

**Fallen Women:  
The Popular Image of Female Suicide in Victorian  
England, c. 1837-1901**

by  
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## 1

**Introduction**

Throughout the nineteenth century, English attitudes toward suicide were markedly gendered. Men and women were thought to have, by nature, different methods of and motives for suicide, and different levels of suicidal propensity. These supposed differences in the suicidal experiences of men and women were routinely expressed in popular literature, newspaper accounts, visual representations, and sociological writings of the time. Suicide was presented as an urban, male behaviour, while women were thought to have a natural immunity to suicide due to their protected place in the private and domestic sphere. Here, Victorian beliefs about appropriate gender roles and separate spheres highly recommend themselves to the discussion of suicide. But though suicide was seen as a male and ‘public sphere’ behaviour, the visual image of self-destruction was overwhelmingly female, throughout the nineteenth century. Victor Bailey has characterized the stereotypical image of suicide as that of “lovelorn, seduced, and abandoned girls choosing suicide over the shame of ‘falling.’” Though actual occurrences of this scenario were statistically few in relation to male suicides, this stereotype predominates in Victorian representation of female suicide and therefore requires explanation.<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that popular attitudes and representations of suicide, particularly those expressed in sociological writings and newspaper accounts, were a means of asserting normative gender roles in response to perceived gender chaos. In particular, I will argue that the popular image of the seduced female suicide was a didactic tool used to discourage uncontrolled or overt female sexuality and other forms of impropriety. By associating suicide with women who

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Bailey, *“This Rash Act”: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 184.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Walkowitz has similarly argued that, “[s]ensational media stories of sexual danger” acted as “cautionary tales” for women circulating in the public sphere, and “significantly shaped the way men and women of all classes

deviated from prescribed gender roles, Victorian culture actively enforced notions of proper female identity and behaviour. This paper will further argue that, by associating female suicidal motives with love and disappointed affection, and male suicidal motives with worldly troubles, Victorians not only solidified the notion that women lived for men (while men lived for themselves), but created an understanding of suicide in which female suicides would be trivialized as emotional acts, while male suicides would be seen as “a barometer of national economic and social well-being.” Put simply, this paper aims to show the many ways in which popular perceptions about suicide were informed by politics of gender in nineteenth-century England.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Historiography and Methodology***

Many historians have examined the relationship between gender and suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England. Two authorities on the subject, Olive Anderson and Victor Bailey, have drawn heavily on official statistics of suicide and, though they acknowledge some of the shortcomings of these statistics, their arguments are shaped by them in the same way that nineteenth-century sociological writings were. For example, Bailey suggests that we ought to “resist the temptation” to accept the traditional gendered ideas about suicide because “the documents are somewhat biased” because of them, yet his book relies primarily on such documents to make arguments about different gendered experiences of suicide. As Ian Miller argues, this conventional historical approach “has focused less fully on how considerations of gender informed lay attitudes towards suicide.” Rather, this approach has continued to promote the idea that “men and women had a different suicide history.” To an extent, historians have

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Walkowitz has similarly argued that, “[s]ensational media stories of sexual danger” acted as “cautionary tales” for women circulating in the public sphere, and “significantly shaped the way men and women of all classes made sense of themselves.” (Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 80); Kushner, “Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective,” 541.

simply reiterated the Victorian notion that differences in suicidal motives, methods, and occurrences are tied to distinctions of gender. The problem with this idea is that suicidal intent, as Durkheim suggested, “is too intimate a thing to be more than approximately interpreted by another.” If preexisting cultural notions about gender shaped records of suicide, using such records to propose certain truths about suicide will limit conclusions to the cultural perceptions of the Victorian age. Historians should not just apologize for the pitfalls of official statistics; they should more closely examine the consequences of their use of them.<sup>3</sup>

My own research follows the approach of Howard I. Kushner, Barbara Gates, L.J. Nicoletti, and Ian Miller, who critically examine this Victorian logic and how it gendered suicide. I examine the gendered nature of Victorian attitudes towards suicide in England as expressed in newspaper accounts, paintings, broadsides, woodcuts, poetry, and in the writings of influential coroners, physicians, psychiatrists, and sociologists in the nineteenth century. My research focuses first on the works of Émile Durkheim, Henry Enrico Morselli, S.A.K. Strahan, and Forbes Winslow on the topic of suicide as it relates to gender. While not English themselves, Durkheim and Morselli were seen as the notable authorities on the subject, and their claims strongly reflect English attitudes about gender and suicide. The writings of these social experts are of fundamental value, as they define and defend the commonplace assumptions that Victorians had about suicide. The other portion of my research draws on three hundred newspaper accounts of female suicides from the nineteenth century, though in the interests of space, I have only drawn directly from approximately forty of these accounts which best reflect the patterns of the group. The cases I have chosen offer an intersection of age, class, location,

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<sup>3</sup> Bailey, “*This Rash Act*,” 233; Ian Miller, “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England, c.1870-1910: The Formative Role of Respectability, Class, Gender and Morality,” *Mortality* 15, no. 3 (August 2010): 195; Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897), xi. From this point forward, any reference to Durkheim will be to his book, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*.

and method of suicide. As Ian Miller argues, newspaper accounts reflect the values of the communities in which they circulate, and it is for this reason that I have made such extensive use of them. My research also draws upon popular poetry, fiction, and visual representations of suicide, like paintings and drawings, to further illustrate arguments made based upon newspapers and sociological writings.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, "Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England, c.1870-1910," 193.

### Victorian Attitudes Towards Suicide

Throughout the nineteenth century, suicide came to be seen as a form of insanity brought on by individual and societal failure. This understanding of suicide was a departure from the cultural perception of suicide as a criminal act on par with murder that should be punished as such. Until 1823, it was common practice for a *felo de se* (felon of the self) to be buried at a cross roads at night without Christian burial rites and to have his/her property forfeited to the Crown. In 1823, a law was passed to end this burial practice and allow suicides private interment in a cemetery, though they would still be buried at night without religious ceremony. In 1832 suicides were also granted Christian burial rites. The law requiring the forfeiture of a suicide's property was not overturned until 1870 but "was easily circumvented by juries," who often returned verdicts of *non compos mentis* (not of sound mind) or a "medium verdict" rather than *felo de se* throughout the nineteenth century. A "medium verdict" was used from the 1840s onwards in cases where "there was insufficient evidence" that the suicide had been of sound mind. Historians Ian Miller and Olive Anderson have estimated that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, only 3% of suicides were declared *felo de se*. *Felo de se* verdicts had been effectively replaced by *non compos mentis* and medium verdicts, the use of which had "increased considerably" in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. According to Barbara Gates, the "ambivalence in this law" reflected the increasingly sympathetic public opinion regarding suicides that began in the late eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Georges Minois, *Histories of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 315, 319; Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6. According to historian Barbara Gates, suicides were buried at a crossroads since the "steady traffic over the suicide's grave could help keep the person's ghost down" and "prevent their restless wanderings as lost souls." S.A.K. Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity: A Physiological and Sociological Study* (London: S. Sonnenschein & Co., 1893), 199; Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 6; Anne Shepherd and David Wright, "Madness, Suicide and the Victorian Asylum: Attempted Self-Murder in the Age of Non-



Though sympathy for individual suicides grew, the act of suicide was still condemned and feared by Victorian people. Nineteenth-century sociologist S.A.K. Strahan argued that, like insanity, the “suicidal impulse” was hereditary in nature, as did sociologist Émile Durkheim, who claimed that suicide was both hereditary and contagious. These views promoted a social stigma around suicide and insanity that led to widespread concealment of self-destruction by families. This fear of suicide went hand in hand with a deep cultural fascination with it. Discussion of suicide evolved into an “important form of social criticism” and was therefore more openly discussed by all members of society. Gates argues that this increasingly open discussion led suicide to appear “more pervasive” than it actually was. England had already acquired a reputation for suicide that, despite being contradicted by statistics, became widely accepted and discussed by Europeans and the English themselves. The “gloomy climate of England and the melancholy disposition of its people” were thought to be the cause of this perceived propensity for suicide in England. According to Gates, the writer Goethe believed that this suicidal climate in England had “prepared the way” for the suicidal “Werther craze” that hit Europe after the 1774 publication of his book *Sorrows of Young Werther*. The English people were not, however, killing themselves at higher rates than the rest of Europe. In 1882, Italian statistician Henry Enrico Morselli published his *Il Suicidio*, in which he found that the suicide rate in France for the years 1856-1876 was at least three times that of England’s. But though the

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Restraint,” *Medical History* 46 (2002): 178; Roland Bartel, “Suicide in Eighteenth-Century England: The Myth of a Reputation,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (February 1960): 151; Bailey, “*This Rash Act*,” 65-67; This third verdict was a “late-century phenomenon,” as evidenced by the fact that more than eighty percent of all medium verdicts in the nineteenth century occurred between 1880 and 1900 (Bailey, “*This Rash Act*,” 66-67). According to Anderson, this verdict was used as early as the 1840s “after the M’Naghten case” to end the “abuse of the plea of insanity in the courts” though these verdicts “were not numerous.” (Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 223-224); Miller, “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England, c.1870-1910,” 194; Bailey, “*This Rash Act*,” 67. According to Bailey and Anderson, the use of the medium verdict was greater than that of *non compos mentis* or “temporary insanity” during this time because it served as a “suspended moral judgment” which neither condemned (*felo de se*) nor condoned (*non compos mentis*) suicide. (Bailey, 72-73; Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 223-224); Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 6.

English reputation for self-murder may have been exaggerated, the people of Victorian England had a well-deserved reputation for obsessing about it. As historian Olive Anderson points out, suicide was a favourite topic of discussion “among both middle and working-class people” and at times excited as much interest as “a good murder.” In 1843, one newspaper criticized the “morbid eagerness” among the English people for reports of suicide in the daily papers. And of these reports, cases of female self-destruction received the most attention.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand why female suicides garnered so much attention, it must first be understood that suicide was seen as a male behaviour in Victorian England. Nineteenth-century sociologists S.A.K. Strahan, Henry Enrico Morselli, and Émile Durkheim all drew attention to the fact that, all around the world, men committed suicide much more often than women. Strahan argued that, “among all peoples, ancient and modern,” the ratio of male to female suicides was generally three or four to one. Morselli believed sex to be “the chief of the human personal conditions” and that the “physiological and psychical differences between man and woman are shown most clearly in their different inclination towards suicide” (189). The widely-held nineteenth-century understanding that men were more inclined to suicide was founded on official statistics. But as historians Olive Anderson, Barbara Gates, and Victor Bailey all agree, these statistics are riddled with inaccuracies. Anderson, whose book *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* makes intensive use of these statistics, acknowledges that “a higher

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<sup>6</sup> Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity*, 194; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 43-45; Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 39, 60, 155. Barbara Gates describes the impetus behind concealment as a response to the awful dilemma of choosing the lesser of two evils.” These evils are the two possible verdicts in suicide inquests, *non compos mentis*, which would attach the stigma of insanity to a family, and *felo de se*, which would result in the property of a suicide being forfeited to the Crown, and the potential poverty of the suicide’s family; Bartel, “Suicide in Eighteenth-Century England: The Myth of a Reputation,” 145, 147, 149, 158. According to Bartel, “it became proverbial for both foreigners and Englishmen to refer to suicide as the great English malady.” (145); Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 23, 24; Barbara T. Gates, “Not Choosing Not To Be: Victorian Literary Responses to Suicide,” *Literature and Medicine* 6 (1987): 78; Henry Enrico Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1882), 190, Table XXIII. From this point forward, any reference to Morselli will be a reference to his book, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*; Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 195; *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 23 March 1843, pg. 3.

proportion of female than of male cases of suicide escape registration in the nineteenth century.” This was partly owing to the fact that many of the women who committed suicide by drowning (which was seen as a quintessentially female method) were pronounced ‘found drowned’ rather than labeled a suicide. When a pregnant domestic servant named Mary Turner drowned herself in 1851, the coroner decided that, since “there was no direct evidence to show how the deceased had got into the water,” she should be pronounced, “Found drowned,” despite the fact that she had previously warned people that she would commit suicide. This was a well-known occurrence that became the subject of a famous G.F. Watts painting (Figure 1). Anderson also claims that a family would have a “greater incentive” to cover up a female suicide; therefore, the statistics likely underrepresent their occurrence. To a degree, then, suicide statistics were shaped by Victorian attitudes towards self-destruction, rather than being the sole foundation for them.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1: ‘Found Drowned’ by George Frederick Watts, 1850.

<sup>7</sup> Durkheim, *Suicide*, 121; Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity*, 177; Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*, 189; Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity*, 177. From this point forward, any reference to Strahan will be to his book *Suicide and Insanity: A Physiological and Sociological Study* (1893); Howard I. Kushner, “Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective,” *Signs* 10, no. 3 (Spring, 1985): 537-538; Barbara Gates, review of *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, by Olive Anderson. *Victorian Studies* 32, no. 1 (Autumn, 1988), 118; Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 142-144; Bailey, “*This Rash Act*,” 4; Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 43-44; *The York Herald, and General Advertiser*, 15 February 1851, pg. 5; *The Yorkshire Gazette*, 15 February 1851, pg. 5; Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 44. Anderson draws this argument from Jack D. Douglas’s *The Social Meanings of Suicide*, which argues that, since female suicides were thought to be the result of “intra-familial ‘strains,’” a woman’s family or husband would be more likely to conceal the suicide to avoid being held responsible for her suicide. (Jack D. Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 215, n. 61)

According to Howard I. Kushner, the Victorian perception of suicide as a male behaviour “tells us more about the assumptions that inform the collection of official statistics than it does about the conduct of women.” The largest of these assumptions was that cases of *attempted* suicide did not need to be examined in order to understand suicidal behaviour. Durkheim’s 1897 *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* defines suicide as “all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result” (xii). And since more men than women fit this description, he concluded that suicide was “an essentially male phenomenon” (18). But as Kushner points out, attempted suicides “are more frequent than completions by as much as eight to one,” and of these attempts, the female share is approximately 2.3 times larger than that of men. By excluding cases of attempted self-destruction from their analyses, nineteenth-century sociologists like Durkheim “ensured that suicidal behaviour by women could not be considered suicide.” The consequences of this exclusion are far-reaching. As Kushner argues, Durkheim established a sociology of suicide which “ensured that women’s suicidal behaviour would be trivialized” because it was ‘unsuccessful.’ Studies of suicide since Durkheim have continued to neglect women’s suicidal behaviour and have therefore strengthened the notion that suicidal behaviour is “an essentially male phenomenon.” If attempts at suicide had been acknowledged by sociologists like Durkheim, Victorian people would have been forced to acknowledge that women, not men, were at greater risk of suicidal behaviour and were perhaps “less content with their social roles than were men.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kushner, “Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective,” 537-538, 543; Bailey, “*This Rash Act*,” 129. Bailey reiterates this statistic in his book on suicide yet he admits he has “made no systematic examination of attempted suicide.” Howard I. Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” in *Histories of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World*, ed. John Weaver and David Wright (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3, 34. Kushner argues that Durkheim likely did not “consciously set out to distort evidence” but that “he was bound to a set of assumptions that framed his conclusions.” (38); Howard I. Kushner

Since suicide was seen as masculine behaviour in Victorian England, one might assume that it would be represented in newspapers, paintings, novels, and ballads as an act committed by men. On the contrary, historian L.J. Nicoletti argues that, after the 1840s, “it was quite uncommon to find images of male suicide in England” as that had been so common in Georgian England. Instead, Victorian people were “inundated with images of self-murdering women.” Historians have described this change as the “feminization” of suicide. According to Gates, Victorians “wanted and expected suicide, like madness, to be a ‘female malady.’” Similarly, Margaret Higonnet describes female suicide as a “cultural obsession” of the Victorian people. In particular, nineteenth-century culture demanded images of female suicides by drowning, like G.F Watts’ ‘Found Drowned’ and John Everett Millais’ ‘Ophelia’ (Figures 1 & 2). Anderson suggests that the drowned female had become the “romantic stereotype of female suicide” and was so “completely familiar” to Victorian people that a depiction of a female standing near a body of water would immediately suggest a “deserted or ‘fallen’” woman about to kill herself. These depictions were so common in Victorian visual culture that many people saw drowning “as the conventional aftermath of seduction and betrayal” for women, and as Gates argues, these images led women to imitate them, as in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft, who once “filled her pockets with lead and tried to drown herself” after being “deserted by a lover.” Gates also suggests that drowning was seen as an *innately* feminine act, as if women had “drowned in their own tears, or returned to the water of the womb.” Similarly, Elaine Showalter suggests that the drowning of Shakespeare’s Ophelia—which became the popular image of suicide in Victorian

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and Claire E. Sterk, “The Limits of Social Capital: Durkheim, Suicide, and Social Cohesion,” *American Journal of Public Health* 95, no. 7 (July 2005): 1141; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 18;

England—was associated “with the feminine and the irrational, since water is the organic symbol of women’s fluidity: blood, milk, tears.”<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2: ‘Ophelia’ by John Everett Millais, 1851-1852

It is important to examine these popular representations of suicide because, as historian Mary Poovey argues, “representation authorizes ethics and social practices” and “stages the workings through of the dominant ideology.” Ian Miller likewise suggests that newspaper accounts are reflections of “the ideas and values of their audience and local community.” What, then, was the ‘dominant ideology’ being expressed in representations of female suicide? Miller claims that representations of suicide were “highly concerned with asserting preferred feminine identity” and notions of “appropriate gender behaviour.” By looking at representations of self-destruction, we can see that suicide served as a platform for solidifying notions of respectable masculinity and femininity, which were “key concerns” at the time. But as Anderson points out, female suicides were not presented the same way across class boundaries. The “novels, songs,

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<sup>9</sup> L.J. Nicoletti, “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London,” in *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London*, ed. Lawrence Phillips. Rodopi: 2007: 7-9; Margaret Higonnet, “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,” *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1-2 (1985): 103, 105, 112; Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 125, 148; Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 197-8; Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 11.

and paintings enjoyed by the middle-class market” presented the female suicide as sinful, and the “street ballads, melodramas, and prints which entertained humbler people” presented the female suicide as a victim. Anderson suggests that middle-class representations portrayed suicide as “the inevitable final retribution for fornication or adultery.” My own research focuses on such moralizing representations of suicide, but as I will later argue, even sympathetic representations of female suicides as victims can carry messages promoting traditional gender identities and behaviours.<sup>10</sup>

Victorian commentators were convinced that suicide was both a masculine behaviour and an urban disease. Durkheim claimed that suicide, like insanity, was more concentrated in large ‘civilized’ towns and cities than in the country. Strahan further argued that the “cause of all true suicide lies in that degenerate condition which is the constant product of civilization” (187). It was believed that the “advance of civilization” brought with it social diseases like drunkenness, insanity, crime, and suicide, and that as the world became more industrialized and urbanized, these ills would grow as well. For Durkheim, growing suicide rates were a perfect measure of the “state of deep disturbance from which civilized societies are suffering” (358). As David Lederer suggests, suicide had become “a perverse badge of modernity.”<sup>11</sup>

However, Anderson has shown that this assumption about the connection between suicide and urbanization is not supported by statistics. In fact, Anderson claims that “the most highly industrialized counties often had extraordinarily low official suicide rates.” L.J. Nicoletti

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Poovey, ‘Scenes of an Indelicate Character: The Medical “Treatment” of Victorian Women’ in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, 138, quoted in Nicoletti, “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London,” 34; Miller, “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England, c.1870-1910,” 193-195; Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 199.

<sup>11</sup> Bailey, “*This Rash Act*,” 265-6; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 16, 320; Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 31-32; Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity*, 187; David Lederer, “Suicide Statistics as Moral Statistics: Suicide, Sociology and the State,” in *Death and Dying in Ireland, Britain and Europe: Historical Perspectives*, ed. James Kelly and Mary Ann Lyons (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 241.

has argued that, with “the increased presence of women in the British metropolis,” this connection between suicide and urban spaces was used as a “disciplinary mechanism” in representations of suicide to “limit women’s circulation in the city.” Victorians believed that the suicide rate for young women was higher in cities than it was for young men, but as Anderson argues, this was entirely incorrect. By suggesting that women in urban spaces were at greater risk of suicide, nineteenth-century culture was reinforcing women’s role as “angels of the hearth” and discouraging their movement in the city. In his *Il Suicidio* (1882), Morselli argues that large cities have a “pernicious influence” on a person’s morality and that “the inferiority of the feminine sex increases with the extension of the centres of agglomeration” (201-203). Kushner suggests that this association between urbanization and suicide became gendered in the nineteenth century due to a “fear of gender chaos” and the breaking down of traditional gender roles. The assignment of different levels of suicidal risk to men and women arguably reinforced traditional ideas of gender distinction and behaviour in the nineteenth century, rather than revealed them.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Family and Suicidal Immunity***

It was a commonplace idea in the nineteenth century that the traditional, patriarchal family unit was the best defence against self-destruction. Durkheim argued that married people were more immune to suicide because of the positive influence “of the domestic environment” and of the process of “matrimonial selection” in which people lacking certain qualities would be left unmarried. These people included “the human dregs of the country,” who were by nature more susceptible to suicide (137). He contended that, for all people over the age of twenty,

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<sup>12</sup> Olive Anderson, “Did Suicide Increase with Industrialization in Victorian England?” *Past & Present* no. 86 (February 1980): 153; Nicoletti, “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London,” 7, 9; Anderson, “Did Suicide Increase with Industrialization in Victorian England?” 158; Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 20.



those who were married were less likely to commit suicide than those who were single (134). He also claimed that the divorced and the widowed committed suicide much more than the married, but still less than those who had never been married, as if the mere experience of marriage imbued a person with a greater degree of self-preservation (224, 136). But though Durkheim believed that married people had a naturally stronger morality, he also believed that the presence of children in a family was a “powerful counteragent against suicide” (156). Morselli agreed, but claimed that children served as a greater safeguard for women than for men (238). Henry Romilly Fedden’s *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (1938) similarly concludes that women who were married and had children had the lowest rates of suicide of any group of people, across all distinctions of class and sex. These assertions all suggest that women who stayed within the traditional roles of wife and mother would be protected from self-destruction.<sup>13</sup>

Since Victorian culture emphasized the family as a defence against suicide, it was believed that women—who were the most entrenched in the family—would have a greater immunity to suicide than men. Kushner suggests that the Victorian ideology that positioned women as “guardians of the family” also positioned them as secure from the evils of society, including suicide. According to Strahan, the supposed female immunity to suicide was in part owed to the “less harassing part she takes in the struggle for existence.” Strahan reasoned that woman was less involved in this ‘struggle’ because she was “the weaker physically and mentally, and because of the calls made upon her by her maternal duties” (178). Durkheim came to the same conclusions, arguing that “it is because [women] are much less involved than men in collective existence; thus they feel its influence—good or evil—less strongly” (263). While man

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<sup>13</sup> Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 19, 20, 27; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 136. These qualities were “health, fortune and morality.” Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (London: Peter Davies Limited, 1938), 328.

actively participates in society, “woman does little more than look on from a distance” (352-353). Durkheim also noted the fact that more women committed suicide on Sundays, the day when “she most frequently departs from indoors, her shelter during the rest of the week, and mingles somewhat with the life of others” (70). These views on the general immunity of women to suicide not only encourage traditional gender roles that exclude women from ‘collective existence’, but they also implicitly warn women that, if they leave the domestic setting, they will be at a higher risk of self-destruction. These views were so strongly fixed in Victorian culture that, as late as 1938, Henry Romilly Fedden was continuing to promote the argument that women were “more completely absorbed into the family unit with its ties of affection and anti-suicide influences” than men.<sup>14</sup>

Despite its popularity, the belief that women were less liable to commit suicide because of their submersion in the family was not supported by statistics. As Kushner points out, even if we accept that men killed themselves more often than women, the high female rate of attempted suicide suggests that women were at a higher risk of suicidal behaviour than men. And if we consider “the social place of most nineteenth-century women,” Kushner argues that integration within a family could not have offered any “special protection” for women. Nineteenth-century sociologists were, in fact, well aware of this statistical contradiction to their belief about female immunity and the family. Durkheim admitted that the “absolute figures” showed that married people killed themselves more than unmarried people (126), and Morselli acknowledged that unmarried women had “fewer motives” for self-destruction than married women, adding:

The proportion of married women who inflict death upon themselves deserves all the attention of psychology; it denotes that woman does not often find in matrimony the happiness of her youthful dreams (232-233).

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<sup>14</sup> Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 19, 27; Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*, 326.

Elaine Showalter advances a compelling explanation for this unhappiness among married women, arguing that those who are “deprived of significant spheres of action and forced to define themselves only in personal relationships” become “more prone to depression and breakdown.” Durkheim suggested that women did not “require so strict a social regulation as marriage” because her desires were already “naturally limited.” He further argued that “conjugal society” was actually somewhat dangerous for a woman, as it “aggravates her tendency to suicide” (145). But as Winslow pointed out, marriage seemed to be “a preventative of suicide” for men, as evidenced by the fact that two-thirds of male suicides were unmarried. Seeing that male and female interests “are so obviously opposed” in this regard, Durkheim noted that, to decrease the rate of suicide among men, the rate of suicide among women would have to increase (352). He asks if “one of the sexes [must] necessarily be sacrificed” and concludes that “nothing else seems possible” (352). Though Durkheim does not explicitly say which sex must be sacrificed, his emphasis on the family as a safeguard against suicide throughout his 1897 study suggests that the interests of men take priority. Unsurprisingly then, married female suicides did not, by any measure, receive ‘all the attention of psychology.’ Such a focus would undoubtedly undermine the Victorian ideal of separate spheres for men and women.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 36; Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 64; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 235. Durkheim argued that since a woman’s mental state was “less developed” than man, her sexual needs and desires had “less of a mental character” and therefore did not need to be regulated through monogamous marriage. He further argued that marriage could be inconvenient for women as it “prevents all retreat” whereas the inconveniences men faced in marriage could be “compensated by the advantages he gains in other respects.” Forbes Winslow, *The Anatomy of Suicide* (Boston: Milford House Inc., 1840), 270. From this point forward, any reference to Winslow will be to *The Anatomy of Suicide*.

## 3

**Gender Chaos and Separate Spheres**

The doctrine of separate spheres emerged in the nineteenth century as a social system built on ideas about gender distinction. The belief that there were natural distinctions or inequalities between the sexes led to a belief that men and women were meant to occupy separate realms of existence. In this gendered ordering of society, women would be relegated to the “private” sphere and men had exclusive access to the “public” sphere. Jennifer M. Lehmann describes the former as “the personal, private, domestic, reproductive familial sphere” and the latter as “the social, public, political, economic, and cultural sphere.” By subscribing to the doctrine of these separate spheres, nineteenth-century society promoted an understanding of the world in which the entirety of human experience was divided along gender lines. Women’s political and economical subordination to and dependence upon men, and their position in the domestic and reproductive setting, came to be seen as natural facts of life. Durkheim and his contemporaries adopted this system of separate spheres to explain patterns of suicide among men and women, just as they used patterns of suicide to justify and promote the system of separate spheres. Anderson contends that the ideology of separate spheres was so deeply fixed in Victorian England’s “urban consciousness” that it led suicide to be depicted “as an escape from sexual dishonor for women, but from worldly dishonor for men.” And if taken together, Victorian beliefs about suicide’s urban, masculine nature and the emphasis on the family and female immunity, can be seen as reinforcing traditional ideas about gender roles and separate spheres. This widely accepted doctrine of separate spheres is therefore indispensable in understanding Victorian attitudes towards suicide.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jennifer M. Lehmann, *Durkheim and Women* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 8, 10-13; Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 196.

As Howard I. Kushner argues, Victorian people experienced increasing anxiety over “gender chaos”—they feared that women “were becoming more like men, and men more like women.” Historians Ian Miller and Elaine Showalter have also suggested that the period after 1870 in particular was seen as a period of “cultural insecurity” over the perceived collapse of the separate spheres. According to Miller, this perception of “sexual anarchy” led Victorians to enforce traditional gender roles with greater intensity. This heightened anxiety regarding gender roles is clear in the 1894 writings of S.A.K. Strahan, who commented that, “within recent years there has been a tendency, especially in England and America, to push woman into competition with man in almost every walk of life” (179). Strahan predicted that this tendency would “speedily cause an increase in the female rate of suicide” and warned that “a higher rate of suicide will not be the only evil woman will suffer as a result of an attempt to compete with man.” Strahan then suggested that, “if woman elects to do as man does, she must be prepared to take the kicks as well as the ha’pence” (179). Such explicitly threatening language shows the high level of anxiety over gender roles that prevailed throughout the nineteenth century. Morselli also connected female suicide with deviation from prescribed gender roles. When discussing the high rate of suicide among women in Spain, he explained that “it must be attributed to the force of their passions, which brings them nearer to the male sex” (191-192). He provided a similar explanation for the higher rates of suicide among widows, arguing that “widowhood brings the woman nearer to man than any other social condition” (230). Finally, he argued that women who worked in “muscular or psychical occupation” were brought “near to man” and therefore had higher propensities for suicide (243-244). Since suicide was considered a masculine behaviour, these nineteenth-century social analysts presented female self-destruction as the logical consequence of moving “nearer to the male sex” (Morselli, 191-192).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 20; Miller, “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-

The belief that female suicides resulted from deviation from their prescribed gender role was widely accepted in nineteenth-century England, as evidenced by the nature of suicide accounts in newspapers. Victorian newspapers routinely commented on the marital status of a female suicide and whether or not she had been occupied in physical labour, as if such pieces of information were explanations in and of themselves for her act. When Margaret Moyes jumped off the Monument to the Great Fire of London in September 1839, *The Standard* reported that “her hands have not apparently been ever engaged in rough labour” and that “a wedding ring was on the middle finger of her left hand.” The inquest into her suicide revealed that she was the eldest daughter of a baker who could not provide for all his children, due to his poor health. It was supposed that “the idea of going out into the world to get her living preyed upon her mind” and led her to kill herself. Though the coroner and the jury went to great lengths to find out if she had a “sweetheart,” the ring on her finger was apparently given to her by one of her sisters, and no such sweetheart could be found. Thus, the prospect of “being about to go out into the world” became the accepted cause of Moyes’ self-destruction. Gates claims that both middling and working-class people would be sympathetic to a case like Moyes’ and “would find her fall—financial and literal—very ‘unfortunate’ indeed.” Gates quotes a verse from a broadside about Moyes that illustrates this sympathy:

The maiden’s mother had been dead,  
 Two years we have been told,  
 Her father, with sickness long confin’d,  
 Besides he’s very old;  
 Which plunged the family in distress,  
 That to service she must go,  
 That so afflicted her youthful mind,

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West England, c.1870-1910,” 195; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990) as quoted in Miller, “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England, c.1870-1910,” 195; Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity*, 179. According to Strahan, these other evils include “general paralysis, gout, instinctive crime, and other gross signs of degenerative change” of which men are more liable. He argues that, “as woman matches man in her mode of life, so must she approach him in liability to all these evils.”

Caus'd this dreadful scene of woe.

Broadsides and newspaper accounts like these suggest that, when women are forced to leave the safety and comfort of domestic life and work for their living as men do, they are more likely to kill themselves.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Female Suicide, Sexuality, and Alcohol Consumption***

Victorian writings and representations of female suicide asserted preferred gender roles and behaviour and were also heavily laden with ideas about female sexuality. L.J. Nicoletti argues that Victorian people were convinced of a “connection between a woman’s suicidal tendencies and her sexuality” that was reinforced by medical discourse on the female reproductive system. Showalter’s analysis of female insanity in Victorian England argues that nineteenth-century psychiatrists considered women to be “more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control.” Some medical experts even attempted to delay the onset of menstruation in women because they considered it “so disrupting to the female brain.” According to Showalter and Anderson, each stage of the female biological life cycle (menarche, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause) was thought to be a time in which women were more susceptible to insanity, and as a result more likely to commit suicide. In 1840, Winslow advised physicians of suicidal women to examine “the condition of the uterine function” (203). He argued that, during and immediately after childbirth, women had a strong inclination to commit suicide and that “any irregularity in the action of the uterine organ may give rise to the same inclination” (203). Morselli similarly argued that the “uterine functions” placed women in a condition of “diminished energy of character and hyperaesthesia of the nerves,” which heightened their

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<sup>18</sup> *The Standard*, 12 September 1839; *The Morning Chronicle*, 13 September 1839; *Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian*, 14 September 1839; *The Leicester Chronicle: or, Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser*, 21 September 1839; *The Westmorland Gazette*, 21 September 1839, pg. 1; Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 41.

suicidal disposition (291). This connection between the female reproductive system and suicide was made explicit in newspaper accounts of Sarah Olden, a woman who slit her throat with a razor while giving birth “because she could not bear the pains of labour.”<sup>19</sup>

Biologically, all women were thought to pass through periods of heightened suicidal risk with each stage of their reproductive cycle. But suicide was also seen as a result of uncontrolled or overt sexuality. Morselli claimed that women were more prone to suicide in their early youth because their pubescent development was more “energetic” than that of men (220). Strahan agreed, arguing that, between the ages of fifteen and twenty, the female sexual change “is infinitely more disturbing and dangerous than the like change experienced by the male” (180-181). When a woman committed suicide, coroners, juries, and newspapers were all eager to know the status of her sexual virtue. At the inquest on the suicide of Margaret Moyes, the surgeon explained his internal examination of the body:

There was nothing to show that the womb had ever been impregnated. There were some suspicious appearances, but, as they might be caused by a general debility of the system, he could not positively state that the chastity of the deceased had ever been violated.

The coroner then suggested that “it would be cruel to form any supposition militating against deceased’s virtue” and the surgeon agreed. Such concern over the virginity of Moyes shows the extent to which unrestrained female sexuality was seen as a cause of suicide. Victorians believed that a woman who lost her purity was a “fallen woman” whose logical path would be one of “madness or death.” This belief led people to assume that the women who killed themselves were impure, sexually frustrated, “lovelorn Ophelias.” Combined with ideas about

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<sup>19</sup> Nicoletti, “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London,” 32; Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 55; Elaine Showalter, “Victorian Women and Insanity,” in *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, ed. Andrew Scull (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 323. According to Showalter, Victorians believed that menstrual blood itself “predisposed women to insanity” because they saw insanity as “a disease of the blood.” (322-323); Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 224; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 4 December 1864.



the suicidal nature of women's reproductive systems, this belief created a culture in which all female sexuality became closely connected with the danger of suicide and was therefore to be repressed.<sup>20</sup>

Just as Victorian culture was deeply concerned with uncontrolled female sexuality, anxiety about "intemperate" women increased throughout the nineteenth century. Ian Miller argues that gendered notions of respectable alcohol consumption were spelled out in representations of female suicide. He claims that, even when other causes for a suicide could be found, if it was discovered that the deceased had been drinking, "this would dominate and cloud the report of the death." When Maria Gotts killed herself in 1847, the newspaper accounted stated that Maria was "addicted to drinking at times, which no doubt affected her mind." When Caroline Cornhill committed suicide in 1857 by throwing herself down the stairs of a workhouse, newspapers reported that "excessive drink, it is feared, was the inciting cause of the rash act." In 1874, a woman named Alice Johnson killed herself while in jail for theft of a cashbox, but rather than examining poverty as a cause of her suicide, newspapers reported that she was "a woman of intemperate habits" who had "lived apart from her husband for three years." As Miller argues, excessive drinking was seen as inappropriate for women because it "undermined their preferred status as a good mother." Drinking was seen as a crucial part of working-class "masculine identity," so women who drank out of moderation were viewed as deviating from their respectable feminine roles as wives and mothers and were "subject to even further condemnation than drunken men." According to Miller, cases of female suicides provided an opportunity for moral condemnation of women's alcohol consumption and other

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<sup>20</sup> Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 74, 132; Elaine Showalter, "Victorian Women and Insanity," 325; Bailey, "This Rash Act," 181; *The Westmorland Gazette*, 21 September 1839, pg. 1; Kushner, "Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective," 540.

deviant types of female behaviour.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Miller, "Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England, c.1870-1910," 200-202; *The Morning Chronicle*, 20 May 1847; *The Morning Chronicle*, 5 January 1857; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 10 January 1874, pg. 2.

### **She Died for Love, and He for Glory**

Victorian representations of suicidal methods and motives were the products of a deeply gendered and widely-accepted dichotomy of suicidal behaviour. Generally speaking, female suicide was regarded as an emotional act brought on by a romantic disappointment, while male suicide was presented as an act of “individual self-determination in response to impersonal adversities.” These two cultural assumptions are perfectly illustrated by Thomas Rowlandson’s 1810 drawing, *She Died for Love and He for Glory* (Figure 3). This gendered division of motives became a commonplace in Victorian culture and in representations of suicide, to the extent that newspaper accounts of suicide seem to be following a cultural script. When a man committed suicide, the act could be attributed to physical illness, financial difficulties, “loss of reputation,” or “mortified pride,” to name a few. As Silvia S. Canetto and David Lester suggest, in accounts of male suicide “emotional and relationship problems may be mentioned, but are typically treated as secondary to the fallen hero plot.” Alternatively, when women committed suicide, their deaths were “most often perceived as motivated by love.” Other “impersonal stressors” involving work and money that may have motivated female suicides were generally ignored. Kushner argues that these cultural understandings of gendered motivations “formed a concept of female suicide as an individual emotional act, while male suicide rates were taken as a barometer of national economic and social well-being.” If women’s suicides were seen as acts of “personal disintegration,” then men’s suicides were seen as indicators of national disintegration. Such an attitude undoubtedly contributed to the trivialization of female suicide and to the promotion of

their romanticized and stereotypical image.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 3: Thomas Rowlandson, *She Died for Love and He for Glory*. Drawing (1810). Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California. Accessed in Victor Bailey's "*This Rash Act*" *Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City*, 209.

The image of the “yearning lovelorn” suicide was a commonplace image of female self-destruction in Victorian England. As Margaret Higonnet argues, the prevalence of this image “complements the familiar assumption that woman lives for love, man for himself.” A woman who is seduced, betrayed, abandoned, or widowed by her lover or husband “is perceived to lose herself; she follows him.” According to Gates, the idea that women who lose their men gain “indifference to life” had “the deepest hold on the Victorian imagination” of all ideas about female suicide. Unsurprisingly then, Victorians were fascinated (and shocked) by the Hindu practice of suttee, in which women killed themselves after their husbands died. Durkheim expressed his frustration that “this barbarous practice is so ingrained in Hindu customs that the efforts of the English are futile against it” (177). But Gates argues that the Victorians had an obsession with suttee that ran parallel to growing concern about an excess of “redundant

<sup>22</sup> Silvia S. Canetto and David Lester, “Gender, Culture, and Suicidal Behavior,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 35 (June 1998): 173-4, 178; “ART. III. Suicide; Its Motives and Mysteries,” *The Irish Quarterly Review*, 1851-1859. 7, no. 25 (March 1857): 71-2; Higonnet, “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,” 106; Kushner, “Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective,” 541.

women” (unmarried women) in England. She suggests that Victorian people “wanted to believe that ‘redundant women’ had really no place to go but death” and were therefore eager to discuss suttee, the extreme manifestation of this idea.<sup>23</sup>

There were manifestations of this idea in English suicide cases that were less shocking to Victorian sensibilities. When Charlotte Brodie poisoned herself in 1893 after the death of her sweetheart, the newspaper headlines read “A Bereaved Sweetheart’s Suicide” and “Tale of Love and Suicide,” indicating a more sympathetic and romanticized response to women who killed themselves upon their lovers’ deaths. Far from portraying this female suicide as “barbarous,” these newspaper accounts mention that Brodie was suffering “from heart affection” and that she had “gone to join her sweetheart.” Instead of condemning these female suicides like they did those practicing suttee, Victorians fetishized women who destroyed themselves upon the death of their husbands or lovers, consequently presenting suicide as a romantic and even understandable solution for broken-hearted and “redundant” women.<sup>24</sup>

Among these broken-hearted suicides were those who had been seduced and abandoned. Anderson argues that the “moralizing, romantic nineteenth-century association of suicide among young girls with seduction” was not founded in fact, and yet it appears the Victorian people accepted the association without hesitation. In his *Anatomy of Suicide*, Winslow summed up the story to which many female suicides were attributed:

A woman is seduced by some heartless and profligate wretch; she is in a short time forsaken and left to her fate. Her mind recurs to the past; she recalls to recollection her once happy state of innocence and peace. Scorned by the world, shunned by her relations and friends, she is driven to a state of agonizing distraction. Despair, in its worst features, takes possession of her mind, and under this feeling she puts an end to her existence (70).

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<sup>23</sup> Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 98-9, 131; Higonnet, “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,” 108.

<sup>24</sup> *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 27 December 1893, pg. 3; *The Weekly Standard and Express*, 30 December 1893, pg. 3; *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 December 1893; *The Weekly Standard and Express*, 30 December 1893, pg. 3.

This story was reproduced in countless newspaper accounts of female suicide. In September 1929 a nineteen-year-old woman named Sophia Scott poisoned herself with laudanum. The report stated that “the unfortunate girl had fallen victim to seduction” and that her seducer had abandoned her after discovering she was pregnant. *The Morning Chronicle’s* headline for this suicide was “Another Case of Seduction & Suicide,” showing that cases like Sophia Scott’s were not viewed as rare occurrences. Another popularized case of seduction occurred in 1834, when it was reported that a woman named Ann Penny drowned herself after finding out that her sweetheart was already married. This man had “several times promised to name the day for their marriage,” but stopped visiting Penny once she had given him a sum of money. The search for stories of seduction in cases of female suicide was so common that when Ann Wilkins committed suicide in 1842, she left a note stating that “there is no blame to any one, and although Robert the footman, at Littleton House, may be thought the cause, he is free from my blood.” Had Victorian coroners and juries been less eager to establish the story of seduction, Ann Wilkins might not have felt obliged to leave such a note.<sup>25</sup>

Even in cases where a female suicide had not been seduced and abandoned, motivations for her death were still rooted in explanations of disappointment in love and affection. Winslow argued that the greatest causes of insanity among English women were “unrequited and disappointed affection” (57). An examination of newspaper accounts shows that Victorians had the same understandings of the causes of female suicide as they did of the causes of female insanity. An 1857 article in the *Irish Quarterly Review*, titled “Suicide: Its Motives and Mysteries,” argued that, among statistics of female suicide, “a great number are put down to

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<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 58; *The Morning Post*, 3 October 1829; *The Morning Chronicle*, 2 October 1829; *The Morning Chronicle*, 13 January 1834; *Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian Royal Yacht Club Gazette, Southampton Town and County Herald, Isle of Wight Journal, Winchester Chronicle, and General Reporter*, 18 January 1834; *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 21 March 1842.

‘crossed in love.’” And indeed, when Sarah Roberts attempted murder and then killed herself in 1866, the *Liverpool Mercury* stated that “it was tried to find out whether she had been crossed in love.” In 1857, the *North Wales Chronicle* reported that Sarah Hills attempted to poison herself after her sweetheart “refused to marry her.” In 1861, Mary Ann Collins also attempted suicide “after a quarrel with her sweetheart,” who had allegedly “played her false.” When Julia Newell drowned herself in 1894, the inquest discovered that her husband had “cruely [*sic*] deceived her as to his means” and had begun to embezzle money, forcing her to pawn her jewelry. The *Essex Country Chronicle* reported that Newell “took the blame, through love of her husband, to herself” and was driven to commit suicide. The same newspaper later reported that the plate on Julia’s coffin was engraved with the words “broken-hearted.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1840, Winslow even suggested that “the term ‘broken heart’ is not a mere poetic image” (56). He claimed that there were recorded examples of the heart rupturing “in consequence of disappointed hope” and “blighted affection” (56). Winslow also argued that “there is no affection of the mind that exerts so tremendous an influence over the human race as that of love” (56). But he did not see love as a cause of suicide for the entire “human race”—only women. In *Anatomy of Suicide*, Winslow wrote that a woman’s life was “but the history of her affections. It is the soul within her soul; the pulse within her heart; the life blood along her veins, ‘blending with every atom of her frame’” (56). Both Winslow and Strahan quoted Lord Byron to illustrate this idea that women’s lives revolved around the pursuit of love. In *Suicide and Insanity*, Strahan quoted from Byron’s 1819 *Don Juan*: “Love is of man’s life a thing apart, ‘Tis woman’s whole existence” (177). Winslow also quoted from *Don Juan*:

Alas! the love of woman, it is known

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<sup>26</sup> “ART. III. Suicide: Its Motives and Mysteries,” 75; *Liverpool Mercury etc.*, 30 July 1866; *North Wales Chronicle*, 30 May 1857; *The Standard*, 25 December 1861, pg. 7; *Essex County Chronicle*, 27 April 1894, pg. 8; *Essex County Chronicle*, 4 May 1894, pg. 5.

To be a lovely and a fearful thing;  
 For all of theirs upon that die is thrown;  
 And if 'tis lost, life hath no more to bring  
 To them, but mockeries of the past alone.

Morselli also argued that “love preponderates in woman” and that it was the “delicacy of feeling and of love, which inspire[s] all her acts,” including suicide (305). This commonplace association between women and love shaped the ways in which female suicides were viewed in the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Fallen Women***

The case of Margaret Moyes was arguably the most sensationalized female suicide of the nineteenth century and is a great example of many of the beliefs that Victorians had about female suicide. As Gates suggests, it gained “a notoriety akin to that of Victorian murder cases” because Moyes threw herself off the Monument, one of “the most public of places” in London, thereby inviting the eager attention of the widest possible public. Afterwards, large crowds gathered around the Monument. According to *The Standard*, there had never been “so many persons who have paid for admission” to the Monument than on the very day of Moyes’ suicide.

*The Morning Chronicle* reported:

It is almost superfluous to mention, as almost every one must be aware of the fact, that this extraordinary act of self-destruction formed yesterday the chief topic of conversation among all classes of persons in the metropolis. During the whole of yesterday Monument-yard was crowded with spectators, as was every avenue from which a near view of the column could be commanded, and the demand for admission to ascend to the terrace was beyond all precedent.

Newspapers for audiences of all classes responded to the demand for information on this “rash and fatal act.” They presented the gruesome details of Moyes’ fall from the Monument and attempted to assign a motive for “such an audacious act.” In her book *Victorian Suicide*, Gates

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<sup>27</sup> Winslow, *The Anatomy of Suicide*, 56.



provides examples of woodcuts that show Moyes “dropping like a lead weight,” which became part of a trend in visual representation of showing women falling from a height (Figure 4). The crowds at the scene of the suicide, and the demand for detailed descriptions of the fall in newspapers, broadsides, and woodcuts, speak to the “greatest interest” that existed “in the public mind to know every little circumstance connected with so tragical an event.”<sup>28</sup>

Following Moyes’ leap from the Monument, the coroner, jury, newspapers and public all eagerly discussed the possibility that she had been a victim of seduction. Moyes’ family and acquaintances (both close and distant) were questioned on whether or not she had had a sweetheart or had kept company with any man. During the inquest, a member of the jury mentioned hearing a rumour that “there was a gentleman who was in the habit of paying his addresses to the deceased.” James Brown, an acquaintance of the Moyes family and a witness in the inquest, testified that he had “known her for a long time” and was “convinced she had no connexion [*sic*] of the sort.” Margaret’s sister Christina likewise testified that Margaret did not have a sweetheart and that she “never saw her receive any love letters.” A wedding ring found on Margaret’s left hand caused a great deal of interest among the public, but it was discovered that the ring was given to her by her sister. Newspaper accounts varied in their reports of which finger the ring was on. *The Northern Liberator*, *The Morning Chronicle* and *The Leicester Chronicle* reported that it was on her “wedding” or “marriage” finger, while *The Standard* first reported that the ring was on her forefinger, then later that it was on her middle finger. Initial reports of the suicide drew upon minor details like these to indicate a story of seduction, but once the inquest began, newspapers were able to follow new leads to get the story they wanted. The inquest uncovered that there had been a man named Captain Bevan who had been lodging in

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<sup>28</sup> Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 38-39, 140-2; *The Standard*, 12 September 1839. Moyes’ fall took place at about ten o’clock in the morning, and drew crowds to the Monument throughout the entire day; *The Morning Chronicle*, 13 September 1839.

the Moyes' house and who had left town the day of Moyes' suicide. Though Margaret's sister and the coroner were both convinced that Bevan would not "have had any influence over deceased," the jury still desired that he should be tracked down and brought in for examination.<sup>29</sup>

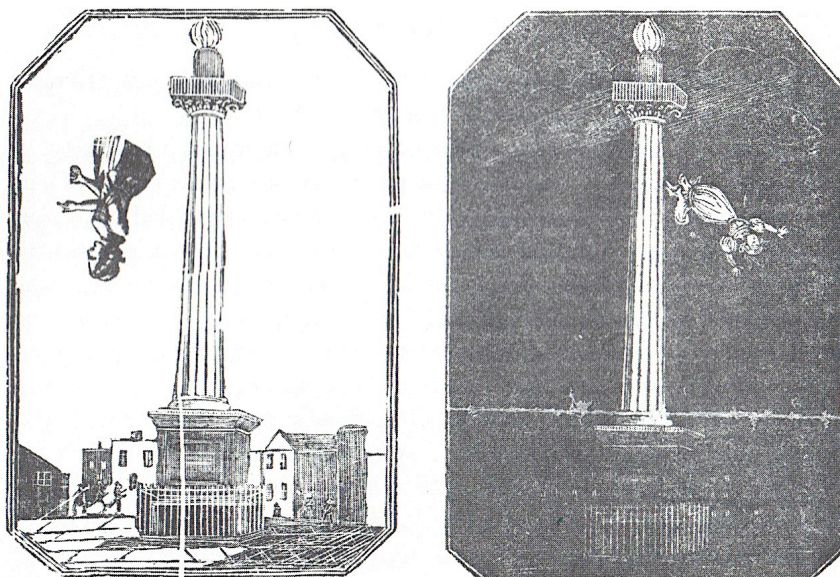


Figure 4: "Self Destruction of a Female by Throwing Herself off the Monument" (1839) and "Particulars of the Coroner's Inquest Held on the Body of Magaret [sic] Moyes" (1839). Accessed in Barbara Gates' *Victorian Suicide*, 46.

These reactions to Moyes' suicide show the "stock assumptions" that Victorians had about female suicide. The stress that the coroner, jury, witnesses, and newspapers put on Moyes' ring, the male lodger living in her house, and the existence of any love letters all show the degree to which female suicide was seen as a product of seduction or disappointed love. Victorians were so eager to know if Moyes was "lovesick or, worse, seduced and abandoned" because they assumed that this was the case for the average female suicide. Since this was not found to be the case for Moyes, the inquest found that the prospect of "being about to go out into the world" to make her living was the reason for her self-destruction. A month after Moyes' suicide, a fifteen-

<sup>29</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian*, 14 September 1839; *The Morning Chronicle*, 13 September 1839; *Northern Liberator*, 21 September 1839; *The Leicester Chronicle: or, Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser*, 21 September 1839; *The Standard*, 12 September 1839. Captain Bevan was questioned but was "proved simply an acquaintance." (Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 41-42)

year old boy named Richard Hawes “reenacted” her suicide. Following Hawes’ suicide, the coroner’s jury and the newspapers did not search for a story of seduction and abandonment, but placed the blame for his death on “hereditary insanity leading to suicide, [on] Hawes’s melancholia, and [on] his reading habits.” As Gates argues, Hawes was seen as “a good boy seized by an unfortunate fit of madness,” while Moyes was imagined to be a “fallen woman” who had been seduced and abandoned, despite the lack of any evidence for this popular idea.<sup>30</sup>

In 1842, Jane Cooper became the second woman to throw herself from the Monument, drawing the attention of the entire country and further establishing the Monument as an emblematic site of female suicide. Cooper’s suicide inspired the construction of an iron cage around the observation gallery of the Monument later that year, that Anderson refers to as the “most famous of all nineteenth-century English anti-suicide structures.” But though the iron cage ensured that Cooper’s suicide from the Monument would be the last, the Monument “remained visually coded as a site of female suicide.” In 1891, an illustration by Henri Lenos in *The Graphic* depicted a group of people visiting the top of the Monument. (Figure 5) In the illustration, the men stand safely away from the edge while the woman, gripping the iron bars, presses herself to the cage as if it were the only thing preventing her “from leaping to her death.” This illustration is a perfect example of the suicidal iconography attached to the Monument, but

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<sup>30</sup> Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 40-44; *The Westmorland Gazette*, 21 September 1839, pg. 1; Hawes had often talked about Moyes’s suicide and had mentioned that the method of falling from the Monument would likely be painless. (Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 42-3); Nicoletti, “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London,” 14-15; Jane Cooper’s reading habits were also commented upon after her suicide. Several newspapers noted that although Cooper was once “very fond of reading religious books,” she had recently “taken to reading novels.” (*The Bath Chronicle*, 25 August 1842; *The Standard*, 22 August 1842; *The Chelmsford Chronicle*, 26 August 1842, 4.)

more importantly, it depicts men as having a greater sense of self-preservation and emphasizes the necessity of the cage for those who lack such self-restraint—women.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 5: Henri Lanos, “Looking from the ‘Cage’”, *The Graphic*, 12 December 1891.

The 1842 suicide of Jane Cooper provoked many of the same lessons about female behaviour as the case of Margaret Moyes and was equally sensationalized in newspapers, broadsides, and woodcuts (Figure 6). One newspaper reported that the “excitement in the neighbourhood during the whole afternoon was intense, and many hundred persons were admitted to view the body.” One of these people, Mr. Rowbottom, recognized the body as his servant, Jane Cooper, who had asked for a day’s holiday the day before and never returned. Just as with Moyes, the coroner, jury, and newspapers all eagerly searched for a story of seduction and abandonment that might have been the cause of Cooper’s suicide. In her examination, Mrs.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 358. The City Lands Committee decided to construct the anti-suicide cage “only three days after” Cooper’s suicide; Nicoletti, “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London,” 15; *The Graphic*, 12 December 1891.

Rowbottom claimed that Jane “was fond of a man at Vauxhall” but that she had “never slept out before that night.” Some letters were found amongst Cooper’s belongings, of which the Coroner claimed that “some appeared like valentines.” In her deposition, Jane’s sister Louisa mentioned that there were two men lodging at the house where Jane was a servant, and she thought that “something had been kept in the dark” about their acquaintance with her deceased sister. Lastly, the surgeon attending the body claimed that, although Cooper was not pregnant, he was convinced that “she had been seduced, though not as recently as Thursday night,” when she committed suicide. He claimed that “there could be no doubt that she had deviated from the paths of virtue.” Despite all these attempts to prove that Jane had been seduced, the jury ultimately attributed Cooper’s suicide to “temporary insanity, brought on by indiscretion in having remained absent from home all night.”<sup>32</sup>

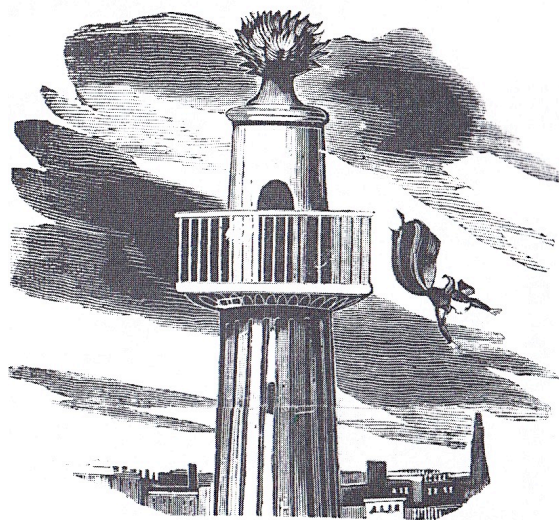


Figure 6: “Another Dreadful Suicide at the Monument, by a Young Woman” (1842). Accessed in Barbara Gates’ *Victorian Suicide*, 47.

The sensationalized cases of Margaret Moyes and Jane Cooper illustrate the Victorian assumption that women who killed themselves must have done so after losing their honour

<sup>32</sup> *Reading Mercury, Oxford Gazette, Newbury Herald and Berks County Paper, etc.*, 20 August 1842, pg. 3; *The Standard*, 22 August 1842; *The Era*, 28 August 1842; *The Chelmsford Chronicle, etc.*, 26 August 1842, pg. 4.

through a seduction—they must have been “fallen women.” Howard Kushner shows how Victorian fiction reinforced this assumption with the literary convention of the seduced and abandoned woman whose “only honorable (and predictable) resolution” was suicide. Works like Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* achieved great popularity during the nineteenth century and included “an illicit love affair [that] led the despairing woman to suicide.” This literary convention drew legitimacy from newspaper accounts of suicide, and in return helped reinforce this characterization of female suicides in the public mindset. According to Gates, suicide was considered the logical and preferred end for “fallen women” who might otherwise live on as prostitutes. When Sarah Ward attempted suicide in 1845, she afterwards stated that she did so because she had been “betrayed by a young man” and was thus “compelled to seek a miserable livelihood by walking the streets.” Women who lost their honour were “considered responsible for their own destinies” and seen as dangerous to “unfallen Victorian women,” so a “fallen woman” who committed suicide was viewed more sympathetically than one who lived in shame and dishonor. In Thomas Hood’s 1844 poem “Bridge of Sighs,” he pleads with the Victorian people to treat “fallen” female suicides with compassion:

Touch her not scornfully;  
 Think of her mournfully,  
     Gently and humanly;  
 Not of the stains of her  
 All that remains of her  
 Now is pure womanly  
 Make no deep scrutiny  
     Into her mutiny  
 Rash and undutiful:  
     Past all dishonor  
 Death has left on her  
     Only the beautiful.

Hood’s poem, illustrated by Gustave Doré (Figure 7), portrays the act of female suicide as a means of erasing sin. By throwing herself into the river Thames, the woman’s “stains” or sins of

her “mutiny” are washed away so that she becomes “pure womanly.” As Gates argues, the female suicide described in the poem is “in effect baptized” through suicide—the “fallen woman” is “washed clean of her sins.” This poem clearly suggests that women who have sinned through seduction can be redeemed through suicide, further highlighting self-destruction as the logical path for “fallen women.”<sup>33</sup>

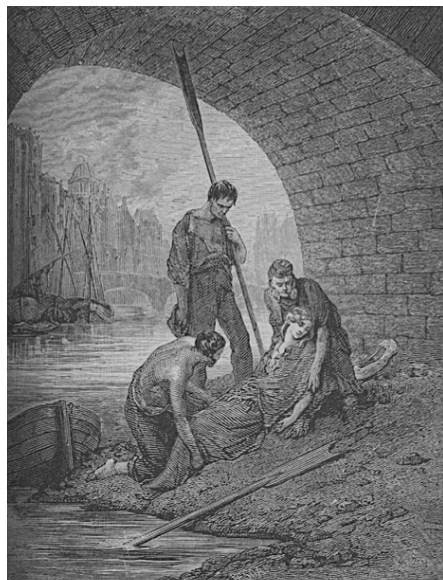


Figure 7: Illustration by Gustave Doré of Thomas Hood’s popular poem ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ (1844) Accessed in L.J. Nicoletti, “Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London,” in Lawrence Phillips (ed), *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London* (2007), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 131-2, 135-6; Kushner, “Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective,” 540; Kushner, “Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity,” 30; *The Morning Post*, 22 September 1845, pg. 8.

## 5

**Conclusion**

In 1861, a magistrate by the name of Mr. Woolrych commented that “the mania for committing suicide, particularly among females, was painful to contemplate, and shocking to humanity.” Mr. Woolrych’s comment is indicative, not of a real suicidal “mania” among women, but of the Victorian preoccupation with cases of female suicide. As I have argued, the image of the female suicide, particularly the seduced and abandoned one, gained popularity throughout the nineteenth century and speaks to a larger cultural preoccupation with maintaining traditional gender roles and behaviours at a time of perceived gender instability. The popular image of the seduced woman committing suicide was used to warn women against overt sexuality and other dishonorable deviations from proper womanhood. By associating “fallen women” with suicide, Victorian culture created an understanding of suicide that could be used to warn women to behave properly. This paper has aimed to show that, just as understandings of gender “defined and shaped opinions on suicide,” so too did suicide justify and enforce Victorian understandings of gender.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *The Standard*, 25 December 1861, pg. 7; Miller, “Representations of Suicide in Urban North-West England, c.1870-1910,” 195.



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