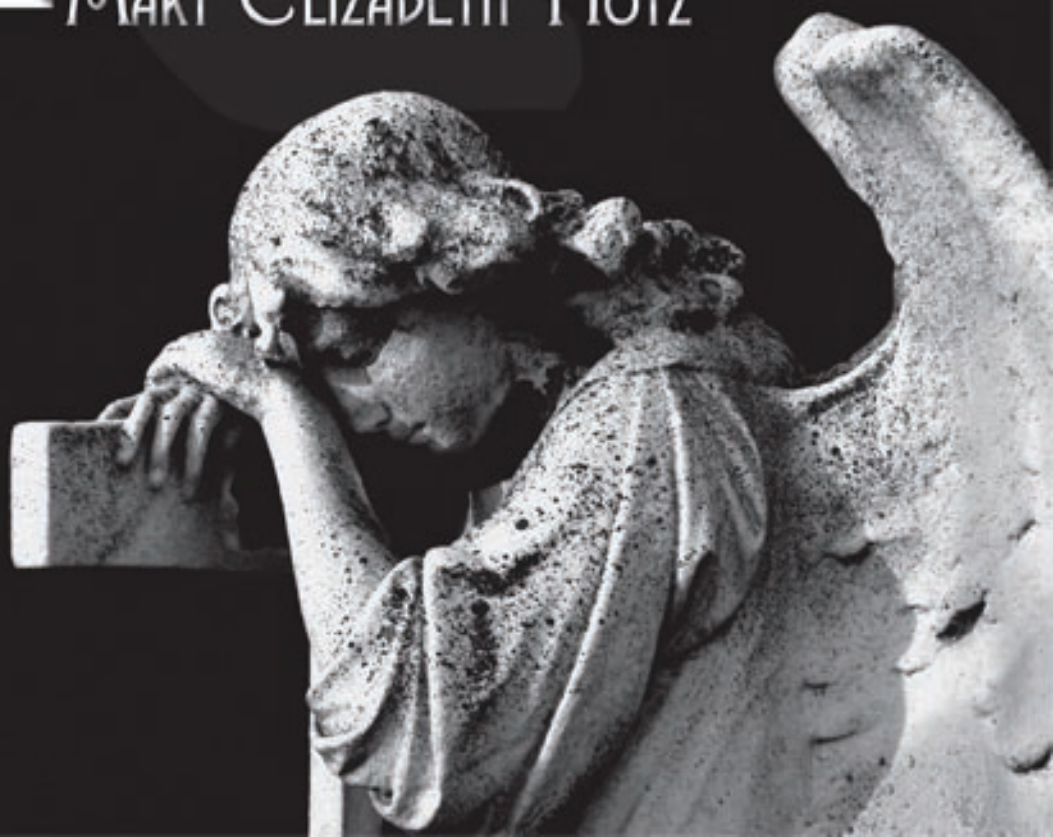


LITERARY REMAINS

*Representations of Death and
Burial in Victorian England*

MARY ELIZABETH HOTZ



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SUNY series, Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

Pamela K. Gilbert, editor

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For Helen V. McHugh

In Memoriam

Daniel McKim Hotz (1966–1989)

William Joseph Hotz (1917–1992)

Ellen McKim Wallace (1938–1995)

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Introduction

Disinterring Death

In establishing the society of the dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself.¹

While reading Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*—in the same week, no less—I wondered about the cultural work of death. What do representations of death reveal about a society and its values? The more I read, the more I discovered that death, especially, was at the heart of the Victorian novel. The body—buried under an ornate tombstone, dissected in a surgeon's theater, tossed into a pauper's grave, or purified by the cremationist's fire—provided novelists with the means by which to examine the nature of social relations in nineteenth-century England. Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Bram Stoker, in particular, focused on the Victorian contest for control of the corpse. They resisted the strictures of middle-class social reformers, praised the traditional practices of the working classes, and, in so doing, asserted their own vision for England as a nation.

In *Mary Barton* (originally published in 1848), Elizabeth Gaskell includes a lengthy description of a pauper funeral for Mr. Davenport, a destitute mill worker who had died from fever in Manchester. Gaskell finds in Mr. Davenport's funeral the essential communal and familial values cherished by Victorian working classes and attempts to portray the Davenports, poverty notwithstanding, as very much a part of community life. Gaskell describes the funeral this way:

It was a simple walking funeral, with nothing to grate on the feelings of any; far more in accordance with its purpose, to my mind, than the gorgeous hearses, and nodding plumes, which form the grotesque funeral pomp of respectable people. There was no "rattling the bones over the stones" of the pauper's funeral. Decently and patiently was he followed to the grave by one determined to endure her woe meekly for his sake. The only mark of pauperism attendant on the burial concerned the living and

joyous, far more than the dead, or the sorrowful. When they arrived in the churchyard, they halted before a raised and handsome tombstone; in reality a wooden mockery of stone respectabilities which adorned the burial-ground. It was easily raised in a very few minutes, and below was the grave in which pauper bodies were piled until within a foot or two of the surface; when the soil was shovelled over, and stamped down, and the wooden cover went to do temporary duty over another hole. But little they recked of this who now gave up their dead.²

In this passage, Gaskell reverses the terms of respectability for a proper funeral that the Victorian middle class had established by mid-century by hinting that truly “respectable” people bury their dead not with extravagant displays of funereal commodities increasingly characteristic of the times but with palpable manifestations of community. Implicit in the description is Gaskell’s complaint about contemporary discussions concerning death and burial—that they afford a very limited understanding of the working class, since they attend only to the material aspects of the pauper funeral. Gaskell shifts her readers’ attention away from the specifically material aspects of burial toward the feelings of those gathered. Shifting one’s perspective, Gaskell implies, has beneficial consequences: the walking funeral manifests the dignity and fidelity of the mourners; “the wooden mockery of stone respectabilities” becomes transfigured through the dignity of their mourning into a “handsome tombstone”; and the common, crowded, potentially putrefactionous grave is ignored. She denies any notion that the parish should change its procedures for the pauper funeral, implying instead that the responsibility belongs to the family—here the widow—to mourn meekly for her loss, and to the community, here represented by faithful neighbors, to comfort her.

I begin with Gaskell’s representation of a dignified pauper funeral, her literary remains, to suggest that Victorian novelists located corpses at the center of a surprisingly extensive range of contemporary concerns: money and law, medicine and urban architecture, social planning and folklore, religion and national identity. *Literary Remains* assumes, then, as Mary Poovey has theorized, that literary texts do not exist in isolation from the cultural context from which they emerge at the moment of production; they are texts among other texts that together create a discursive “network of connotations and associations” and participate in cultural production.³ Such an assumption serves to reposition literary texts in the historically specific debates in which they participated, and it exposes the dynamic role they play in the constitution and destabilization of social relations. Understood in this way, literature operates with poignant power not just to create culture but to contest it as well. My aim here is to map the many and varied representations of burial in Victorian culture to show how the arguments over burial reform, strikingly evident in the novels under consideration, reflected the larger sociopolitical and religious debates and processes taking place in the nineteenth century.

To achieve this comprehensive and complex understanding of social change, I shuttle among a variety of texts and practices in order to identify the debate over burial, cemetery, and cremation reform and its position in the political and social reform debate that emerged around the time of the New Poor Law of 1834, which radically redefined who exactly would receive assistance from the local parishes and how that aid would be administered. For example, I study parliamentary debates over the New Poor Law, burial, cemetery, and cremation reform legislation, sanitary reform texts, mortality statistics, funeral, burial, and cremation handbooks, and newspaper accounts to uncover certain strategies, rituals, narratives, and ideologies that govern Victorian culture. In addition to these primary sources, I turn to secondary social histories and anthropological studies to identify the broader contours of these debates. For example, histories of early Victorian labor relations elucidate the crucial impulse to protect laborers for work and the cultural anxieties about crowds, an important and a necessary reality in the working-class funeral. Feminist studies focused on the role of women in death practices help us read critically Gaskell's heroines and their contribution to an improved mid-Victorian society. Explorations of late nineteenth-century preoccupations with degeneration offer insightful commentary on the corpse and its decomposition. Finally, I offer close readings of Victorian novels that both challenge the moral authority of reformers who sought to reframe death and expose the dire consequences of neglecting the corpse's power to renew and change life for survivors and the communities in which they lived.

Literary critics, both the historicist and formalist kind, either frame the historical debate and then turn sharply into rather formalist readings of the literature or ignore the debate completely by operating within unquestioned categories of individualism and sentimentality. Certain literary studies of the representation of death fail to extrapolate and reconstruct cultural forms that inform representations of burial and the meanings they bore for mid-Victorian society.⁴ Garrett Stewart, from a deconstructivist perspective, argues that "the novelistic representation of death necessitates a specialized rhetoric of figural and grammatical devices to approximate the evacuation of its very subject."⁵ He is concerned with death only as it takes shape within the novel's content and form, and he seems unaware that material conditions could influence the linguistic shape of the "death sentence." Elisabeth Bronfen, on the other hand, begins her book, *Over Her Dead Body*, with a discussion of culture. That is, she acknowledges immediately that the nineteenth century seems obsessed with representations of dead women, but she views these representations as "symptoms" of a culture that manifests a profound ambivalence about death. For Bronfen, culture is a monolithic bourgeois entity, and she refuses to recognize pluralities within and resistance to the dominant culture. This bias precludes attention to class or nationality. For example, in her summary of Philippe Ariès's work, she accepts without question conclusions about tombs and monuments as if everyone in the nineteenth century, no matter what the country, had the desire and the wherewithal to provide

memorials for family or friends. Furthermore, her discussion of the symbolic implications of embalming, that it denies the power of mortality by creating a symbolic double, overlooks the fact that many people in Victorian Britain were denied or did not participate in this process of “doubling” through memory and memorials. In her discursive analysis, she fashions the bourgeois subject/corpse into a bourgeois “other.” But given life among the poor and working classes in Victorian England, and the discursive strategies used by reformers to moralize them, Bronfen’s blanket characterization of the middle-class corpse as other seems inattentive to the period’s historical particulars. A more recent collection of essays edited by Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin, *Death and Representation*, goes some way to rectify this isolated middle-class bias by including a section on the interplay of history, power, and ideology vis-à-vis representations of death. Nonetheless, Bronfen and Goodwin, in their introduction to the volume, call for more precise historical readings of specific representations of death that would admit to the circulation of power within culture, something I hope *Literary Remains* achieves.⁶

New historicist critic Catherine Gallagher also tends to read texts that treat death along a tightly argued paradoxical avenue in two important essays.⁷ For example, in her work on the connections between the body and the body politic, she focuses on a single contradiction: In nineteenth-century England, economic value was related to bodily well-being, but—ironically—articulated in terms of bodily illness, death, and apparent death. According to Gallagher, writers as distinct as Thomas Malthus and Charles Dickens occupy this singular paradoxical territory. Gallagher points to a critical contradiction that operates in Victorian thought, and her argument is appealing because she attempts to explain the mid-Victorian tendency to reorganize economic investigations around the body. However, her own tendency to read along a paradoxical line drawn, for the most part, by middle-class men, overlooks others who are positioned differently in society and who participate differently in changing forms of material culture.

Even Esther Schor’s *Bearing the Dead*, a historically sensitive study of the cultural meanings of mourning and grief in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, seems reticent to explore the materiality of the corpse, choosing instead to focus on elegaic texts and what they reveal about sentimentalism among the living. Her epilogue, which describes briefly key changes in attitudes toward mourning in Victorian England, gestures toward material conditions by mentioning Edwin Chadwick’s famed *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843), but her conclusions veer toward decidedly upper-class concerns about mourning rituals and the rise of individualism and away from the rich historical particulars of the era, suggesting that much more was at stake in the burial battles. Unable to unhinge her romantic perspective to assess the Victorian era on its own terms, she closes her study with a reading of Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* as an allegory for the fate of Victorian attitudes toward death because it “figures aestheticism as the moral

heir to the Enlightenment culture of mourning.”⁸ Her conclusions about Victorian death, then, are twice removed from the times, first because she fails to consider directly the contentious history of death, and second because she relegates the work of Victorian history to Romantic allegory.

To avoid swerving into more formalist discussions of novels that happen to have within them abundant representations of death or veering into lengthy historical analyses as ready contexts for those novels, I read with some care many and varied sets of texts and practices in order to locate systems of details that constitute the burial debate raging during the nineteenth century and to lay bare a major framework for how the Victorians understood themselves and the world in which they lived. Key dimensions of the traditional working-class funeral in the first decades of the nineteenth century, for example, reveal the importance of the local community to aid the future repose of the soul and to comfort the mourners, the domestic location of many of these practices, and the powerful need, among the lower ranks, to procure funds to enact a decent ritual.

Understandably, social historians of death who have so aptly delineated the social and political contours of the dead body have not included literary representations that often form a significant resistance to national remedies to solve the burial reform crisis. Despite the fact that death loomed large in Victorian culture, its sentimental deathbed scenes, expensive funerals, and macabre interments have led, in early, specifically Victorian, studies, to distorted analysis of it by social historians. James Stevens Curl’s *The Victorian Celebration of Death* and John Morley’s *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, while providing scholars with excellent working bibliographies, outline with broad brushstrokes the environments and contexts for death but provide little by way of critique or analyses of what these environments and practices suggest about Victorian culture. For example, Morley’s assessment of the role of women in early to mid-nineteenth-century British deathways seems misguided. He judges those women who prepare the dead for burial as “incompetent, drunken, snuff-taking hired nurses,” even though they were well respected in the communities they served.⁹ Morley’s perspective reflects, actually, a later view among the wealthy, who by that time were quick to banish death from their homes and to eschew those who were directly associated with it. Morley’s unqualified assessment of women as watchers and wakers of death effectively reinforces this later upper-class distaste for it.

Later studies have rectified this unreflective critical stance. Superb scholarly work on death in the early modern period by David Cressy, Clare Gittings, and Ralph Houlbrooke painstakingly presents evidence to suggest that the seeds of the Victorian burial crisis were planted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Post-reformation deathways reveal an ongoing “contested conversation” about religious and secular death rituals, from the elements of a good death and decent funeral to the proper role of the minister and intramural burial.¹⁰ Building upon and extending this critical work, historians of Victorian death have deepened and widened our understanding of the multiple sociopolitical and religious matrices

from which representations of death and burial emerge. Pat Jalland's poignant *Death in the Victorian Family*, a study of attitudes toward death in middle and upper-class Victorian families, Ruth Richardson's monumental study of the 1832 Anatomy Act, John Wolffe's quite precise *Great Deaths*, an exploration of the deaths of the famous, and Peter C. Jupp's thorough study of cremation, *From Dust to Ashes*, disinter crucial historical documents and practices to suggest that these very processes and discourses informed national life and identity.¹¹

Until rather recently death studies have failed to account for local resistance to what is perceived as a stable, dominant, and shared understanding of death. Previously, death was seen by some anthropologists and sociologists as a publicly recognized problem demanding some sort of social, medical, political, or religious solution.¹² But, as anthropologist Lawrence Taylor argues, the event of death should not pose so much a problem for analysts but an opportunity to position death as part of a "larger and compelling order" invested with a kind of "ultimate reality derived from the deep emotional power and resonance of the experience of death."¹³ Thinking of death less as a problem and more as an opportunity to offer life meaning transforms death into what Zygmunt Bauman has called "the primary building material for social institutions and behavioral patterns crucial to the production of societies in their distinctive forms."¹⁴ As a result, cultures develop what Bauman calls "life strategies" to face mortality, strategies that take shape around the culture's capacity to face death more directly or to avoid it by either taming or domesticating it or by reorganizing energies around health, such as the mid-nineteenth-century preoccupation with diseases. These cultural processes serve as a major vehicle for social division and stratification, because survival is perceived as a successful bid for immortality.

The fundamental social relation of death, its ability to inscribe subjectivity onto the bodies of survivors, which novels so successfully portray, becomes a potential source for political power, for the body, as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff argue, can never be a struggle-free zone, as the Victorian Burial Acts suggest, especially when major social reform movements are under way.¹⁵ Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, in their seminal anthropological study of death, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, have shown that in certain societies political authorities and marginal social systems engage death's emotional power to their advantage by using it to shape their political identity.¹⁶ Death, then, its constitution, control, and association with the political, becomes a source of potential conflict and significant change within a culture. Robert Hertz's influential *Death and the Right Hand* broke much of the ground here as he argued for the unity of body and soul after death and recognized the powerful potential of the corpse to define social relations and to reshape the world of the living.

In contrast, historian Philippe Ariès attempts to account for death's relationship to political power by highlighting, for example, the dominant role the Catholic Church had in late medieval burial rituals.¹⁷ However, even though Ariès begins to articulate the increasing importance of political power to the rep-

resentation of death, he eventually loses sight of what was happening outside the lives of individuals and their bourgeois domestic circle and neglects a world beyond the shades drawn to protect the dying and their families from public scrutiny. Moreover, his vast and in many ways admirable study of death, which begins with the Middle Ages and concludes with the dawn of the twentieth century, elides critical differences between one country and another, one era and another. A solitary analysis of the Brontës, for example, bears much of the weight for his interpretation of deathways in nineteenth-century England. David Cannadine strenuously disagrees with Ariès and Geoffrey Gorer's *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (1965), who both assert that Western society was obsessed with death in decidedly nostalgic ways. Rightly so, Cannadine argues for a less romanticized and more historically nuanced study of death in the nineteenth century that includes significant developments—both ceremonial and demographic—throughout the century.¹⁸

Katherine Verdery's *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* appreciates the rich and complex relationship between politics and corpses. In this recent and compelling study of bones and corpses that have become political symbols in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since 1989, Verdery suggests that bodies, because of their indisputable materiality, contribute to a symbolic efficacy crucial to political strategies occurring within cultural systems.¹⁹ A student of dead-body politics, then, attends to the connections between particular corpses and the wider national and international contexts of their manipulation. Informed by these articulations of the dynamics of dead-body politics, I hope to show how the political work of Victorian dead bodies infers ideas about economy and morality, domesticity and religion, and history and the future life of England.

My argument is that through the literary representation of a significant human event such as death, authors resist social reformers' interference into death practices, or deathways. With national interests at heart, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Bram Stoker, by their tenacious attention to corporeality, reject the centralizing process by which the body is isolated from its social and political contexts. Rather, by positioning the corpse as a locus for collective action, the novels these authors wrote, and the reason they are included here, assert the primacy of local communities and affirm the inseparability of corporeal and social being in the world. The novelists assume, then, that because of the Victorian contest for control of the corpse, the ministrations involving the close proximity of the dead to the living in the preparation of the corpse for burial and the interment itself served, in part, to mark and determine the nature of social relations in nineteenth-century literature and society.²⁰

Victorians, especially those in cities encountering massive urban growth, faced a life in which widespread disease and death struck quickly and without warning. Social reformers of the period, writing under the assumption that miasma spread disease, often concentrated on the grisly conditions of churchyards, where effluvia from decomposing bodies supposedly proved fatal to neighbors. Social reformers'

discussions about dangerous burial practices and the need to reform them focused attention on the problem of the working-class corpse more sharply than it had been focused before. At stake in the representation of the corpse and attention to its corporeality were certain ideologies and cultural constructs vigorously contested throughout the nineteenth century. A newly enfranchised middle class, for example, increasingly defined its interests in national and economic terms and claimed the power to identify and classify the working classes according to those interests. Discussing whether to use local medical officers to evacuate the working-class home of a corpse became a polemic for national systems of inspection and regulation, justified to meet society's need to protect working-class survivors for the labor market. Arguments over neighborhood churchyards quickly turned into a battle between local vestries and centralized commissions who wanted, by national legislation, control over cemeteries and funeral services by government contract, at the expense of communal rituals perceived as meaningful by the working class, like the Davenport interment. This series of burial laws, collectively known as the Burial Acts, which will organize the chapters that follow, punctuates nineteenth-century English life and society and reflects not only the apparent Victorian preoccupation with death but reveals how England began to shape its national identity.

By the 1870s and 1880s, because of the success of the Burial Acts from 1852 to 1857 and the alleviation of physical problems with the churchyards, the battle over the body and its burial was concerned less with sanitation and supervision than with religion, especially in rural England, where public cemeteries were relatively unknown. By law, anyone who died in the village had a right to be buried in the parish churchyard, whether Anglican or Nonconformist. However, only the Church of England clergy could preside and accept burial fees, even though they may not have officiated at the service. Claiming a serious infringement upon their religious liberty, many Nonconformists rejected the Anglican burial service, and Nonconformist or Dissenting ministers did not accept lightly their exclusion from the funerals of their parishioners. Throughout rural England, then, death and burial were fraught with this fiercely religious debate about who could be buried where and by whom. This debate finally expired with the 1880 Burial Act and significant concessions offered to Dissenters by the Church of England.

In the late 1890s, the burial reform debate had turned its attention to cremation and, ironically, circled back to issues of sanitation and economy that characterized the debate in the 1830s and 1840s. Arguing that earthen burial threatened, as it were, to contaminate England from the inside out, cremationists urged the banishment of decay through incineration and offered a fresh opportunity for people to be "progressive," to think less about history and memorialization in cemeteries and churchyards and more about the technological hallmarks of an advanced civilization taking shape in the present and future. Throughout the nineteenth century, reformers called for practices that in effect redefined domestic space to exclude the dead by articulating that space's relation to the health of the nation.²¹ By illuminating the material and discursive conditions of the

burial reform debate, I draw attention to specific strategies reformers deployed to conceptualize the problem they perceived. The novelists, in their literary counter-moves, represent death as an opportunity to resist those seeking to claim national power, by favorably representing in their novels “local” communities and individuals appropriating burial practices to new circumstances and new purposes.

By tracing the representations of burial in Edwin Chadwick’s *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interments in Towns* (1843) and John Claudius Loudon’s *On the Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries; and on the Improvement of Churchyards* (1843), I contend that both authors seek to redefine the features of working-class burial in order to solidify England’s middle-class and national identity. Chadwick’s report primarily posits the dead body as a site of problematic social practices and the pivot for all manner of legal, social, political, and economic inquiry. The effect of such positioning is to demean traditional ways of disposing of the dead as practiced by the poor and laboring classes and to idealize middle-class procedures that seek to sanitize death, removing it from any opportunity for exchange with the living through exhaustive administrative machinery. Loudon, a renowned landscape architect and cemetery designer, enunciates the twin effects of successful cemetery design in mid-Victorian England: the isolation and containment of death and the reformation of the lower classes to serve the interests of the wealthy.

In contrast, Elizabeth Gaskell’s two industrial novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854–1855), challenge contemporary representations of traditional burial practices as problematic by portraying the issues of labor relations, death, and domesticity as an opportunity to individuate women, who would, in turn, transform mid-Victorian society. Outlining the essentially optimistic view of Unitarianism, which Gaskell espoused, I demonstrate that Gaskell’s belief in the Christian impulse to ameliorate social evil not only underwrites her two novels but differs significantly from Chadwick’s idea that only national mechanisms can solve the problem. Instead, by reinstituting the value of death’s proximity to life, which burial reform discourse categorically denies, Gaskell acclaims the positive effects of working-class contact with death because these situations are models for collective and communal activities and, therefore, are possible sites for creating community across class lines. From these representations of death, Gaskell concludes that the middle class must incorporate into its considerations of political economy the central strengths of working-class domesticity: a recognition of kinship networks extending beyond immediate families where women are crucial to meaningful social reform.

Having delineated Chadwick’s vision of the corpse as waste matter and Gaskell’s conception that the corpse provides a positive opportunity to create community and individuate women, I turn next to several Dickens novels. In brief discussions of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and a longer analysis of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865), I consider the material conditions of death that Dickens shapes to suggest a conservative reformation of

Victorian society. Unlike earlier social reformers, who viewed death as waste and therefore a problem to be disposed of by administrative order, Dickens perceives death as an opportunity to rehabilitate a society addicted to money. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* and the death of Little Nell, for example, Dickens highlights the spiritual aspects of her death and emphasizes the potential of her funeral to gather a community more interested in virtue than filthy lucre. In fact, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens, through his representation of Jerry Cruncher, denounces the culture's association of the corpse with market capitalism. Finally, in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens challenges a new development in burial reform discourse, the preoccupation with monetary compensation for burial, and intervenes in the movement to position the corpse as a locus of monetary value. Through an analysis of new developments in the burial reform debate in the 1850s and 1860s, which emphasized not the sanitary and public health problems that had so dominated earlier burial reform discourse but economic compensation for clergymen and property owners whose churchyards were forced to close, I identify important issues that Dickens utilizes in *Our Mutual Friend*. He rejects the propensity to individualism inherent in the clergymen's complaint about compensation and argues that dead bodies mean something more than income to people, families, and communities. Understanding the power of the corpse to mediate social change, Dickens redefines forms of compensation inherent in the self-help philosophy and the gentlemanly ideal as they circulate over corpses and their burials. In particular, I argue that Dickens rejects the self-made man and recuperates the gentlemanly ideal cleansed of its associations with class and social ambition.

Dickens's distaste for the ready association of death with money is leavened, in part, by Thomas Hardy's affection for rural England and the silenced voices of those resting in its churchyards. I first focus on the burial reform debate of the 1870s and 1880s, which centered on religious battles between Anglicans and Nonconformists over the sacred space of the grave. The issues of nationhood, religious tolerance, and community that the debate discloses also mark Hardy's major novels. From *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) to *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Hardy believes that rural burials and churchyards humanize the ground of history and memorialize for future generations individuals and communities whose social relationships are characterized by virtue and loving kindness. Hardy takes his Wessex universe seriously by becoming a waker of death, because he believes that the apparently lost world of the dead teaches profound lessons to the living—the power of the corpse to transform those who touch it and the capacity of the churchyard to connect people across time and space. But even as Hardy's novels celebrate death as the arbiter of history, his later novels give way to an encroaching world distinguished by a growing complacency about the past and a definitive reticence to stand near death, as if to suggest that doing so would impede the progress of a developing nation.

The imminent approach of a technologically advanced society anticipated by Hardy arrives emphatically with the introduction of cremation and Bram