Dying the Bad Death: Critique of the Suicide Burial in Robert Southey's "The Cross Roads"

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: Mistreatment of the body following a stigmatized death is a culturally relevant issue that disproportionately affects marginalized groups. Robert Southey's work in "The Cross Roads" details the life and death of a young working class woman through a folkloric retelling of her murder. In this work, I curate a historical review of the period's values regarding stigmatized death, including the religious attitudes towards suicide and domestic homicide. The previous historical review is then put into dialogue with Southey's work to fully contextualize his criticism of the crossroad burial practice. Moving forward, research may be applied to literary works outside of the 18th-century Graveyard poetry movement to fully understand how and why working-class bodies are mistreated in life and death.

What happens to our minds after we die is a conversation debated widely in the poetic arts. Some, however, are more concerned with what happens to the body after death. Mortuary practices -- the disposal of the post-mortem body -- reveals the culture's views on life, death, and morals tied to the process of dying. Studying literature depicting different mortuary practices allows the scholar to piece together a perspective of a culture's values and beliefs.

Robert Southey's "The Cross Roads" serves as a staunch criticism of imbalanced power dynamics between gendered laboring classes in life and death. Southey reveals an insidious cultural disregard for the well-being of vulnerable populations through the unexpected death of a parish girl and her roadside burial, a period-typical burial for perpetrators of suicide. The historical analysis conducted in this work explores the English cultural view of domestic homicide and suicide in the 18th century. The cultural misrepresentation of domestic homicide leads to the parish girl's marking as a perpetrator of suicide. I primarily draw historical context from Robert Halliday's "The Roadside Burial of Suicides: An East Anglian Study" and J.A. Sharpe's "Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England," along with theoretical explorations of the literary supernatural and the period's attitudes towards women, death, and the macabre from other sources.

Suicide in the 18th century was heavily stigmatized. The suicide taboo is rooted in religious ideology, resulting in legal and social consequences to those who had committed suicide (Halliday 83). Violence against the self was deemed to be "worse than murder," – to die by suicide would be "[an offense] against God, against the king, and against nature" (Halliday 82). Roland Bartel's "Suicide in Eighteenth-Century England" notes the disdain Robert Blair and Edward Young, the well-read Graveyard poets, held towards suicide (147). Those who 'committed' -- or, rather, 'died by'-- suicide were deemed as the felo-de-se, or "the felon of the self" (Halliday 82). The perpetrator of suicide can be excused of their crimes through unsoundness of the mind, "[the distraction of] sickness, grief, infirmity, accident, [or young age]"

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(82). Many were not afforded this right, as the sin of violence against the self far-outweighed forgiveness. In the eyes of the law and the public, to die by suicide is to assert one's will over the natural order of power and life.

Prior to the ballad's formal beginning in the Voller text, Southey claims the versified retelling of a conversation he had with an individual who was present at the crossroad burial in Bristol, making the poem quasi-biographical (211). Due to the constraints of undergraduate research, inaccessibility of archival records, and the taboo surrounding the parish girl's death, Southey's statement cannot be verified within this paper. Regardless of the truth behind its inspiration, "The Cross Roads" brings a needed perspective of class and gender to the discussion of mortuary practices. For additional clarity in the literary analysis, it should be noted Southey refers to the ballad's characters by physical characteristics or occupation, rather than assigning them names.

Southey deters from the cultural discussion of violence by placing the parish girl a victim rather than an actor of violence, whether that be to the patriarch or herself. Due to the lack of legal intervention to ensure the safety of traveling workers, traveling workers relied upon the kindness of strangers to ensure they have a somewhat consistent income and a roof over their head. Choosing to portray the murdered servant as a young, female, domestic laborer calls to attention the intersectional identity in which she has a higher risk of violence. Some readers may be tempted to read the gendering of the parish girl and her status as a single woman to invoke paternalistic feelings of protection and empathy. However, this reading overlooks the capacity in which the parish girl serves as a representational figure for vulnerable populations wronged by legal institutions and the cultural landscape.

In assigning the parish girl's victimhood, Southey removes the responsibility of violence from her hands, and distributes blame to parties holding the most power within the social order. The male employer and the legal system – who did not bring her justice with their refusal to ensure proper body burial -- are the entities that had enacted violence. Southey reframes violence in a way that disrupts the conversation of suicide and domestic homicide in the English literary history rather than engaging in narratives that shame individuals in vulnerable social positions.

Southey structures the ballad as a dialogue between two male characters of varying positions in society. They are all referred to by their positions of employment or a gendered marker, and not given names in the duration of the ballad. The storyteller is an older man whose occupation relies on his manual labor, while the younger man is a traveling soldier. The two share their lunch against a post in the highway road, the soldier wishing to rest his "sorely prest shoulders" (Southey, line 28). Long mornings of labor and travel have led to a sense of comradery in a moment of reprieve.

Prior to this point in the ballad, there had been no mention of the parish girl. She only becomes relevant as the two men rest upon her grave -- the stake acting as her grave marker. The old man begins the story of the parish girl with the story of her burial,

There's a poor girl buried here,
Beneath this very place,
The earth upon her corpse is pressed,
This post was driven into her breast,
And a stone is on her face. (Southey, lines 41-45)

The "poor girl", later referred to as the parish girl, is first introduced based on how her body is buried. The sensationalization of the crossroad burial takes priority over who she was in life, or even the story of her death. The old man places her in a passive position within her own death. The post is driven through her. A stone is placed on her face. In each phrase, the burial is done to her rather than her bringing this upon herself. The passivity in the language surrounding her burial foreshadows the parish girl's role as a victim rather than a perpetrator of suicide.

"Prest" and "pressed" are used for both the soreness of the soldier's shoulders and the earth on top of her corpse. There is a connection between the living laboring body and the corpse of the laboring body. The body is a subtle yet important theme within "The Cross Roads", as the description of the body and face are used to infer behaviors and moral implications of

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Southey's characters. The laboring body, in life and death, is placed in a position of discomfort. Violence is committed on both parties through their occupation; the parish girl having been murdered by her employer, and the soldier enduring physical exhaustion because of the labor he performs. The parish girl's body does not receive rest in her burial, as the way her body is positioned is an act of violence in itself. The parish girl's body is penetrated by the stake and the stone on her face conceals her identity, reducing her to a body covered in dirt with no grave marker. The laboring body is put in a position of further discomfort due to death; this, however, does not erase the discomfort experienced in life.

The parish girl had fled from her previous employers, as she had been working in "service hard" (Southey, line 83). "Service hard" may be a reference to the labor she had performed in a literal sense, or possibly her treatment at the hand of her previous employers. Regarding the normalization of violence against women and workers in the household, the parish girl was likely to be a victim of violence in some form, whether that be physical or emotional. As a female laborer, the parish girl was offered minimal to no legal protections based on sex and class.

The cycle of abuse continues when the parish girl is introduced to "that house in evil day" (Southey line 83). The parish girl settles into the farm owned by a cruel man and his even crueler mother. The inclusion of the mother as an unsafe figure nods toward the antagonistic role women occupy in murder ballads of the period, as previously discussed in Sharpe and Kane's works. While the mother is described as "worse" than her son (Southey line 91), the male employer occupies more narrative space. Southey describes him at length in lines 88 through 90:

> Passion made his cheek grow deadly white
> And his grey eyes were large and light,
> And in anger they grew red.

When describing the body, Southey employs the use of color and charged language, invoking a sense of terror through visualization. The man's vices manifest in how he carries himself. His anger is reflected in his eyes, grey becoming red under the influence of such a strong emotion. The discoloration of his face is an effect of passion. The use of the word "passion" – rather than 'rage' or 'fury' as synonyms of anger – points to a more sinister, eroticized image. His passions are left ambiguous; however, the evil he carries with him is now marked with both fury and a staunchly negative sensuality. The male employer's primal emotions distort the traits that would have affirmed his humanity.

The reference to the male employer's sexuality is particularly concerning when looking at the various dynamics unfolding within the home. The male employer has no wife or romantic prospects mentioned, but he does have a physical proximity to a young woman with only one confidant - already marked as an equally unsafe individual – in the home. That confidant being his ill-tempered mother does not bode well for the future of the parish girl. The lack of virtuous traits and physically intimidating nature of the male employer lead both storytellers – Southey and the lounging old man – to believe the male employer is responsible for the parish girl's death.

Unlike the heavy taboo surrounding suicide in the eighteenth century, domestic homicide is a crime the public seemed to be less concerned about on a moral level. According to Stuart A. Kane's "Wives with Knives: Early Modern Murder Ballads and the Transgressive Commodity", ballads detailing the trope of the "murderous wife" surged in popularity. The "murderous wife" trope marks a cultural interest in macabre crimes of women in the domestic space (221). J.A. Sharpe's study, "Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England", is primarily concerned with correcting the narrative surrounding domestic homicide in the late 17th and early 18th century. Sharpe's historicism is useful in establishing the reality of domestic homicide and the depictions of such in popular literature pre-dating Southey's ballad. The evidence reflects a large portion of domestic homicide victims operated closely with the household but were not of the immediate family. Overwhelmingly, those targeted in domestic violence were apprentices and servants of the home. The evidence reflects a large portion of domestic homicide victims were apprentices and servants of the home (Sharpe 38). The perpetrators of domestic violence

doi: 10.29173/spectrum225

were typically the patriarch of the home, killing their apprentice or employee (Sharpe 41) The statistics call attention to a violent power dynamic in which the worker faces physical and emotional violence at the hands of the employer.

Kane's legal historicism affirms both the absence of protection for the victims of domestic violence and the villainization of vulnerable populations when committing domestic violence (221-224). Violence against the household's patriarch was conceptualized as an unthinkable act; however, violence against women and workers would have been permissible. When examining the dynamics between the three parties, women and workers were in a position where they were legally and socially viewed as property to the patriarch/employer. Those in vulnerable social positions are only discussed when they are in positions of criminality, erasing the very real danger the patriarch of the home possesses in domesticity.

The farm where the family and the servant had lived is worn-down by nature, the man-made structure becoming dilapidated over time. Described over various points of the poem (Southey lines 75-80, 95-100), the dwelling gains its importance as a scene of violence. What used to be the man and his mother's farm is, at the time of the old man's story, taken over by nature. Rotting and neglected, the abandoned home reflects the energy of the violence that had taken place. The isolated stable serves as the perfect place to commit a crime – private, remote, and distant from the community. The parish girl is found dead a year into her service with the man and his mother. The parish girl is discovered "stiff as a corpse and cold as clay" (Southey line 104). The parish girl's lifelessness is emphasized through alliteration and metaphor.

In death, the parish girl is cold to the touch. By using the word "clay" to describe the parish girl's corpse, Southey may be referencing the malleable nature of her death. The parish girl's life and death are reported through a spectator, her murder is disguised by her employer's household, and her death is not investigated further by the legal system. The story surrounding the parish girl's death is molded to suit the motives and desires of others. The parish girl is continuously shown to be in positions in which she cannot advocate for herself. The literature reflects the historical period's attitudes as previously established within the analysis presented, as workers are put in positions in which they must prioritize their income over their safety and well-being. When looking at the intersection of identities with the parish girl, female workers face the same violence, with the added stressors of misogyny and sexualized violence.

The coroner acts as another perpetrator of violence against the parish girl. While the old man is still framed as the storyteller, Southey's narrative briefly shifts to depict the legal and social discourse surrounding the parish girl's death. He describes,

And there were strange reports about;
But still the coroner found
That she by her own hand had died,
And should be buried by the way-side,
And not in Christian ground (Southey lines 110-115).

The isolated nature of her death, in addition to the well-known morality --or lack thereof-- of the man/her employer, creates controversy among the village. "Strange reports" references the use of gossip and storytelling in the wake of her murder. In spite of the talk surrounding the parish girl's death, the coroner rules her death a suicide. The parish girl is marked as a perpetrator of suicide, the felo de se. Not given the grace of "acting unsure of the mind", the coroner guarantees the highway burial; her body is to be abandoned under the dirt of the crossroad. As a result of the legal neglect, passive violence is enacted against the laboring body.

Edward Umfreville's Lex Coronatoria: Or, the Office and Duty of Coroners (1761) establishes the philosophy and obligations of the coroner regarding suspicious death. Those accused of dying by suicide could not be buried in consecrated ground. The perpetrator of suicide, with few exceptions, would be buried at the meeting of the crossroads or a public highway (Umfreville 9). The body of a perpetrator of suicide is described as a "nuisance to innocent society" (8), thus justifying the isolation from sacred grounds. The parish girl is marked as a perpetrator of suicide in the legal world, despite the people of the village having doubts and suspicions

doi: 10.29173/spectrum225

of the circumstances surrounding her death.

In reference to the historical context of domestic homicide, it is unlikely that the male employer would face the full legal consequences associated with murder. Both figures of the worker and the woman were viewed as property in relation to the patriarch of the home, rather than having agency and control as individuals. The lack of proper investigation into the parish girl's death is a moment in which the nature of the society, at the point of writing, is revealed. The death of a young woman with no assets or connections beyond the work she performs does not warrant the waste of time, energy, and resources. It would be easy and efficient to simply declare her death a suicide. Southey's depiction of the coroner comments on the disregard of vulnerable populations in the English legal system.

Justice for the dead is not necessary when the dead are displaced workers, as there are no family or strong connections to advocate for the proper treatment of their body. This may also be a commentary on how the displaced workers are forced to approach labor and living. Due to the lack of legal intervention to ensure the safety of traveling workers, the travel worker is forced to rely upon the kindness of strangers to ensure they have a somewhat consistent income and a roof over their head. In life and death, the laborer must seek out advocates on their behalf, or face consequences that put their safety and/or spiritual salvation at risk.

The old man acted as a witness to the parish girl's burial in his youth. She was no longer the parish girl who had worked among them during the year's passage. The young parish girl had been marked as a perpetrator of suicide and, thus, the spectatorship of her burial rites became a socially permissible act. The funeral rites, or rather the lack of, the parish girl became a spectacle among the village people. This in part may be due to the unusual nature of the highway burial. The highway burial is a trek to the middle of the crossroads and, due to the nature of religious rejection, there are no formal words to wish the dead into a peaceful afterlife. The cold departure to the world, as previously discussed, is a result of the mortal sin the perpetrator of suicide is accused of committing.

The language surrounding the parish girl's body changes following the coroner's ruling of suicide. The old man describes her corpse, carried away on a board;

Her face was of a dark dark red
Her eyes were starting wide:
I think they could not have been closed
So widely did they strain (Southey, lines 124-127).

Color returns to the parish girl's body, which had previously been described as "stiff" and "cold". While this phrase could allude to the natural bruising process the body experiences after death, it is worth analyzing this phrase within the greater context of the parish girl's story. Red is utilized only twice in the poem. The first instance is the description of the changing color of the employer's eyes in his fits of rage, and the other being the parish girl during the transportation of her corpse. The previous example is linked to an eroticized rage. As the two are linked through the usage of color associated with passion, Southey worryingly implies sexual misconduct. As the narrative confirms the employer to be an individual of moral deficiency, the corpse's unrest could be due to an unthinkable harm, in addition to the brutality of her murder.

The body of the parish girl only changes color after the accuse of suicide. The use of red to describe the parish girl's face could be a reaction of rage and refusal to the accusation of self-violence. The phrase is followed by another folkloric superstition – the "belief a victim's body can reveal its murderer's identity" (Campion-Vincent, 13). Véronique Campion-Vincent's "The Tell-Tale Eye" explores the phenomenon in which medical and criminological professionals believed photos of the murder victim's retina would reveal the murderer in their last moments of life and the superstitions that likely motivated their belief. Eyes staring ahead with a morbid purpose, the parish girl may be trying to accuse the murderer from beyond the grave.

Justice was not given through the legal system but delivered to some extent through metaphysical means. The parish girl lived on in a haunting memory, instilling the old man with a sublime horror to be carried with him well out of his youth. The old man claims to still relive "the ghastly sight" (Southey line 128) in

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dreams. Southey blends the metaphysical and the natural world several times within the ballad. This may be an instance where the natural decaying process of the body is mistaken for the folkloric supernatural, as the old man is narrating from a more rural perspective. As Southey continues to affirm the beliefs of the rural over the more technical legal world, as seen in the disagreement between the townsfolk gossip and the coroner, it may not be a mistaken perspective. Southey continues to employ cultural superstition and images to signal a moral failure regarding the treatment of women and workers.

Ghosts, magic, and other supernatural beings haunt the English imagination. Supernatural beings are found throughout English literature, in which many ghostly themes and scenes having been borrowed from the folklore of Western Europe. Martin Puhvel's "The Mystery of the Crossroads" examines the supernatural throughout various Western European stories. Puhvel notes the crossroad burial may have confused the spirit, drawing it away from the village. (173). When presenting "The Cross Roads" in The Graveyard School, Voller theorizes the crossroad burial carried a folkloric purpose, preventing the dead from rising (210). The crossroad served as a folkloric haunted scene before Southey's work, which makes the presence of ghosts within his tale not completely unexpected.

Southey does not dismiss the existence of spirits, including commentary on a ghostly afterlife presented by his village narrator. Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks' Insistence of Horror traces horror, terror, and aspects of supernatural belief in English literature of the 18th century. Throughout the works of the eighteenth century, the figure of ghost is utilized as an imaginative tool building off a cultural fascination with the macabre, unbound from strict rules or thematic formulas found in religious stories (Spacks 68). Southey utilizes the accepted cultural notion of guilt manifesting into an unrested spirit. Operating under Spack's theorized function of the ghost, the lack of the spectral figure can be seen as a restfulness of the soul.

There is a haunting "beneath the church-tree's yard / . . . wherein that man is laid" (Southey, lines 66-70). The man buried in the churchyard cemetery had the right to be buried in the churchyard, as he was not branded a perpetrator of suicide. Southey assigns spiritual unrest to an individual who did not commit suicide. The churchyard ghost subverts the cultural and religious expectations of dying "a good death", as a supposedly proper death still condemns the ghost to an afterlife of hauntings. While Southey does not staunchly defend the perpetrator of suicide within the ballad, an individual who died by suicide is not painted in a villainous or monstrous light. The lack of characters who died by suicide within the text – in which a supposed suicide is the catalyst of conflict – places the criticism on the society which negatively reacts to suicide, as opposed to people who died by suicide.

The poem's closing stanza calls back to the parish girl's burial. The old man closes the parish girl's story in the same way it began. The old man says,

They laid her where these four roads meet,
Here in this very place,
The earth upon her corpse was pressed,
This post was driven into her breast,
And a stone is on her face (Southey, lines 130-135).

Knowing the full story behind the parish girl's death brings a quiet sense of horror to this stanza. The parish girl was laid to rest at the meeting place of the crossroads on a false charge, driven away from the place she had lived. Southey utilizes linguistic tools to further communicate the old man's distress surrounding her death. The use of anapestic substitution in the last two lines allude to delayed speech through rhythm. The changing of tense between the last three lines creates a sense of finality, or perhaps resignation to life's cycle. Revisiting the symbolism of the burial itself, a post was driven into her body to prevent an unrested spirit from rising and a stone was placed over her face. A post was used to physically tie her body to the ground, reinforcing her position as a female worker who did not have full agency within the social order. The stone on her face covered her wide and accusatory eyes, that presumably could not have been closed even during the burial process. In covering the tall-tale eyes and staking the parish girl into the ground, they are effectively silencing her ability to speak even in death. As customary with the crossroad burial, the

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parish girl was shunned from consecrated land and denied a Christian funeral. The parish girl is barred from dying the death she had deserved after living in accordance to the virtues demanded out of her.

The parish girl's status as the perpetrator of suicide is yet another way she is victimized. The crossroad burial is a manifestation of the cultural disregard that had led to the death of the perpetrator of suicide, ensuring victimhood in life and death. Southey resists the antagonistic culture of the perpetrator of suicide by painting the accused parish girl as a figure worthy of sympathy. This also makes a statement against the injustice the laboring class faces at the hands of their employers. Both the victim of domestic homicide and the perpetrator of suicide are neglected members of vulnerable populations, cast aside until a malefactor – whether that be committed by the patriarch/employer of the self or the larger legal institutions – had the opportunity to commit an act of violence. In analyzing literature of a given period, we gain insight into power dynamics between those holding power and vulnerable parties.

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