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Die not, poor Death, when I Am Laid in Earth:
**A Written Portrait of the Beautiful Morbid in Victorian
Literature**

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to retrace some of the most remarkable representations of death in the Victorian English literature of the nineteenth century, with the aim of developing an intertextual pattern of the contrastive nature of death as a hybrid representation resulting of the combination of the aesthetics of the beautiful and the macabre. Both forms of narrative representation use different means, but in spite of this, these seemingly divergent fields are likely to coalesce, since they share a common purpose: understanding and bringing sense into the transience of existence and the mysteries of death. In order to prove and illustrate the key points of this critical approach, a comparative analysis of some outstanding literary works is performed, thus providing a clearer and applied sight on the matter.

Keywords: *death, Victorian literature, aesthetic representation, abject and the sublime, the uncanny.*

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Justification and State of the Question

The anointment of death lies carved deep in the core of our phylogeny, remaining lethargic until it emerges to claim us into its realm when our time as mortals is consumed and we are thrown into the obliterating void of eternity, from where we are not supposed to return. But we, in spite of being subjects of Death and marked by its presence, may as well carve some signs of its concomitant presence among us.

For the most of our lives, we are merely spectators of death, voyeurs of everyone else's dissolution until the time has come for us to become players in the stage of the macabre. As sentient beings, to what extent are we able to articulate the presence of the unspeakable, the unknown or the ungraspable through the means of language? And by choice of what tangible and comprehensible terms (or even terms at all) in order to describe the only thing that everyone is going to feel but none will be able to tell? Speaking of the unspeakable and thinking of the unimaginable constitutes itself an oxymoron. It certainly is quite a conundrum to convey such an unsettling, dizzying and extremely abstract idea into understandable codes. Concepts that escape the boundaries of our rational minds like the infinity of the universe or the eternity of time just leave us breathless, stunned and profoundly confused. Putting these issues into words may result into a fruitless and frustratingly insane endeavour; even the task of looking into our own eyes with our own eyes or understanding how our brain functions by using that very same brain seems less paradoxical and more attainable.

This existential riddle is what human beings have dealt with from the very dawn of man. And we face that need to deal with it because, unlike the rest of animal species – as far as we know-, we are aware of our condition as mortal beings, and we deal with death by the means of language, which is another defining trait of our species. Thus, death and language lead us to how life is retold and depicted through symbols, that meaning art and, particularly in this case, it brings us to the world of literature.

General Objectives and Methodology

Death is undoubtedly a relevant concern for all of us, since it pervades almost everything in life, and even life itself is conditioned by its presence. Thus, we find Victorian literature as the perfect field of study into which analyse the representation and understanding of death/Death and its portrait, because it is well known the attraction of the artists of the era towards the issue of death, dying, the morbid and the supernatural, among many themes related to the end of life and the afterlife. Death is a constant of all ages, but Victorian times were particularly *fond* of the artistic, philosophical, sociological and existential implications of this appalling yet alluring issue. Therefore, the general aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which some defining aspects of death and Victorian literature intermingle and how this relationship results in a multiple recreation of death. In order to accomplish that purpose, we realize a comparative analysis of the textual surface of some literary works that were written throughout the mid-nineteenth century in order to go beyond that surface and get to explore the successive layers where death can be traced and unveiled in those texts.

With that objective in mind, the text is divided into two parts where the perspective, symbolism and relevant cultural references associated to death in the Victorian age are sought. The first part sheds light on some basic aspects about the representation of death and the aesthetics of the abhorrent, as well as about the exploration of some important traits concerning narrative devices and how they overcome the difficulties of communicating the unspeakable through the fluidity of literary language, and the ways in which death and literature reciprocally feed one another. The second part revolves around the aporetic nature of death and dying and how the dualism of the *beautiful morbid* or *beau macabre* (which constitutes one of the main motifs of this paper) is depicted on literary scenes where this cathartic disjunction of the beauty and the eerie takes place in the imagery of the diverse and spaces of death and afterlife created by authors such as Charles Dickens, Alfred Lord Tennyson or Emily and Charlotte Brontë. A selection of characters and scenes of these works are to be explored in the light of an interdisciplinary and comparative scope through the means of close reading and deconstructive techniques for their textual analysis.

1. Autopsy of an immortal cycle: thematic overview.

1.1. The unsettling *Thanatos*: synchronic and diachronic attitudes towards death.

Human beings, as creative individuals and groups, have been trying to tackle with life and its many fields and matters in manifold ways, but literature conforms a unique means from which stems the systems of beliefs, mind-sets and values of human culture and civilizations throughout history. Death, of course, as the ultimate aim and destination of life, features prominently in the annals of literature.

Within the mystery of death and the plethora of emotions that it encompass, the most remarkable and striking of them is that of the pervasive terror that has always driven most of human endeavour so far. *Death anxiety* appears reincarnated throughout different cultures, ages and authors in its disparate rebirths. Aristotle affirmed that “fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us” and he also referred to death as “the most terrible of things”. The basic human response to death is hiding, ignoring or escaping from it. In turn, literature sometimes implies escapism but also handles coping and confrontation, as we will explore afterwards.

We use these images to overcome death, to cope with dying and loss, for human societies have always tried to overcome this fear through strategies of belief and control: religion, politics, philosophy, and art. Diverse aspects of death such as the disposal of the dead body, burial rites, grief, bereavement, keepsakes and remembrance of those who passed, etc. have been displayed over the centuries and across cultures.

There is much to say about the differences among periods and cultures, but throughout this essay we are going to maintain a synchronic approach concerning basically English literature during the Victorian era. Diachronically, though, there has been a historical tendency towards immobility for centuries, regarding shared experiences of death within the Eastern civilization, with the exception of a few innovations that caused substantial changes through the 13th century and in the mid-eighteenth century whose relevance is worth at least a brief review. These changes occurred in such a slow-paced fashion that they

were mostly unnoticed then, only to be made evident with the perspective of time. Following the distinction asserted by Philippe Ariès in his popular essay *Western Attitudes Toward Death*¹, historically, those attitudes shall be grouped into two categories: the death of one's own and the death of the other - '*Thy Death*' in the English translation-.

1.1.1. The death of one's own.

From Antiquity, there was a persisting sense of familiarity towards death and a collective idea of fate, thus implying that accepting death was simply another way to accept the natural order of things. For centuries, people somehow assumed that death was there and that it was inevitable, so it would be pointless trying to escape from it or, on the other hand, idealize it. Consequently, before the 13th century, literary traces of that cultural and social pervading attitude can be traced back in medieval tales or epic poems such as *Le Morte d'Arthur* or *Tristan and Isolde*, where death was shown as 'domesticated', since the heroes seemed in charge of their lives until their very end; death was noticed by them as an instinctive warning. There was no sudden death, not even when this *imminere mortem* occurred quickly and unexpectedly; there was always time for the characters to feel their time was coming to an end and that being so, they *performed* their ultimate act of heroism and dignity while uttering out loud this intimate conviction of their demise. For instance, the ill-fortuned Tristan "felt that his life was going away, he understood that he was about to die". Death could be beautified through lyrical language, but above everything death was not a source of fear and awe but an act of nature as common and unsurprising as rainstorms or as the daily setting of the sun.

But some things occurred from the thirteenth century onwards that steadily began to change this conception, both in literature and in real life – assuming that they might be considered separate and isolated spheres, which seems unlikely – and it was mainly due to the emergence of a singular phenomenon: the concern about individuality. In respect of death, the scope of individuality stems from various changes in representation:

¹ Ariès, 1974: 27-55.

Firstly, the idea that doomsday does not only occur at the end of times anymore, when the righteous shall arise from the dead. Now, each individual confronts a personal judgement in their deathbed, when the Almighty verifies their *liber vitae* (book of life). Hence, there is another whole conception of the Apocalypse: every mortal being faces a double reckoning: the first one taking place in the *Dies Irae*, when the imbalance of good and evil actions committed during their lifetime are to be judged; and the second moment, called *dies illa*, the last day of the world or doomsday, when the verdict of the first account is to be executed.

Secondly, the imagery of the corpse occupies now a foreground position. Especially after the 16th century, there is a significant rising and diversification in what concerns the representation of the macabre. It changed the conception of the dead body, conception that had prevailed during the Early Middle Ages: that of the corpse as a decomposing mummy. Then, from 16th century on, the tendency to deploy the process of decay and rot declines and appears a new style that is prone to depict the dead body in the form of *morte secca*, which adopts the physical features of the corpse after the rotting process is finished and there are only bones left. In time, the representation of the dead body as a bony carcass has intermingled with the prototypical anthropomorphic representation of Death as a skeleton clothed with a dark cloak and holding a scythe, which nowadays has become the utmost cliché of death as seen by popular imagery.

This should be regarded along with another important phenomenon: funerary epigraphy –which had been progressively abandoned before the Middle Ages– is brought back into fashion and this takes us back to the issue of the rise of individuality, which entails a whole bundle of philosophical and existential nuances. Visual –paintings, engravings, funerary sculptures– as well as written representation –epitaphs, odes, and eulogies– are brought together through the means of a common trope: the fear of death.

Fear of death, fear of dying and decomposition and appreciation of life as their antithesis and counterpart constitute the *chiaroscuro* of “the death of one’s own”. People began to despise the idea of undignified death or the abjection of seeing themselves merely as a filthy bag of bones, blood and faeces whose only purpose is to wither slowly, wrinkle, decay and rot. They were also terrified of

corruption during their lifetime, such as disease or ageing, processes that can be interpreted as forms of death from within one's own or death *intra vitam*.

The underlying assumption of death always being within our bodies revolved around the idea of mortality as a failure of men, and that led to a raising sense of self-consciousness and death awareness. In turn, epitaphs, gravestones and monuments of death mirrored this new consciousness as they ultimately transfigured these cultural shift around death into a need to preserve identity of the self; a desperate attempt to reach some sort of immortality and claim their endurance beyond the grave.

1.1.2. The death of the other.

As the eighteenth century went by, a brand new perspective about death was born: 'the death of the other'. Death is experienced then as a voyeuristic display and those who are left to see it become astonished spectators of this fearful and compelling show. It is not the case that the fear of the own death disappears, but rather that this shift towards death from the point of view of the viewer is highlighted now much more than in the previous centuries, and it takes place in ways never seen before turning it into a unique and unprecedented approach that will be developed for the next two centuries either in social practices or in the artistic and the literary field, which makes our main concern.

This new approach implies that death becomes dramatized and exalted; the moment of final departure is impressive and awe inspiring. It is the focus on the death of the loved ones, more than the death of the self that brings about a peculiar taste for romanticism and rhetoric when tackling the topic of death. This trait goes hand in hand with the aforementioned rising of self-consciousness and the cult of individuality, giving way to a weird and mesmerising phenomenon: the cult of the dead, which entailed an inflamed and passionate veneration for the memories of the dead ones, their tombs, cemeteries, rituals and everything in general regarding the symbols and aesthetics of death, grief and morbidity.

As a direct consequence to those innovations, imagination and fantasy contribute to this evolving pathos by becoming obscure and more extravagant when dealing with the theme in question. The transgression of the imaginary blends together Eros and Thanatos into a hybrid we may call *beau macabre*. That

which used to arouse fright and horror is now alluring and suggestive at the same time. The love and worship professed to the beloved ones trespass the boundaries of rational thinking and earthly matters and so they become idealized and sublimated into a pleasuring and aesthetic vindication of dying, which is in turn exalted and aided by the marvels of romantic and dramatic fiction. We can consider these events as a set of coping/creative strategies to deal with mourning, even if it is at the expense of becoming detached from reality: for some it was depravity, for others, escapism, overcompensation, madness, savagery, and etc. but only one thing is certain: the fictionalization or sublimation of some aspects of the loss of a loved one did occur extensively.

That being said, we may be doubtful about something: can we, as fellow mortal and fallible beings, bring into question or even deny that any sort of stylization of a prosaic and bleak event is less real, justifiable and significant than the biological ceasing of life itself? The idea of parting from a dear one gives way to pain and suffering, it is moving and moves people to the edges of their cognition; therefore, the role of fiction in the process is not as out of place as it might sound. After all, language is part of what makes us human, just as our awareness of death and our ability to lie/creativity, so it is not odd that the three of them blend together in order to endure through life and overcome death.

The dramatization of mourning; the theatricality of grief; wallowing in misery and suffering or even finding amusement or consolation in it; the anxiety of separation; relics of death; the epitome of the romantic death/suicide and the aesthetic ideals of decay; frailty, restless sorrow, excessive affection or fondness for death iconography and mementos. These are just a handful of illustrative examples of what the culture of death involves. This cult would develop over the 18th and 19th centuries, reaching its highest point in the Victorian Era.

The need to eternalize the ephemeral and the urge to stimulate some kind of coexistence between the living and the dead conformed the context in which beauty and death intertwined and gave rise to a halfway reality which was shaped, designed and sheltered under the wings of literature.

1.1.3. *Shall thou feed on Death that feeds on Men*²: Taming or silencing dead? A historical struggle of a lifetime.

In hindsight, if we retrace the milestones of the different schools of thought and theoretical considerations around *the Great Equalizer*, from antique times to our days, we come to realize that there had been a remarkable evolution: death is regarded and reflected upon within an immeasurable span of variables, but it is also noticeable a change in the form and degree of our proximity towards death and our acceptance of it.

As we expounded above, it begins with a perception of death as a natural event, where the degree of proximity between death and its literalness is the highest possible – since death usually contains some degree of symbolism, as it happens with every human endeavour-. From here on, a progressive denaturation arises and death becomes gradually cut off and internalized once it becomes manufactured by means of creative imagination; that is the reason why the rawness of dying is tempered and literalness gets eventually estranged. Fear of death drives us to the emphasis of the fictional component and it is then when aesthetics, imagery and narrative manufacturing show up.

The next section concerns the role played by literature in death but also death *in* literature and death *of* literature, different senses of death and fiction interweaving and composing a cyclical framework of liminality where death and creation feed and feast on each other through an everlasting dynamic of death and rebirth, where sorrow and dread beget life and abject beauty.

1.2. *Ink and dust*: narrative representations of the uncanny. Written attempts at fixing the intangible.

As stated at the beginning of our dissertation, it is not an easy task to speak about death, let alone trying to explain the plethora of phenomena related to it. This ungraspable nature of death has a lot to do with the concept of the *Unheimliche*, a German term used as leitmotif of Sigmund Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche*, published in 1919. Although *das Unheimliche* is quite an

² Shakespeare, 1609: (146, 13).

untranslatable term³, we could translate it approximately as un-homely or uncanny and it refers to all those things that evoke a sense of uneasiness because they are simultaneously recognizable as familiar but also unsettling because they exhibit a sense of strangeness or even horror. It goes without saying that our idea of death fits perfectly the mould of this definition: it is a fact of life, a common occurrence, but nonetheless it is very distressing and unsettling at the same time; we recognize the inherence of death in our everyday existence but the enigmatic and inscrutable nature that underlies it also scares us fiercely.

1.2.1. *Beyond the utmost bound of human thought*⁴: where death and writing meet.

Death can be seen as one of the most characteristic subjects of the uncanny/*das Unheimliche*, particularly when we ponder about its representational nature. In this context, when trying to unveil and portray death, we run the risk of being stuck in its spider web of allusions, meanings and paradoxes. It is indeed a puzzling area charged with ambivalence and ambiguity. As stated by Freud: “If death itself is not something spontaneous [...] then we can feel at home (*Heimish*) in the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*)”.⁵

Therefore, it may seem reasonable resorting to literature to feel more at home. This is due to the fact that literature has steadily proven to be successful as a substrate where death can sprout and become materialized. Thus, inside the frame of literature, death can acquire a definite form –or many-, even though that form looks diffuse or mutable. Literature becomes a site of creation and recreation, a kind of Ariadne’s thread that is made of words and ideas which can help us to outline a map of our concerns about existence and its (f)utility.

The experience of facing death arouses dread, fascination, horror, and consequently everyday objects and situations may lose their familiarity. Literature takes the place of psychology, but somehow it sublimates the feelings that death arouses, and even replaces *actual* death in our imagination, for when *real* death

³ This takes us once again back to the challenge of verbalizing and properly articulate the burden of abstraction surrounding these crucial concerns. Language, translation, death and literature force us to sway back and forth into trying to disentangle their fluid and slippery nature.

⁴ Tenyson, 1842: line 32.

⁵ Freud, 1927: 16-17.

is turned into a myriad of specular images that tantalize us, we become possessed and fascinated by them, and even ourselves become somehow reassured under the spell or lullaby of death as voiced by literature.

Perhaps the reason why literature is more able to come to terms with death is due to the fact that they both share uncertain spaces where eerie and fickleness flow, in a place of thoughts and half-conscious daydreaming. Literature is a form of externalizing our human consciousness, and besides, the ground of literature is not only a vessel for our death as mortal beings but a maker itself of its own kind of death/s.

1.2.2. Reincarnation *avant la lettre*: spaces of death and afterlife.

Both literature and death dwell in the edges of existence, they spread out across the border of uncertainty, of the unknown, between real and fictional. Death is commonly referred to as “the Great Divide”, and so it happens that everything that cannot be grasped or easily labelled falls within the borders of that unseen division, leaning towards that threshold, out of the margins of the empirical understanding.

Life after death, just as the life underneath the page of a book, exists to us as representations, but who says that these “forged” realities are less worthy or acceptable than the *actual* ones? After all, philosophers like Plato or George Berkeley claim that there is not physical world beyond our ideas, we just know the world as experienced by our own minds, so the world we sense and internalise is just a copy, a recreation that takes place in our imagination. That would imply that real worlds and imagined worlds belong on the same level and they are born and they perish in the same place, the world of ideas.

Reality, as we conceive it, is made of a set of conventions and social constructions. Fiction exists just within an alternate set of frames and conventions, so that, once they have been brought into material being, these wor(l)ds become part of our material world and thus, they turn out to be just as genuine as *real* ones and they are experienced likewise. Of course, they are made of different tissues, but in spite of it, they stem from the world of human

ideas, they live on by our side and within ourselves like *nymphs*⁶, and therefore, like their mythic counterparts, they are formed in the image and likeness of men and in parallel to their creators and hosts, they can also die or vanish into spectral images that spur us to bring them back to life from their purgatory of flickering imagery. Patricia Wough and Gilbert Sorrentino tackle the matter as follows:

Descriptions of objects in fiction are simultaneously *creations* of that object. (*Descriptions* of objects in the context of the material world are determined by the existence of the object outside the description.) Thus the ontological status of fictional objects is determined by the fact that they exist by virtue of, whilst also forming, the fictional context which is finally the words on the page.⁷

These people aren't real. I'm making them up as they go along, any section that threatens to flesh them out, or make them 'walk off the page', will be excised. They should, rather, walk into the page, and break up, disappear.⁸

Although literary fiction is just a verbal reality, it builds a whole (imaginative) world that holds a complete referential status as an alternative to the world we live in. We live in the midst of this blurry border between real and intangible, between life and what lies after it, trapped amongst a set of multi-layered realities, in which exist a number of *afterworlds* and *alterworlds* as vast as the creative space available. These works of fiction are born and nurtured in the imaginary and they possess their own realities, populated by beings of flesh and ink, whose lives and afterlives exist beyond each reading. In fact, it is literature the one that re-invents death(s) and provides it with a whole new and unique perspective: stories die when they are not read anymore; dead authors speak to us from the Great Beyond to tell and retell their stories; characters live and die over and over to our perpetual delight and mourning, until someday we cease to exist and these stories and *personae* will vanish along with the last one of us.

⁶ Agamben, 2007: 39-44.

⁷ Waugh, 1987: 88.

⁸ Sorrentino, 1971: 27.

2. *Disinterring the Victorians: Literary foundations and Victorian conceptions of Death.*

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of believe, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness.*⁹

We have the audacity –nearly desecration- to quote these breath-taking initial compasses of the *Tale of Two Cities* overture in order to re-contextualize those same words to give account of the mutable, dual and contradictory personality of the Victorian era, although it commenced a few decades after the era portrayed in Charles Dickens's novel. It may well be the case that these 'two cities' recounted the story of a two-faced London: capital, epicentre and symbol of the British Empire; a metropolis strained by multiple binary oppositions and contradictions: splendour, advancement and prosperity in the face of decline, poverty and overall exploitation.

There can be said that two queens reigned over the twin cities of London during Victorian times: the all-powerful and beloved Victoria ruled over the Golden Empire on the surface whereas another so-called queen *Sick-toria*, Dame of Shadows, spread out her wings from the depths of the sewage system of the ancient *Londinium*, settling down her own kingdom of the Underworld. This kingdom of the dead and the damned coexisted in apparent harmony with that of the living, who also happened to venerate this unlawful and fearsome queen, a monarch that used to feed on the flesh and fearful worship of her subjects.

This picturesque symbiotic entanglement between the living and the dead conformed the social and cultural landscape of the Victorian nineteenth century in Britain, a split image on a broken mirror, a schizoid portrait of an era. Victorian Britain and its numerous iterations conform the story of *real* Britain and its *doppelgänger* – or rather *doppel-gelassen*¹⁰.

The living and the dead mirrored and complemented each other just like reality and fiction do in turn. Writers of that time performed their creative endeavour in a surrounding where death wandered aimlessly and was

⁹ Dickens, 1859: 3.

¹⁰ In German: 'serene double' or 'silent double', as opposed to 'double-goer' or 'double-walker'.

ubiquitous. Mortality rates were high in the 19th century, particularly due to the poor living conditions of a considerable amount of the population. Even more dramatic were the rates of children mortality. Disease was an ominous warning of what was surely to come after, it was an omen of death, especially in the case of the underclass. Epidemics of cholera proved to be one of the toughest incarnations of the Great Equalizer, since it ravished the population irrespective of their class, condition or age. At the same time, cholera tarnished the flesh of its victims with the very mask of death: the symptoms of the disease made the victims look almost like a living corpse, a fact which popularized the expression “a blue funk” because of the dread that cause the vision of the ravages caused by the ominous bacteria.

Deathbed scenes were commonly witnessed and described in great detail. Likewise, funerals that took place afterwards become overwhelming and flamboyant spectacles of death – mostly in the case of wealthy families-. These scenes fulfilled a religious, symbolic and social purpose at once; they showed an interest to exhibit and represent different connotations of death, which had in turn a great impact upon the literary world.

Victorian authors used scenes of death to convey a varied set of moral and artistic values through them. Dickens, for instance, endowed his death scenes with a profound emotional and moral burden. Others reacted otherwise, like George Eliot in *Middlemarch* or Thomas Hardy in *Jude the Obscure*, where he depicted a much less softened and quite realistic and bitter vision of dying. It is also worth noting the case of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, which we will analyse in depth later on, just as we will with regard to Heathcliff’s love obsession beyond death in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë.

Other literary standpoints of that time focused on a more realistic conception of the Victorian society. However, some depictions focused more on aspects such as the erotic sublimation of instincts related to death and dead people, or on the importance of women or female bodies and their intimate and symbolic impingement over death.

Nonetheless, by the end of the Victorian period some important changes occurred: the sharp decline of religious faith and the enormous advancement of

science. Victorian death culture evolved, nourished by subconscious reactions to the universal phenomenon of death, in such a way that the new scientific discoveries which allowed to get a better understanding of human anatomy or the working of physiological functions helped as well to question how and when a person had died and as a consequence; it propelled old anxieties and fascination while creating new ones like the horror of being buried alive or the dread of human flesh torn apart by nature or by the hands of a surgeon, creating a further level of enthrallment about death.

2.1. Reminiscences from the spectral dimension: imagery and dialectic of the abject. *Mors pulchra*.

All memory, therefore, implies a time elapsed; consequently only those animals which perceive time remember, and the organ whereby they perceive time is also that whereby they remember.¹¹

Memory, time and imagination. According to Aristotle, the working of our minds revolves around these triad of elements. We belong to a kind of animals that are able to perceive the ticking of time, and therefore, since we are bestowed with such an overwhelming gift that allows us to realize how fleeting our nature is, we are fully aware of our subjection to that same perception of time too. In other words, our perception of the past – which spreads steadily from the moment of birth chasing and pushing our present further and further, a felt present that lasts no longer than the uttering of this word – does not exist as such in our material world, the past leaves a trace or a resonance only in our imagination, in such a way that it becomes a mixture of real and fictional facts that no one else can experience ever again as they occurred in the first time, not even ourselves. Hence, we cannot tell apart what is real and what is forged when it comes to our memories or the memories we hold of others, be it real, imagined, alive or dead people.

We replay what we lived according to our images of it, to our (re)imagination of that moment, and to achieve that experience we play the strings of the same instrument that we resort to when we read a piece of fiction and we vividly see its contents in our mind's eye; it also takes place when we

¹¹ Aristotle. *On death and reminiscence*. Chapter 1.

make up some story or some lie or reverie. This instrument is called imagination¹², the loom where all the images we have perceived or conceived become interweaved.

Memory is the mental function that we use to get access to this imaginary, so that memory is always in need of an image or *phantasma*¹³, which generates itself a *pathos* that awakes a mental and physical reaction inside of us, that is, a sensation or a thought. This mnemonic image is loaded with an amount of energy that succeeds in moving us - both in the emotional and the kinetic senses-.

Consequently, this takes us back to the concept of reminiscence as stated by Aristotle, which involves the searching of that ghost or *phantasma*, a searching that may lead us to disturbance, melancholy or agitation because such is the power of images: they can cause fascination, confusion and anguish.

Men are anointed by nature with an inexplicable urge that compels them to capture those *elementargeister*¹⁴ images and restore them their energy and temporality. Images that are like ghosts that cannot completely die, they endure as echoes until we resurrect them once they are captured and nourished in the imagination. Willingly or unwillingly, we create images or we feed on images to carve and shape our reality, while at the same time we are equally modelled by those same images. Therefore our memories and our fictions blend together and so it occurs that sometimes it is very challenging to tell them apart.

As we mentioned before, trying to exhibit the truth around death is as hard and elusive as trying to prove which part of what we remember is real and unarguable. Our imagination and our background of verbal and visual imagery is as immeasurable and blurred as the landscape of the afterlife. Therefore, should narratives and metanarratives around death and dying be disqualified because of being *unrealistic*? Culture, as much as our daily experiences, usually involves a mixture of reality and fantasy, being the proportion of both elements variable depending on the genre, purposes or aims of the narrative or the author.

¹² From *imago*, 'an image, likeness', from stem of *imitari*, 'to copy, to imitate' (from PIE root *aim- 'to copy').

¹³ Agamben, 2007: 29-33.

¹⁴ *Ibíd.* 39-40.

The fact is that many cultures consider decay of human bodies as unclean and corpses as appalling and grotesque entities. At the same time, the dead is not totally 'dead', since he or she is still seen as a familiar figure, the image of the beloved person. The horror of that (uncanny) contradiction calls for the need of avoiding and hiding the manifestation of such decay. When the rotting process begins, the body looks less like the beloved one and it is then when religious rituals and anesthetization appear, splitting the double-headed nature of the corpse as dead and undead, human and non-human, in turn reminding us of our own materiality and mortality.

These aesthetic interventions have the purpose of deceiving or transforming decaying matter through artistic tools into something more acceptable, pleasing or moralizing: a beautiful portrait of the dead, a safe liminality designed for otherness. This is what we have chosen to entitle as beautiful death or *mors pulchra*.

2.1.1. *The Sick Rose*: deathbed scenes, sentimentality and submission of the merciful death.

In the nineteenth century, the death of every person was public and shared by the family and the community. Death was met as an event, devoid of repulsion. Literature also expressed an open rejection towards ugly death and authors were prone to hide the physical signs of mortality. Death could be considered beautiful, but the abjection of the corpse was driven away via the literary escapism of the deathbed scene.

Victorian fascination with death entails a turn about the *locus* of death: death is not as familiar as it was during the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, death is now an external and malign force and it is symbolically handled in the literary imaginary to 'heal' its malignant influence. This is the moment when the deathbed scene is ritualized and it becomes one of the most common tropes of English literature in the 19th century. Deathbed scenes depict the dying body as a sentimentalised spectacle by ritualizing the death of a character in order to make of death a statement of some sort. Underlying those scenes was the convention of a good Christian death, which takes the body of the dying person and restores it to an ideal and perfected version of itself, thus

allowing the reader to bear witness of a type of death that proves to be saintly, immaculate, safe and spiritually uplifting. This is precisely what occurs with Nell Trent, a character from Charles Dickens' novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which reunites a bunch of literary tropes of the time: fictional sentimentality, the objectification of the dead woman and female invalidism – which we will see later- or the cathartic power of art in the mourning process.

If death is considered a dilemma between cleanliness and defilement, the usage of the sublime in literature as an aesthetic device forces us to reflect upon our boundaries with the living and the dead/death and highlights the theme of the hyperawareness of existence, that is, the certainty that we are mortal and, at the same time, that there exist external forces that are stronger than us.

Julia Kristeva explains the opposition between the abject and the sublime, a confrontation that is of a special relevance to our present study. Through sublimation – i.e. the a(na)esthetization of death as a beautiful trance- we keep the abject (the grim, brutal and ugly death) under control. The abject is everything that destabilizes or unhinges what we know –or we think we know- of life, it breaks it. The sublime, on the other hand, makes us more aware of our existence. According to Kristeva, sublime means that “it is too vast or powerful to recognize, and tests the limits of your ability to feel, to understand, to make sense of the world”¹⁵, so when facing death through real and fictional experiences, we are in two places at the same time: the *here* and the *beyond*. It conveys both a sense of pleasure and of pain, which lays in the root of our theoretical proposal from the beginning: that of the distorted duplicity, the ambivalence of death, the threshold existing between life/afterlife and real/fictional or in the revolting beauty of death.

Art is an instrument through which we can sublimate unsettling experiences of abjection and death. So the dead body was chosen in the nineteenth century as an instrument of the sublime, hence the popularity of the deathbed scenes at the time. Those texts were influenced by the aesthetics of art and religion with the main purpose of covering the horrors of nonexistence. It constituted a kind of literary or artistic necrophilia, for they chose to relate to these lifeless corpses as though they were alive. Moreover, the dead is given another

¹⁵ Kristeva, 1982, 20-21.

life beyond its mortal existence, he or she is re-created in an alternate world where the dead is still alive and she is allowed to linger or survive as an image, either as an image of everlasting death or, on the other hand, an eternal being in the afterlife of literary labour.

The worship of dead bodies ran in parallel to other kinds of worship that we described before, and they all shared the sublimating purpose of transforming the horror of death into a spectacle of beauty and pleasure.

The void created by the death of a loved one is filled with the language of poetry, which can name and renew that emptiness and longing. That is what we refer to as literature and, through its language, authors work their alchemy by turning some emotions into new ones as they reshape and weave images, in the same fashion they originate emotional responses in the absence of actual emotions. They create fictional stories and fictional emotions to bring forth the illusion of remembrance, creating another reality for the dead in the imagination of the living by using the tools of narrative. The human mind and the assets of creativity collude to avoid facing the nothingness of existence.

The deathbed scene was used as a way to familiarize with dying, but also as a representation, a kind of tribute and preservation of the deceased's life. It was, as we told before, an attempt to name and tame death.

Nevertheless, it occurred a shift later in the nineteenth century when this approach was deemed shallow and was based on unrefined and cheap feeling that purported the arousal of exaggerated responses on the reader. The deathbed scene stopped being a place of reconciling emotions and sublimation, it was seen then as a literary device of cheap and excessive sentimentality that idealized and sanitized unworthy objects and resulted into ridicule, vulgarity and simplification of transcendental issues. Needless to say, this shifting attitude led to some biting statements born in the very heart of the literary world, like the popular piece of malevolent wit by Oscar Wilde: "One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without dissolving into tears of laughter".

2.1.2. *Great is your reward in Heaven*: Little Nell's deathbed scene analysis.

The death of Nell Trent in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) is one of the most popular deathbed scenes in Victorian literature and one of the most representatives and controversial among the scholars. The novel tells the story of a destitute girl and her grandfather wandering through the countryside and being harassed by an evil landlord. It looks like the plot of a fairy tale, but unlike fairy tales, the tone drifts away from a happy ending when tragedy strikes the fate of the protagonist.

The scene where Nell's death is depicted results as distressing as it should, even though the way in which the *corpse* is described is not as distressing and it is pointed out by Julia Kristeva as a primary example of the abject, for Nell's body is not a vessel for horror but an unharmed site of repose and beauty. This sentimentalized version of death constitutes a rejection of death as a sign of failure and, consequently, a source of escapism from reality.

By the means of Romantic aesthetics, Dickens crystalizes Nell into a durable symbol of flawless innocence, and with her, he invokes a relief upon the common attitudes of pain and despair caused by children's death in the context of Victorian industrial life.

She died soon after daybreak. (...) They could tell, by what she faintly uttered in her dreams. (...)

Opening her eyes at last, from a very quiet sleep, she begged that they would kiss her once again. That done, she turned to the old man with a lovely smile upon her (...).

They did not know she was dead at first.¹⁶

As shown above, the description of her death fits the classical Evangelical allegory of the 'good death', that is why, in spite of being dead for two days, there is no sign of decay occurring to Nell's corpse. George Cattermole's engraving included in the first edition of the novel and entitled 'At Rest' helps to catalyse the corpse of the girl as in icon of innocence and purity. Nell is transformed in an angelic figure, her uncorrupted body is kindly embalmed as though prepared for the afterlife. Death is customized in the scene as a culmination of goodness and

¹⁶ Dickens, 1841: 530.

such a serene and compelling form of dying seems to be a reward from God. In her final moments, she smiles, as if experiencing a pleasant dream or as she is about to fall asleep. Dreaming and sleeping were inevitable analogies extensively used in the imagery of the literature of the nineteenth century, as well as in real cases of premature demise. The infant corpse lying on the bed marks the threshold in so far as it points to the Beyond, and the child in question is translated into a sign for an imagined resurrection, either pagan, Christian or fictionalized. It might remind us some other pieces where children endure much suffering during their earthly existence only to be finally rewarded with the touch of death, after which we contemplate a scene of reunion with their loved ones in the afterlife, being one of the best known that of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match Girl* (1845). Or a traditional prayer aimed to children, dating back to the eighteenth century, which confronts them with the stark issue of death and God's consolation:

*Now I lay me down to sleep, / I pray the Lord my Soul to keep, / If I should die before I
'wake, / I pray the Lord my Soul to take.*

Deathbed aesthetic like the one rendered in Nell's dying scene is paramount in the cult of the beautiful death in the nineteenth century, where literature showed a usage of imagery similar to that of the nascent photography, which was used to capture images of the dead, especially dead children characterized under the theme of the 'last sleep', where their angelic shape is unveiled through the beauty of the corpse, even though it may appear an eerie and grotesque practice to the modern sensitivity.

Nell is referred to as "spiritual, so slight and fairy-like" throughout the novel, she is a beatific Victorian heroine and she is finally rewarded with a good Christian death, for Nell is too good for this wretched penance of living, she is unsuitable for the world and the world for her.

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death. (...) Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but

peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose.¹⁷

Although it is true that Nell's death is openly idealized and somewhat naïve in its excess of melodrama, it is also a captivating representation of the purity of children, particularly if we take into account the harshness that many children had to go through in the age when *The Old Curiosity Shop* was written. Through the looking glass of literary creation they were granted the consolation of dying peacefully and ascending in heaven, where they would be save from a life of abuse, poverty and disease.

On the other hand, according to some scholars, the corpse of the little girl is, too, eroticized as a spectacle: everyone regards the corpse before she is taken and buried, and all of them mention her beauty and her youth. Once her corpse is turned into a pure inert figure, and exhibited effigy, devoid of violence and physical pain thanks to her unrealistic depiction, it becomes an artistic piece, an *object* that is no longer revolting but desirable. This interpretation brings about a new meaning that introduces a sense of the grotesque that distorts in some way what we draw forth before, and this introduces again our convoluted debate concerning the seemingly incompatible duality of the dead as represented in the literary imagery. The lifetime and death of Nell is thoroughly puzzling and contradictory: although she is unfit for this world because she is excessively pure and innocent, she is also more grotesque than other characters, like Quilp.

Quilp is the antagonist, he is a devious dwarf and represents absolute moral depravity as opposed to Nell being the epitome of kindness, even though the depiction of her uncorrupted corpse is much less realistic when compared to Quilp's one. His death is bleak and gruesome, much in line with a realistic rendering of dying. He is referred bluntly and straightforwardly as a corpse, a "ghastly freight and deserted carcass", unlike Nell, whose idealized portrayal disguises her putrefaction and calls for a true sample of abjection, considering that the artist and the spectators –the rest of the characters and the readers as well-, when confronted with the possibility of a revolting sight, reject the abject placed before our eyes because we do not wish to name or imagine the unbearable.

¹⁷ *Ibíd.*: 528.

2.2. *The most poetical topic in the world.* The idea of the dreadful beauty.

*Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott.¹⁸*

According to the tenets of several critical thinkers and storytellers over the centuries, beauty tends to be exalted by a set of dreadful elements that in theory should be in conflict with it. It occurs, though, that this contrast tends to raise and complement those qualities inherent to the idea of beauty. Hence, the eerie and the weird, when found in convergence or within the sphere of Beauty, conform an abstraction that seems to remark that the more painful and sorrowful beauty is, the more sublime it becomes.

And the thing is that beauty hardly ever is able to elude the lure and influence that tragedy, gloom and melancholy have upon it, giving way to a sort of aesthetical fascination that usually goes along with our congenital fascination with the contingencies and mystery of death, thus composing scenes where decay and the macabre come together with the stylization and finesse of an embellished writing, under the veil of the enigmatic and the eerie. This argument takes us back to the context of the *aporia* of the uncanny (*das Umheimliche*), since the idea of the beautiful macabre or the macabre of beauty involves the psychological and aesthetic experience of something that is strangely familiar and luring but also unsettling.

In such a way this idea is expressed by authors such as Walter Pater (“What may be called the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch its exquisitely finished beauty”.¹⁹) or Charles Baudelaire, who points to quite an interesting concept of beauty, away from the canonical ideals and premises regarding the naivety, balance and harmony which have been extensively linked to the classical meanings of beauty and the beautiful:

*Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme,
O Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin,
Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,
Et l'on peut pour cela te comparer au vin.*

¹⁸ Tennyson, 1842: lines 114-117.

¹⁹ Walter Pater, 1873: 116.

*Tu marches sur des morts, Beauté, dont tu te moques;
De tes bijoux l'Horreur n'est pas le moins charmant,
Et le Meurtre, parmi tes plus chères breloques,
Sur ton ventre orgueilleux danse amoureusement* ²⁰

Some decades after the first peak of the dreadful aesthetics of the Gothic fiction (1764- c.1830), we bear witness to a renaissance and restoration of the topic around the theme of the *beautiful macabre* during the second half of the nineteenth century. It takes places under a renewed sensibility that draws the interest of the writers into a redefinition and rediscovering of the concept of beauty itself.

Horror, specifically the kind of horror related to death, is promoted to the category of beauty, or at least it begins to be part of the compound of elements of that which turns out to be alluring or aesthetically pleasing: the reader finds himself entrapped inside a continuum where they are at risk of being unable to tell apart the horror of beauty from the beauty of horror.

2.2.1. *As You Lay Dying*. Mourning as a source of aesthetic pleasure.

The death of the object of love, muse or beloved wife takes on some additional nuances in the resurgence of an interest towards the grieving of a lost love and the lovely macabre: *Her* death is the source of a soaring and excruciating pain and sorrow, but a kind of sorrow that operates now as a catalyst of the poetical craft and as a nexus between the cruelty of loss and the voluptuousness aroused by the dead body of the loved female, which is symbolized as something corrupted and uncorrupted at once. That may seem quite a nonsense, but this oxymoronic nature is precisely what makes it so enthralling: this internal contradiction elevates this literary event to the highest pitch of dramatic intensity and formal refinement, and it is in those cases where both the hideous and the unsettling frame the external beauty, while at the same time, it reveals the less evident beauty of the unsettling, i.e. the dismay and distress provoked by a tragic and premature demise of a beautiful lady as well as the sight of the lifeless body.²¹ The uncanny blend between the abject and the

²⁰ Baudelaire, 1857.

²¹ "Though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies" (Aristotle: *Poetics*, 4).

sublime endows the scene with the forbidden and sinful indecency that entails the transformation of the object of desire into another object –or rather *abject*-even more forbidden, unstable and disquieting, but still mesmerizing.

This approach follows the footsteps of some authors like Anna Letitia and John Aikin, as stated in *On the pleasure derived from Objects of Terror*, where they ponder upon the elements and motifs linked to the sensations of pleasure and delight at the sight of events which, in theory, would strike us with abhorrence and should make us move away from them: misery, suffering, despair, catastrophe, murder or death, among many others. According to the Aikins “passion and fancy cooperate elevating the soul to its highest pitch; and the pain of terror is lost in amazement”²². It is no wonder then that Goethe affirmed that ‘*Das Schaudern ist der Menschheit bestes teil*’²³, much in accordance with the statements of the Aikins.

The idea of sorrow as conceived in the heart of the voluptuousness of beauty, as though both of them stemmed from the same natural essence, finds an exemplary embodiment in the poetry of Keats, whose ill-fated biography constitutes itself a fine example of the gloomy beauty of tragedy as seen by the Romantics. In his *Ode on Melancholy*, Keats describes the aforementioned nexus existing between desolation and pleasure, claiming that the ultimate sense of beauty is its ephemeral nature, so therefore the inevitable fate of beauty is no other than death, vanishment and loss. Those things that are the most ethereal and fetching are the same things that cause, in its absence, the deepest and most painful of sorrows; in turn, that sorrow or melancholy is precisely the one giving meaning to the existence of that lost beauty in the first place, and ascribes to it a much more elevated and transcendental status:

*She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die; / And Joy, whose hand is ever at his
lips / Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh, / Turning to poison while the bee-mouth
sips.*

In a similar fashion, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *To a Skylark* depicts that same symbiotic chiaroscuro between the pleasure and the anguish experienced by humankind as a consequence of experiencing the bliss and subsequent loss of

²² Aikin, A.L. & J., 1773: 119-127.

²³ Goethe, 1832: 2, 5: line 6272.

the sublime. A sort of sublime that demands to seem fragile, ephemeral and transient in order to fit that same designation; hence, it would imply being something like a brief yet powerful particle of light, a fleeting spark, like the flight of the bird in the poem:

*We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter*

*With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those
that tell of saddest thought.²⁴*

2.2.2. *Death and the Maiden*. The macabre dance between the womb and the tomb.

“The death of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world”, according to Edgar Allan Poe. But to what extent is that assertion plausible and what is it based on?

In the artistic and literary circle of the mid-nineteenth century the trope of female death is conceived as an issue between the aesthetic and the empathetic, which makes us wonder about the accuracy of death representation and how much it involves the author and the reader emotionally and morally, or on the other hand, if it is just a question that involves uniquely the artistic representation of an event that happens to be beautifully disturbing. Art transforms the fact of death into a verbal or visual sign that may be interpreted in two ways or fulfilling two different aims: on the one hand, art restrains actual pain and leaves it in the background once it becomes subservient to the artistic work; on the other hand, art takes real death to elevate it and strengthen it, shedding focus and visibility to the scene. This is why we usually find in the English literature of the nineteenth a (meta) artistic treatment regarding the depiction of the dying woman; thus, the author resurrects the female figure who has died and, in a certain way, he mourns her again in order to overcome or accept the loss through the means of art. It does not matter if the loss is real or based in a real event (given that it was real, the author would experience a triple mourning).

²⁴ Shelley, 1820: lines 86-90.

Authors like Robert Browning in *My Last Duchess*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*, or Alfred Lord Tennyson in *The Lady of Shalott*, they all show in their writings a strategical attempt to portray the death of a woman through the poetic voice of the narrator and trying to attain female death through this device, although death, as we know, tends to resist language and any kind of stability. Therefore, the body in question is severed from the sphere of the living and it is replaced by a stable image, an image that is at once a self-representation and a fictionalization of real death, resulting somehow a deprivation of the individuality of the subject in which, eventually, the woman might be reduced to the traditional image of the loved lady or muse (like Dante's *Beatrice* or Petrarca's *Laura*).

Then, the signifier would be replaced by another signifier which is depersonalized and contains the stereotypes of femininity at the time: vulnerability, weakness, fragility, sensuousness, beauty, passivity, etc. The reality of the *de-composing* body is reshaped through the artistic *re-composing* of the body, given that the poetic ability is able to work the miracle of resurrection when the right brush-strokes or rather the right choice of words and rhythms are made. Nevertheless, it is not without the danger of associating woman to an idea of passivity, and since the most passive state possible is death, it could turn the female body into an icon of beautiful and virtuous femininity. By obtaining this iconic life-in-death figure, we reduce the multiplicity of themes and meanings to just one, verging on the misogynistic necrophilia. By doing that, authors alleviate and sweeten up both death and femininity, equating the death of a woman to the quietness and soothing contemplation of an everlasting Sleeping Beauty, which was also a common and recurring theme during the Victorian era.

The replacement of the real dead woman by an imaginary one, changing the lifeless body by a corpse that paradoxically shall outlive the real one and even its creator, is based on something that is called by cultural anthropology as *second burial*²⁵, meaning the period after death when the corpse starts to decompose and the individual is symbolically moved from the world of the living to the invisible world of the dead.

²⁵ Hertz, 1960: 53-75.

When translated into the literary language, the *second burial* is a ritual in which the representation of the dead subject and their subsequent transformation in a piece of artwork takes the individual from the world of the living into the *invisible* world of the subjective and the imaginary, that is to say, the world of the undead. However, why do they consider precisely the death of a beautiful woman the most poetical topic, in the manner of Poe?

There was a popular and strong association between death and women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An association based on their apparent contradiction, –once again we have to go through the matter of the binary oppositions- since woman has traditionally been regarded as a symbol of life, a giver of life as much as Mother Nature, given that our perpetuation as a species depends on Her nourishing gift. Likewise, beauty is the antithesis of decomposition and the vision of a rotting corpse, processes that cause disgust and horror, considering that they signify the decomposition of the aesthetic unit.

As mentioned above, sadness and melancholy are the ornament and the right context in which our contemplation of beauty is elevated and extolled, and since sorrow and melancholy conform the highest and most legitimate poetic tone, it is not surprising therefore that the poetic and tragic figure *par excellence* is the death of a beautiful woman, being the literary realm and art in general the suitable context where to assimilate and wallow in the amusement and lamentation of the beautiful Other being destroyed. However, simultaneously, that beauty that is being destroyed is replaced by its double and contemplated as an enduring piece of artwork. After all, according to Elizabeth Bronfen's maxim:

The creation of beauty allows us to escape from the elusiveness of the material world into an illusion of eternity (a denial of loss), even as it imposes on us the realisation that beauty is itself elusive, intangible, receding. Because it is created on the basis of the same elusiveness it tries to obliterate, what art in fact does is mourn beauty, and in so doing it mourns itself.²⁶

²⁶ Bronfen, 1992: 64.

2.2.3. Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* and the deadly curse of fairness.

And then there were all those poems about women, written by men: it seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women frequently inhabited them. These women were almost always beautiful, but threatened with the loss of beauty, the loss of youth – the fate worse than death. Or, they were beautiful and died young.²⁷

Alfred Lord Tennyson composed in the first half of the 19th century quite a popular and excellently crafted poem entitled *The Lady of Shalott* (1842) in which he gets to portray the motif of the “Sleeping beauty”, so popular during the second half of the century; it is an image apparently devoid of inconsistencies and paradoxes, since it is engraved in ethereal –and eternal- repose; the sleeping princess lies impassive and flawless waiting for the prince's kiss to release her from the curse that has come upon her.

As we explained in the previous section, the portrayal of ladies that are seemingly asleep or embalmed as fascinating sculptures are common representations or metaphors that were employed in order to overcome the idea of death or as a means to understand or mourn the death of a loved other. Nonetheless, it also functions as a way to put women to sleep and silence them, reducing their presence to mere ornamental shells with nothing to reply for themselves. That is why death, as the most passive state, adjusts tightly with the coeval thinking of the era, when women were expected to be pure and free from any sort of aggressive trait. So that, women were trapped as well through their representations in literature, either by being written as sleeping/death bodies incapable to mutter any response and completely numb, or by facing death as the only path possible to escape from this patriarchal embodiment.

Turning the feminine into a resting or dead body involves an idealization of the cadaver turned into an object of art. The celebration of the female corpse fulfils a double fetish: the body is insensible, impenetrable and untouchable, but the sight of its (forged and illusory) perfection becomes a form of fetishist enjoyment. As occurs with the embalming of the corpse or the wax models of the nineteenth century, the ghastly embellishment facilitates a different form of

²⁷ Rich, 1972: 21.

touching, a satisfied sight preventing sexual aim²⁸, keeping the body within reach but eventually lost.

In the poem at hand, Tennyson makes a characteristic use of internal and external space to convey the idea of the isolated Lady, a restriction which is inherent to the woman in the Victorian age, and it is emphasized throughout the stanzas of the first two parts of the poem focusing on the natural environment (John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* can be seen as a pictorial double of Tennyson's own portrait).

The secluded Lady of Shalott is not provided any option for her liberation, her entrapment and isolation in the tower is apparently a life sentence, a *curse*, as it is described in the text; any attempt to escape would cause terrible results. The paradox is that, when trying to escape her entrapment, she eventually exchanges it for another, which is death. But physical death can be read also as a liberation to another and more suffocating death, which is living alone and in the shadows, because the Lady does not really exist in the outside world; she can witness all the things that happen in the outside through her mirror but she cannot experience them. Then, if nobody is aware of her existence this could be understood as another form of being dead.

Besides, the Lady in the poem is repeatedly associated with death. The first attachment to death appears soon in the poem in the third stanza (lines 19-21):

The reaper, reaping late and early, / Hears her ever chanting cheerly, / Like an angel, singing clearly, / O'er the stream of Camelot.

Reaping and the reaper are terms that allude to death: the *Grim Reaper* is a common and popular personification of death, as opposed to the process of nourishment, since the act of reaping forms part of the harvesting, so it happens that the reaper appears when the life cycle of the being in question (vegetal or human) has come to an end. It is also suggested that the voice of the chanting Lady reminds of the voice of an angel, being these another figure related to the afterlife.

She knows not what the curse may be; / And so she weaveth steadily, / And little other care hath she, The Lady of Shalott. (42-45)

²⁸ Scopophilia or *Schaulust* describes a person's deriving aesthetic pleasure from looking at something and from looking at someone, as opposed to scopophobia, which may speak of the alternative reaction at the sight of a dead body.

In this stanza, the protagonist faces her inevitable fate, shared by every mortal being, that is death, although she does not know how and when the *curse* will take place or what is its origin -the reason of (her) death-. Meanwhile, she occupies herself to gazing at the outside world through her mirror while attempting to capture and fix its vivid beauty through weaving, which is both a domestic and artistic skill that can be seen as a self-reference to the author himself and the poetic labour in general, a craft devoted to portraying beauty.

Out flew the web and floated wide; / The mirror crack'd from side to side; /'The curse is come upon me,' cried/ The Lady of Shalott. (114-117)

Once the Lady is aware that the curse has come upon her, she assumes the consequences and heads, as in a trance, for the encounter of her final destination, as if guided by an instinct or an external voice (the author?). Her death is shown as a whole ritual, it is lengthened and the poet seems to find amusement in using rhythm and imagery to transform the female character into an icon of death, an embodiment of the beautiful dead/ sleeping beauty until she is allowed to exhale her last breath. It is also interesting to draw attention to the vision of the “*shallow boat/ Beneath a willow lay afloat*” that proves to be her final bed or deathbed, and eventually her coffin; she even writes her name on it, as though it was her final epitaph, attempting to vindicate her identity even though it has to be in death, passively confronting her vanishing and her banishment into the Beyond, chanting her sorrow whilst sailing away through her own version of the Acheron.

Lying, robed in snowy white/ That loosely flew to left and right—/ The leaves upon her falling light—/ Thro' the noises of the night/ She floated down to Camelot. (136-141)

‘*Snowy white*’ reminds us inevitably of Snow White and her glass coffin (“the dwarves let a transparent coffin of glass and wrote her name in golden letters”), another example of the prototypical sleeping/dead princess, embellished like the “*gleaming shape*” and “*dead-pale*” Lady of Shalott, after the feminine ideal of the Victorian age. Her robes are pictured in the Pre-Raphaelite manner²⁹, vaporously floating around her, halfway between an ethereal angel and an object of sexual desire.

²⁹ See *Boreas* (1903) by J.W. Waterhouse; *Flaming June* (1895) by F. Leighton; *Ophelia* (1852) by John Everett Millais or the various Pre-Raphaelite renderings on the theme of *The Lady of Shalott*: J.W. Waterhouse, (1888); H. Darvall (1851), G.E. Robertson (1864) or A. Hughes (1873).

2.3. *A feast for vultures: decay, violence and necrophilia. Mors luridum.*

The lives of the sisters Brontë were forged under the constant influence and yoke of death: they were born and raised in the same lands that housed the graveyard of Haworth, their hometown. But death was not simply part of the landscape, the Brontës also had to mourn the premature passing of many members of the family: Emily and Charlotte's mother died when they were children; a few years later, their older sisters died as well of tuberculosis in their adolescence; Branwell, the only son of the family, succumbed tragically to his addictions; eventually, Emily herself died soon after the burial of her brother, she was only 30 years old. One by one, the Parcae cut the threads of life of the Brontës until they all abandoned this earthly existence before their time, leaving just the patriarch as sole witness of the heartbreaking devastation that his family had undergone.

It goes without saying that death was a theme of great relevance in the plot and themes developed in *Wuthering Heights*, the first and only novel of Emily Brontë. *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is a work of prose where death is omnipresent: out of its thirteen main characters, apart from the servants and the two narrators (Nellie and Lockwood), ten of them are dead before the ending, and most of them die prematurely and in a traumatic manner. Death is represented and seen by the own characters from different angles: it is frequently deemed as a punishment for the evil deeds committed throughout their lifetime, but sometimes it is seen as a liberation from the torment experienced. The vision of death in the novel has been thoroughly analysed by scholars, being its complex and polyhedral understanding of death one of the most explored narrative sources. This vision blends the sociocultural tradition of the era with the predominant Christian beliefs and the subversive usage of the supernatural or controversial taboos concerning death when portraying the rawness and lewdness of death and the passion, madness and violence surrounding death, which we subsume in the notion of *mors luridum*.

It is also worth noting how some of the characters reappear later in the novel as spectral presences, spirits or, if I might put it this way, as sort of living corpses, forced to wander eternally among the moors, tied to their previous earthly existence.

2.3.1. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: the urge of darkness in *Wuthering Heights*.

Some critics consider that the novel contains enough elements as to be interpreted and labelled as a *metaphysical romance*³⁰. Some of the most prevalent elements of this narrative are found in the deep analysis that Emily Brontë performs about human nature, existence and the afterlife.

It is precisely the idea of the afterlife and its peculiar interpretation of heaven and hell what differs consistently with the prevalent conception of the time, based in the Christian theology; Emily Brontë draws an allegoric contrast between the elements and passions of the natural world and the spiritual world, as well as the dichotomy divine/diabolic. Her vision on the spiritual/supernatural has a lot more to do with the physical and earthly world and less with the purely spiritual, at least in the way that the dogmas of Christianity deployed these issues: the Great Beyond in *Wuthering Heights* is not a creation of God but of men.

As we told earlier, some of the characters are already dead when the story begins: for instance, the first time we meet Catherine (Earnshaw) she is not alive but introduced to the reader as a (seemingly) ghost that wanders around the house trying to get in through the windows (“let me in – let me in!” [...] “I’m come home, I’d lost my way on the moor!”³¹). Catherine, who has died after a short life plagued with torment and ravaging passions, is buried in a green slope in the moors, where the heath and other wild plants and beasts (as wild as her will and identity) grow and dwell around her tomb. Catherine, either her body, her spirit or life force, raises from the dead and wanders through the moors, which become a liminal zone between life and death, a pagan subversion of Catholic purgatory (an idea which was in turn rejected by the Protestant ideology), since she refuses to rest in peace without Heathcliff (“But Heathcliff, [...] I’ll not lie there by myself; they may bury me twelve feet deep, and throw the church down over me, but I won’t rest till you are with me... I never will!”³²).

There is an extensive amount of subversion underlying this almost sacrilegious resistance on the part of Catherine, who refuses to accept the

³⁰ Gilbert & Gubar, 1979: 255.

³¹ Brontë, E., 1847: Chapter 3, 17.

³² Ibid. Chapter 12, 92.

separation that death imposes on the living and the dead, by turning her obsessive devotion to Heathcliff in a defiance of death and of God, eventually condemning herself to become a lost soul or tormenting spirit, a role that she takes soon after when she chases and harasses Heathcliff tormenting him to his own death. Thus, their sickly and ardent relationship is prolonged beyond death and it comes to no surprise that, as a consequence of their mutual torment, they cannot find repose in life and neither in the afterlife. Death as the great possible separation is redefined by Emily Brontë while defying the orthodox beliefs of the time by creating a personal concept of heaven and hell, minimizing the influence and the presence of God and turning the characters into demiurges of the story, being their own personal choices and their drives and urges the ones that rule over their existence and inscribe the wounds and injuries of their mortal fate. Brontë thus materializes some earthly, out of the canon and human versions of heaven and hell, populated in turn by their own versions of angels and demons.

Multiple polarities and mirrored dualities can be observed in the narrative of *Wuthering Heights*, being one of them the juxtaposition of the two houses where the action is set: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. The first would be understood as an earthly version of Hell, it is described as “a perfect misanthropist’s heaven” because of its dark and dismal atmosphere, as well as for the unwelcoming and tempestuous weather that surrounds it; moreover, the house is inhabited and later on ruled by its own *Satan*, the untamed and fearsome Heathcliff, who reigns over the estate like an evil tyrant.

On the other hand, Thrushcross Grange rests upon a valley and it is harboured against the forces of nature, it is a kind of haven or Heaven beautifully crafted and filled with a peaceful atmosphere. However, it is constantly threatened by the prowling presence of Heathcliff and the overwhelming and crushing passion of the two lovers, ravishing the lives of others in their Miltonic fall. Catherine herself describes her own vision of the afterlife to Nellie:

If I were in heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable. (...) I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy.³³

³³ Ibid: Chapter 9, 57.

The existentialism of Catherine and Heathcliff have been analysed by many critics like McInerney (1980) as nihilistic, since none of them manifest the will to surrender to any kind of superior or divine authority, and like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, they are fallen angels of some sort that rise up against any sign of authority and so they are eventually damned to lose their lives and *Wuthering Heights* too, a crystallization of their love and their passion; a passion that in turn means their ruin and downfall, their fall from grace and their death. Their pride and destructiveness (both self-inflicted and mutual) throw Catherine and Heathcliff into misfortune but, at once makes way to their reencounter beyond the dark veil of death. After all, it is "Better to reign in Hell, tan to serve in Heav'n"³⁴.

2.3.2. *Female Fall*. Eros and Thanatos and the antithesis of Sleeping Beauty.

As a closure of this brief study on *Wuthering Heights*, it feels inevitable to mention a scene in particular where Heathcliff, tormented and maddened by the loss of Catherine, rushes to her tomb, digs up the casket and breaks the lid in an attempt to join her. Through the means of this macabre communion, the lover intends to transcend several boundaries: morality, religion and sanity, among others. In doing it, he tries to melt his flesh and spirit with those of his beloved. Therefore, it entails a kind of portrayal that vastly diverges when compared with the archetype of the Sleeping Beauty that we ponder about previously. Here there is no trace of the pure and aseptic ideal of the immaculate body of a feigned angel; the exhumed and desecrated body of Catherine and her eerie exposure becomes the romantic antithesis and polar opposite of those ethereal beauties, although it can be seen as another kind of macabre and lurid beauty: *mors luridum*. The scene communicates, as with the characters, a physical, passionate and crepuscular dimension of existence and its ceasing. Heathcliff is aware of Catherine transformation into dead flesh, he knows that she belongs now to earth and death, this is the reason why he wants to join her in flesh and soul through this heathen rite of necrophiliac marriage with death and putrefaction.

*Of dissolving with her, and being more happy still! Do you suppose I dread any change of that sort? I expected such a transformation on raising the lid (...) I knew no living thing in flesh and blood was by—but as certainly as you perceive the approach to some substantial body in the dark, though it cannot be discerned, so certainly I felt that Cathy was there, not under me, but on the earth.*³⁵

³⁴ Milton, 1667: Book I, 263.

³⁵ Brontë, E., 1847: Chapter 28, 248.

2.3.3. *The mirror crack'd from side to side.* Bertha Mason as a symbol of Death(s).

She was on the roof, where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off. (...) She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. (...); we heard him call 'Bertha!' We saw him approach her; and then, ma'am, she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement."³⁶

Atavism became one of the main topics of interest in the Victorian Gothic: degeneration theory appeals to the correlation that exists between the natures of humans and animals, as well as to the fear that those primal instincts of mankind may imply a kind of regression to their primitive behaviour and the absence of will, morality or reason. This caused a raising concern about certain behaviours that were seen as pathological and degenerate in the nineteenth century, fundamentally those observed within the members of the working class or social trends such as the *New Women*. Moral depravity and degeneration are supposed to lie underneath the existence of such Otherness, that are a social and cultural representation of everything that society is supposed not to be/do, everything that 'goodness' refuses and fears. And, of course, that otherness that shall be buried leaks into the Gothic fiction of the mid-nineteenth century.

At the same time, death is another central motif of the Gothic, so it is not odd to say that death becomes a necessary tool required to solve the challenges and troubles caused by the existence of evil, such an evil that could endanger the plans of moral purity, which should be restored whatever the cost. Such a restoration involves the erasure of the sinful and evil perpetrator, and so this is when suicide appears. Suicide is another of those immoral and intolerable behaviour that entail a huge danger to the social wellbeing and harmony (not for nothing was it referred to as the *English maladie*). This view of the suicide as a pernicious element for the social tissue gets intertwined with fiction as it resorts to suicide as a means to eliminate the degenerate, subversive or dangerous behaviour of the protagonist.

Bertha Mason (or rather Rochester) is not the protagonist in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847); in fact, she is not given a single line in the novel and appears

³⁶ Brontë, C., Chapter 36, 436.

only twice, being the rest of her appearances indirect or surrounded by a halo of supernatural phantasmagoria, thus acquiring a more dominant presence than it seems at first sight. In spite of this fact, Bertha has become one of the most relevant and thought-provoking characters of the novel, having been extensively analysed by the critics from a vast scope of theoretical approaches: feminism, postcolonialism or psychoanalysis, among many others. Bertha Mason has been turned into a literary archetype or motif herself, holder of multiple symbolic and critical readings that try to decipher the complexity of this devoiced enigma.

From our point of view, Bertha is an almost absolute and overall representation of death and dying: she is a suicide, sometimes a ghost, occasionally a vampire; an embodiment of Death drive³⁷ or the Freudian *id*; a banshee from the Irish mythology; a shadow or alterity; a *fallen woman*, silenced and buried alive in the attic, turned into an almost legendary spectral presence; she is seen as a feral beast or a soulless creature whose only choice is immolation by fire to be purified from her alleged faults and sins. Bertha is always introduced to the reader from a subjective and consequently biased point of view, either from Jane, the narrative voice, or through her dialogues with the other characters. She is described by them as though they speak of a supernatural (or subhuman) entity, which cannot be put into words, she resists language and just inspires fear and sighs –Bertha is then as ineffable as death itself and as death too, she awakes an atavistic fear of the deadly unknown-.

Only other characters speak of her or on her behalf, since Bertha is deprived of her own voice and identity, she is annulled and secluded, transformed into an absence, a dead woman. It is not strange then that she behaves as such, like a soulless and primitive creature, a deranged *nymph*³⁸ with no life to live on her own, responding to her seclusion and interment with violence, howling, death rattles and unearthly laughter. For instance, in the following excerpt Bertha Mason is described and compared to a vampire:

"Fearful and ghastly to me (...) It was a discoloured face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!"

³⁷ The Freudian drive toward death and self-destruction, i.e. *Todestrieb*.

³⁸ See section 1.2.2. (pp. 14-15).

"Ghosts are usually pale, Jane." "This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?" "You may." "Of the foul German spectre—the Vampyre."³⁹

Ballesteros (1998) reflects on this embodiment of Bertha as a vampire, an undead creature who drains life from the bodies of the living. This vampire-like nature highlights her position as a fallen woman because the behaviour of these creatures are linked to excessive sexual appetites and to a threatening and dangerous dimension of femininity, boundaries that should not be trespassed according to the puritanical creed of the mid and late-nineteenth century.

Through the narrative devices used by Charlotte Brontë, Bertha is designated as the Other. She is the reflected otherness of Jane Eyre, for she holds the rebellious, fierce and dark plight that Jane possesses but keeps tightly under control ("Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little that I am soulless and heartless?"). But she is as well the obstacle that keeps the lovers (Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester) away from each other, so it is mandatory and convenient for them that the lawful wife (Bertha) vanishes, that is to say, she needs to die, not just because her death is instrumentally convenient but also because her symbolic death (being annulled as a meaningful human being, locked up, kept in secret, silenced and disallowed as a lunatic) proves insufficient when she comes to the fore and wanders through the corridors of Thornfield Hall, resurrected as an appalling otherworldly presence that (like *Dracula*) 'disguises' herself under different shapes, as regarded by the rest of the characters, in order to torment them (or their guilty consciences, as in the case of Edward Rochester or Richard Mason, Bertha's brother).

Bertha is, according to Gilbert and Gubar (1979), the *truest and darkest double* of Jane, she is an embodiment of ruthless instincts, a complex and strong force that strives to emerge and vindicate her freedom, which in the case of Bertha has been suffocated until she has been driven to the verge of a seemingly mental illness, the death of reason. By means of this atypical conduct she becomes –perhaps unwillingly- an avenging angel of death, a suicidal and an arsonist.

³⁹ Brontë, C., Chapter 25, 287.

Bertha's depiction throughout the novel is seldom compassionate, she is always treated as dangerous and disposable, the language used to describe her dehumanises (by using the neutral pronoun 'it') and degrades her: she is described as a goblin, a vampire, a madwoman of whose illness no one but herself and her own lineage is held responsible: she "came of a mad family", her mother was "a madwoman and a drunkard". She is compared to a hyena, an animal that feeds on the rotting corpses of other animals and, like her, project a seemingly evil and bone chilling laughter.

It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell.⁴⁰

She is dressed like a ghost or a dead woman, since she is seen wearing a gown that looks like a shroud, that is, a garment used to wrap a dead body. She is a dead woman in every aspect except for her body is still made of living flesh and bone, although that is just a temporary state. The way she is spoken about and interpreted seems to have a performative effect on herself, given that he eventually decides to take her own life as though fitting the portrait that has been made of her throughout the novel. Her looks, with her dark long hair waving, the fluttering gown/shroud and her shrill hollering reminds us to another creature related to death: the banshee, a female spirit from the Irish mythology that appears wailing and yelling to announce bad omens, mainly a courier that indicates the upcoming death of someone nearby. Like the banshee, Bertha wails and yells as a warning of her own mischief, but it could be seen too as a cry of despair, a sign of her longing due to her entrapment and repression (and/or depression), or a premonitory display of grief for her own imminent departure.

Bertha sets fire to Jane's bridal gown, but she herself is dressed in shrouds to become the bride of death and jump from the roof to culminate this macabre ceremony. Bertha's death marks the end of the problem in the story for the dutiful heroes, but her spellbinding and powerful presence as a suicidal, a poor soul lost in a living Purgatory, a Satan's whore reigning and succumbing to the flames of her own suttee will keep on haunting our dreams, our memory and our imagination.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: Chapter 25, 286.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to outline and draw a scripted tapestry in which we could take a bundle of dissimilar threads (both theoretical and literary) related to the visual, narrative and symbolic representation of death and dying in the Victorian literature. Although the initial approach might seem quite vast and meandering, it is possible that we have managed to reach the way to interweave those heterogeneous threads through the use of a common and sharp needle: the binary opposition formed by the antithesis of *beauty* and *dread*, given that this antithesis is the backbone to the overall structure of our dissertation. A structure that draws from several sources (literary criticism, linguistics, sociology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, philosophy, etc.) in order to fuse them together and make them conform the different layers of bone and flesh of this written portrait.

Death is a fact, but it is also an element loaded and filled with an enormous and almost endless symbolic and allegoric potential that allows us to intertwine different examples and significances that we give to death (or Death). In the first place, allegoric death served our purpose as it is placed opposed to life to speak about the creation of life through art and the imagination and about how this creative potential is also required to destroy that pre-existing life. Death in art is sometimes a pretext to give life just in order to take it; the power of creation gives way to the power of destruction, and through that same destruction art is creating again. Secondly, death becomes a context and central motif to speak about the destruction and decay of the mortal body, and how death inspires artists/writers to become gods ("In the beginning was the Word") and thus, they feel free to sculpt and shape their creatures just to kill them with embellished delight. This eternal dance between the *beautiful* and the *macabre* articulated our analysis on different creatures made of ink and dust that populate (and are buried in) the pages of Victorian narrations.

Therefore, throughout this dissertation we have shown different ways in which these *personae* (that were born to die) are depicted, with the aim of assembling their similitudes and connections, their beauty and their horror, overt or latent: in the death of a holy child; or the *felo de se* of an insane suicidal woman; or a pair of lovers that look for death to see each other in the Beyond; or the terrible though delicate death of a beautiful woman.

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