



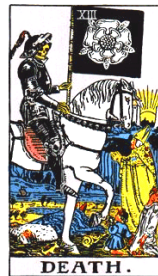
The Victorians and Death



Shadowing every day in the Nineteenth Century was death; 3 of every 20 babies died before their first birthday with those surviving having a life expectancy of 42 years. Death was a daily reality, lurking in untreated water, disguised in bottles of “curatives”, hovering over every scene of childbirth.

On a very practical level, Victorian society was an elaborate maze of rules and etiquette that gave society order during the social upheaval of the Industrial Revolution. Etiquette books instructed the new middle class in the details of socially acceptable behaviour and one of the areas of life with the strictest code was death. Those who bypassed the established rules and rituals of mourning risked scandal and ostracism.

With the death of Queen Victoria’s consort, Prince Albert in 1861, the English fascination with death became even more pronounced, with entire “cities of the dead” built at the terminus of railroad lines. Funerals became increasingly more elaborate with intricately carved and gilded coffins. Funeral hearses and horses were adorned with black ostrich plumes and fitted with black and silver trappings. Funerals for children featured white accents; white gloves on mourners, white ostrich plumes and a white coffin.



After Prince Albert died in 1861, Queen Victoria (and so also the country) basically was in mourning for 40 years. The rules of mourning were the most strict in areas of fashion: Deep mourning dictated that women wear clothes made entirely of black crepe, a fabric that didn’t reflect any light. All items of clothing, including parasols and handkerchiefs were trimmed in black, sans lace or other decoration. Men wore plain black suits with black armbands. Even children were dressed in black, including baby garments trimmed with black ribbons.

The appropriate mourning period for a widow was a minimum of two years; the first year was considered “*Deep Mourning*” and required not only an all-black wardrobe, but also strict curtailment of any social engagements. Jewelry was not worn for the first year, and after one year, the widow progressed to “*Half-mourning*”, meaning that she could trade her black crepe dressed for black silk. “*Half-Mourning*” allowed for jewelry made of pearls, amethysts, black glass and jet. A popular trend was to incorporate a lock of the deceased’s hair into mourning jewelry. Although free to wear colored clothing after two years, many followed the lead of Queen Victoria and remained in black for the rest of their lives.

Parents who lost a child wore deep mourning for nine months and half-mourning for three months. Children mourned deceased parents and the death of a sibling required three months of deep mourning and three months of half-mourning. It was not unusual for individuals to spend the better part of a year dressed in mourning for one departed relative or another. The business of death and it’s accoutrements became a very big business. Even today there are jewelry stores in Britain that specialize in nothing but Victorian mourning jewelry.



Jet & Pearl Mourning Jewelry

Human Hair Mourning Jewelry

Throughout this period, certain images were repeated to represent the frailty and brevity of human life; draped urns, broken columns, weeping willows and extinguished torches can be seen in everything from tombstones, portraits, children’s books, and embroidered samplers. The same imagery recurs in Victorian literature and poetry with bereavement touching every aspect of Victorian life, bringing a somber hue to even the brightest day.

