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Stoker, creator of *Dracula* (1897), provides his audiences with an opportunity to better understand the fears that permeated the minds of Victorians. Stoker presents two characters that are perfect examples of the evolution of Georgian and Victorian obsessions and fears regarding death.

> With some difficulty- for it was very dark, and the whole place seemed so strange to us-we found the Westerna tomb. The Professor took the key, opened the creaky door, and standing back politely, but quite unconsciously, motioned me to precede him....The tomb in the day-time, and when wreathed with fresh flowers, had looked grim and gruesome enough; but now some days afterwards, when the flowers hung lank and dead, their whites turning to rust and their greens to browns; when the spider and beetle had resumed their accustomed dominance; when time-discolored stone, and dust-encrusted mortar, and rusty, dark iron, and tarnished brass, and clouded silver plating gave back the feeble glimmer of a candle, the effect was more miserable and sordid than could have been imagined. It conveyed irresistibly the idea that life- animal life- was

> not the only thing which could pass away…. 'To open the coffin.' 'You shall yet to be convinced.' Straightway he began taking out the screws, and finally lifted off the lid, showing the casing of lead beneath…. Striking the turn screw through the lead with a swift downward stab, which made me admit the point of the saw. I had expected a rush of gas from the week-old corpse…. The coffin was empty…. 'Perhaps a body-snatcher.'[1]

At this moment of discovery the two tomb explorers, professor and student, display two societal fears related to corpses that characterized the Georgian and Victorian periods. John, the student, suggests body snatching as a possible explanation for the missing corpse.

Body snatching was a deeply held fear that increased in the Georgian period, and continued during Victoria's reign. In addition, John "expected a rush of gas from the week-old corpse" hinting at Victorian fears surrounding miasma and the decomposition of corpses. The intended objective of this paper is to further explore the societal use of mausoleums, tombs, vaults, and other above ground burial technology and architecture employed in the Georgian and Victorian era. The protection of the corpse from the living and the protection the living from the decomposing corpse were two main aims of Georgian and Victorian burial reform respectively. Why did the continued use of above ground burial technology come under attack

[1] Bram Stoker, *Dracula (1897),* (NY: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 211-213.

during the Victorian period?

The second half of the 18th century was the golden age of the mausoleum. Aristocratic landowners began building mausoleums within their estates to create a more attractive landscape and as a place to commemorate themselves in death. Lynn F. Pearson's *Mausoleums* provides an excellent historical background to the development and use of mausoleums in many cultures, including Great Britain. She defines a mausoleum, as "a magnificent or monumental tomb," and continues "more intuitive description including elements of entrance, enclosure, mass and separation leads to the definition of a mausoleums as a substantial, discrete funerary structure containing a tomb or tombs, and which can be entered."[2] Pearson argues that mausoleums had multiple functions: "Not only did the building act as an eye-catcher, but it provided the family with a safe haven for family remains, unsullied by contact with social inferiors."[3] Mausoleums continued to instill the idea of social boundaries in death. Mausoleums became the "it" form of burial, and just as coffin makers had a business boom, mausoleum architects did as well. As the Victorian period came to a close, the Edwardian era saw the rise in the number of cremations and the grandiose funerary statements of wealth became less fashionable.[4]

Aristocratic social standards as well as the "ideal of undisturbed repose in the grave" were key elements in the Georgian era (1714-1837) funeral. Ruth Richard-

[2] Lynn F. Pearson, *Mausoleums,* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2008), 3.

[3] Ibid, 6.

[4] Ibid, 8.

son, in *Death, Dissection and the Destitute,* situates her historical discussion of the corpse before the 1832 Anatomy Act. During this period anatomy schools were on the rise and the use of dissection became a popular educational tool. However, dissection was considered an unacceptable and inhumane practice. Hanged murderers were considered an acceptable sector of society to be used for this inhumane practice, so dissection was seen as a unique punishment for the worst crimes. However, this supply of bodies was not enough to satisfy the increase in anatomy schools therefore, body snatching notoriously filled the demand for cadavers. The passing of the 1832 Anatomy Act allowed for the corpses of the poor and homeless to be used for practice by surgeons, rendering dissection punishment for a dying pauper.

Social class was easily identifiable by the characteristics of a burial. Pauper funerals involved no pomp and circumstance. There was no marking for the burial; and the coffin was of lower quality wood. All of these realities allowed for body snatchers to come in the night and snatch the corpses from the graves with little to no evidence. As Henry Morely recalled: "The practice was to remove carefully the soil at the head of the grave and expose one end of the coffin, open that, and with an instrument contrived for the purpose, draw out the body by the head. The coffin was then closed again, and the grave also closed again, so neatly that no sign of its desecration could be easily perceived."[5] To counteract fears of body snatching and to maintain the repose of the corpse in death, the aristoc-

[5] Henry Morely, "The Use and Abuse of the Dead," in *Household Words* 17, April 3, 1858, 361.

racy invested a considerable amount of money in the funeral and burial of loved ones. Richardson acknowledges the use of the triple coffins, "a considerable part of the cost in such funerals often covered transport out of the metropolis to (safer) vaults near country seats. The financially comfortable- like the Right Honorable Lady Elizabeth Colville in 1839- often also had double or triple coffins, but were less secure in a church or chapel, or even less so if the vault was in a churchyard."[6] Richardson states: "Those who could afford to do so purchased double or triple coffins- one of which would often be lead, which was metal known as a corpse-preserver… The Georgian undertaker provided his more fortunate clients with the prospect of rotting safely in secure coffins, sealed tight against the soil and dust of less eminent corpses: and above all, safe from body snatchers."[7] Richardson further introduces another technological advance of the time, underground structures that could be used to further protect the deceased: "Deep graves, secure vaults and the many other expedients available to the financially fortunate were purchased in the hope of acquiring what Lord Radnor admitted in Parliament that he himself desired for his own body a tomb more secure than his own home."[8]

Triple layered coffins and the burying of the deceased in vaults could not completely protect the dead from being taken by body snatchers, but it provided a

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[6] Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 80.

[7] Ruth Richardson, "Why was death so big in Victorian Britain?," in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke (Oxford, UK: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1989), 111.

[8] Ibid.

greater level of security and peace of mind to Georgian patricians. Desires to further protect the corpse resulted in an increase of new patents and "high-tech" coffin innovations. Metal coffins were patented as early as 1781, but they became more widely used in 1818. Edward Bridgman designed a coffin that was to be cast out of wrought iron and concealed with spring catches "on the inner side of the lid to prevent levering, and joined in such a way as to thwart any attempt to force the sides of the coffin apart." In addition, this coffin was designed to have the head and footstones connected by "secure iron bars," accompanied by a cast iron vault-tomb that extended a considerable distance below the ground and was "to serve as a resurrectionist proof receptacle for more than one wooden coffin."[9] Protecting the corpse from the body snatchers was the major concern of the Georgian period. It seems as if mausoleums and vault like structures, whether below or above ground, provided some sort of reassurance that the corpse was better protected than simple under ground burial. But all of this cost a considerable amount of money, yet another way of defining social class in death amidst the fear of body snatching.

Georgian patricians were buried or entombed in vaults, shafts or mausolea. The rich were entombed in magnificent coffins in their family vaults usually under churches or in a mausoleum in parklands or near a church.[10] James Stevens Curl, author of *Georgian Architecture*, states: "While it was doubtless useful to have a mausoleum as an eye-catcher to ornament the park or terminate the vista, the entombment of fami-

[9] Ibid, 81.
[10] Ibid, 195.

lies in mausolea reflected a new sensibility. If the individual mausoleum could not be had, the entombment in a chapel or within a church was the next best thing."[11] Curl emphasizes the pervading Georgian fear of bodysnatching; "Burial in a church or vault was preferred to interment in the churchyard because of the universal fear of body snatchers who disinterred freshly buried bodies for sale to the anatomists."[12] While safety and protection were among the main aims in the selection of a specific burial technology, what the technology said about the deceased, in regards to their social standing, was also of importance.

Georgians, as well as Victorians, were not regarded as equals in death. Highgate Cemetery (1839) was initially built to alleviate the nineteenth century crisis of inadequate burial space for the dead, but soon became known for its picturesque landscapes and accommodation of the wealthy. "Monumentality can be clearly witnessed as one ascends Highgate Hill, where tombs become increasingly monumental, until, at the summit, the dead remain forever visible."[13] The rich could afford grandiose monuments, "the Highgate cemetery ethos preached prosperity and status," and immortality was guaranteed if buried in the monuments of Highgate.[14] Even more than for the Georgians, death provided the Victorians with the definitive opportunity to make public statements about social

[11] Ibid, 198.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Paul Graves Brown ed., *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, (Oxford, UK: Routledge 2000), 114.
[14] Ibid, 116-117.

status and monetary value.[15] Richardson shares Thomas Laqueur's belief that death provided the perfect opportunity to display social standing. Richardson states: "The Victorian era was one with an obsessive interest in the gradations of social placing; and death served as a prime means of expressing, and of defining, social place."[16] While many of these practices were well in place before Victoria took the throne, the societal anxieties they reflect became fully identifiable as "Victorian."[17] In the Victorian period sanitary questions and anxieties replaced the Georgian fear surrounding body snatching. Did these concerns allow for the continuation of older protective burial technologies, with a different intended purpose? Did these technologies, consciously or subconsciously, also protect the living from the dead? As Richardson notes: "Almost all death customs appear to have been capable of operating on more than one level- to serve more than one need."[18]

The Victorian era (1837 to 1901) was characterized by the advancement of science and technology. The topic of death was a given serious contemplation and exploration. Richardson acknowledges the physicality of the human corpse; "it is a carcass, with a predisposition to decay, to become noisome, obnoxious to the senses and harrowing to the emotions. Disposal of such perishable remains is imperative."[19] Understanding when death officially occurs, preventing premature

[15] Ruth Richardson, "Why was death so big in Victorian Britain?," 106.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid, 107.

[18] Ibid, 8.

[19] Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute,*15.

decomposition, and treating corpses correctly were all topics that were seriously debated; this included considering the appropriate burial grounds, coffin technology, cremation, bodysnatching, dissection, and the overall mechanics of death. Health officials and the government instituted regulations and reforms, but the core of Victorian societal fears continued to persist.

In his work, *The Victorian Celebration of Death,* Curl focuses on anxieties surrounding the prevalence of corpses in burial grounds, "the churchyards became scenes of the most appalling horror, where bones would be heaped on bones, and partially rotted bodies would be disinterred to make way for a multitude of corpses…something had to be done in order that death could be celebrated in a hygienic and dignified manner in surroundings more fitting than the loathsome corruption of the churchyards…"[20] A crowded burial ground with decomposing bodies was increasingly seen as inappropriate in the Victorian period.

Not only an unpleasant sight, crowded graveyards also epitomized the Victorian fear of miasma. The concept of miasma was not developed during this time period, but miasma theory was used to explore the outbreaks of cholera in the 1830's and 1850's. Putrefaction or decomposition occurs immediately when a person passes for the body immediately begins to emit gases. The miasma theorists believed that it was possible to contract an illness or serious disease from the vapors and gases arising from decomposing

[20] James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death,* (Detroit: The Partridge Press, 1972), 53.

matter, especially fleshy matter or excrement.[21] Miasma was identifiable by a foul smell. "London Burials," published in 1851, mentions the "dreadful beyond all smells- to which that of a cesspool, it seems, is as rosewater in comparison, and which leaves in the mouth a coppery taste if you had been 'chewing a penny-piece'…"[22] Given the state of Victorian burial grounds, some sort of smell would have undeniably existed. Scientists and medical men of the day believed that those who lived in close proximity to decomposing material were at greater risk for infection.[23]

Miasma theory and the conditions of graveyards and churchyards are the two major reasons cited in the movement to eliminate interment within towns.[24] Edwin Chadwick, in 1843, disregarded miasma as an immediate "appreciable evil" in burial grounds. Chadwick's extensive reports as a Poor Law Commissioner concluded that the deadliest miasma emanates from the body within the first two days after death.[25] Chadwick advised that cemeteries maintain separate graves

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[21] Stephen Halliday, "Death And Miasma in Victorian London: An Obstinate Belief," *British Medical Journal* Vol. 323, No. 7327 (Dec. 22 - 29, 2001): 1469.

[22]"London Burials" in *London*, Ed. Charles Knight (London, UK: Henry G. Bohn, 1851), 167.

[23] For more information on miasma and the Victorian fixation of clean air see: James Cantlie's "Degeneration Amongst Londoners" and Lynda Nead's *Victorian Babylon*, Chapter 1 "Maps and Sewers."

[24] Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic- and How it Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World,* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 86.

[25] Mary Elizabeth Hotz, *Literary Remains: Representations of Death and Burial in Victorian England* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), 19.

at least six feet deep and, as Hotz states, provide "adequate space between them and a safe and protected distance from local habitations, morally uplifting visual arrangements, and careful attention to the cultivation of breathing spaces to disarm the effects of miasma."[26] John Claudius Loudon shared Chadwick's opinion about the placement of graves and urban graveyards. Loudon focused on the organization of space in London during the Victorian period and participated in a discussion concerning how cemeteries should be organized. Contrary to other figures of the day, Loudon recommended burials in airtight sealed coffins in vaults or catacombs. Loudon believed that managing a family grave was difficult because it was nearly impossible to allow the appropriate amount of earth between coffins. Six feet was the standard. If these standards were not respected they would prove harmful to the living, affecting their health and their feelings surrounding death. According to Curl, "Loudon defined the uses of a cemetery to include the disposal of the remains of the dead in such a manner as that their decomposition, and return to the earth from which they sprang, should not prove injurious to the living either by affecting their health, or 'shocking their feelings, opinions or prejudices.'"[27] Curl continues by summarizing how Loudon's beliefs were based on perceived real threats: "he recalled the several unpleasant incidents when coffins in the vaults of the new London cemeteries had exploded, and undertakers were sent for in order to re-solder the lead coffins to contain the corruption." Loudon's reference to this

[26] Ibid, 29.
[27] Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death,* 82.

type of corruption was clearly a description of the gases that are released during decomposition. Scientists and medical men of the Victorian era believed that these gases, if not handled correctly, could make a coffin explode and spread disease.[28]

Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* (1843) and the *Supplementary Report on Interments in Town* highlighted the societal fears surrounding "an exposed putrid body," that is decomposition and its potential ill effects. R.A. Lewis's expresses the anxiety: "London's two hundred graveyards gave off incessantly the exhalations of decay, and the morbific matter, whose deadliness was shown if it got into the slightest cut, might be breathed into the lungs when it was diffused into the atmosphere."[29] Chadwick enthusiastically believed that bodies should be buried outside the boundaries of towns: "all interments in towns, without exception must be prohibited. The joint stock cemeteries and the private grounds must be bought out. The churchyards must be closed, their sites being kept as open spaces for public use."[30] The condition of urban graveyards was no secret, those living close proximity to churchyards understood the severity of the problem. Lewis quotes a congregational minister, "More crowded even than the churchyards were the private cemeteries, usually the property of an undertaker, where…the soil was 'saturated and blackened with human remains and fragments of the dead' and 'the splash of water is heard from the graves, as the coffins descend, produc-

[28] Ibid.

[29] R.A Lewis, *Edwin Chadwick and the Public Health Movement 1832-1854* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1952), 67.

[30] Ibid, 73.

ing a shudder in every mourner.'"[31]

Reformers focused on sanitation, arguing for lightweight, perishable coffins. Strong, leaden coffins did not allow the earth access to the body. Reformers believed that if the body was placed directly in the ground decomposition would occur more rapidly with little to none pollution or spread of disease.[32] The rector of Mixbury in 1852, Revd William Jocelyn Palmer, upon his death requested that "my body may be buried in the Church Yard at Mixbury, in the plainest, commonest, and least expensive way, in a single coffin, made of elm board, and in a common grave, as near as may be to my dear son Thomas; without brick and mortar, except so much as shall be sufficient to give stability to a common head and foot stone."[33] Pat Jalland's research reveals countless examples of Victorians who preferred to move away from the heavy lead coffins. Simple graves were increasingly preferred over vaulted or brick graves, lead coffins were seen as too heavy, and new perishable coffin technologies were developed.[34] Miasma was a constant fear; an earth burial would allow for decomposition to occur quickly.

Sanitary concerns became the driving force in the death culture of health- minded middle-class Victorians. The middle to late 19th century saw significant changes in the way that corpses were dealt with after death, as well as in funeral and burial arrangements. Reformers were particularly concerned with the rate at

[31] Ibid.

[32] Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 202.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

which bodies decompose and the protection of the public. Consequently, urban graveyards and churchyards and aristocratic burial technology and architecture (mausoleums and tombs) fell under suspicion.

George Alfred Walker, in an 1842 article, comments on the "entire absence of every precaution" when placing corpses beneath churches and burying corpses in densely populated burial grounds. Walker focused on the reality of burials in common burial places: "bodies are placed one above another, and side by side, to the depth of twenty-five or thirty feet, the topmost coffins being but a few inches from the surface."[35] Walker shared Chadwick's belief that bodies should be placed six feet below the ground for proper and safe decomposition to occur. Walker also disregarded the popular belief that lead provided an extra layer of protection for the health of the public. Walker warned that when decomposition was slowed "under a medium temperature, as in vaults, the expansive force of the gas is such, that the lids of coffins frequently become convex, and sometimes are rent asunder, and the gases thus and otherwise disengaged become diffused and mixed with the atmosphere, and enter the lungs in every inspiration."[36]

As mentioned above, Chadwick's *Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843) reveals his enthusiastic belief that corpses should not be interred within the boundaries of cities. Chadwick participated

[35] George Alfred Walker, "Burials," *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal (1840-1842)* Vol. 3, No. 26 (Mar. 26, 1842): 520.

[36] Ibid.

in multiple interviews with undertakers and those involved in the process of interring or entombing a corpse to further investigate and provide evidence for his beliefs. Chadwick comments on gases seeping out of coffins, from vaults or underground, and the existence of miasma in graveyards: "The occurrence of cases of instant death to grave diggers, from accidentally inhaling the concentrated miasma which escapes from coffins, is undeniable. Slower deaths from exposure to such miasma are designated as 'low fevers'… [so] that the exposure to that influence is apt to produce grievous and fatal injuries amongst the public."[37]

The possibility of a leaden coffin bursting in the vaults of cemeteries and churchyards was of major concern, "The inquiry brought forward instances of the bursting of some leaden coffins and the escape of mephitic vapor in the catacombs…of two laborers having been injured, apparently by digging amidst some impure water which drained from some graves."[38]Victorians feared that miasma could potentially poison the air they breathed, and as Chadwick reveals, they feared the possibility of miasma contaminating the water sources of the cities:

> The regulation of the depth of the graves has been found to be a subject requiring great

[37] Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain. A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns. Made at the Request of her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department* (London, UK: W. Clowes and Sons, 1843), 15-16.

[38] Ibid, 27.

> attention, to avoid occasioning too rapid an evolution of miasma from the remains, and at the same time to avoid its retention and corruption, to avoid the pollution of distant springs, and also to avoid rendering increased space for burial requisite by the delay of decomposition usually produced by deep burial for the ground usually becomes hard in proportion to the depth, and delays the decomposition.[39]

Chadwick fervently believed that cemeteries should be moved outside the limits of the city and a considerable distance from people, but if bodies were to remain within the limits of the city then a depth regulation needed to be put in place.

> That inasmuch as there appear to be no cases in which the emanations from human remains in an advanced stage of decomposition are not of a deleterious nature, so there is no case in which the liability to danger should be incurred either by interment (or by entombment in vaults, which is most dangerous) amidst the dwellings of the living, it being established as a general conclusion in respect to the physical circumstances of interment, from which no adequate grounds of exception have been established. That all interments in towns where bodies decompose, contribute to the mass of atmospheric impurity which is injurious to the public health.[40]

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[39] Ibid, 128.
[40] Ibid, 31.

Chadwick alludes to the belief that entombment in vaults is most dangerous. In the early pages of his report, Chadwick discusses the prevalence of miasma and effluvia in churchyards and whether it was detectable. Chadwick states: "Another surgeon who had lived for many years near a churchyard in the metropolis, and had never observed any effluvia from it, neither did he perceive any effects of such emanations at church or anywhere else; yet he admitted that his wife perceived the openings of vaults when she went to the church to which the graveyard belonged, and after respiring the air there, would say, 'they have opened a vault,' and on inquiry, the fact proved to be so."[41] Vaults and tombs were believed to be the most dangerous form of burial because they did not allow for the effluvia, miasma, and decomposition gases to dissipate.

Chadwick also discusses the question of leaden coffins. He states: "The retention of bodies in leaden coffins in vaults is objected to, as increasing the noxiousness of the gases, which sooner or later escape, and when in vaults beneath churches, create a miasma which is apt to escape through the floor, whenever the church is warmed…"[42] Chadwick continues, "burial in lead, as well as in other expensive coffins, appears to be generally promoted by the undertakers, to whom they are the most profitable," insinuating that Victorian fears were encouraged in order to profit undertakers.[43] Removing corpses from the city provided Victorians with a possible solution to

[41] Chadwick, "Report on Sanitary Conditions," 4.
[42] Ibid, 135.
[43] Ibid, 136.

the injurious effects of miasma and the decomposition of corpses. Chadwick's wish was granted; in March of 1842 "a Select Committee" was established to consider the development of legislation to "remedy the evils arising from the interment of bodies within the precincts of large towns, or of places densely populated."[44]

The "Lectures on Public Hygiene and Medical Police," delivered by James Black at the Manchester Royal School of Medicine and Surgery in the summer of 1844 summarizes Victorian fears of the decomposing corpse. Similar to Chadwick, Black calls into question the existence of miasma in burial grounds: "It is difficult in every case to determine the exact amount, if any, of the injurious effects on health that result from living near or in the immediate vicinity of burial grounds…but where there are any exhalations ascertained to arise from such places, we may infer upon sound theory, that they must have a positively noxious effect."[45] Black emphasizes that burial grounds should be placed outside of towns and "at a distance from springs and rivers that are subject to overflow."[46] Additionally, the depth of the grave needs to be taken into consideration, "If they are deeper, the decomposition is retarded from the total exclusion of the air and heat; and if at a less depth, they would

[44]J. Ingham Ikin, "On the progress of Public Hygiene and Sanitary Legislation," *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal (1844-1852)* Vol. 15, No.19 (Sep.17, 1851): 568.

[45] James Black, "Lectures on Public Hygiene and Medical Police," *The Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal* Lecture IV (September 25, 1844): 394.

[46] Ibid.

allow the exhalations from the corpses to permeate the earth easily, and thus infect the atmosphere."[47]

Similar to Walker and Chadwick, the article published in *The Lancet*, "Progressive Closure of Graveyards," in 1849, stresses urgency that "a proper outlet for our enormous mortality ought instantly to be found."[48] Churches were perceived as both a positive and negative location for the burial of a corpse, the positive being the church is a place of worship, and the negative being the church as a place "of pollution by festering bodies of the dead in the vaults beneath."[49] The church was likened to a hospital during the ongoing cholera epidemic, the "death dust" from the tombs arising from beneath the church and affecting the worshipers. *The Lancet* provides a clear articulation of the belief that burials above ground were harmful to society: "During the present frightful mortality [cholera] some mode and place of interment must be found, not more expensive or onerous to the poor than the present method of burial. Otherwise, the most fearful results may be expected. We shall have dead bodies accumulating *intra muros* above ground, instead of beneath it, and we need not say which is more baleful alternative."[50] This suggests that earthen burial and above ground burial were both feared, but that "*intra muros*" (above ground) burial might be the more feared method of the two.

Waller Lewis inspected vaults in 1849 and 1850 throughout London; his main objective was to further

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[47] Ibid.

[48] "Progressive Closure of Graveyards," *The Lancet* (September 15, 1849): 298.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

understand how a body decomposed within an above ground burial receptacle. In 1849, with the cholera epidemic in full swing, the General Board of Health prohibited burials within a vault or mausoleum unless in an "air-tight leaden coffin."[51] An objective of the General Board of Health was to understand the ways in which a decomposing body's gases distribute, "To observe how the dead man strives, after his fashion, to escape from his subterranean imprisonment with greater force than ever in life he could have exerted to tear asunder galling manacles, or burst through dungeon walls."[52] It was believed that the gases released during decomposition were strong enough to burst through cement and brick. Like Chadwick and Walker, Lewis hoped for "the practice of entombment in receptacles" to be prohibited and vaults to be closed forever.[53]

The General Board of Health's findings on extramural interments provided Lewis a context to begin his inspections of the churchyard vaults throughout London and the possibly ill effects of confining a body undergoing decomposition.

> Do the members of the Board of Health know what sort of substances they seek to confine, when they put a corpse weighing some eight or ten stone, into a box of sheet-lead closely soldered down? Are they acquainted with the seventeen or eighteen chemical elements of

[51] Waller Lewis M.B., F.G.S, "On the Chemical and General Effects of the Practice of Interment in Vaults and catacombs," *The Lancet* Vol. 58, Issue 1458. (1851): 125.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

> which the human body is built up, and with the influences of confinement on the putrefactive combinations of these elements? Have they considered how, and by what process that decomposition takes place, which leaves at the end of ten years only, a few brittle bones in the else vacant shroud? And are they aware of the terrible retribution with which nature will punish the violation of her law, if they persist in obstructing with leaden barriers the corporeal absorption of the dead?[54]

Lewis suggested that the Board of Health was not fully enlightened of the affects of decomposition and what can happen if the noxious gases are confined. The absence of air does not stop the process of decomposition, and by withholding air from the decomposing corpse the chemicals released will create a gaseous poison so intense that "their mere contact with mucus surface of the body may occasion sudden death."[55] Earthen burial is the solution. Lewis argued it provided a safe decomposition if the corpse is buried at the appropriate depth.

Lewis's investigations yielded no evidence that the air around vaults was contaminated with harmful gases. However, the gases released within coffins were unpredictable enough that the practice of interment in vaults should be eliminated. Additionally, coffins do not consistently bulge by the expansion of elastic fluids within. However, leaden coffins did slow the decomposition of a corpse: "In my opinion, the fact

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

that coffins so rarely become bulged is to be ascribed to the great porosity of the metal employed, when slightly bulged, the lead, from being thinner before, becomes more pervious to the contained air."[56]

Lewis' conclusions were as follows: 1) Internment in vaults should no longer be permitted. "No good object is gained by this practice. The corpse so treated are by this means converted into so many active volcanoes, constantly emitting poisonous effluvia into the atmosphere, for an indefinite period." 2) No one should have access to "these receptacles" after a certain amount of time for "after a certain interval, during which friends or relatives should have the power of removing any coffins from the vaults to the public cemeteries, all these receptacles should be hermetically closed and future access thereto forbidden." 3) Lead coffins should be banned, not for their purpose, but for their cost; "they only add to the exorbitant charges of undertakers. Until a very late period they were constantly stolen from the vaults, emptied of their contents and sold as old lead." 4) Bodies should be able to decompose in peace, "[I]f the object of interment is to allow the human body, after it has served a purpose here, to return speedily as possibly to its elements, and to become perfectly inert, it should be placed in a light wooden coffin, from 5 to 8 feet deep, in suitable pervious soil."[57]

In the spring of 1856 *The British Medical* journal published a question and answer section in which the following subject was discussed, the discontinuation of vaults beneath Westminster. However, one exception

[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

still remained for privileged parties: "that the bodies buried be embedded in a layer of powdered charcoal, six inches at least in thickness."[58] Why charcoal? Charcoal, as with lead, was believed to absorb the "deleterious gases arising from the decaying body," but little substantial evidence supported this belief the editor states. In 1864 *The Lancet* published "The Interment of the Dead" a letter to the editor, discussing the use of lead in burials; "Burials in lead, in vaults, and in catacombs are another cause of annoyance and injury to the public. The lead coffins burst, or are perforated. In both cases they continue, for a long time, to be vomitories of stench, contagion, and disease."[59] The correspondence was signed, "your obedient servant, a sufferer from the evil complained of." The writer claimed that he had suffered from the decomposition of dead bodies and general death customs of the time.

For the majority of British history it was commonplace for some corpses to be buried beneath the church and in the surrounding churchyard. During the Victorian period this traditional practice came under fire.[60] In 1882 *The British Medical Journal* published "Unsanitary Burials in Churches," which stated: "The churchwardens, or, at any rate, those who carried out the work, ought to have known that gases readily pass through most kinds of bricks, and, if

[58] "Powdered Charcoal in Church Vaults," *Association Medical Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 172 (Apr. 19, 1856): 319.

[59] "The Interment of the Dead, To the Editor of the Lancet," *The Lancet,* (Nov. 5, 1864): 534.

[60] Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings, *Death In England: An Illustrated History,* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 193.

under pressure (as in the case of a decomposing body in a wooden coffin), will also find their way through a thin layer of concrete."[61] If burials beneath churches were dangerous to the churchgoers (which was believed before the publishing of this article in 1882,) where were the dying practitioners to be buried? Those who were well off left the churchyard and buried loved ones in brick-lined shafts, mausolea, and vaults on their own property or in the national cemeteries.[62]

As in the Georgian period, above ground burial technology was used in the Victorian period to denote social standing and perpetuate societal class boundaries. The intended use of mausoleums, tombs and church vaults was also to further protect the corpse from the living (body snatchers, anatomists, etc.). From the primary sources I have provided, I have not found substantial evidence to suggest that these technologies were ever used to protect the living from the dead. But rather, with Victorian sanitary obsessions, these technologies began to cause more fear for the living. However, certain coffin technologies (lead linings) were developed throughout the Georgian and Victorian periods in the hope of protecting the living from the dead. The middle to late Victorian period saw the rise in new beliefs surrounding fleshy decomposition. Reformers and health officials, as well as the public, began to focus on rapid decomposition, having the corpse return to the earth as quickly as possible. The use of triple layer coffins, lead, and airtight coffins would not allow for a rapid decomposition. Light

[61] "Unsanitary Burials In Churches," *The British Medical Journal* Vol. 2, No. 1141 (November 11 1882): 955.

[62] Jupp, *Death in England*, 193.

wooden coffins and more natural forms of burial began to appear, for the coffin disintegrated rapidly the corpse would do the same.

In the early Victorian period Chadwick and other prominent health reformers of the time believed that corpses should be moved outside the boundaries of the city. But if that was not possible, all corpses should be buried in strong, leaden, airtight coffins. Throughout the Victorian era continued, evidence mounted against aristocratic forms of burial; in tombs, church vaults, and other above ground burial technologies, they were believed to further harm the population due to their explosive nature. Rapid and more natural forms of burial began to be favored in the middle to late Victorian period. For example lightweight, perishable coffins placed directly in the earth would guarantee a quick disposal of the dead. As mentioned above, Chadwick states: "The retention of bodies in leaden coffins in vaults is objected to, as increasing the noxiousness of the gases, which sooner or later escape, and when in vaults beneath churches, create a miasma which is apt to escape through the floor, whenever the church is warmed…"[63] For the majority of the Victorian period, the movement of graveyards outside the boundaries of the city was seen as the foolproof solution to the sanitary and spatial concerns.

As the Victorian period was coming to a close, cremation gained popularity as an additional solution to harmful decomposing corpses that might infect the population. Sir Henry Thompson, Queen Victoria's surgeon, and his medical colleagues, developed the Cremation Society of Great Britain in 1874 the hope of

[63] Chadwick, "Report on Sanitary Conditions," 135.

persuading the public that cremation was the best solution for a speedy decomposition and disposal of corpses.[64] In terms of burial sites, cremation eliminated the monumentality that was popular during the Georgian and Victorian periods. "The Progress of Cremation," published in 1889 by *The British Medical Journal,* alluded to the "disadvantages" of interment in burial grounds. If directly pointed to the possible sanitary and health predicaments; "Accept the practice (cremation) as one of great advantage to the community…by requiring that their ashes shall be cremated, instead of their bodies being disposed of by interment, of which the disadvantages have repeatedly been pointed out by eminent authorities."[65] Cremating a corpse eliminated the process of decomposition and solved the problem of having too many corpses and not enough burial land.

Stoker uses *Dracula* to comment on the Victorian funeral practices. The story alludes to the transitions Victorian society was experiencing. Hotz states that Stoker "collapses the boundaries between the living and the dead in order to problematize England's sense of itself as a civilized, rational, and progressive nation; and he insists, paradoxically, that despite enormous efforts to contain and confine the corpse, it remains, ultimately, restless in Victorian culture to remind society of its essential and educative role in modernity."[66]

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[64] Sir Henry Thompson, *Cremation: The Treatment of the Body After Dead* 3rd Ed. (London: Smith, Elder, &Co., 1884), 1-39.

[65] "The Progress of Cremation," *The British Medical Journal* Vol.1 No. 1477 (April 20 1889): 905.

[66] Hotz, *Literary Remains,* 153.

Throughout this paper I have seen significant transitions that took place during this period: from tombs and mausoleums and airtight leaden coffins, to the perception that these technologies actually could harm the public more than a corpse buried in the earth, to the resurgence of natural burial and the development of cremation, all these transitions signified the evolving Victorian perception of death and how the body and corpse could be treated. Understanding the way that a society approaches the treatment of a life event such as death allows us to understand other aspects of that society. The evolution of the treatment of the corpse exemplifies Victorian society struggling for a proper, scientific form of disposal of the dead, while still accommodating the display of social class.

Maxine DeVincenzi transferred to Santa Clara University as a History and Anthropology major in 2009. SCU's History and Anthropology departments provided her with many opportunities to explore her true interests within both disciplines. Maxine's senior capstone, "Protecting the Dead or Protecting the Living? Above Ground Interment in Georgian (1714-1830) and Victorian Britain (1837-1901)," is the result of her research and exploration in the way in which people of the past approached and dealt with death.