard cliff, while it is at precisely this ‘favourite seat’ that she is bitten by her other suitor, Dracula. (316)

The duality that Bronfen sees between sleepwalking Lucy’s desire for death in the form of Dracula and conscious Lucy’s anticipation of Arthur’s arrival is a useful one as it points to a fascination with, and longing for, death that is too terrible to be articulated during the full light of day. It can only be silently enacted during the stillness of the night.

This idea of Dracula as an additional suitor is part of a particularly female literary trope which Sandra Gilbert identifies as “erotic suicide.” Gilbert identifies four examples of distinctly
female literary suicide plots: “the Alcestis plot, in which a virtuous wife dies for her husband, either in his place or at his behest” (251-252); “the plot or theme of self-loathing that also underlies some female suicides and suicide attempts is probably most clearly associated with the suicides of older women” (252); “the mimetic or competitive suicide—a female version of what suicidologists sometimes call ‘the Werther effect’ that seized so many brooding young men after the publication of Goethe's sensational novel” (253); and the “notion of erotic suicide” which she associates with “the rhetoric of romance that infuses so many of Plath's suicidal fantasies” (251).

In her brief analysis of Plath’s poetry, Gilbert looks at the “Bee-Keeper’s Daughter” as “a poem in which she [Plath] yearningly outlines the incestuous eroticism that marked her death-drive” (251). If Dracula is both Lucy’s suitor and her father (in the sense of transforming her into her second, undead life), then the novel connects incest to Lucy’s unconscious death drive. The young woman who toys with taboo by imagining multiple husbands crosses boundaries between father/daughter while crossing the boundaries between life and death. Lucy’s unconscious desire for death becomes embodied in the undead lover.

The tension between death and sexuality is the central argument of Gilbert’s article, and it is worth noting the underlying allegory of “Death and the Maiden” (249) that she identifies as being a particularly feminine trope in literature relating to suicide. Reading Emily Dickinson’s “Death Is the Supple Suitor” alongside Schubert's 1817 setting of Matthias Claudius’ Der Tod und das Mädchen Gilbert notes that Claudius’ work suggests that “Death’s courtship . . . may be menacing, but it is suavely, even sexily menacing, proffering a perverse hymn to the beauty of the woman whom the skeletal wooer implacably desires. What makes ‘his’ wooing curiously plausible is the ‘maiden’s’ half-conscious complicity in death’s scheme . . . Even as she struggles to repudiate the advances of this ‘savage skeleton,’ the maiden fantasizes yielding to his wiles” (250). A similar tension between longing and repudiation is at play in Dracula. When Lucy tries to explain what she felt the night she sleep-walked into the graveyard to Dracula, she says in a
“half-dreaming kind of way” that “I didn’t quite dream; but it all seemed to be real. I only wanted to be here in this spot – I don’t know why, for I was afraid of something – I don’t know what” (132). Lucy’s words combine a longing for the location (the seat above Geordie’s grave) and, by extension, for Dracula who is waiting for her. Dracula, as both the seducer and the bringer of death, evokes a response in Lucy that combines longing with fear. The “half-dreaming” way in which she recalls this occasion suggests that she is in a state somewhere between conscious and unconscious, neither fully one nor the other. It is only in this in-between state, what Breuer might term auto-hypnoid, that Lucy seems able to articulate both emotional states. When Lucy is fully conscious she is unable to remember what has passed during the night, although Mina observes on numerous occasions that she is more anxious than usual; while sleep-walking she actively searches for ways to exit the room or open a window to provide access for Dracula.

While Bronfen’s argument connects Lucy’s “favourite seat” to Dracula’s physical attack, it fails to account for Lucy’s fascination with George’s death. Physical contagion in the form of Dracula becomes conflated with psychological contagion/fascination in the form of Gordon’s grave, a connection that Lucy makes explicit a few days later when she tells Mina that “My poor little feet didn’t make much noise then! I daresay poor old Mr. Swales would have told that it was because I didn’t want to wake up Geordie” (132). With these words Lucy reveals George’s potential for return, thus linking him not only to herself through her obsession with her “favourite seat,” but also to Dracula. In her discussion of the transgressive nature of the vampire, Glennis Byron suggests that “While the vampire himself embodies transgression, he is, even more importantly, also the catalyst which releases subversive disruptive desire in others. When Arthur Holmwood says of Lucy, ‘There is something preying on my dear girl’s mind,’ he unconsciously puts his finger on the real nature of the threat posed by Dracula; it is more than just bodies that he penetrates and disturbs” (2). Lucy’s fixation on George’s grave reveals her own suicidal ideation.
The potential for self-harm that is offered through the story of George’s death is actuated by her unconscious desire to seek out and facilitate Dracula’s access during her sleepwalking state.

As Lucy’s unconscious moves her ever closer towards Dracula, she becomes increasingly complicit in her own demise. The duality of Lucy’s struggle between a conscious desire to live and an unconscious desire to die is apparent in Dr. Seward’s characterization of her behaviour towards the end of her life. As Lucy languishes in bed, he observes that “it struck me as curious that the moment she became conscious she pressed the garlic flowers close to her. It was certainly odd that whenever she got into that lethargic state, with the stertorous breathing, she put the flowers from her; but that when she waked she clutched them close” (196). Lucy’s consciousness becomes clearly divided between her waking actions and those that occur while she is a somnambulant state. Van Helsing, the voice of authority on all subjects relating to the supernatural, and by extension the unconscious, recognizes that Lucy is close to death, and that “It will be much difference . . . whether she dies conscious or in her sleep” (197). Recognizing Lucy’s split mind, Van Helsing anticipates that if Lucy dies while in a hypnoid state, then Dracula’s influence over her will be complete. This distinction suggests that if Lucy dies while conscious, then her soul will remain her own. The amnesiac response that keeps Dracula’s visits hidden from Lucy’s waking mind would remain dormant and her transition would remain unfulfilled.

**Mina Harker and Vampiric Liminality**

Lucy’s complicity in her death is easily identified once we understand how to decode Victorian references to suicide, and in the contexts of these references we can also identify her liminal position as both angel and demon, virtuous and fallen woman. Mina’s relationship to suicide, however, is complicated by the fact that she does not actually die. I would argue, however, that while Mina does not actually die, her prolonged, although incomplete, transition to vampirism can be interpreted through the same encoding of suicide in the novel, and by the same
liminality by which we understand Lucy’s death. For Mina, the liminal position between life and death which she comes to occupy is mirrored in her personal relationships as she is positioned as both insider and outsider, as authority figure and helper. Mina is initially introduced not through her own words, but through Harker’s references to her in his journal. These references, however, are fleeting, and generally amount to an impassioned farewell every time he feels that he is in danger; she is at best a secondary character in his journal. The letters between Mina and Lucy, however, reveal Mina’s character to be one that is shaped by bonds of affection, friendship, and most of all loyalty to her future husband. Her initial letter to Lucy is filled with references to Jonathan, and her desire to be “useful” to him once they are married. She apologizes to Lucy for her “delay in writing” and explains that she has been “working very hard lately, because I want to keep up with Jonathan’s studies, and I have been practising shorthand very assiduously” (86). Perhaps it is an unfair comparison considering that Harker is committing his thoughts to a personal journal, while Mina is imparting information to her friend in a letter, but it is impossible to overlook his primary place in her writings, and her next to non-existent position in his. This juxtaposition between Harker’s “goodby, all! Mina!” (85), which ends the opening section of the novel, and Mina’s letter which opens the next section centered on her friendship with Lucy, makes apparent Mina’s focus on interpersonal relationships, and her ambiguous position in the life of her future husband.

To confirm that Mina’s primary quality early in the novel is loyalty, one need only look at her reaction to the news of Harker’s illness. Despite her lingering concerns about Lucy’s illness, (133) Mina decides to “leave in the morning and go over to Jonathan, and to help to nurse him if necessary, and to bring him home” (133). Mina’s resolution not only to go to him, but also to resolve to marry him in Europe, knowing only that he is in a sanatorium suffering from a
prolonged “brain fever” (134), suggests that she is a woman who honors her commitments, even when life turns out differently than she no doubt expected. This decision also places Mina within the categories of both caretaker and authority figure, or perhaps, more accurately, that her position as caretaker gives her authority to act not only on her own behalf, but on Harker’s as well.

Mina’s liminality becomes increasingly problematic as she becomes closer to Dracula in ways that point to her complicity in her transformation. As John Allen Stevenson suggests, the problem with Mina’s vampiric infection is not located in her physical proximity to the vampire, or the fact that she has shared his embrace. Rather, “the problem is one of loyalty: the danger is not that she will be captured but that she will go willingly” (139). Mina herself warns the men she may change suddenly and unexpectedly, and “in such a case you must lose no time in using your opportunity. At such a time I myself might be – nay! if the time ever comes, shall be – leagued with your enemy against you” (373). She has the potential to become a threat because she is one of their group. Mina’s recognition of her own vulnerability to the vampire’s influence, her awareness that she is slowly losing control of herself, suggests that the transformation goes beyond a physical boundary, penetrating the unconscious and feeding on desires which are kept tightly under wraps during the conscious waking hours. Mina herself, then, seems aware that her increased exposure to the vampire is altering her very thoughts, which have the potential to alter her personality, something that we now associate with various mental illnesses and disorders.

As Mina becomes increasingly vampiric, her actions begin to resemble textbook understandings of hysteria. In his work with Freud on hysteria, Josef Breuer uses case studies to

---

29 This letter from Sister Agatha is on the facing page to Dr. Seward’s diary entry about Renfield and homicidal and religious mania. This juxtaposition connects the two men (despite their very different symptoms) through a shared insanity spread by Dracula.

30 In her introduction to The Blood of the Vampire, Greta Depledge points out that Lucy also exhibits hysterical symptoms, noting that “the depiction of Lucy with which Stoker provides the reader reads like a detailed case history of a nineteenth-century hysteric” (xiv).
attempt to understand and explain the relationship between affect\(^3\) and somatic symptoms in hysterical phenomena. Breuer found that in cases where “the emotional disturbance – apprehensiveness, angry irritability, grief” either preceded or immediately followed the somatic symptom, and where patients were able to talk through their responses, the “quality of the affect always became quite understandable, even though its intensity could not fail to seem to a normal person (and to the patient himself, after it had been cleared up) to be out of all proportion” (223-224). Instead of a physical action creating an affect response, as was the case in other patients Breuer documented, these patients had “ideas which were intense enough not merely to cause powerful somatic phenomena but also to call out the appropriate affect and to influence the course of association by bringing allied ideas into prominence – but which, in spite of all this, remained outside consciousness themselves” (225). He goes on to suggest that these patients suffer from a “splitting of the mind” since “Their psychical ideational activity is divided into a conscious and an unconscious part, and their ideas are divided into some that are admissible and some that are inadmissible to consciousness” (225). Essentially, Breuer hypothesizes that certain ideas, especially those involving “fright, anxiety and anger\(^3\)” (245) provoke certain affective and somatic responses. These responses may continue, according to Breuer, even when the conscious mind empties the initial idea of meaning, such as “dread of events which did not occur” or “fright that turned to laughter of joy after a rescue” (224-225). Breuer notes that for many of the patients who suffered from these symptoms, hypnosis was necessary in order to bring their unconscious thoughts into the conscious. ‘Unconscious ideas,’ according to Breuer, “never, or only rarely and with difficulty, enter waking thought; but they influence it” (237). Arguably, what we see in

\(^3\) The foot note to The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume II (1893-1895): Studies on Hysteria points out that “Breuer seems here to be using the term ‘affect’, in a sense quite exceptional in the present volume (though one sometimes employed by other psychologists), to indicate specifically feelings of pleasure and unpleasure. The same word ‘Affektwert’ is used by him above (p. 213f.) in his regular sense of an unspecified emotion or feeling.

\(^3\) Breuer suggests that all of these emotions may be present in young women during puberty who are experiencing sexual feelings for the first time.
Mina’s reaction to Dracula is a combination of fear and desire that has caused a splitting of her mind which keeps her desire trapped in her unconscious. This desire, however, continues to influence her actions. In her recognition of Dracula’s power over her, Mina acts as both physician and patient. While it is Van Helsing who ultimately identifies what they need to do to cure her, it is Mina who provides her own diagnosis of her condition. It is Mina, far more than the men, who recognizes that the more that Dracula interferes with her thoughts, the greater the likelihood of her acting in ways that would normally be considered out of character, and that are beyond her control.

As with Lucy, Mina is complicit in her transformation, although I would suggest that she is complicit in ways that reinforce structures of male authority through the figures of her husband and, more importantly, the doctors. Rather than challenging the status quo as Lucy does in her wish for multiple husbands, Mina defers to the wishes of her male companions at every turn, even at the expense of her own well-being. Once Mina’s equality in the group is lost and she is excluded from the men’s plans, she becomes increasingly despondent and melancholy in her isolation and passivity. Even as she finds herself “crying like a silly fool” (296) when her husband withholds information from her, she nevertheless reinforces their authority by acknowledging that their protectiveness “comes from my husband’s great love and from the good, good wishes of those other strong men” (296 my emphasis). While Lucy is susceptible to the vampire/suicide’s influence from the beginning, Mina succumbs to melancholy only once she is denied information and activity. It is her very isolation which allows Dracula access to her and which allows her depression to flourish. The men make it clear that there is a distinct difference between the levels of stress that men and women can handle before reaching a breaking point, and “if she had remained in touch with the affair, it would in time infallibly have wrecked her” (295). This distinction seems predicated on the assumption that women are more vulnerable to mental disturbances because of their increased emotionality, not necessarily because of weaker
intellect. It is Mina’s combination of “a man’s brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted – and woman’s heart” (274) that prompts Van Helsing (the medical authority within the novel) to exile her from future meetings.\(^3^3\) What the men fail to grasp, however, is that “eventually passivity breeds exhaustion, enervation, and illness” (Showalter 64). When “deprived of significant spheres of action and forced to define themselves only in personal relationships, women become more and more dependent on their inner lives, more prone to depression and breakdown” (Showalter 64). Dracula’s hold on Mina strengthens as she allows herself to be pushed further and further outside of the group.

Mina’s isolation becomes a self-perpetuating melancholic cycle; without new information about the men’s pursuit of Dracula to occupy her mind, she overanalyses the facts she does know, but in her depressed state she misattributes causes and effects: “If I hadn’t gone to Whitby, perhaps poor dear Lucy would be with us now. She hadn’t taken to visiting the churchyard till I came, and if she hadn’t come there in the daytime with me she wouldn’t have walked there in her sleep; and if she hadn’t gone there at night and asleep, that monster couldn’t have destroyed her as he did. Oh, why did I ever go to Whitby?” (296). Mina’s logic positions her as the reason for Lucy’s death, a spiraling connection of thoughts which psychologists would now identify as depressive thinking. In the wake of the men’s withdrawal, Mina seems fixated on Lucy’s death in a problematic, melancholic way which prevents her from properly mourning her friend.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud notes that “the distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (243). While most of these characteristics are shared with mourning,

\(^{33}\) Van Helsing’s belief in the emotional frailty of women causing nervous disorders and breakdowns is perhaps not surprising considering the madness of his “poor wife dead to me, but alive by Church’s law, though no wits, all gone” (213).
the aspect of self-reviling is specific to melancholia, and is the one that causes the shift from a normal process to one that is pathological. Freud explains this distinction further by saying that

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy. He is not of the opinion that a change has taken place in him, but extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better. This picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and—what is psychologically very remarkable—by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life. (245)

As Mina fixates on the things that she may have done that contributed to Lucy’s death, her behaviour becomes a model for melancholic or unnatural grieving in ways that also reinforce her connections to the vampiric.

In his lectures on vampires, Rickels extends the concept of problematic mourning by connecting it to the vampiric. He suggests that

when mourning shuts down, something like vampirism has already taken place. The melancholic builds inside himself a crypt where the dead person can be kept alive as undead, and he keeps that crypt of preservation secret because all it takes is for someone, an analyst, for example, to open the otherwise unprotected crypt and let in the light and air, and that it is the way it goes, what is already dead must again die, now once and for all. (56)

In their efforts to keep Mina physically safe and protected, the two analysts of their party, Dr. Seward and Van Helsing, miss the psychological harm she endures because of her banishment
from their planning sessions. Rather than allowing Mina to become an active agent in her mourning process – to focus on the destruction of Dracula, and to be allowed to champion Lucy’s memory – they force her into a problematic melancholic cycle in which she focuses excessive energy on Lucy’s memory even as she is prohibited from participating in plans and discussions which focus on avenging her death.

Ultimately, Mina’s desire for life seems stronger than Lucy’s. While Lucy is a woman prone to sensibility, Mina’s rational “man’s brain” seems able to counteract the pull towards self-destruction. When the female vampires call out to Mina “Come, sister. Come to us. Come! Come!” (408), Van Helsing’s “heart with gladness leapt like flame; for oh! the terror in her sweet eyes, the repulsion, the horror, told a story to my heart that was all of hope” (408). Mina resists the familiar and familial ties addressed to her by the female vampires, a reaction very different from Harker waiting “in languorous ecstasy” (70) for them to overcome him. The implication is that Lucy, as the object of attention from multiple suitors, has both a woman’s mind and a woman’s heart, a combination that increases her susceptibility not only to the physical threat of Dracula, but also to the psychological threat he embodies.

Jonathan, Mina and the Gendering of Suicide

The hysterical symptoms that Mina exhibits while under Dracula’s influence put her at risk not only from the vampire, but also from herself.34 There is, however, a marked gender difference between the ways that male and female characters think about and approach ideas of suicide. Escaping from Dracula’s castle, Jonathan Harker envisions death as the lesser of evils. Looking at the sharp precipice he must navigate to make his escape he considers that “at its foot a

34 Tracing the history of what we now understand as dissociative, conversion, and somatoform syndromes, all of which formally fell under the category of hysteria, Carol North notes that “patients with these disorders have been variously described as having in common a female preponderance; a multiplicity of symptom complaints; chronic course of illness; vague, circumstantial, imprecise, and exaggerated descriptions of their symptoms; dramatic style of presentation; suggestibility and hypnotizability; voluminous of symptoms of many types; extensive comorbidities; psychotic-like symptom presentations; emotional instability and difficulties with affect regulation; impulsivity; suicidal ideation and attempts; marked and persistent identity disturbance; intense and volatile personal relationships; stormy marital histories; chaotic family backgrounds; and histories of childhood neglect and abuse” (emphasis mine 508).
man may sleep – as a man” (85). Death, at least in Harker’s configuration, offers loss –
“Goodbye, all! Mina!” (85) – but also the potential to regain his manhood which has been called
into question, or lost, during his time in the castle. Harker’s passivity, his inability to do anything
other than wait with closed eyes in “languorous ecstasy” (70) when confronted with the female
vampires, marks a noticeable change from the travel and activity that characterise the first few
entries in his journal. Looking over the precipice, Harker knows that there is a strong possibility
that he may not make it down to the bottom alive. This moment, however, is understood in terms
of an active heroic act which has the possibility of death rather than the more passive longing to
die that we see in Lucy and Mina. In his determination to escape the castle at any cost, Harker
assumes the aspect of the adventurous plundering hero taking the Count’s gold “lest I want it
later” and pushing himself to his physical limits by “scal[ing] the castle wall farther than I have
yet attempted” (85). In the process of pushing himself to the very limits of his endurance, Harker
reclaims the parts of himself that he lost while under Dracula’s control and he emerges from his
ordeal as a man physically weakened, yet one the novel deems worthy of being a husband and
father, a point that Mina affirms when Harker enters the search for Dracula. While initially
concerned that Harker might suffer further setbacks or brain fever from his exertions, Mina
quickly decides that “he was never so resolute, never so strong, never so full of volcanic energy,
as at present” (267). Being able to be actively involved in hunting Dracula returns Harker to
sanity, removing the ambiguity which had plagued him since his return from Transylvania.

Harker’s return to vibrancy and masculinity creates a telling change in Mina. When
Harker reaches out to offer her comfort, her journal entry says that “a brave man’s hand can speak
for itself; it does not even need a woman’s love to hear its music” (277). While it is Mina’s
intervention with Van Helsing that brings Harker back to vibrant masculinity, he credits the
doctor with his recovery. Once Van Helsing affirms the validity of Harker’s experiences at
Dracula’s castle, Harker tells him that “I was ill, I have had a shock; but you have cured me
already” (225). Harker credits the male physician with his cure, effacing Mina’s contribution and active engagement in his recovery. At the start of the novel, Mina is active and engaged with those around her, and with the investigation into Dracula. She occupies a privileged insider position within their group. With Harker’s recovery, however, she is increasingly kept in the dark about what is happening in the men’s investigation – a lack of information which places her increasingly at risk. Mina quickly goes from being in a position of power as the knowledge keeper in the group, to being not only an outsider of the group, but an outsider who cannot be trusted with information. It becomes clear that the men see her as weak, and in need of protection from sights or sounds that she might find distasteful. As the object that needs protecting, Mina comes to occupy a liminal position in relation to the group as she inhabits the uneasy space between knowing and unknowing. She cannot forget what she knows about Dracula, a knowledge that Lucy lacked, but neither is she privy to all the information that is available to the men who are hunting the vampire. There is a very real fear among the men that Mina, with her “man’s brain” and “woman’s heart” (274) will not be strong enough to withstand what they might face. The text suggests that Mina’s brain, like that of Harker, has the potential to recover from upsets or fevers. It is her heart, the locus of emotion, that poses the problem and which “may fail her in so much and so many horrors; and hereafter she may suffer – both in waking, from her nerves, and in sleep, from her dreams” (274). In the now-familiar dichotomy between brain and heart, men are granted the privileged position of being associated with knowledge and reason, thought processes which require conscious action, while women are associated with emotions, or involuntary psychological and physiological responses over which they have no, or very limited, control. Despite Mina’s “man’s brain,” a brain that Van Helsing points out “that a man should

35 The lines following this quotation also introduce the idea of hereditary insanity being passed on through the mother. One of the reasons that Van Helsing opposes Mina’s involvement is that “she is a young woman and not so long married; there may be other things to think of some time, if not now” (274). Any shock which Mina may suffer from her involvement with the hunters may directly affect her ability to bear children, or their mental health when born.
have were he much gifted” (274), Mina’s “woman’s heart” is a liability in the hunt for Dracula, and it is a weakness that for Van Helsing and the other men, no amount of reason or rationality will allow her to overcome. Unlike Jonathan’s mind which is able to recover through his participation in ridding the world of Dracula, Mina’s, it seems, would be forever altered in detrimental ways by her activity and equal fellowship with the men’s endeavors. No matter the strength of her mind, it is the womanly weakness of her heart which provides Van Helsing with the rationalization he needs to exclude her from further participation in the men’s endeavors.

While Mina is relegated to the side lines in the men’s pursuit of Dracula, despite the fact that she arguably has the most to lose if he escapes, Harker again has an opportunity to exhibit the heroic self-sacrifice which characterized his escape from Dracula’s castle. As Mina slips further into the liminal position that identifies female suicides, moving from the active caregiver who races to Harker’s aid to the passive invalid waiting to be saved, Harker occupies an increasingly active position. As Harker is forced to accept the possibility that despite the best efforts of Van Helsing and the other men, they may not be able to prevent Mina’s transformation, he casts himself in the role of altruistic protector. In his journal, Harker admits that “if we find out that Mina must be a vampire in the end, then she shall not go into that unknown and terrible land alone” (337). Harker’s willingness to undergo the same transformation as Mina, essentially ending his own life, is identified as an altruistic and heroic action which reasserts the manhood that had been threatened by the lingering effects of his illness and his exertions at Dracula’s castle. His wording privileges masculine ideals associated with Imperial notions of adventure, discovery and expansion. He offers himself as escort and protector for Mina, willing to leave hearth and home to guide her through an “unknown and terrible land.” While Harker’s actions have at their root a noble and heroic impulse, Durkheim’s categorization of altruist suicides provides a useful reminder to not make our definition of suicide dependent on “the subjective feelings it inspires” (240). While the heroic suicide may have admirable qualities, if the intention
behind the action is to die, Durkheim argues, then the death must be understood as a suicide. While Mina’s death wish brings her closer to Dracula, the eroticized death figure who is the architect of her transformation, Harker’s altruistic suicide brings him closer to Mina as she becomes both the recipient and transmitter of the vampiric/suicidal disease.

While Jonathan is able to resist Dracula at his castle, although at a cost to his health, he does not show a similar resistance to the idea of undergoing the same vampiric transformation as Mina. At no point does Harker consider that his transformation may alter his personality (a worry that plagues Mina about her own change); he assumes that he will continue to hold almost the same position in Mina’s life as he does currently. He posits a view of vampirism which positions himself as the noble, self-sacrificing lover who is following a much older tradition: “I suppose it is thus that in old times one vampire meant many; just as their hideous bodies could only rest in sacred earth, so the holiest love was the recruiting sergeant for their ghastly ranks” (337). While Harker’s description of vampiric transmission draws on the binary archetypes of hideous beasts and holiest loves to understand how vampiric contagion occurs, he does not seem to recognize the liminal position that Mina occupies in his narrative. She is both one of the hideous bodies and part of the holiest love. She is the diseased carrier who infects Jonathan, activating in him a masculine willingness to die even while she remains a shining beacon of female purity who galvanizes the masculine heroes into action.

For both Mina and Lucy, there is a tension between their position as pure, angelic women who need to be protected from Dracula, and their own complicity in their vampiric transformations. In the novel’s references to insanity, and Lucy and Mina’s hypnoid states that are indicative of hysteria, we can see the way that these hypnoid states provide a form of escape from the restrictive social roles they are expected to occupy. These hypnoid states allow for moments of liminality and transgression in which they can enact fantasies which are otherwise prohibited. Lucy’s complicity in Dracula’s seduction allows her to fulfill her fantasy of multiple
sexual partners since Dracula and Arthur are positioned as romantic rivals, each of whom is favoured by either the conscious or unconscious part of her psyche. For Mina, the liminality of the hypnoid state is slightly more complicated. Just as Xantippe longed to be part of the masculine intellectual community, so too does Mina want to be an insider in the group hunting the vampire. While her connection to Dracula excludes her from this group, it also allows for her return. The information that she can provide about Dracula ensures that they cannot leave her behind when they leave for their final hunt. These liminal states, then, provide both Lucy and Mina with opportunities that would otherwise have been denied them, yet these opportunities also come at a heavy cost. To occupy this liminal space is also to occupy a transgressive space, a space of possibility outside of expected roles. By understanding Victorian beliefs about moral contagion and its relationship to suicide, we can see how both characters, once infected by Dracula, become contagious in their own right, threatening to spread within the confines of the domestic spaces the men strive to protect.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?

As I opened this discussion of women and suicide with the death of feminist scholar and author Carolyn Heilbrun, I want to close by turning, briefly, to the ways that the liminality of female suicides established during the Victorian period continues to influence our perceptions of women and suicide today. In 2013, *Vice* magazine published its Women in Fiction edition which contained, among its interviews with women writers, a fashion spread featuring models posed as famous female writers who have taken their own lives. While the original *Vice* layout was removed from the internet following public outcry, these images remain accessible in the archives of feminist news blogs like *Jezebel*.36 These photographs, used to sell clothing, depict the writers in the moment immediately prior to their deaths. The images of Virginia Woolf, the historian Iris Chang, Dorothy Parker (who actually didn't die by suicide, but attempted to end her life several times), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath, novelist Sanmao, and Beat poet Elise Cowen are captioned with their dates of birth and death, but conspicuously absent is any mention of the literary works these women actually produced.

This photo spread, unfortunately titled “last words” in fact erases the multitude of narratives created by these talented women, recreating them in their final moments as silent blank slates onto which others can inscribe their own narratives. Reminiscent of the visual culture of the Victorian period, these photos forever trap the images of these women in the in-between moment between life and death. While we know the final outcome of the acts these photos reenact (they are, after all, representations of historical women), they nevertheless depict both an ending and the potential for a non-ending. All but one of the images resist narrative closure by imagining

36 Given the disturbing images located in these pictures I have chosen not to reproduce them in this chapter, although the link to the specific *Jezebel* entry that contains these images can be found in the works cited page.
these women in the moments immediately prior to, or in the act of, their suicide. The exception is the photo of Elise Cowen which shows the moment immediately following her fall, although, like the drowned women in Victorian paintings, the image is one of beauty, rather than one depicting a realistic representation of what this scene would actually look like. As horrifying as it is to consider that less than five years ago someone thought that the suicides of female authors would be appropriate content for a fashion layout, a generous reading of these photographs can see them as a form of recuperative wish-fulfilment. Capturing the likeness of these women in the moments leading up to their deaths forever forestalls the death itself. It creates interpretive ‘what if’ possibilities to imagine different endings for these women’s lives.

Logically, of course, we know that these images do not alter historical facts, but that is not what is at stake in these photographs. Images like these demonstrate our inherited fascination with female suicides, and our lingering desire to impose our own narratives on deaths that refuse to be easily understood. However, these images, like those in the nineteenth-century, refuse to be easily categorized, even with our historical knowledge of events. The liminal space occupied by the women in these images, that space between life and death, is a space of potential. Similarly, the narrative endings of *The Mill on the Floss*, “Xantippe” and *Dracula* are fixed and unchanging, yet, in their use of ambiguously suicidal female characters, they offer the potential to read these characters not as either virtuous and submissive or fallen and rebellious, but as both/and. They are virtuous and fallen and rebellious and submissive, and the ambiguity of their deaths which refuse to either confirm or deny their suicides contributes to their liminality, of their existence on the thresholds of multiple dichotomous categories. The refusal of these texts to constrain their female characters to easy binaries, like the open verdict so often returned for female suicides, provides, in many ways, what we may now think of as a ‘safe space’ in which discussions of suicide can occur. The very ambiguity of these depictions of suicidal women mitigates our own potential
discomfort with a subject that “so deeply resists our attempts at knowledge and explanation” (Higonnet “Frames” 230).

Reading female suicides as researchers, we occupy the positions of coroner, juror, and medical professional as we seek to ascribe meaning, and to create explanations that account for the actions described in the text. Writers like Eliot, Levy and Stoker, in many ways, created narratives that mirrored, yet also distorted, the experiences of women and suicide in Victorian England by creating female characters who were both suicidal and not suicidal, rebellious and submissive, and virtuous and fallen. Female suicides occupy liminal positions within these texts; they exist at the boundaries of these dichotomous categorizations, occupying all of them, and yet resisting easy classification into any of them.

Any discussion of suicide must be prepared to embrace ambiguity. The act itself defies explanation, as the only person who could provide an authentic explanation for the act is the reason an explanation is required. What we are left with is a multitude of interpretive, often conflicting, possibilities. These possibilities invite choice; they seem to ask, or even demand, that we commit to one of many possible explanations, rejecting and closing down other narratives. The social context in which a suicide occurs, and within that context, the way that an individual thinks and feels about a particular suicide guides the narrative they ascribe to it. “Sympathetic narratives,” according to Margaret Higonnet, “naturalize the puzzling act by attributing to it an inexorable logic of reaction to pain, political oppression, or emotional loss.” In contrast “other narratives may build generically a pattern of deviance, of illogic: the suicide was irresponsible, dangerous to others, immoral, or transgressed the circuit of the socially acceptable” (230). To commit to the power of one explanation over others, however, to sympathize with or vilify a suicide is to oversimplify an incredibly complex action to reduce our own discomfort with the subject matter.
To suggest that the deaths of Maggie Tulliver, Lucy and Xantippe, and the near death of Mina are the result of overpowering social forces is to deny the possibility that their actions are the result of rational choice. Conversely, to suggest that each character is somehow deviant and creates the circumstances which lead to her destruction is to ignore the social and cultural factors in which her death occurs. To provide a narrative for women’s relationship to suicide is particularly difficult, because, although ending their lives less often than men, women attempted the act at least as often as men. Given this disparity, Higonnet suggests that “when women represent the death of the self on their bodies, they do so in a gesture that remains open-ended” (“Representations” 104). This open-endedness, or as I have suggested, the liminality of these characters, allows us to read them in ways that take into account both social factors and agency.

---

37 Howard Kushner suggests that “although we can never know for certain the extent of attempted suicide, most experts agree that for every one completed suicide there are six to eight attempts. They indicate that women attempt suicide at a rate approximately 2.3 times greater than do men. On the other hand, men demonstrate the opposite trend; they complete suicide at a rate 2.3 times greater than women. If the numbers of those attempting and completing suicide are added together, the rate differential between genders collapses” (503).
Works Cited


Doré, Gustave. *Glad to Death’s Mystery: Swift to Be Hurt (Also Known as The Bridge of Sighs).* N.p., 1850. Print.


*Eliza’s Attempted Suicide*. N.p., 1868. Print.


Issued by the Junior Etching Club. *The Bridge of Sighs (No. 9 in Passages from the Poems of Thomas Hood)*. N.p., 1858. Print.


*Suicide on a Railway*. N.p., 1877. Print.


