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The Tragic Descent of Serious Reaction to Misplaced Sentiment

Kevin Almond

The Tragic Descent of Serious Reaction to Misplaced Sentiment

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Abstract: The paper examines the way society distorted tragedy into farce. Limiting the investigation to the first half of the nineteenth century it describes how Romantic artists developed an overly tragic sensibility in their work, persona and lifestyles as a reaction to the effects of the industrial revolution. It then examines how the early Victorians sentimentalisd this tragic attitude particularly in the exaggerated etiquette and artifice associated with mourning and death. Tragedy is the quintessential expression in describing excessive sadness or disaster, therefore it is the most dramatic, rendering it virtually impossible to exaggerate. Attempts at exaggeration have bordered on caricature or satire, that have distorted tragedy into travesty. Tragedy has manifested itself through various expressions in art, literature and reality yet only rarely, as in the Romantic Movement have all three mediums merged. This resulted in a histrionic tragicomedy of display that began as a serious reaction to social conditions and ended in sticky sentimentality.

Keywords: Art, Romantic, Sentimental, Tragedy, Exaggerate, Farce

Introduction

TRAGEDY IS THE quintessential expression in describing excessive sadness or disaster; therefore it is the most dramatic, rendering it virtually impossible to exaggerate. Attempts at exaggeration have bordered on a caricature or satire, which have distorted tragedy to farce. In history, tragedy has manifested itself through various expressions in art, literature and reality, yet only rarely, as in the Romantic Movement, have all three mediums of tragedy merged. This not unnaturally resulted in a histrionic tragicomedy of display that began as a serious reaction to social conditions and ended as misrepresentation.

Romanticism emerged in the late eighteenth century and lasted in various forms until 1900. In many ways it could be seen as a reaction to the creative alienation caused by the industrial revolution, whose most crucial years were between 1750 and 1830. This was a time when people flocked to expanding towns and cities in search of work and prosperity, their lives being geared towards the machine of industry, which offered little opportunity for interest in the arts.

In many ways Romanticism evolved from the tragedy of art being divorced from society. It created, perhaps, one of the first coherent artistic groups to insist on their right to stand on the fringes of society. The tragedy of their creative divorce being the central theme employed in their self-alienation which, like the reactions of many minority groups became exaggerated.

Marcel Proust once said:

"As for happiness it has nearly one advantage only, that

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of making unhappiness possible. Happiness is wholesome
only for the body, but it is heartache that develops the forces of the mind."[1] (Schrade, p106)

This could almost be an epitaph for much of the Romantic philosophy. Their art and life style were filled with an intense, theatrical and tragic melodrama that often looked suspiciously artificial or posed. Their preoccupation with the past, impermanence and decay, the early and bizarre deaths of their heroes both in fact and fiction, very quickly became farcical and decayed into sentimentality.

The increase in literacy in early nineteenth century England helped to spread these tragic Romantic attitudes, which hitherto had been limited to their purveyors. This shaped the background of the Victorian sensibility, a sensibility that manifested itself extravagantly in the emotions displayed in death, the tragic finality that moves even the most apathetic of people. This reflected a move towards the popularisation of high art and culture. The historian and writer Saint Beauve divided Romanticism into two periods. Individual Romanticism up to 1829 and Social Romanticism after this date. His essay on '*The Hopes and Desires of the Literacy and Poetic Movement after the Revolution of 1830*', asserts that art after 1830 turned popular and began to reflect contemporary social movements. This is exemplified in the Romanticism of Victorian family life that produced the sentimental ballad, the Valentine and a bizarre social etiquette in the objects, clothes and remembrance of the dead.

The one certain thing about human life is death. Throughout history people have found different ways of dealing with this; they have tried to forget it or have prepared themselves gradually. In his book '*Greek Tragedy and the Modern World*', Leo Aylen states that one of the functions of tragedy is to help people come to terms with death. People have an obvious need to learn how to live with this and tragedy could be the means of filling this need. When related to the central theme of this paper, tragedy is the means of coming to terms with both the temporary death of art and creativity and the trauma of human death. It is fascinating that society developed this view of death in art and literature, and the excessive way it was interpreted, beginning as a serious individual reaction and ending as sticky sentimentality designed for popular appeal.

Findings and Discussions

In his book '*British Romantic Art*', Raymond Lister reveals a general agreement that Romanticism is impossible to define. It is possible, however to grasp a general meaning of Romanticism without pinning it down to a dictionary definition. The movement emerged as a reaction to man's creative alienation in the Industrial Revolution. Therefore it is not suprising, that the main obsessions pursued were youth and death coupled with a melancholy longing for the past.

The early deaths of so many Romantic heroes both in fact as in fiction resulted from these obsessions. This occurred because many Romantics were not content in just devoting their lives to art. They wanted to present their whole personality as part of their art as well. This developed the tragic legend of the Romantic hero.

Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770), subject of the Victorian painting 'Death of Chatterton' by Henry Wallis, possessed every qualification for a tragic Romantic hero. The author of

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[1] Quoted in Leo Schrader *Tragedy in the Art of Music* Page 106

forged medieval manuscripts, written with an extraordinary intensity for a person of such youth, Chatterton emerged from an extremely humble background. He had immersed himself in the medieval past of his own locality, St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol and had risen through his own creative efforts. Often reviled and misunderstood by his contemporaries, Chatterton committed suicide before reaching maturity. Through his work, but even more through the events of his short, tragic life, he had become a legendary symbol of the martyrdom of creative genius.

Chatterton's story was ideal as a prototype in the developing characters of the Romantic poets. Bound themselves by a sense of their own separateness, the result of both personal unhappiness and the transitional social climate, the Romantic poets chose to exaggerate their sense of dejection by affecting a pose of tragedy. Unfortunately, many poets absorbed too much of this simulated persona, so that it became like a mask they could not remove. Similar to Marilyn Monroe, a more recent tragedienne, this adoption of a false image followed a path of self-destruction whose conclusion was a tragic and inevitable early death.

The most predominant Romantic hero to emulate Chatterton's tradition was John Keats, who condensed his poetic entity into five short years from 1815 to 1820. Afflicted by recurring bouts of tuberculosis, Keats was only too aware of the transient nature of his own life, as he remarked to a friend:

"To distrust life is to cherish the idea of death."[2] (Quennell, p96)

Keats' early life had indicated a tragic destiny. His childhood was full of disaster. He regarded his mother's early death as a betrayal that caused him an impassioned and prolonged grief. From then on he viewed happiness as an illusion. This formed the basis of his poetic genius because it initiated in him, a conflict that shaped the characteristics of his individual style (for instance, his love of sensations), which he endeavoured to resolve through art.

His love of sensations pursued a dramatic conflict between two extremes. In *'Ode to a Nightingale'* he examines the extremes of joy and melancholy by illustrating the plight of the nightingale's transient existence. Like the butterfly, the pleasure of the nightingale's beauty was short lived before the ugliness of death appeared:

'Darkling I listen and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful death
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme
To take into the air my quiet breath'[3] (Keats)

In '*Ode on Melancholy'*, (an archetypical Romantic title), he dwells upon the intensities of pleasure and pain:

'She dwells with beauty, beauty that must die
And joy whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching pleasure nigh
Turning to poison while the bee mouth sips'[4] (Keats)

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[2] Quoted in Peter Quenelle *Romantic England* Page 96
[3] Taken from *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats 1819
[4] Taken from *Ode on Melancholy* by John Keats 1819

Keats, who like his contemporaries Shelley and Byron, possessed what a Freudian psychologist would call a 'death wish'. It is debatable as to whether they were born or socialised into this endowment, though it is more likely that the three poets were socialised into it due to the similarity of their tragic circumstances during childhood. What is certain is that the disruptive social climate during the Romantic Movement allowed them to put their death wishes to a creative use.

Keats was more outwardly tranquil and more subtly exaggerated than the more exhibitionist Byron and Shelley. Byron, enhanced by his own tragic childhood of poverty, constant insecurity and hideous domestic turmoil, declared himself a pessimist and a determined fatalist. This was justified as he matured because no-one seemed to court disaster more ingeniously, or repeatedly. as Byron himself acknowledged in a letter to his friend, Augusta Leigh:

> 'I have been cunning in mine overthrow
> The careful pilot of my proper woe'[5] (Quennell p117)

Byron, who also suffered from a 'death wish' had developed a guilt complex as a result of his awful childhood and was constantly committing misdemeanours to justify this sense of guilt. In an attempt to summarise Byron's excesses, an admirer, Tom Maturin described his:

> 'Secret struggles of passion where the soul trembles
> on the verge of the unlawful and the unhallowed and the
> human capacity for feeling and suffering is pushed to
> its extreme limits' (Quennell p118) [6]

Byron thrived on his 'secret struggles of passion'. They were both a source and inspiration to his art and as an artist he gave his all. This could, perhaps, explain the real tragedy; his total dedication left him with no inner resources to counteract the pose of tragic destiny to which he resigned himself.

Shelley had a similar belief in his fatalistic destiny, but whereas Byron admitted his downfall was largely his own making, Shelley felt that society dealt him unprovoked blows the blows. On one side stood the devoted enthusiast Shelley, on the other prejudice, tyranny and superstition. He became both petulant and self-deceptive. Without questioning why society misjudged him Shelley exaggerated this misjudgement to bolster his own sense of separateness.

This led him to over-dramatise other aspects of his life. He was nervous to the point of neurosis. Once he believed an unknown assailant had made an attack on him. A pistol shot was found to have pierced his flannel nightgown, but people believed that Shelley had discharged it himself, because no-one had seen the assailant.

His self-deceptiveness allowed him to treat situations in which he inflicted pain on others as personally tragic to him. For instance, after falling in love with Mary Wollstonecraft, he hastily tried to arrange a ménage à trois in which his three months pregnant wife, Harriet, was relegated to the part of sister, while Mary took over her place as his wife. Harriet's indignance merely led a blinkered Shelley to accuse her of the basest and blackest treachery.

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[5] Quoted in Peter Quenelle *Romantic England* Page 117
[6] Quoted in Peter Quenelle *Romantic England* Page 118

The meeting of the two poets, Shelley and Byron beside Lake Geneva, Switzerland in 1816, began a friendship united by a sense of doom which indirectly resulted in their bizarre early deaths. Shelley died in Italy after both poets had mutually agreed to settle there. He was drowned on a boat during a Mediterranean storm, his body being discovered six days later, mutilated and partly eaten by fish. A distraught Byron attempted to arrange a cremation and later described the nauseous details:

'the quivering flames turned yellow, green and blue,
the corpse fell open, the frontal bone of the skull
fell off and as the back of the head rested on the red
hot bottom bars of the furnace, the brains literally
seethed and boiled, as in a cauldron for a very long time'[7] (Whipple245)

It was said that Byron never quite recovered from the shock of Shelley's cremation. He certainly lost the spirit of his youth, penning a short poem as he slid into a self-willed decline:

'My days are in the yellow leaf,
The flowers and fruits of love are gone
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone'[8] (Byron)

His official cause of death was given as malaria and it is not impossible to imagine Byron's perverse gratification on learning about the terminal nature of his disease.

The Romantic poets set precedents in the same way as many pop stars do today. In the sensationalistic tradition of people emulating for example Elvis Presley, the Romantic poets found themselves the objects of a similar kind of posthumous devotion. There is more than a hint of Byronic fatality in the life of Petrus Borel, the author of some morbid short stories and poems throughout the 1840's. He transformed himself into the Hell's Angel of a central club of Parisian Romantics. Glorifying in his satanic reputation, he then raged through a life that ended bizarrely with a unique suicide, he hung himself from a gutter. The poet Gerard De Nerval, who's passionate, necrophiliac verse was filled with love and death as its themes, was equally fatalistic. Exuding decadence by parading the streets of Paris with a pet lobster on a lead, he affected a tortured and malevolent personality distinguished by rolling eyes and swirling black capes. He also committed suicide. It is interesting to note that this did not revert to the sentimentality of the Victorians. What originated as a pose developed as a serious and successful attempt at producing high art.

The Romantics used poetry as the main medium of personal revelation. For them poetry was an expression of their gloomy fatalistic personalities, displayed with the direct expression and natural feeling that were a part of their contemporary artistic climate. It encouraged artists to explore other tragic extremes in human nature, ranging from fascination with whores, homicidals and the insane to the supernatural, the cornucopia of exaggerated influences which the Victorian's sentimentalised.

Many Romantic artists developed a passionate interest in nature. The development of the Industrial Revolution had destroyed a society that relied both artistically and socially upon

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[7] Quoted in Addison Whipple *the Fatal Gift of Beauty* Page 245
[8] Taken from *on this Day I complete my Thirty-sixth Year* By Lord Byron

nature. The Romantics attempted to reverse this process through art. Whether they felt a sincere sense of loss, or were just inspired by the tragedy in nature's destruction remain a speculation. It certainly served as a valid excuse to indulge in obsessive melancholia, as in the wistful diary entry by Sir Humphrey Davy, chemist, physicist and friend of Coleridge:

> 'Today for the first time I have a distant sympathy
> with nature. I was lying on the top of a rock, the
> wind was high and everything in motion, the branches
> of an oak tree were waving and murmuring, the yellow
> stream below was alive and myself part of the series
> of visible impressions. I should have felt pain in
> tearing a leaf from one of the trees'[9] (Quennell p189)

The sensations of loss, decay and impermanence were recurrent features in other aspects of Romanticism, particularly in a mournful preoccupation with the past and ruins. This preoccupation symbolised vigour and strength being sapped by the onslaught of society, resulting in the ultimate tragic sensation which is death.

One of the more bizarre Romantic diversions was in the building of 'follies' as an attempt to emulate the past. A folly is defined in the *Collins English Dictionary* as:

> 'Any foolish but expensive undertaking, especially
> a useless and needlessly extravagant structure'[10] (Collins)

This is exactly what the Romantic diversion was. The process involved the demolition of new buildings or structures and their rebuilding as ruins. The more dedicated pursuers of the cause even planted dead trees around their simulations. Romantics were attempting to create havens of inspiration amid the onslaught of industrialisation.

Painters of the Romantic period had similar aspirations to the Romantic poets in that they attempted to transcend both their lives and personality into their art. Referring to Raymond Lister in his book, *British Romantic Art*,[11] he described the artist as a 'man possessed', an attribute he shares alone with the madman. His possession is an obsession that takes over his creative functions and is beyond his control. It surges up from his subconscious and unconscious minds, releasing a well of human emotions and feelings that are then transformed into art. Raymond Lister failed to suggest what ignites an artist's so-called possession. The Romantic artist's 'possession' was instigated by man's creative alienation during the Industrial Revolution yet some artists could have used the term Romanticism as a stepping stone to a more personal means of expression through art. This theory is especially significant when examining the life and works of Henry Fuseli, one of the first painters to be associated with the Romantic Movement.

Fuseli had few of the self-deprecating fatalistic attitudes, so predominant in other Romantics. Yet his obsession with the erotic and shadowy dream world of the Gothic novel adhered him to be more grotesque and sensual. His works reflected some of the most peculiar traits of his own personality. He was preoccupied with sin; this was obvious in his malign

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[9] Quoted in Peter Quenelle *Romantic England* Page 189
[10] Taken from *Collins English Dictionary*
[11] Quoted in Raymond Lister *British Romantic Art* Page 56

choice of subject. He had a gift for conferring an expression of latent evil on every face and every attitude that seemed to suggest erotic dreams. This was even suggested in his self-portraits which hint at his sinister, diabolical obsessions.

His main subject matter was nightmare. It was rumoured that before retiring to bed he would devour a plateful of raw beef because he hoped it would improve the quality of these nightmares. Two paintings show a fascination with a dreaded beast, in the first with its pale glaring eyes and floating mane, thrusting its neck between the curtains of a bed whereas in the second it is mounted by the devil, plunging through an open window, leaving behind it a pair of naked women who - to further complicate the effect - are obviously lesbian lovers.

Fuseli was too cynical to affect a tragic pose, however, his fascination with the gruesome and the bizarre produced works that were both tragic and wildly Romantic. He was, as the writer Johan Kaspar suggested:

'The representation of a real individual and
the soul and character of that individual'[12] (Lister p56)

Many Romantics affected a tragic pose as a reactionary enterprise. In a climate of artistic uncertainty and hunger for revolution, it seemed natural to go to the root of the matter and set up a new criteria. It resulted in real originality. In staging a self-imposed exile from a polite society, the painter Gericault was able to achieve this.

As a young adult, he was described as being very handsome, cultured and socially desirable, in possession of a considerable amount of wealth inherited from his mother's early death. His contemporary, Adelaide de Montgolfier, wrote:

'He was at once animated and gentle,
tall grave with singularly beautiful eyes,
dreamy, mild and deep like those of the Orientals.'[13] (Berger p10)

A marked change in his character began during in a passionate, incestuous love affair with his aunt. After the affair ended, he sank into an existence of pessimistic oblivion, the death of his affair instigating a parallel fascination with the death and menace in human tragedy. Shaving off his hair to symbolise his divorce from the rest of the society, he indulged in a passionate frenzy of painting, depicting such morbid subjects as maniacs from insane asylums, deformed people, hangings, beggars and decomposing bodies.

His most controversial painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, depicts the ship-wrecked passengers of the 'Medusa' on a raft in the high seas. Hunger and thirst had led to survivors being subject to cannibalism. As part of his research he had studied the expressions and postures of the newly dead corpses delivered to him from the morgue; in fact he took such a fanatic and fetishist delight in his analysis that his studio began to resemble a slaughterhouse.

It is tragic that a man of Gericault's obvious social and monied affluence could resort to such morbid fascinations. His sudden change of character was like a gigantic and simulated performance. The ultimate example of tragic posturing, that confirms Marcel Proust's theory that it is only 'heartache that develops the forces of the mind' 1 (Schrade, p106), even though in this case the heartache could have been simulated.

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[12] Quoted in Klaus Berger *Gericault and his Work* Page 10
[13] Quoted in John Morley *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* Page 16

One of the last paintings to fall under the term 'Individual Romanticism' was Delecroix's *The Death of Sardanopolis*, exhibited in 1829. This was based on Byron's poem about the death of the Greek King, Sardanopolis. The themes of the poem were intellectual and moral freedom which represented the dramatic terrors and excesses that the Romantics displayed when faced with opposition against this freedom. Delecroix over-exaggerated the excesses in Byron's work by representing suicide, sadism, oriental despotism and sensuality. He depicted the bearded Sardanopolis reclining on a huge bed, contemplating the extraordinary scene of carnage taking place around him.

It is hardly surprising that Romantic paintings after 1830 turned popular and began to reflect contemporary social attitudes to death and tragedy. Delecroix had reached an intense pinnacle in the individual Romantic feeling which was never surpassed. Admittedly, paintings like Henry Wallis' *Death of Chatterton* and William Milner's *Dreams* were Romantic in their gloomy theatricality, but they lacked individual depth. The *Death of Chatterton* capitalised on the growing public fascination with Chatterton's tragic legend, whilst *Dreams* epitomised the Victorians' morbid obsessions with the supernatural. *The Death of Sardanopolis* was a definitive end to the first half of Romanticism.

Art after 1830 turned popular and began to reflect contemporary social movements. This was similar to the development of kitsch. Kitsch is usually a shallow piece of art or writing that reflects high art, yet is designed for popular appeal. The development of the early Victorian sensibility is also similar in that their overly sentimentalised attitude to death and tragedy was a maudlin, insincere and excessive development of the tragedy in Romanticism. This is convincingly reflected in a letter in *Country Life* (Morley, p16) on Victorian funerals that enthuses:

'I well remember one dreary, foggy morning, on the way
to school, seeing two jet black horses, complete with plumes
and drivers' hats enwreathed with crepe, suddenly loom out
of the mist, making my blood run cold.'[14] (Morley, p16)

Charles Dickens presented many clear images of the spectacle involved in Victorian funerals. To a writer so obsessed with the minutia of domestic details, the pomp and prudery in funerals was irresistible as inspiration. He emphasised the sordid and the ludicrous as in the funeral of Pip's sister from *Great Expectations*:

'The coffin was followed, it was a point of undertaking
ceremony that the six bearers must be stifled and blinded
under a horrible black velvet housing with a white border,
the whole looked like a blind monster with twelve human
legs. It was all very much appreciated and the
neighbourhood highly approved, we were all but cheered.'[15] (Morley, p21)

Dickens descriptions have a physical immediacy that presents a far clearer picture of life than contemporary visuals like prints and paintings. His attitude to funerals both repelled and fascinated him, a contradiction he emphasised with satire:

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[14] Quoted in John Morley *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* Page 21
[15] Taken from *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Charles Dickens 1843-44

'I have orders sir to provide silver-plate handles of the
very best description, ornamented with angels heads from
the most expensive dies. To be perfectly profuse in feathers.
In short sir, to turn out something absolutely gorgeous.'[16] (Dickens)

The importance of religion, especially when related to funerals in the lives of the Victorians is hard to exaggerate. It lurked beneath an exterior of self-assurance that hid their inner doubts and terrors. In a transitional social climate this is not a surprising attitude, however, it was rendered amusing because religion was often used for the wrong reasons. For example, it was often thought necessary to maintain the same class standards in death as in life, and to use death as a bizarre means of social advancement. This was a predominant feeling among the poorer classes, when paupers sometimes abandoned children's bodies in the streets rather than subject them to the degradation of a pauper's grave.

In the House of Commons, Committee's review of funerals in 1843, an undertaker from Holborn remarked that funerals could be performed for fifty per cent less, without any reduction of solemnity. The irony of this statement was that people appeared to be paying lavishly for an unhappy solemn event. However, it is probably more accurate to suppose that the Victorians were emulating the Romantic passion for tragedy, albeit in a totally hypocritical way. Solemnity became a revered word. It accurately implied a gloomy, sombre and deeply earnest glee in all matters regarding death, not unnoticed in another scathing piece of Dickens' social commentary from *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

'… the whole of that strange week before the funeral
was a round of dismal joviality and grim enjoyment.'[17] (Dickens)

As already stated, an essential characteristic of early Romanticism was the exaggerated presence of appearance and personality, especially in relation to dress. Cloaked in Gothicism and melodrama, it produced much eccentricity, not unappreciated by satirists of the time. There is a parallel characteristic in the Victorians' exaggerated approach to mourning dress.

It was to women that the burden of mourning dress fell. For women, full mourning dress was sombre and intimidating, an ultra-monotone of rigidity and intensity, in which even a bride could wear black. In his *Dombey & Son*, Dickens describes the widow's weeds of Mrs Pipchin as:

'The gown of a widow who had, like many, remained in
black for forty years, black bombazine of such a
lustreless, deep dead, sombre shade, that gas itself
couldn't light her up after dark and her presence was a quencher to any number of
candles.'[18] (Morley, p70)

No doubt encouraged by the imperishable figure of Queen Victoria, who steadfastly remained in mourning for her husband, Prince Albert, until she died forty years later, the Victorian widow regulated her costume to that of a uniform. For the first twelve months she wore a

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[16] Taken from *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Charles Dickens 1843-44
[17] Quoted in John Morley *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* Page 70
[18] Quoted in Leo Aileen *Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* Page 30

Parramatta dress and mantle, a tightly fitting and very restrictive garment covered entirely in heavy black silk crepe. Following this, she adopted the widow's silk for nine months, still heavily trimmed in crepe. Twenty-one months after the bereavement, crepe was discarded and only plain black dress was worn. Finally after two years a widow could go into half mourning for six months, wearing a choice of colours that ranged from grey, lavender, mauve, violet or black, grey and white stripes. Any woman who became indignant at such a lengthy process found few people to whom she could voice her objections, as social ostracism was part of the convention.

This period of excessive mourning proved to be as terminal as life itself. Protests began to rise against mourning in the same way that the Romantics had protested against the Industrial Revolution. It seems feasible that as the social climate of the early Victorians became more settled and the society's habits began to change, the restrictions of the complicated, costly and meaningless etiquette of mourning became more irksome and ridiculous. The attacks gradually mounted and were even reflected in the Victorian novel.

This seems to prove that a mass indulgence in tragedy can only be practised in a particular social climate as Leo Aylen emulates in another theory from *'Greek Tragedy and the Modern World'*:

'There cannot be tragic drama unless the audience to
some extent shares the writers' preoccupations'[19] (Aylen, p30)

Society had simply changed. The early Victorians had made a convention out of non-conformity; the later Victorians reacted with a move towards practicability. When faced with such examples as this melodramatic description from *Charles Dickens and Early Victorian England* of a priest shuffling along a beach in a sweltering July heatwave that reflects both reality and fantasy, it's easy to see why:

'A venerable figure in seedy, shiny black, with a triangle of
yellowing pique at his throat, his face shaded by a black straw
hat. His nose keeps in July its January look of frostbite. Be he,
he is Gothic, a solid shadow irresistibly advancing.'[20] Cruishank, p66)

Conclusions and Implications

The idea for this paper emerged from the author's interest in the exaggerated and sentimentalised etiquette of Victorian mourning dress. It traces a personal investigation into the descent of serious reaction to misplaced sentiment. In so doing, it discusses how the tragedy of many artists and writers sense of alienation, can be distorted by a wider society into farcical over exaggeration. Limiting the investigation to the first half of the nineteenth century, it exemplifies the way that Romantic artists developed an overly tragic sensibility both in their work and life style, as a means of coming to terms with the alienation of art and culture. The ironic way that the early Victorians over-sentimentalised this serious tragic attitude, particularly in their approach to mourning and death, is then discussed. Obviously in illustrating this point of view certain questions arise. For instance, if tragedy is exaggerated to the extent

[19] Quoted in R J Cruickshank *Charles Dickens and Early Victorian England* Page 66
[20] Quoted in John Morley *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* Page 18 (Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son)

of its being a caricature, is it really a result of a contemporary social climate? Is there then the potential in all of us to dramatise in a maudlin and sentimental way? The answer is probably yes, and this can be justified by examining inflated public reactions to other tragic occurrences. For instance when the film star Rudolph Valentino died prematurely in 1926 there was an instant public outcry. This came through both the newspaper reports of the time, which sensationalised his life and death, and in the reaction of his female fans. It seems that having ignited women to a fever pitch of sexual emotion in his on-screen performances, his tragic death could only be met with a mass demonstration of exaggerated mourning. More recent reactions to the deaths of public figures such as Princess Diana and the reality TV star Jade Goody have provoked similar overstated displays of mourning.

There is a clear dividing line between tragedy and the exaggeration of tragedy. As described in the introduction, tragedy is the quintessential expression in describing excessive sadness or disaster, it can go no further. The example of exaggerated Victorian mourning provides a case study of the mawkish and tragicomic effects of this misplaced sentiment. It should be remembered, however that not all tragic Romanticism reverted to sentimentalism. Its influence on Petrus Borel and Gerard de Nerval led them to develop a serious interest in tragedy that produced high art and in turn influenced other artists. Whatever the dividing line was and is between high and popular art, both Individual and Social Romanticism exaggerated and parodied tragedy. Dickens noticed this theory with a touch of satire in *'Dombey & Son'*, when Mr Mould asks:

> 'Why do people spend more money upon a death, Mrs Gamp than a birth?' (Morley, p18)

He was answered:

> 'It's because the laying out of money with a well conducted establishment, where the thing is performed upon the very best scale, binds the broken heart and sheds balm upon the wounded spirit.' (Morley, p18)

If any conclusion can be drawn from the themes discussed in this paper, it is that artists have an ultimate right to stand on the fringes of society in order to express their creative alienation. This takes great strength of character as the social order through bigotry and oppression can attempt to manipulate them into a more conventional expression of their art. This is a tragedy in itself, however society has the ability to twist serious and individual expression, into a mawkish, over emotional and popularised appeal designed for the masses. This is the ultimate, tragic contradiction.

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