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# Victorian Suicide and its Portrayal in the Times

Bachelor's project in Lektorprogrammet i historie

Supervisor: Anne Engelst Nørgaard

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## Summary

This paper is about how suicide was reported on by the British newspaper *Times* in the years 1840-1860. I have chosen 22 newspaper articles from this period. These articles are always on successful suicides, without the deceased having committed any other crime than the suicide itself.

The paper is divided into six main sections: introduction; theory and method; historiography; historical background and context; analysis; and a conclusion. While the introduction and conclusion are relatively self-explanatory in terms of content and structure, the other sections contain further sub-divisions and as such I will explain their role in the text. In the "theory and method"-section I present a short description of discourse analysis and how this is related to the paper. Furthermore, I will define some central terms and briefly outline how the source material was chosen and other circumstances surrounding the *Times*. In the "Historiography"-section some of the main developments in regard to suicide as a historical object will be presented. Of particular focus is research originating after 1980, as this is when most of the groundbreaking works on suicide have been published. I will also concern myself mostly with suicide as it relates to the modern period and in western Europe – not only because it is relevant to the paper itself, but because this is where most of the historical research has been done. After this follows a "historical background and context"-section. Here I will primarily present two views on suicide: one in which it is seen as having gone through secularization- and medicalization process. The other in which suicide, as an object of literary interest, has been written about, commented on in various literary forms. Finally, in the analysis section I present five themes I identified while reading the newspaper articles. These are: suicide as a medical phenomenon; the way status influences how the deceased was presented; sensationalism in terms of either speculation on motive, or how it focus on gory details; and finally, moral judgements – a theme which is entirely not present in the newspaper articles examined in this paper.

As mentioned, I utilize discourse analysis to read the newspaper articles in question. I also base myself on a series of articles, research and theories on suicide as a foundation for this discourse analysis. Of central importance are a series of articles on the medicalization of suicide, but also MacDonald's hugely influential work on how a process of secularization of suicide occurred from 1660-1800. The paper will also base itself on a chapter from Barbara Gates' book *Victorian Suicide*, in which she outlines how suicide was sensationalized in both newspapers and novels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Oppsummering

Denne oppgaven handler om hvordan selvmord ble rapportert på av den Britiske avisen *Times* i årene 1840-1860. Jeg har valgt ut 22 nyhetsartikler fra perioden. Disse nyhetsartiklene handler alltid om vellykkede selvmord, uten at den avdøde har begått noen andre forbrytelser utover selvmordet i seg selv.

Teksten er delt inn i seks hovedseksjoner: innledning; teori og metode; historiografi; historisk bakgrunn og kontekst; analyse; og konklusjon. Mens innledningen og konklusjonen er relativt selvforklarende med tanke på innhold, er de andre videre strukturert og jeg vil derfor gi en kort forklaring. I «teori og metode»-delen så presenteres diskursanalyse og dette relateres til oppgaven. I tillegg forekommer det en begrepsavklaring og en rask gjennomgang av tilnærmingen til kildemateriale og omstendigheter rundt *Times*. I «historiografi»-delen fremstilles de viktigste utviklingene mtp. selvmord som historisk objekt. Her blir det tydeliggjort at det er først etter 1980 at interessen for selvmord har vokst, og at mye fokus har blitt lagt spesielt på moderne historie, og i vestlige land. Deretter forekommer en lengre «historisk bakgrunn og kontekst»-seksjon. Den historiske bakgrunnen som gis vil basere seg på hvordan selvmord muligens har gått gjennom en sekularisering- og medikaliseringssprosess; og hvordan selvmord som et fascinasjonsobjekt har blitt håndtert av aviser og andre literære former og verk. Analysen fremstilles i form av fem temaer jeg identifiserte i nyhetsartiklene. Disse er: selvmord som et medisinsk fenomen; status sin påvirkning på hvordan den avdøde fremstilles; sensasjonalisme i form av spekulasjon rundt motiv eller fokus på makabre detaljer; og til slutt moralske dømmelser – som viser seg å være et tema som er ikke-eksisterende i de nyhetsartiklene lest her.

Oppgaven vil hovedsakelig basere seg på diskursanalyse for tilnærmingen til artiklene. Her blir utdrag fra en bok og en fagartikkel basisen for forståelsen av diskursanalyse som resten av teksten kommer til å benytte seg av. Videre så presenteres en rekke teorier og modeller som vil fungere som et utgangspunkt for perspektiver og temaer som kan identifiseres i nyhetsartiklene. Her vil MacDonald's teori om en *sekulariseringsprosess* i synet på selvmord fra 1660-1800 ha en sentral plass, men til enda større grad «videreføringen» av denne, der en rekke historikere har påpekt en *medikalisering* av selvmord som skjedde fra 1800-tallet og utover. Oppgaven baserer også til stor grad på et kapittel fra Barbara Gates sitt verk *Victorian Suicide* fra 1988, der hun beskriver hvordan selvmord ble sensasjonalisert i forskjellige literære former – slik som nyhetsaviser og romaner.

## Introduction

Suicide is a comparatively recent addition to the field of history. It is only in the past four or so decades that it has received any considerable attention as an item of historical importance. Any historian who wishes to explore the history of suicide must face the methodological challenge inherent in the reliability of the available evidence and in the conclusions which can be reached from such an individualistic experience as suicide.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, in the last forty years, strides have been made in examining suicide across a variety of historical periods. Western Europe, and then primarily in the early modern and modern period, has received notable attention – exemplified by some of the groundbreaking works published in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

The Victorian period stands out as a time where a modern understanding of suicide had just been conceptualized. Changes in attitudes to suicide could be observed in judicial, medical, social, and cultural fields. This paper will look at how suicide was reported on by the Times in this particular period and in regard to some of these changes. Twenty-two newspaper articles taken from the Times from the period 1840 to 1860 will form the basis of the analysis. To contextualize these newspaper articles, a series of perspectives established in other historical works on suicide will be discussed and employed. I will then examine the discourse surrounding suicide in how it was reported on by the Times in the period 1840-1860 and present some of the central characteristics.

The paper is structured into four main parts. The first section outlines the theory and method which will be employed in the analysis. Among this is a short description of discourse analysis and how it relates to the thesis of this paper, an explanation of how the primary source material was chosen and how it was analyzed. Then follows a clarification of central terms related to the topic at hand. In the second section on historiography, I examine the central developments in the historiography of suicide. Particular focus is placed on research done in the last four decades as this is when some of the first major historical works were published. After this I continue with a description of the historical background and context of suicide. This section will introduce a selection of theoretical perspectives which will later be used in the analysis section. Among these perspectives are themes such as the secularization of suicide as hypothesized by MacDonald; and then the more general trend of the medicalization of suicide seen in the early modern period; suicide

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<sup>1</sup> Róisín Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 3 (2006): 903, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091587>.

<sup>2</sup> Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," 904.



as it was handled by Victorian literature in various forms. Finally, in the analysis section, I will systematically go through a selection of themes which defines the discourse on suicide in the newspaper articles. To present these themes, I will primarily utilize quotes found in the articles. However, I will also discuss the lack of or omissions of certain words and themes as well.

## Theory and Method

### Discourse analysis

The analysis of the newspaper articles in this paper will be conducted through the methodological approach of discourse analysis. There is no clear consensus as to what precisely a *discourse* constitutes or how an analysis of a discourse should be done.<sup>3</sup> However, it is generally agreed that the term focuses on how language is structured in a variety of patterns, and how these patterns relate to time, space and social relations.<sup>4</sup> These patterns are neither static nor are they random - they reflect the culture and society to which they correspond. Despite disclaiming the difficulty in pinning down the precise details of what discourse means, Jørgensen and Phillips propose a preliminary definition of what a discourse constitutes. This definition will be the basis for this paper's analysis, "*a discourse is a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)*".<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, a select few discourses surrounding suicide will be examined. This will be done by looking at newspaper articles from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the perspectives that will be focused on relate to gender, and how class and status might influence how a suicide was reported on. The process of medicalization and how this affected popular attitudes to suicide will also be looked at. Furthermore, moral attitudes to suicide as represented by laws and religion will be considered. Finally, the extent to which reporters sensationalize suicide will also be examined – both in terms of appealing to the emotional side of their readership, and in how they provide explicit gory details when describing the suicide and the deceased's body.

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<sup>3</sup> Marianne Winther Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse analysis as theory and method* (London: Sage, 2002), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Løkke and Olden-Sørensen Sebastian, "Diskurs for historikere," *Historisk tidsskrift (København)*. 101 : 2001 : 1: 186.

<sup>5</sup> Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse analysis as theory and method*, 2.

## Terminology

Seeing as the distinction between suicide and self-murder was important to the Victorians, both legally and morally, the task of distinguishing between the two fell on the coroner and his jurors. Coroners were usually minor gentlemen, elected or selected to the post in their respective county.<sup>6</sup> The coroner's primary task is to inquire and investigate into any death which appears to be of unnatural origins.<sup>7</sup> While the coroner was in charge of conducting the actual investigation, the verdict any given case received was decided on by a jury. These jurors were often selected from the deceased person's village and chosen due to being acquainted with the dead person's affairs.<sup>8</sup> For the most part jurors were of the middle class, and by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they had already been literate and well-versed in fashionable opinions for well over one-hundred years.<sup>9</sup> In the case of suicide, it was up to the jury to decide whether there was enough evidence to suggest that the deceased had committed self-murder.

In discussing the history of suicide, particularly as it relates the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is some central terminology that must be addressed. The corresponding and mutually exclusive phrases *felo de se* and *non compos mentis* are used in virtually all newspaper articles on suicide. *Felo de se* translates into "felon of himself", and was used to indicate that an individual had committed the felony of self-murder – distinguishing the person from those who had committed suicide while *non compos mentis*.<sup>10</sup> *Non compos mentis* means "of unsound mind" which often would be used interchangeably with phrases such as "temporary insanity", "temporary derangement" or other similar phrases when in the context of crime – suicide included. If the *non compos mentis* verdict was delivered by a coroner's jury, it absolved the person who committed suicide from guilt and punishment. In the eyes of the law it was not possible to commit self-murder while of an unsound mind, as the former required a calculated deliberation not present in the insane. As Edmund Wingate explained in 1660: "He is *felo de se* that doth destroy himself out of premeditated hatred against his own life, or out of a humour to destroy himself".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Michael MacDonald, "The Secularization of Suicide in England 1660-1800," *Past & Present*, no. 111 (1986): 40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650502>.

<sup>7</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, "Coroner," Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., Accessed May 12, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/coroner>

<sup>8</sup> MacDonald, "The Secularization of Suicide in England 1660-1800," 65.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

## Mental illness

The terminology surrounding those considered mentally ill has undergone tremendous changes over the last centuries and even decades. Words and phrases rise and fall out of fashion as they become archaic or considered insensitive. The source material which will be considered in this text originate from a wide variety of points in time, and as such there are multiple different words and phrases ultimately referring to the same thing: those suffering from a mental disorder.

While the analysis of the primary source material, that is the newspaper articles, will treat differences in the usage of such phrases as possibly being indicative of the discourse on suicide – any differences in the terminology arising from the secondary source material will be considered as a function of the changing sentiments of those times, and not as a change in the concept they are referring to. In the cases where the secondary source material refers to those who could be diagnosed with a mental disorder, the phrases “mental illness” and the “mentally ill” will be employed.

## Source Material

The source material used in this paper consists of twenty-two articles on successful suicides found in “The Times Digital Archive”. The articles were chosen by searching for the keyword “suicide” within the period of 1840 through 1860. The individual articles were chosen by sorting by “relevance” and then simply picking the first results which were available. Any article which dealt with “attempted suicide” or “murder suicide” were excluded as source material due to presenting possible confounding variables. If the article was a reprinting of a publication found in another newspaper, the article was excluded as well, seeing as it did not represent the Times as such. No attempt was made as to balance the primary source material in terms of variables such as gender, age, religious affiliation and so on. In order to avoid having to consider for variance across newspapers, only one newspaper was used in this text. The Times was chosen due to its prominent position in British society in the period in question and the ease of access to its historical publications.<sup>12</sup> This increased the likelihood that an adequate sample size of articles were published in the period of interest in this paper.

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<sup>12</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, “The Times,” Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Times>

The Times has a place in British history as one of its premiere newspapers. It is one of Britain's oldest newspapers and is published in London.<sup>13</sup> While it concerned itself mostly with short news notices and reporting on scandals in its initial phase, it quickly became a widely respected influence on British public opinion in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Barnes, who was the Times' first great liberal editor, ensured that it operated as an independent newspaper known for maintaining high standards of reporting and striving for accuracy.<sup>15</sup> This all ensured that it reached its peak toward the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before thereupon rapidly losing this position with the abolition of Stamp Duty in 1855.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that it cannot be assumed that the Times represent the average British citizens view on suicide at large. However, the short chronicle of the Times' history above goes to show that it had a massively influential position in British society in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Especially its influence on British public opinion makes it a useful preliminary tool to analyze the discourse on suicide in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Historiography

Although history's arrival to suicidology is of relative recency, it draws on traditions, models and developments from many of the other fields which have concerned themselves with the topic beyond the mentioned years.<sup>17</sup> The historiography of suicide is usually considered to have begun with Durkheim's hugely influential text *Le Suicide*, first published in 1897.<sup>18</sup> In this book, Durkheim explored the relationship between the individual and society, and how this relationship could explain the causes of suicide. To explore this relationship, he based himself on data on suicides from just a few decades back – beginning around the 1860s.<sup>19</sup> Using this data, Durkheim concludes that the driving forces behind suicides, was found in the rise of industrialization and how that caused the individual to be distanced from society.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Hobbs, "The Deleterious Dominance of The Times in Nineteenth-Century Scholarship," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18, no. 4 (2013/12/01 2013): 474, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2013.854519>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2013.854519>.

<sup>17</sup> Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," 904.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 906.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 906.

Durkheim and others saw this tendency to primarily inflict men, and following from this logic, men should thus be more likely to commit suicide than women.<sup>20</sup>

While Durkheim's legacy is often considered to be within the field of sociology, the impact of the conclusions he reached should not be underestimated within the field of the history of suicide either. Durkheim's model served as an explanation for why suicide was committed and was thus an internally coherent tool historians could test individual cases of suicides against.<sup>21</sup> After its publication, Durkheim's methodology and conclusions have been criticized on multiple fronts. Most notably in terms of his statistics he relied on, the statistical analysis which followed from this, and the conclusions he reached based on this analysis.<sup>22</sup> Well over half a century later after, in 1967, Jack Douglas released *The Social meanings of suicide*, in which he dismantled the statistics on which Durkheim's *Le suicide* was based on.<sup>23</sup> Douglas argued that the statistics on suicide Durkheim and others relied on in their analyses were essentially useless due to differences in reporting from the period. The only alternative was to look at suicides individually, on a case-by-case basis.<sup>24</sup> Douglas' concerns about historical inquiries into suicide became the foundation on which historians began taking suicide seriously in the 1980s.

In the 1980s, MacDonald and Murphy embraced this line of thinking as they explored changes in attitudes to suicide in early modern England. Their work, hugely influential in the history of suicide, would subsequently be challenged over the coming years. In 2000, Murray showed that attempts to commit suicide were not punished harshly in the late medieval period – which was one of the points made by MacDonald and Murphy.<sup>25</sup> He concluded that it wasn't the act of suicide that was held in contempt, rather it was the loss of life and the consequences that said loss had to the community and society. Murray thus questioned the idea of a "secularization" of suicide verdicts in the early modern period. Leniency in regard to suicide, argued Murray, was not as novel as MacDonald would have you believe.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought," 461.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Zell, "Suicide in Pre-Industrial England," *Social History* 11, no. 3 (1986): 304, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4285541>.

<sup>22</sup> William SF Pickering and Geoffrey Walford, *Durkheim's Suicide: a century of research and debate*, vol. 28 (Psychology Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," 906.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 906.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 907.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 907.

Recent publications show little support for MacDonald and Murphy's "secularization" argument as it is presented in their earliest work. Instead it has been posited that a process of "hybridization" took place.<sup>27</sup> While there were certainly changes in how suicide was perceived by the general public, the notion that religion played such an insignificant part in shaping those attitudes, has been rejected by historians examining attitudes to suicide in the proceeding decades. Research does show support for the growth of leniency in how verdicts were handed out – but the notion that this leniency grew primarily out of a process of secularization has for the most part been rejected.

The last twenty years of historical research into suicide has been marked by a willingness to explore an ever-developing breadth of perspectives. Baumann showed that in Germany there was an increasing politicization of suicide in the mentioned period. Conservatives used increases in suicide as sign of irreligion, while liberals used it as sign of working-class struggles. Both sides ultimately seeing it as a plight providing support for their worldview.<sup>28</sup> Other historians have attempted to yet again explore statistics originating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and what they can reveal about suicide. Most notably Victor Bailey with his work "This rash act: Suicide across the lifecycle in the Victorian city". While his book does seem to lend its support to some of the central postulations of Durkheim, the interpretation of the statistics he used, like was the case with Durkheim, has been criticized for considering too few variables among other things.<sup>29</sup> Other historians have focused in on local settings when exploring attitudes and patterns in suicide. Despite operating with small sample sizes, some have shown that Durkheim's link between social isolation and suicide is still valid.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, as of historical research into suicide from the early modern period, is still defined by its focus on researching attitudes to suicide and the intellectual discourse on the topic.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 908.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 915.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 914.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 918.

## Historical Background and Context

### The Victorian Period

The Victorian era is considered as lasting from 1820 to 1914, which roughly corresponds to Queen Victoria's reign.<sup>31</sup> It is defined by its class-based society, a growing economy and state, and significant developments in suffrage.<sup>32</sup> The industrial revolution had transformed British society, with unprecedented levels of migration to cities, and the consequences this had on the social order of society being among its main impact.<sup>33</sup> Victorian society was highly hierarchical with gender and class being some of the main ordering principles. The doctrine of separate spheres kept men and women's roles in society divided.<sup>34</sup> Women were supposed to concern themselves with private domestic duties – such as childrearing and housekeeping. Men, on the other hand, could engage with the public sphere and should strive to be the breadwinner in the family. While the proportions changed over the century, around 70-80 percent of the British population belonged to the working class in the Victorian period.<sup>35</sup> Most working class families could not realistically adhere to the doctrine of separate spheres, or to some of the other Victorian sensibilities, but the ideas still had a profound influence in shaping how all people, across gender and class, saw their position in society.<sup>36</sup>

### The Secularization of Suicide

In *The Secularization of Suicide in England 1660-1800*, MacDonald argues that the way suicide was viewed was completely transformed over a 150 year period. While the act of suicide and how society perceived it was primarily viewed in lieu of religious and magical ideas in 1660, by the 1800s those ideas were now based on medical and philosophical influences.<sup>37</sup> In his article, MacDonald chronologically addresses the central developments in English coroners' verdicts given in suicide cases. These developments are then assumed to

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<sup>31</sup> Susie Steinbach, "Victorian Era," Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., Accessed May 12, 2020.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Howard I. Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought," *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 3 (1993): 461, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3788623>.

<sup>34</sup> Susie Steinbach, "Victorian Era,".

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> MacDonald, "The Secularization of Suicide in England 1660-1800," 52.

reflect broader changes in attitudes on suicide in British society. He begins by focusing on how medieval attitudes to suicide were largely influenced by a combination of folklore and religion.<sup>38</sup> During this period, the clergy taught that suicide was literally diabolical.<sup>39</sup> Suicide was seen as being the cause of temptation by the devil. The souls of those who then succumbed to that temptation, or “self-murderers”, in turn became malevolent. The alternative burial rituals which were used well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century were seen as one way to protective a community from those malevolent, restless, wandering spirits of self-murderers.<sup>40</sup>

During the 1500s, and early 1600s the Tudor crown rigorously enforced a dichotomous view of suicide through coroners and their juries in order to amass as much of the property it was entitled to.<sup>41</sup> Those convicted as felons could have their property seized by the Crown, while those seen as *non compos mentis* could not. Out of the at least 267 suicides in the early 1600s, only one was returned *non compos mentis*.<sup>42</sup> However, during the latter part of the 1600s, and especially in the 1700s, the English judicial system underwent a transformation in which the proportion of *non compos mentis* verdicts to that of *felo de se* verdicts completely reversed. Here, MacDonald observes that it was not the judicial developments which led to these changes. He claims it was largely due to the coroner’s jury which in turn were influenced by the opinions and attitudes of the governing elite.<sup>43</sup>

By the early 1700s, almost 40% of suicide verdicts returned were *non compos mentis* – up from 7% in 1660.<sup>44</sup> Once the 1750s came around, the ruling elite generally saw suicide as an act caused by mental illness, and not as having diabolical origins. While the upper echelons of society became the vanguard of the changing attitudes to society, the views of the common people lagged behind.<sup>45</sup> Practices, such as burying self-murderers with excommunicates and unbaptized babies, continued well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly among country folk.<sup>46</sup> The middle class, where the coroner’s jurors were often pulled from, also became increasingly literate and well-versed in fashionable opinions by the 1750s. A

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 88.



natural consequence of this was that they came to adapt the medical interpretation of suicide which resonated with the educated higher echelons of society.<sup>47</sup>

By 1800, MacDonald points out how *felo de se* verdicts had virtually become non-existent.<sup>48</sup> The few which were returned, were usually given to criminals who otherwise would have escaped their punishment. Other marginal members of a given community, such as people in disgrace, servants, strangers and beggars were also more likely to be given *felo de se* verdicts.<sup>49</sup> However, more generally, sympathy and compassion became more prominent forces guiding the verdicts given throughout the 1700s. The view that "the Children should [not] be starv'd because the Father destroy'd himself." became widespread throughout the 1700s – sympathy and compassion came to gradually replace the magical and religious beliefs of centuries past.<sup>50</sup>

## The Medicalization of Suicide

By the 1800s, popular attitudes relating to suicide were already characterized by sympathy, compassion and leniency. Even a century earlier, the majority of suicide cases returned with *non compos mentis* verdicts. Indeed, "temporary derangement" "temporary insanity", "being at the time of unsound mind", were some of the most common phrases used in the verdicts given by jurors. While MacDonald argues for a process of secularization as evidenced primarily by that of the coroner and his jurors, a more general trend of the "medicalization" of suicide has been a theory used by historians to outline the developments in how suicide at large was treated by society from the seventeenth century and onward.<sup>51</sup>

Most Victorians had stock assumptions about suicide, regardless of class or education. It was the unhappy, the lonely, the lovelorn, the mad, and the ruined who took their own lives. Most of the coroners' inquests looked for such motives.<sup>52</sup> Supplementing this was the view that suicide originated from some pathology coming from the interior of the person, the brain.<sup>53</sup> While mostly serving as a striking anecdote, the curious case of Benjamin

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>51</sup> Georgina Laragy, "'A Peculiar Species of Felony': Suicide, Medicine, and the Law in Victorian Britain and Ireland," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 3 (2013): 732, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23354985>.

<sup>52</sup> Barbara T. Gates, "Cases and Classes: Sensational Suicides and Their Interpreters," in *Victorian Suicide, Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 40.

<sup>53</sup> Ian Marsh, "The Uses of History in the Unmaking of Modern Suicide," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 3 (2013): 71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23354986>.

Haydon, who in 1846 shot himself in the head and then cut his own throat because he believed he suffered from a “diseased brain” – could be seen as a representation of broader developments in how suicide was perceived in Victorian society.<sup>54</sup>

Due to people increasingly believing that suicide could be prevented – and suicidal people sometimes even treated, the Victorian era saw large-scale construction of asylums.<sup>55</sup> A growing number of individuals also became involved and then specialized in the emerging professional field which had to do with the insane – and it was in this context that the British psychiatric profession was established.<sup>56</sup> Psychiatry began developing not only as a professional field due to academic interest, but also due to the perceived increased need to prevent suicide in society. Alongside this development, was the implementation of new laws and regulations as a way of regulating matters relating to the this new facet of society. The 1845 Lunatics Act required that all patients who were going to be confined in asylums had to be certified as insane.<sup>57</sup> In the cases where a patient was suspected of being melancholic or suicidal, a wide range of actions could result in a “yes” being ticked off and the patient then certified. For instance, “refusal of food” or merely talking about death were seen as indicators that the patient might be suicidal.<sup>58</sup> The Act also stipulated that asylums had to be run by a medical practitioner. All of this goes to show that although psychiatry had established itself as independent academic and clinical field by the middle of the century, it was still very much in its infancy. Attempts to explain the origins of suicide, catalogue its symptoms, prevent it from happening, change the laws relating to it were all ongoing and changing processes in the period in question. However, despite its relatively recent origin, the psychiatric field already carried with it terminology and dominant theories which influenced the views of people beyond the limited sphere of physicians and medical practitioners.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to an end, this ongoing process of medicalization culminated in a significant number of medical and legal professionals questioning the veracity of the coroner’s verdicts in suicide cases.<sup>59</sup> They pointed out how 90 percent of those who

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<sup>54</sup> Marsh, "The Uses of History in the Unmaking of Modern Suicide," 72.

<sup>55</sup> Peter McCandless, "" Build! Build!" The Controversy over the Care of the Chronically Insane in England, 1855-1870," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 53, no. 4 (1979): 553-74.

<sup>56</sup> Anne Shepherd and David Wright, "Madness, suicide and the Victorian asylum: attempted self-murder in the age of non-restraint," *Medical History* 46, no. 2 (2002): 188.

<sup>57</sup> Shepherd and Wright, "Madness, suicide and the Victorian asylum: attempted self-murder in the age of non-restraint," 183.

<sup>58</sup> Jansson and Åsa, "From Statistics to Diagnostics: Medical Certificates, Melancholia, and "Suicidal Propensities" in Victorian Psychiatry," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 3 (2013): 719, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23354984>.

<sup>59</sup> Laragy, ""A Peculiar Species of Felony": Suicide, Medicine, and the Law in Victorian Britain and Ireland," 737.

committed suicide were not in an asylum at the time of their death.<sup>60</sup> This criticism was not against the effectiveness of the asylums. What they took particular issue with was that suicides were automatically judged to be insane under the current system with a coroner's jury.<sup>61</sup> There was thus a high likelihood that the coroner's jury was not actually giving a measured verdict on the cause of the death in the case of suicides, but instead blindly handed out *non compos mentis* verdicts because suicide had become intrinsically linked with the notion of "temporary insanity". Even when there was no evidence as to the mental condition of the deceased, most cases of suicide were assumed to be caused by insanity until proven otherwise.<sup>62</sup> Although the debate highlighted above featured most prominently a few decades after the period which will be looked at in this paper, it should be seen as a climax of tendencies which were very much present earlier in the century as well.

The relevance of the jury's verdict on suicide was also slowly reduced as legislative changes occurred in the period between 1823 and 1882. First, in 1823 it was made illegal to put a stake through the heart of the deceased and then bury those considered *felo de se* at a crossroads.<sup>63</sup> The Forfeiture Act of 1872 then meant that the Crown renounced all of the income derived from the estates of felons including suicides, and this removed the entire aspect of financial gain as a motivator for returning a *felo de se* verdict.<sup>64</sup> Although the Crown had never sought to enforce their right to this income in the preceding decades, rejecting it outright was still an important milestone in reducing external and confounding influences on suicide verdicts. Another two changes of legislation in 1880 and 1882 ensured that those found *felo de se* could now be buried during the day in consecrated ground without the police having to attend the funeral.<sup>65</sup> These were important strides in destigmatizing suicide, but it was still only in 1961 that suicide was completely decriminalized as the remainder of penalties were removed.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Laragy, "'A Peculiar Species of Felony': Suicide, Medicine, and the Law in Victorian Britain and Ireland," 737.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 738.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 738.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 734.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 734.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 734.

<sup>66</sup> Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," 513.

## Literature and Newspapers

Suicide as a topic explored in a variety of literary texts, newspaper articles included, has undergone significant changes throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a point at which suicide notes printed in newspapers could be considered an “established literary subgenre”.<sup>67</sup> Those committing suicide were well-aware of the possibility that their suicide notes might be published in a newspaper, something which in turn influenced the way in which said suicide note was composed. Although this trend eventually faded away, it illustrates how at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the link between literature on suicide and how that could in turn influence further suicides was a heated topic explored by contemporary commentators.

Perhaps nowhere is this controversy epitomized than in Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* – a novel read widely in western Europe after its release.<sup>68</sup> There was worry at the time that the protagonist in the story, who takes his own life, might inspire others to do the same. Whether there was actually widespread imitation of Werther’s suicide has never been conclusively demonstrated – but nonetheless the fact that the book itself was banned in certain places speaks about the feared influence literature could have on suicide.<sup>69</sup> In the cases where readers of Werther did end up committing suicide, Werther was only one of several factors leading to the decision. However, Werther, seen as an influence believed to coerce young men into taking their own lives, is thought to have possibly extended into the 1830s – illustrating the lasting impact of the novel.<sup>70</sup> Clearly, suicide was interwoven in the literature produced at the time. In the minds of the public, the two were engaged in a symbiotic relationship where literature produced suicide and then suicide again produced literature.

Another example of this symbiotic relationship between suicide and literature is evident in a series of suicides in the 1840s from The Monument in London. Margaret Moyes, an “attractive young woman”, committed suicide by throwing herself from London’s Monument

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<sup>67</sup> Eric Parisot, "Suicide Notes and Popular Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century British Press," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 3 (2014): 278, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24690288>.

<sup>68</sup> David P. Phillips, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 3 (1974): 340, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094294>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2094294>.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>70</sup> Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," 911.

in 1838.<sup>71</sup> The case reached notoriety beyond that of any other suicide as the public speculated on what could possibly have caused a young person to take their own life in such a manner. The next year, Richard Hawes, fifteen years of age, threw himself from the Monument in a fashion all too familiar to the Londoners. The suicide of Hawes had a transparent imitative nature as he had frequently talked about Moyes in the time preceding his death.<sup>72</sup> As was the case with Moyes, the newspapers focused on the details of the bloodiness and goriness of his death, and only then on possible reasons for why he choose to take his own life.<sup>73</sup> Then in 1842, another twenty-five year old woman committed suicide from the Monument despite the safeguards the city's officials had instituted to stop this from happening again.<sup>74</sup>

Newspapers such as the Times usually featured articles on suicide as one item amongst many others on their pages. In less respectable publications, such as broadsides, this was not always the case. Broadsides were a single sheet of paper which featured news and were often read by the lower classes.<sup>75</sup> In those broadsides, one might encounter "cocks". This archaic term, refers to fictitious confessions for a crime or suicide. In relation to suicides, "cocks" were as popular as accounts on the inquests itself.<sup>76</sup> Reading a broadside, one might also find moral judgements such as "*And her dreadful fate a warning be; to others while they live*".<sup>77</sup> In contrast to this, newspapers like the Times instead used Latin words and medical phrases to describe the given circumstances of a suicide. On reading on Margaret Moyes suicide, one would be met with clinical language, rather than a moral tone, as to appeal to the sensibilities of their audience. "*Upon examination of the body, it was found that the spine was fractured as also the back of the cranium, but the features are in no way disfigured, save by the appearance of coagulated blood forced from the nostrils, eyes, and mouth by the sudden concussion; the left arm is severed just above the elbow, and is only retained in its place by the integuments and the sleeve of the dress*".<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gates, "Cases and Classes: Sensational Suicides and Their Interpreters," 38.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>74</sup> "Another Suicide Of A Young Female By Throwing Herself From The Monument." Times, 20 Aug. 1842, p. 6. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS101085972/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=2f94b3db>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Gates, "Cases and Classes: Sensational Suicides and Their Interpreters," 49.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, " 48.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, " 39.

It was in the context outlined above that graphic accounts of “extraordinary suicides” were heavily criticized in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Already in 1828, George Burrows warned that “nothing is found so attractive as tales of wonder and horror, and every coroner’s inquest on an unhappy being who has destroyed himself is read with extraordinary avidity”.<sup>79</sup> Come 1843, in the wake of the series of suicides from London’s Monument - concerns relating to how newspapers might influence people to commit suicide had risen to a point where William Farr, the Registrar-General, demanded “some plan for discontinuing, by common consent, the detailed dramatic tales of murder, suicide, and bloodshed in the newspapers.”.<sup>80</sup>

## **Analysis**

In this section I will present the findings of my examination of the primary source material. Upon reading the newspaper articles in question, there were a few patterns in the discourse on suicide which made themselves clear. Some of those patterns correspond to the perspectives found in the secondary source material described earlier in the paper. For instance, there is an abundance of psychiatric terminology throughout most of the articles. A vast majority of the articles are also characterized by the sensationalism described in the “Literature and Newspapers” sub-chapter. There are also some themes which are not present in the newspaper articles, such as religious views or references to the law.

The following section is organized into four main themes which I think encapsulate the primary characteristics identified in the discourses on suicide. Some of these themes have further subdivisions. The first theme is that of medicalization. In this section I examine how medical and psychiatric terminology is used in the newspaper articles. I also consider how the article attempts to use psychiatric concepts to explain why the suicide was committed. The next theme which is explored is slightly vaguer – but corresponds roughly to the notion of status. This part looks at a few traditional markers of status in Victorian society - such as wealth, profession, gender, social circles, beauty and how they influence how the suicide was reported on. I then also attempt to find any recurring patterns which stretches across these markers. Following this is a section on sensationalism which is divided into “motive” and “gore”. The former is featured less across the articles. It deals with cases where the newspaper reporter focuses on questions relating to the motive of the suicide – particularly when the newspaper reporter highlights details which seem intrinsically linked to the matter

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 42.

of “why”. The latter then has to do with cases where the article devotes a significant amount of its space to descriptions on the gory details of the suicide. Finally, the last section is a combined look at the themes which are not overtly present in the any of the articles.

## Suicide as a Medical Phenomenon

As noted, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a medicalized and secularized view of suicide was becoming commonplace in Britain. With this view came corresponding terminology and a willingness to ascribe suicide and other mental illnesses as an issue belonging to the realm of psychiatry. Although there were concerns about the effect of publicizing newspaper articles on suicide – especially relating to the method used by the deceased, these articles continued to feature regularly in newspapers throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1859, the Times reported on a suicide committed by Charlotte Oldfield, who ran out into the wilderness in the middle of the night in January and consequently died.<sup>81</sup> She was attended by a nurse as she had diphtheria and suffered from a “... *severe affection of the head, and on Friday produced symptoms of delirium.*” The article then explains in great detail the scene in which the deceased storms out of the house wearing nothing but her nightdress, and notes how the coroner believes “... *there could be no doubt as to the cause of death, or of her having, while suffering from severe delirium, destroyed herself.*” Finally, the article quotes the coroner as saying that had the symptoms of delirium been taken seriously and increased medical personnel been sent to the family’s house, “*the unfortunate event would not have taken place.*” The suicide was seen as a direct result of Charlotte’s symptoms of delirium and the newspaper report highlights this fact by emphasizing certain quotes from the coroner.

In 1844, a report on an “Extraordinary Suicide” described the circumstances surrounding the suicide of Mr. Dickenson – a middle-aged man whose wife murdered their two children and then attempted to kill herself.<sup>82</sup> The report notes how Dickenson had produced three letters before he committed suicide, and that “*All the letters go to prove that his mind was*

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<sup>81</sup> "MELACHOLY SUICIDE." *Times*, 22 Jan. 1859, p. 6. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS101749814/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=eb568ce0>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

<sup>82</sup> "EXTRAORDINARY SUICIDE." *Times*, 12 Apr. 1844, p. 5. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS84571788/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=fb099a40>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

*shaken, in consequence of the dreadful deed perpetrated by his wife, and there is good reason to suppose that he has been labouring under aberration of mind ever since.*" Like was the case with the suicide of Charlotte, this newspaper article draws a parallel between how Dickenson's abnormal state of mind might have led to his decision to commit suicide. However, while Charlotte's suicide is unambiguously presented as the result of insanity – Dickenson's suicide is instead portrayed as a natural outcome produced by the horrible circumstances surrounding his children's deaths.

John Gordon Bailey, a medical practitioner, committed suicide in 1853 by swallowing a large quantity of poison.<sup>83</sup> He was 30 years of age at the time of his death and was due to being married the next year. The evidence in the case proved "... *that for some time past he had been in a state of nervous irritation ...*", but that he also "... *exhibited no signs of absolute insanity.*" Despite this, as was the case with the vast majority of suicide cases in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "*The jury returned a verdict of "Insanity."* Yet another case, this time on a fifteen-year-old girl, notes how "*She was not of a weak mind, nor had she ever threatened to commit suicide, but was of a remarkable lively disposition*".<sup>84</sup> It is in large part this type of witness testimony which leads the jury to the verdict of "Accidental Drowning", as they felt they had too little evidence to conclude she committed suicide. In both of the aforementioned cases, the articles portray the suicides as being clearly linked to the state of the deceased's mind. However, they fail to go all the way and attribute it exclusively to insanity. While all of the articles in general make this connection between the deceased's state of mind and the decision to commit suicide, only a select few take it a step further and attribute it to insanity.

Of course, most of the articles on suicide do not directly address whether the deceased suffered from any potential mental illness or issues. As a general rule, the articles primarily rely on the coroner's inquest for information on the deceased. Those coroners again relied on witnesses to establish whether the deceased suffered from temporary insanity or not – and in those cases where no witnesses could be immediately summoned, or the coroner's inquest had not yet been conducted, most of the newspaper articles make no attempts in establishing a connection between underlying psychiatric issues and the act of suicide. That is not to say the newspapers did not draw a connection between the state of mind of the deceased and the act of suicide, only that they reserved the use of the emerging psychiatric

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<sup>83</sup> "Suicide Of A Medical Practitioner." *Times*, 10 June 1853, p. 4. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS67537098/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=4fd9da62>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>84</sup> "Mysterious Suicide Of A Girl." *Times*, 5 Nov. 1844, p. 6. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS101480293/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=36f8dd09>. Accessed 29 Apr



terminology primarily to those cases where an inquest had been conducted. No matter, while the jury's verdict was the official explanation as to why the suicide was committed – most of the articles display a willingness to entertain alternative explanations that run contrary to those very verdicts. There seems to be some understanding in the way suicides are reported on that the verdicts are not usually causal explanations representing the deceased's state of mind at death, but that they seem to serve some purpose beyond this scope.

## Status

### Wealth, and Social and Professional Status

Newspaper articles on suicide from the 19<sup>th</sup> century were relatively intimate in nature. Not only did they state the name, age and residential address of the deceased, there was a tendency to feature certain aspects of the deceased's person such as that of high status. In terms of status, this could be done in a variety of ways. Reporters on suicide would often bluntly state whether the deceased was a man or woman of wealth. While other times they focused on the individual's profession or other roles they had in society. In certain cases, especially when the deceased was a younger individual, the newspaper articles conveyed the deceased's status by focusing on their social circles. Discussing the case of Theresa Swifthorne – aged 21, the article mentions that "*The evidence proved that the friends of the unfortunate woman were highly respectable, but that for some time past, in spite of their intreaties, she had led a most abandoned life, frequenting the company of private soldiers and drummer boys.*"<sup>85</sup> Then another article talks about the fate of Richards, a twenty-five-year-old man who committed suicide by slashing his throat and then throwing himself out of a window. "*Mr. Richards' friends are understood to be respectable, but it was stated they had deserted him ; in consequence of which he had not the means of subsistence during six months of his imprisonment, excepting what he received from his fellow prisoners.*"<sup>86</sup>

In the examples used above, it is the friends of the deceased which are used as a marker of status. Whether this is because of deceased's age or because they lacked any other markers

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<sup>85</sup> "MELANCHOLY SUICIDE." *Times*, 13 July 1853, p. 7. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS118786285/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=518c46c7>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2020.

<sup>86</sup> "Dreadful Suicide In Whitecross-Street Prison." *Times*, 30 Oct. 1847, p. 8. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS134774110/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=4249b541>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

of status is difficult to conclude on with certainty solely from the newspaper article. In cases where the deceased themselves possessed obvious markers of status, the focus was shifted onto those instead. John Bailey, the medical practitioner who committed suicide by swallowing poison, was noted as being “... a rising man in his profession, the author of several medical works, and lecturer on midwifery to the Hunterian School of Medicine.”<sup>87</sup> On Mr. Hodgson, a man who shot himself after having had complications in relation to his liver, they describe him as being “... about 45 years of age, was a gentleman of very extensive property, and much respected, was a magistrate for the Liberty of Ripon, and of the North Riding of Yorkshire”.<sup>88</sup> In all of the aforementioned articles, the status of the deceased is emphasized in one way or another. In the two former articles, the suicide is presented as having occurred in spite of the individual possessing status – while in the two latter examples, the suicide is seen as being related to the individual losing status. Regardless, the possession of social status is suggested as being incompatible with that of committing suicide.

There are also cases where the reverse is true, and the articles reference markers indicating lack of status and wealth. Reporting on a young man who shot himself, the reporter points out that “He had for some days been engaged in labouring work, but had complained of destitution.”<sup>89</sup> As is the case with the majority of the newspaper articles, the article never goes as far as to explicitly attribute these factors as causal explanations for why the individual decided to commit suicide. However, deciding to report on it reveals how the reporter believes there has to be some connection between the two variables. Indeed, this is shown rather overtly in the case of a French gentleman who hanged himself. The article first points out that “It would seem that the deceased had been formerly in excellent circumstances, and that he had credentials from the mayors of several towns in France.”<sup>90</sup> However, later on it follows this up by explaining how “Poverty had evidently overtaken him, for, although a portion of his attire was in order, and his linen of a superior quality, his boots were much worn, and he had no stockings, and only two sous were found in his

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<sup>87</sup> "Suicide Of A Medical Practitioner." *Times*, 10 June 1853, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> "MELANCHOLY SUICIDE." *Times*, 29 Nov. 1847, p. 6. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS102399357/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=92f36927>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

<sup>89</sup> "Shocking Suicide In A Jewish Synagogue." *Times*, 1 Oct. 1859, p. 12. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS202544449/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=4fa28f0f>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>90</sup> "Suicide Of A French Gentleman." *Times*, 12 Dec. 1857, p. 5. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS84447628/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=f1c4fc83>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

*pockets.*" The newspaper article makes it abundantly clear that it is his fall from grace which caused this man to take this own life.

It seems that the newspaper articles generally report on wealth and status of the deceased if they happen to be middle- and upper-class. There are several possible reasons for this. One might be that wealth and status are seen as insulators against being compelled to commit suicide. When someone who is of higher class then ends up taking their own life, the act is seen as a threat to this set of beliefs – and as a result becomes more interesting to the reader. Reporting on a nineteen year old woman who drowned herself, the articles points out that "*The family are in very good circumstances, and it is stated that the unfortunate young lady would have been entitled, on coming to age, to considerable property.*"<sup>91</sup> In this case, it is clear that her entitlement to this property is seen as a factor which should have dissuaded her from committing suicide. The article concludes by exclaiming that "*An inquest will doubtless be held, at which some clue may be obtained to the cause of the rash act.*" The fact that the woman was financially secure seems only to reinforce the need to establish some alternative explanation for her actions.

Another reason for the propensity to only point out class markers of upper-class individuals might be that the reporters see the newspaper articles on suicide serving in part as some form of obituary. Choosing to highlight the accomplishments of the deceased individual is then a means of respecting the dead. In the case of a Norwegian translator who poisoned himself, this seems to be the case. The report on his death points out that he "... *was much respected for the propriety of his conduct and his kind and courteous manner. He was a married man.*"<sup>92</sup> Here, the focus is not on his material possessions nor is it on his profession – typical markers of status in society. Rather, the article chooses to focus on character qualities that extend beyond class. It is highly possible that the reason for focusing on these character qualities lie in the fact that he did possess some alternative status in society, and had he been lower-class this would not have been the case. It is noteworthy that only one of out of the twenty-two articles actually point out qualities in the deceased's person like the aforementioned article does. As a rule, reports on suicide do not concern themselves with making judgements on the deceased's character in this way – and following from this, one

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<sup>91</sup> "SUICIDE OF A YOUNG LADY." *Times*, 23 Apr. 1859, p. 9. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS151557271/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=c2196e74>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>92</sup> "DETERMINED SUICIDE." *Times*, 20 Oct. 1856, p. 7. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS119050068/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=ba5809d8>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

might argue that describing the reports as baring the same purpose as that of an obituary falls short.

## Physical Appearance

Edgar Allen Poe famously stated that "The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."<sup>93</sup> Another personal quality which is sometimes reported on is that of beauty - or the lack there-of. In the twenty-two articles analyzed in this paper, there are three of them which make explicit comments on the attractiveness of the deceased. The first one is about a twenty-five-year-old woman who in 1842 threw herself from the Monument in London. The article remarks that despite falling quite a distance and hitting the pavement, "*The features were in no way mutilated, and the deceased was a well-looking young woman.*"<sup>94</sup> On the well-off nineteen-year-old woman who drowned herself, the reporter notes that "*the deceased was ... of prepossessing appearance.*"<sup>95</sup> Youth is often interconnected with beauty, and as such, the fact that the two examples used here are young women, might mean that the reporter is just as well commenting on the age of the deceased rather than the actual attractiveness. However, there are several other instances of young women who commit suicide in the source material where there follow no descriptions of the deceased's looks. Of course, one might wonder if the few examples illustrated here in reality only speak of the reporter's character rather than reveal some aspect of British society at large. Regardless, the fact that a newspaper such as the Times thought it acceptable to publish such comments on the physical attractiveness of a suicide victim indicates that whatever can be assumed about the reporter's character can also partially be thought to represent some part of society.

There was one instance where the physical attractiveness of a man was described. The reporter observes that the deceased "*had very handsome features.*"<sup>96</sup> The lack of articles examined in this paper makes it unproductive to attempt to discuss the gendered differences in reporting on the physical attractiveness of suicide victims. Nonetheless, again it is telling that the physical attractiveness is reported on at all. No matter the gender, there are no examples of cases where the relative unattractiveness of a deceased person is

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<sup>93</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The philosophy of composition," (GR Graham, 1846).

<sup>94</sup> "Another Suicide From The Monument." *Times*, 20 Aug. 1842, p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> "SUICIDE OF A YOUNG LADY." *Times*, 23 Apr. 1859, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> "Suicide Of A French Gentleman." *Times*, 12 Dec. 1857, p. 5. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS84447628/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=f1c4fc83>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

remarked upon. Like was the case with status and wealth, it might be that beauty is considered an insulator against the compulsion to commit suicide – and that following from this it becomes more interesting to report on. A reporter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century might consider it particularly remarkable and noteworthy when those who they believed should not feel compelled to commit suicide ended up taking their own lives regardless – such as was the case with the rich, those of high social class, or the beautiful.

## Sensationalism

### Motive

In her work *Victorian Suicide*, Gates explains how “Customers for every London newspaper craved knowledge of the particulars of such an audacious act. What they wanted most of all were detailed descriptions of the fall and attempted explanations for such bitter desperation. Every type of coverage featured these two aspects of the case, and each paper reflected the language and mores of its readers when presenting its details.”<sup>97</sup> Newspapers were well-aware that suicide could attract customers and which aspects of suicide those customers found the most interesting. As such while the majority of newspaper articles allude to some sort of driving force leading the victim into committing suicide, a select few articles take this a step further and explore in depth the possible reasons for why the deceased might have chosen to end their existence.

When a 15 year old girl was found drowned, “*The Coroner and jury remarked, that it was extraordinary that no motive could be assigned for the deceased committing so rash an act, and said that they should like to have more evidence.*”<sup>98</sup> The newspaper article does in this case make sure to include the reasoning for the jury’s verdict. The jury concluded that there was no doubt in their mind that the girl had actually committed suicide, but that the evidence was not sufficient to prove that this was the case and as a result the death was ruled “Accidental Drowning”. It is indicated in the quote from the article that a proven motive serves as evidence in the eyes of the jury. The fact that the lack of this was enough to make a jury rule contrary to their convictions indicates the importance Victorians placed on motive in cases of suicide. While in this case this belief is shown by focusing on the lack of motive - in other cases, motive was intrinsically linked to the secularized and medicalized

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<sup>97</sup> Gates, "Cases and Classes: Sensational Suicides and Their Interpreters," 39.

<sup>98</sup> "Mysterious Suicide Of A Girl." *Times*, 5 Nov. 1844, p. 6.

view of suicide which was developing at the time. Motive was in those cases actually equivalent to the verdict the jury returned. The victim - and correspondingly their motive - was of unsound mind, temporary insane or suffered from delirium at the time of their death.

The remaining handful of articles fall into two categories: those where motive is not addressed at all – and those where motive is overtly speculated around. Nowhere is the latter exemplified as in an article from 1854 titled “Melancholy Suicide”.<sup>99</sup> The article describes the circumstances surrounding the death of Jessie Lauder, a woman in her late twenties. The first half of the article describes the particulars of the suicide - the names of those who attended to the corpse, the method employed in her suicide, the time and place of where the event took place and so on. The article then mentions some personal articles found on the deceased, among which are a series of letters addressed to family members and a lover of hers. After this the reporter infers that “*The melancholy act appears to have been the result of disappointed love, and to have been deliberately premeditated. She must have been engaged for the last day or two in writing parting letters to relatives and friends, all couched in the most affectionate and endearing terms.*” This particular suicide carries with it a comparatively relatable motive, and the reporter uses this fact to add his own reflections: “*These display an intensity of feeling, and, at the same time, a philosophy under the most poignant sorrow, that is almost irreconcilable with the desperate issue.*”

In a final dramatic touch, the reporter mentions how Jessie’s lover “... *apologizes for the delay in writing to her, ascribes this delay to her letter having been mis-sent to a town three miles distant from his proper address ...*”<sup>100</sup> Apparently, the servant girl who discovered the body was carrying the lover’s letters up to Jessie. One can only infer whether the reporter is insinuating that the suicide could have been avoided had the letters not been mis-sent. There are obviously numerous details which would have to be revealed and examined to establish the extent to which this is actually how the events transpired. However, the reporter attributes the suicide to disappointment in love and then devotes a considerable portion of the article to describing the mis-sent letters from the woman’s lover. No matter the actual circumstances of the suicide, the article leaves enough room for the reader to imagine a tragic event akin to those found in fictional literary works. As Gates

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<sup>99</sup> "MELANCHOLY SUICIDE." *Times*, 22 May 1854, p. 9. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS151161526/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=5a58e117>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

noted, the readers of London newspapers wanted "*attempted explanations for such bitter desperation*", and in the case of Jessie Lauder they got precisely that.

## Gore

After another woman committed suicide by jumping from the Monument in 1842, three years after the incident with Margaret Moyes Gates describes, the Times recounts the suicide this way "*In falling her body turned completely round, and directly after struck against the carved stone dragon at the north-west corner, which it will be remembered projects out some distance at a height of about 50 feet from the base of the pillar – bounding thence into the road, a fishmonger's cart which was passing time close to the kerb, with a man driving, just escaping the falling body, some portion of the deceased's clothes touch the man's head, and rendering his escape from instant death truly miraculous.*"<sup>101</sup> While there are few other articles which go into as great detail as this one does – the description, with its arguably extraneous details, epitomizes the recurring theme of articles from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century obsessing over the gory details of suicides.

In what the Times describes as "*A most extraordinary case of accidental suicide ...*", the reporter explains the circumstances of how a boy of fourteen years experimented with hanging himself.<sup>102</sup> They paint a vivid picture, leaving nothing to the imagination as to how the corpse of the boy was found: "*The line merely passed under the chin and at the back of the ears, without encircling the neck and as the feet were upon the ground and the knees within two inches of it, if inclined only to try the effect of experimental hanging, failed in saving himself.*" In another case of suicide by strangulation headlined "*Melancholy Suicide*", the method is described as follows: "*The mode in which the fatal act and been accomplished was by unfastening the cord of the window-blind, supplementing it with her boot and staylace, fastening the end to the knob of the shutter, and passing it over the shutter at the top. She had stood on the windowsill, and, with the shutter partially closed, put her neck into a noose, thrown her feet off, and thus effected her purpose.*"<sup>103</sup>

The few cases where the method of suicide is not described inordinately, are those where the method generally does not result in mutilation of the body. The consumption of poison

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<sup>101</sup> "Another Suicide From The Monument." *Times*, 20 Aug. 1842, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> "EXPERIMENTAL SUICIDE." *Times*, 18 Apr. 1853, p. 5. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS84969618/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=caf4d17c>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>103</sup> "MELANCHOLY SUICIDE." *Times*, 22 May 1854, p. 9.

and drowning being the most notable examples of this in the articles examined in this paper. On the contrary, when the deceased chose a particularly gory method, the ensuing newspaper article was sure to describe every facet of the consequences. Suicide by shooting was a method which was sure to generate expressive descriptions of the scene of death. Portraying the suicide of a middle-aged man, the article explains how "... *the deceased was discovered lying upon the pavement quite dead, with his head shattered in a most shocking manner, and some of the unfortunate man's brains were afterwards found adhering to the railings.*"<sup>104</sup> In another case of suicide by shooting, the scene is described as "... *on opening the door a dreadful spectacle presented itself, the unfortunate gentleman being laid on the floor, with his skull literally blown to pieces, and his brains scattered about.*"<sup>105</sup>

Describing how a French gentleman took his own life by jumping in front of a moving train, the reporter remarks that it "*literally cut him to pieces.*" and that they "*found the mangled remains scattered about the line.*"<sup>106</sup> At the end, the article notes that "*The hat was afterwards found at the spot where the woman and boy saw it placed.*" Here referring back to an off-hand comment made earlier in the article in which two witnesses saw the man remove his hat before approach the line. The reporter poetically juxtaposes the horrible descriptions of the corpse, with the relatively trivial matter of the accuracy of the witnesses' account on a hat. While motive, status and other similar circumstances are inconsistently incorporated into the newspaper articles examined in this paper, the opportunity to recount the gory minutia of a suicide is seldom lost on a reporter.

## The Law, Religion, and Moral Judgement

Although there clearly was an audience willing to read about and speculate around suicide, and the Times was eager to provide the desired material – suicide in the respective period was still considered morally wrong. This was the case both in terms of the law, but also in regard to religion. Sanctions against the bodies of those convicted as self-murderers could be and were still carried out at the time. Despite this, there is not a single instance where

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<sup>104</sup> "SHOCKING SUICIDE." *Times*, 22 July 1853, p. 4. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS67406070/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=f168069c>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2020.

<sup>105</sup> "MELANCHOLY SUICIDE." *Times*, 29 Nov. 1847, p. 6. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS102399357/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=92f36927>. Accessed 29

<sup>106</sup> "EXTRAORDINARY SUICIDE." *Times*, 6 Nov. 1857, p. 7. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS118002022/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=e1c51bda>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.



one of the newspaper articles references suicide in the context of religion. Nor is there a single instance where the deceased is condemned in terms of breaking the law. Even in the one article where a *felo de se* verdict is given, and the deceased is then considered a felon in the eyes of the law, the reporter makes no references to the implications of a *felo de se* verdict beyond the verdict itself.<sup>107</sup> For all intents and purposes, the phrase could be changed to *non compos mentis* and the article would read exactly the same.

As shown previously, the discourse surrounding suicide is not marked by disinterested vocabulary. Reporters showed a great eagerness to supplement the barebone facts with witness accounts on the character of the deceased, gory descriptions on the body, and speculation into possible motive. Despite warnings and criticism from commentators at the time, with definite proof that newspaper articles on suicide indeed could lead to more suicides, reporters painted vivid pictures of the act when given the opportunity. They also readily employed the emerging terminology found in the field of psychiatry. Despite all of this, the Times refrained from even alluding to the immorality of suicide in the eyes of the law and religion.

## Conclusion

The discourse surrounding suicide in the Times is clearly characterized by the usage of certain terminology, but also by its omissions of certain themes which were otherwise present in society at large. Most of the articles analyzed used terminology associated with the emerging psychiatric field. Words such as «delirium», «insane» and «melancholy» appear frequently across a majority of the articles. There is also a recurring trend of attributing the suicide to some sort of «derangement of the mind». In some cases this is done simply by labeling the deceased as a lunatic or referring to the fact that they were institutionalized. Other articles mention other diseases and symptoms the deceased may have suffered from. Some of them then attempt to explain the suicide in terms of those other diseases. No matter whether done explicitly or implicitly, the majority of articles are clearly influenced by medical and psychiatric thinking.

Another aspect which is clearly recognizable in the articles is that of sensationalism. In this paper, this has been framed as belonging primarily to two separate categories. The category

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<sup>107</sup> "The Late Suicide At Wolverhampton." *Times*, 7 Jan. 1860, p. 5. The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS85104167/TTDA?u=ntnuu&sid=TTDA&xid=fdab8f5e>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2020.

which features most prominently in the articles examined here is «gore». The matter of gore is discussed overtly and consistently across all the articles. The other category, which relates to «motive», is only present in some of the articles – and is seldom discussed directly. Nonetheless, when reporting on suicide, most articles devote a significant portion of their word count to sensational details on relating to the method of suicide, its aftermath, or a possibly relatable motive. As was noted even at the time, reporters seemed highly aware of the attraction among their readership to articles on murder and suicide – and they tailored their articles accordingly.

There are some notable omissions from the articles as well. Topics such as religion and the law are never mentioned, and the reporters never pass any moral judgements on the deceased. Whether this tendency represents the beliefs of the British population at large is beyond the scope of this paper. It would be of interest to examine other major publications at the time in order to identify the breadth of this style of reporting across all of Britain.

Due to the low sample size used in this paper, any attempt to look at differences in the discourse on suicide across variables such as gender or status will obviously put into question the veracity of any conclusion. There were some tendencies present in the newspaper articles of highlighting markers of status when they were present. This might be because in general markers of status were seen as insulators against suicide. It may also be because when individuals of status committed suicide, it fit into a “fall from grace” narrative which played nicely with the desires of the Times’ audience at the time. Then again, this could also be attributed to differences in the style of reporting any given journalist had. While a focus on status is clearly present in the articles analyzed, it is beyond the sample size and scope of this paper to examine the meaning of this.

In this paper, themes such as medicalization, focus on status and sensationalism have been explored in the discourse on suicide in newspaper articles. These themes have already been examined in preceding historical research – both in terms of newspaper articles specifically, but also as it relates to other aspects of British society and culture. The analysis in this paper establishes the existence of these themes, but makes no attempt to tie them into a broader historical picture. Going forward, the aforementioned themes should be analyzed in-depth on their own, while also being supplemented with other types of source material. Of particular interest here might be personal correspondence, intellectual and political discourse, literary works, and so on. Looking at how the themes develop over a larger period of time, or their presence across different types of British newspaper might also be conducive. No matter, suicide, as written on by the Times, was characterized by multiple

themes – some which are identifiable in most of the articles produced, while others are only encountered in a fraction of them.

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