# Shrouded in Shadows: Victorian Mourning, Macabre and Death Fetish in Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels*

**Mouhamada S**
*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English*
*Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India*
 *https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1547-0838*

**Abstract**
*Death is an ornate, ostentatious affair for the Victorians. From the macabre accoutrements associated with mourning practices to the observation of elaborate funeral processions and embellishments within cemeteries, one can discern the profound Victorian obsession with death. This fanatical preoccupation aligns with the notion of 'fetishism,' serving as a manifestation of the era's deep-seated fascination with mortality. Furthermore, the presence of the mourning rituals can be seen as a coping mechanism/response to the growing death rates. Therefore, this paper probes into the attitudes, customs and culture of the Victorian era to elaborate on the wider, national fetish for mourning, death and cemetery culture that followed Queen Victoria's bereavement of Prince Albert's demise. The study elaborates on how the processes of memento mori and fetishist rituals provide social stability and acceptance for the Victorians in the face of radical changes. The paper though directed towards a conglomeration of the era in totality, studies in particular, Tracy Chevalier's Neo-Victorian novel Falling Angels. This study focuses on how the novel portrays the standardised mourning culture upheld by the upper-class Victorians and, in turn, offers insights into the gradual shift towards a new and burgeoning Edwardian age.*
**Keywords: Funerary Customs, Fetish, Death and Neo-Victorianism.**

## Introduction

Periodisation of history is a problematic concept, as it somewhat homogenises, clutters and conglomerates the course of events with an arbitrary start and end point. Though it seems superficial, it works as a useful, historical framework for chronological understanding and categorisation of past events. When discussing different epochs in English Literature, we employ descriptive markers that serve as distinguishing signposts for each era. These markers are defined by a range of factors, including the reigning monarchy, prevailing literary trends, societal activities, ways of life, transformative social changes, and the prevailing fashion sensibilities. By considering these multifaceted elements, we construct a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the distinct characteristics and ethos that define each historical period. In this context, what we commonly refer to as the Victorian period in the annals of Great Britain corresponds to the reign of Queen Victoria, which commenced in 1837 with her ascension and came to a conclusion in 1901 upon her passing.

The Victorian era is characterised by a remarkable convergence of factors that encompass not only the monarch's rule but also the prevailing literary, cultural, and societal landscape of the time. The era in question is marked by a multitude of intricate strata and a wide array of distinguishing attributes, akin to the multifarious spectrum of a rainbow. Its complexity defies rigid confinement within a precise temporal framework, making it a subject of considerable richness that transcends strict boundaries of definition. As Morse Peckham correctly says, "Even Queen Victoria herself can no longer be seen as a perfect exemplar of what we usually mean by Victorian" (19). The Victorian age is amorphous, porous and fluid in nature, with emerging studies and research deepening our understanding of Victorianism and its counter-culture.

More than a century has rolled by since Sigmund Freud, the eminent Austrian neurologist, scandalised the ever-orthodox Victorian societal ideals with his provoking theories on personality, sexuality and repressed subconscious. A direct attack on Faux-Victorianism. Even so, it is quite ironic that, it is in his words we acutely capture the root, the very essence of the Victorianism-which can be equated to an aspired state of super-ego (moral framework that governs the ego). Although everything seems prim and proper in the surface, there was always an impending doom and inherent fear that pervaded the Victorian mentality. The fear of sexual awakening, the fear of immodesty, the fear of irreligiousness and the fear of being caught/exposed, that later led to a revisionist reading of the whole system mostly through psycho-analytical studies.

Theoretical frameworks rooted in the exploration of repressed natural instincts uncovered the concealed layers and uncharted domains within the Victorian era. The opulence and refined preferences of high society obscured a stark contrast with the actual reality. Consequently, research into the Victorian counter-culture emerged as a prominent endeavour aimed at presenting a multifaceted view of Victorianism. This perspective extends beyond the superficial imagery of ball gowns, polished manners, gentlemen, and ladies. It delves into the darker recesses of society, including hidden alleys, frivolous obsessions, sexual vulnerabilities, prevailing misogyny, and deeply ingrained social inequalities.

The mainstream projection of Victorian culture is nothing but the culture of the creamy layer, the aristocratic elites. For instance, the Victorian society preferred morality over instincts, etiquette over needs, elaborate funerals over grief and championed a stringent, moralistic view of the world with undercurrents of Christian piety. In fact, there is a remarkable difference between the projected Victorian reality and the lived reality. The prevailing codes of conduct described were most notably pronounced within the upper echelons of society, where an implicit link between one's financial and economic standing and their perceived morality was firmly established during that era. As the labour class steadily gained influence, socialist and communist movements began to flourish, posing a significant challenge to the entrenched aristocracy and their social status. Fearing this encroachment on their privileges, the bourgeoisie devised a narrative that drew connections between the lower-middle and working classes and what they labelled as immoral behaviour and depravity. This tactic was employed to discredit and undermine the rising influence of these emerging social movements.

The Victorian era established a set of standards for funerary customs and mourning rituals. These practices were a privilege accessible to the wealthy but often served as an aspirational goal for the less fortunate. The less privileged strata of the society harboured a strong desire to ensure a dignified burial in an ornate cemetery, as being laid to rest in a pauper's grave was widely considered the epitome of disgrace. In response to this societal backdrop, numerous novels published during the Victorian era emerged as scathing critiques of the hypocrisy and affectation prevalent among the elite classes. Works such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and R.L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* prominently feature aristocratic antagonists.

This serves to illuminate the underlying beastly and dark facets concealed within the seemingly genteel and elitist Victorian psyche. These narratives shed light on the dualities and moral complexities that coexisted within the society of that era.

**Neo-Victorianism and Counter Culture**

Lytton Strachey famously argued in the preface to Eminent Victorians that "The history of the Victorian Age will never be written; we know too much about it" (9) and yet even after a century has elapsed, the history of the Victorian period has never left the spotlight, it continues to be rewritten and reimagined. Such kinds of re-imagining, re-interpretation and re-vamping of the Victorian aesthetic in the contemporary times can be categorised under the umbrella-like term-Neo-Victorianism. For instance, the 2009 movie, *The Young Victoria* is a Neo-Victorian revisionist take on the life of the queen and the dynamics of the age. Likewise, numerous books about the Victorian period penned in the 21st century are commonly labelled as Neo-Victorian. Neo-Victorianism represents a clear-cut artistic movement, encapsulating an artistic resurgence that nostalgically revisits the culture, customs, and lifestyle of the Victorian era (1837-1901) while incorporating elements of the contemporary age in which it is created.

Chevalier's subtle blending of fiction and factual circumstances in her narrative technique, is typical of the Neo-Victorian novel, that has invited both academic praise and critical vitriol. There is a certain aura, a radiating halo surrounding the Victorian age (1837-1901) which propels us towards a mixed feeling, both of fascination and repulsion at the same time. The age has been continuously re-visited and rewritten because of its minuscule intricacies and sundry characteristics. At its inception, the Victorian era is all about high society, corsets, aristocrats, tea parties, wide brimmed hats, extravagant architecture, debutantes and courtships, often showcasing a luxurious, baroque lifestyle in the midst of industrialisation and global outreach in England.

Mainstream media promotes such a polished 'aristocratised' version of the so-called Victorian age. Contemporary re-imaginings like the series *Bridgerton,* novels like *Possession* by AS Byatt, Bodies of Light by Sarah Waters, *Crimson Petal and The White* by Michel Faber and Popular paintings on Victorianism like *A Private View at the Royal Academy* by the English artist William Powell Frith centre around the posh and creamy layer.



**Figure 1 A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1891**

The attached painting (Fig. 1) portrays a gathering of illustrious Victorians at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, perpetuating an idealised image of the Victorian era. It meticulously adheres to the

aristocratic lifestyle, depicting well-dressed individuals characterised by their impeccable manners and refined tastes. Similarly, numerous other artworks circulated throughout Europe also revolved around the customs of the upper classes. These artworks commonly featured themes such as elegant tea parties, luxurious picnics, upscale shopping excursions, and horseback riding. It is not surprising that the culture associated with Victorianism primarily emphasised the dominant bourgeois, the affluent, and the privileged strata of society. This segment invested in opulent living, and this opulence later became synonymous with Victorian culture. However, Victorian culture was not solely about regency and etiquette. It also delved into the grim realities of the time, encompassing the slums and dark alleys of London, the pursuit of artificial aspirations, the rising mortality rates, issues like child abuse, and the morbid fascination with death and mourning. In 1850s England, issues such as the widespread use of cocaine, drug addiction, alcoholism, regulated prostitution, and the proliferation of pornography were as conspicuous as contemporary times. Adultery, though a criminal offence, was as common as petty theft. The Victorian era's veneer of artificial morality concealed a world of promiscuity and duplicity. While taking a life was considered the gravest sin, poison became the favoured method of harm, and serial killings, exemplified by figures like Jack the Ripper, cast a chilling shadow over London. Victorians played a pivotal role in the emergence of detective fiction and forensic investigations, reflecting their growing fascination with criminal activities and morbidity, as evidenced by the popularity of crime novels. The works of Arthur Conan Doyle, featuring the iconic detective Sherlock Holmes, offer significant insights into the Victorian mindset.

Despite some works shedding light on the darker aspects of Victorian society, there remains a dearth of research on the pervasive facets of faux Victorianism and fetishes within the counter-culture. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the Victorian preoccupation with death and related customs as a fetishist phenomenon.

## Re-presenting Victorian Morality in *Falling Angels*

Tracy Chevalier, an esteemed American-British author and a distinguished member of the Royal Society of Literature (RSL), has gained widespread recognition for her notable literary contributions. Perhaps her most renowned work is the 1999 novel *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. Chevalier's literary oeuvre predominantly falls under the genre of historical fiction, where she skilfully intertwines historical elements with a hint of fantasy, offering readers a captivating and contemporary perspective on the past. In addition to her fiction, she has been a consistent and valued contributor of articles to esteemed publications such as the Financial Times (FT), The Guardian, and other prominent weekly newspapers and journals.

*Falling Angels* is a literary mosaic that intricately weaves together the fading tapestry of Victorian culture, customs, and lifestyles as they stand on the precipice of a transition into the Edwardian era. At the heart of this narrative are cemetery visits and ornate expressions of grief, bereavement, mourning, and the distinct Victorian perspective on death. The novel can be likened to a blank canvas onto which the author splashes a myriad of colours, capturing the diglossia of voices from various strata of society. It delves deep into the anxieties that characterised the Victorian age, often shrouded by the conventions of the time. This poignant story revolves around two neighbouring families, inherently disparate in their beliefs, attitudes, and ways of life. Tracy Chevalier's vivid descriptions of ceremonial walks through graveyards, the tragic death of Ivy May, and the families' responses to mourning customs are beautifully depicted, offering a glimpse into the profound emotional complexities of the era.

The text presents a series of first-person accounts from characters representing diverse segments of society, each characterised by their unique and contrasting personality traits. Through a method of comparison and contrast, the author delves into the evolving dynamics of the new millennium,

marked by significant transitions, cultural shifts, and rapid progress. For example, we encounter Lavinia Waterhouse, a melodramatic embodiment of Victorian sentimentality, alongside Maude Coleman, a straightforward, contemplative, and pragmatic individual. Then there is Kitty Coleman, symbolising the burgeoning feminist movement and suffragette ideals, while Gertrude Waterhouse clings to the traditions of the Victorian era. These characters embody values situated at opposite ends of the spectrum, yet a curious commonality binds them together: their peculiar relationship with graveyard visits, mourning rituals, and the contemplation of death. Their lives intersect through their ownership of neighbouring gravesites in London's Highgate Cemetery.

This shared connection underscores the enduring influence of these aspects on their lives, despite their stark differences. They are brought together by their ownership of adjacent gravesides in London's Highgate cemetery.

The novel commences on a sombre note, marking the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. This event serves as a symbolic representation of the death of prevailing moral values and the birth of new and revitalised perspectives for the approaching century. Tracy Chevalier introduces one of the central characters, Kitty Coleman, in a powerful, feminist, and distinctly 21st-century manner, embodying a broader metaphor for the tumultuous era. Kitty Coleman, initially the epitome of Victorian ideals, possesses beauty, grace, and financial means that align with the archetype of a perfect Victorian woman. She resides in an esteemed household, surrounded by a loving family and servants, living a life of dignity, partaking in tea parties, and even hosting them. However, as the narrative unfolds, her worldview undergoes a profound transformation. She embarks on a journey of intellectual and emotional growth, confronting the flaws within her societal constraints and reshaping herself. The graveyard serves as a significant performative space within the novel, witnessing the unfolding of pivotal events. It is within this space that Kitty Coleman experiences a profound sexual awakening, a transformation that shapes the course of her character's development.

In Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels*, the exploration of Victorian morality is a central theme that delves into the complex and often contradictory values of the era. The novel paints a vivid picture of the societal norms and moral codes that defined the lives of its characters, shedding light on both the surface propriety and the underlying hypocrisies of Victorian society. It showcases the stark differences between the upper and lower classes and how these divisions are reinforced by societal expectations. Victorian morality heavily prescribed gender roles and expectations. The characters in the novel grapple with the limitations imposed on women and the rebellion against these norms, as seen through characters like Kitty Coleman. Falling Angels introduces the suffragette movement, illustrating how women began to challenge the moral and social constraints imposed on them, seeking to redefine their roles in society.

The Victorians were known for their repressive attitudes toward sexuality. Falling Angels explores the suppression of desires and the consequences of breaking the sexual taboos of the time. The concept of the ideal Victorian family and the moral values it represents are challenged as the characters navigate issues of infidelity, child-rearing, and marriage. The novel highlights the dichotomy between public displays of morality and the private actions of individuals. Characters often lead double lives, reflecting the dissonance between their outward virtue and inner conflicts. The elaborate Victorian mourning rituals and the fetishisation of death are woven into the narrative, providing insights into how morality was intertwined with the rituals of grief and remembrance. In Falling Angels, Tracy Chevalier skilfully portrays the multifaceted nature of Victorian morality, revealing the tensions between societal norms and the complex inner lives of her characters. The novel serves as a lens through which readers can explore the intricate and evolving moral landscape of the Victorian era.

## Fetishism: Theoretical Variations and Conceptualisation

The etymological roots of the term 'Fetish' is derived from the Portuguese word fetico, which refers to a supposed inhabitation of power in a material-object, through witchcraft or magical arts. In the 18th century fin de siècle, fetishism as a descriptive marker has been extensively used and dissected in the fields of literary and cultural studies. Karl Marx famously argued in the Capital: A Critique of Political Economy on how "commodity fetishism" influenced the alienation of social labour from the material object and its "use value". Furthering the proposition, he delineates the conceptualisation of fetishism on the basis of the economic relation between commodity production and exchange value as being a social relation between inanimate things like merchandise and money, not considering workforce (164).

Marx, with an analogous exemplar derived from the anthropological field of study, further exemplified the usage of the term to a certain cultist-fetish relation, which he explains can be "a magical charm or ritualistic object like a totem" that is anthropomorphised, animated as a metaphorical reminder. In primitive cults and tribal societies, the fetishised material-object becomes a personification of a godhead, whereas in a capitalist society, the commodity or exchange money becomes "the direct incarnation of all human labor" (187). To inculcate a sense of value transaction, the social relation between the capitalist and the labourer gets assumed "as a fantastic form of relation between things" (166).

In accordance to William Pietz, Fetishism, in the field of psychology and the realm of sexuality, is derived from Sigmund Freud's reference, in his Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex, to an inanimate, non-genital object that causes sexual connection/ arousal, while working as a response or confrontation to the castration complex. Freud concocts a connection between sexuality and objectified fetish. It can be defined as a displacement of physical pleasures and desires onto 'fetishes', which can be an object, alternate body part or perks of imagination. Freud's theory on the fetish limits itself to the phallic theory as the signifying chain. Studies following the same, in particular, Slavoj Zizek's, revisionist take on Marxist and Freudian fetishism, exemplified the problem of commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism at the level of practice and not knowledge. He describes this attitudinal practice, involving the structuring of feigned "fetishistic illusion", as an "ideological fantasy" (Zizek 86). Anne McClintock, a Zimbabwean author, provides a conglomeration of the marxist, psycho-analytic and anthropological junction of the conceptualisation of fetishism, in her seminal text, Imperial Leather, as a displacement of social disavowal and contradictions onto "impassioned objects" (McClintock 184).

Death as a conceptual mode of fetishism can be described as a fixation, an un-evidenced fascination towards the ideology of death-which materialises through funerary customs, graveyards, corpses and so on.



**Figure 2 Queen Victoria's Funeral Procession, 1901**

## I. Death and Funerary Culture

Death is an intrinsic and inevitable facet of human existence, representing both a universal human experience and a complex societal paradox. Discussions and contemplations on death and the potential realms beyond have permeated human discourse since time immemorial. However, during the Victorian era, there was a distinctive and heightened focus on the transmutation of death into various objectified forms, often manifesting as a fetish. The Victorian era was marked by a fervent fascination with the rituals and customs associated with death and mourning, as well as the adornment of cemeteries. It gave rise to high fashion which was centred around mourning attire and elaborate grieving ceremonies.

Victorians were confronted with death at an astonishing rate, particularly due to the alarmingly high levels of infant mortality. Reports of criminal abuse, rape, and homicide were distressingly commonplace news during the 19th century. It was not until the advent of medical science and improvements in public health that life expectancy rates began to rise. This transformation signified a significant shift in the Victorians' relationship with mortality and the surrounding social attitudes. An undertaker's order book from 1824 states the following requisites for a funeral:

> A strong coffin with white padded satin lining with pillow, mattress, sheet, padded satin-lined lid, very strong outside oak case covered in superfine black cloth, best silvered nails which ornaments, a rich plume of black ostrich feathers, silk scarves, black hat-bands for attendants and gifts for mourners, best silk dressing black poles and saddle cloths for horses, pages with truncheons and staves, gloves, crepe, attendants, rooms on the road, coachman, feather-man, seating, costing a total of 800 pounds and eleven shillings. (29)

This grand spectacle was but a tiny fragment of the broader Victorian portrayal of death and funerary ceremonies, which were often characterised as materialistic and fetishised approaches to coping with loss and transformation.

## II. Mourning and Bereavement

Death was a spectacle and bereavement was an extortionate occasion for the Victorians. The rococo funeral processions in baronial style with thousands of people—clad in black yet fashionable mourning attires— crepe gowns, feathers, hatbands and dark gloves, the ornamented cemetery spaces, exquisite funeral buffets were introduced in the Victorian times and was part of the mainstream culture. In Falling Angels, mourning was not presented as a purely sentimental and individual manifestation of grief; instead, it was depicted as a solemn obligation, and sorrow was regarded as a duty that must be discharged. During the 19th century, it was considered both morally and socially inappropriate to forgo grieving and to deviate from the prescribed customs of mourning, which had reached their apex during this era.

Examining Queen Victoria's diary entries provides valuable insights into her expressions of sorrow as she records at the tender age of 16 "…received the news of the death of my poor old Nurse, Mrs Brock…She was not a pleasant person,". Her entry reveals a sense of superficiality and unaffected grief, as she notes, "it is impossible, and it would be very wrong, if I did not feel her death…". (Victoria 71). This approach to death and mourning was influenced by the norms shelearned from the Hanoverians, religious figures, and the various societal conventions surrounding mourning. These customs were seen as obligatory and a sign of affection, compelling Queen Victoria to exhibit an overwhelming response when her husband, Prince Albert, passed away.

**Figure 3 Queen Victoria in Mourning, 1867**

However, Queen Victoria's attitude towards death took a dramatic turn when her husband, Prince Albert, passed away. Her reaction was one of profound despair, deep depression, and mourning, which triggered a wave of national mourning and a significant reduction in her public appearances. She became widely recognised as the "Widow of Windsor" due to her perpetual state of mourning. She donned exclusively black attire for the entire 40 years following her husband's death as can be seen in figure 3. Mourning became the central focus of the monarchy, and the public was compelled to partake in her obsessive self-indulgence. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that Queen Victoria's extended period of mourning significantly influenced a form of fetishism among the general populace, as they emulated her conspicuous and prolonged expression of grief.

The character of Kitty Coleman can be interpreted as a embodiment of the radical thinkers who challenged the shallowness of extravagant customs. She discreetly celebrates the queen's passing, welcoming the new century with a glimmer of optimism, hoping that ''England would miraculously slough off her shabby black coat to reveal something glittering and new'' (7). Her yearning extends beyond mere alterations in mourning attire; she aspires for a transformation in the mindset and attitudes of the people, seeking a radical change that transcends the superficial.

## III. Cemetery Space and Memento Mori

In *Falling Angels*, the London Cemetery serves as a central and complex element in the narrative, playing a significant social role by connecting the characters and reflecting their social status and refined sensibilities. The graves of the Waterhouse and Coleman families are adorned with distinctive funerary objects that provide valuable insights into their respective social classes and tastes. The melodramatic and sculpted angel at the Waterhouse gravesite serves as a poignant metaphor for the enduring grip of Victorian ideals. In contrast, the minimalist urn at the Coleman gravesite symbolises the transitional shift to the Edwardian era, marking a departure from the elaborate Victorian mourning customs.

The neighbouring families exhibit a profound affection for the cemetery space, treating it almost as a place of habitation. They engage in extended, ceremonial strolls, leisurely activities, and even moments of intimacy amidst the graves. Maude Coleman and Lavinia Waterhouse, for instance, form a connection with the gravediggers' son, Simon Smith, and spend their leisure time within the cemetery's confines. Notably, a scene featuring Lavinia, a dramatic Victorian coquette, depicts her secret desire to recline in a freshly dug grave, a manifestation of her fascination with cemetery spaces. This particular scene underscores the Victorian preoccupation with such spaces, demonstrating the alluring and mysterious allure they held.

Moreover, the advent of photography introduced the practice of memento mori, where palpable reminders of existence were cherished. Locks of hair, brooches, rings, personal items of the deceased, and post-mortem photography served as poignant tokens of remembrance. Victorians, as a result, engaged in a fetishisation of materialistic reminders that emphasised the fleeting nature of

life through an array of customs and practices. These reminders became tangible links to the past and representations of the enduring human preoccupation with the inevitable passage of time and mortality and the desire to capture and preserve the ephemeral.

In conclusion, *Falling Angels* encapsulates the manifold dimensions of the Victorian society, the overt preoccupation with death and mourning, and the contrasting impulses of those who resisted these norms. It is a literary exploration of the intricate interplay between tradition and change, conformity and resistance, offering us a window into the rich tapestry of Victorian life and its enduring impact on the human psyche. Tracy Chevalier's novel not only serves as a vivid historical narrative but also as a reflection on the perennial themes of life, death, and the evolving human relationship with mortality.



**Figure 4 Post-Mortem Victorian Portrait, 1890's**

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