Title of Paper: **Dearly Departed: The Treatment of the Corpses of Sweethearts**  
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**Abstract:**

In Henry Fuseli’s 1781 painting “The Nightmare,” the supine figure of a voluptuous young woman is thrown violently across a mattress, as an evil spirit sits upon her torso. A picture of anguish, the woman is coded in sexuality, from the thin gown which reveals her body, to her parted lips, and in her terror she becomes an alluring subject of sexualized fantasy. Though Fuseli’s title confirms that the woman is suspended in a terrifying fantasy, and is therefore alive, her position and vulnerability are suggestive of a Desdemona-like character, suspended in her final moments. As the undertaker in *Dracula* says of Lucy Westenra, “She makes a very beautiful corpse,” (Stoker 147). As with the figure of Fuseli’s distressed woman and Othello’s wife, the corpse of the sweetheart is romanticized in gothic fiction, becoming an object of fascination and article of attachment for those left behind. However, what is initially represented as romantic – an outlet for the expression of love and a space created for acceptable masculine grief – the treatment of the corpse becomes instead a device used to define the character of the lover, with sinister implications. She becomes not a person but a device, victimized and brutalized in body and memory. In Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Stoker’s *Dracula*, the dead sweetheart is worth more emotionally dead than they are alive, and the resulting corpse becomes a catalyst for subversive sexuality, a fetishistic object that legitimizes a culturally unacceptable fascination with the ultimately vulnerable woman. For the characters of Lucy, Annabel Lee, and Catherine, the greatest violence of their narratives is not death itself, but the dehumanization of their memory, and the persistent objectification of their corpses. “Dearly Departed: the Treatment of the Corpses of Sweethearts” seeks to examine the role of the lover’s corpse in gothic fiction, exploring both its function and the implications of violence and abuse in romantic narratives.

**Keywords:** Gender; Sexuality; Gothic; Romance; Violence; Burial; Stoker, Poe, Bronte

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Like to other Shakespearean tragedies, the final act of Othello is littered with fresh corpses and the cursing of both the living and the dead. Here, in the hero’s bedchamber, Desdemona’s rose is plucked (5.2.13), Emilia dies for speaking the truth against her treacherous husband, and Othello escapes prosecution to “die upon [the] kiss” of the wife he smothers (5.2.421). This intimate space, once defined by lust and love, is transformed into a sepulcher, providing a narrative tomb in which the audience can bury the innocent and the fallen. At the center of this tomb lies the remains of the sweetheart—the trusting and innocent young woman who gives herself to love and reaps the ghastly consequences. The image left with audiences is like to that portrayed by Henry Fuseli in his 1781 painting “The Nightmare.” Here, one can imagine Desdemona as the voluptuous young woman thrown violently across a mattress, frozen in her final moment of life. In the painting, the fallen figure of a Desdemona-like woman is a picture of anguish, yet is coded in sexuality, from the thin gown, which reveals her body, to her parted lips; in her terror she becomes an alluring object of sexualized fantasy: a corpse-like, and vulnerable subject.

Othello’s proclamation that he will not mar Desdemona’s body with his deed, preserving her (at least temporarily) in her youthful perfection, defines the corpse of the sweetheart as an object of desire, and a possession to be cherished. The allusions to alabaster suggests that Desdemona is in her stillness a work of art, and an article to be prized for its physical characteristics. In his murder of his wife Othello not only wishes to prevent her from “betray[ing] more men,” (6) and avenge her rumored infidelity, but to preserve her as that which he most desires: not a living, breathing partner, but a symbol of innocence and mark of Othello’s morality as he righteously slays that which he loves. In life, Desdemona humanizes Othello, transforming him from a war-driven automaton to a compassionate and doting partner; in her death she is meant to symbolize his moral superiority and depth of sympathy. “Be thus when thou art dead, …/ And I will love thee after,” Othello promises, establishing that Desdemona’s value is that of her representative beauty and innocence. And as the men circle her fallen form, her worth as a corpse becomes clear, standing as a figure rather than an individual. She is not here Desdemona, but Othello’s wife and victim, a representation of chastity, and the abused figure of the perfect wife.

As with the figure of Fuseli’s distressed woman and Othello’s wife, the corpse of the sweetheart is romanticized in gothic fiction, becoming an object of fascination and article of attachment for those left behind. However, what is initially represented as
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romantic – an outlet for the expression of love and a space created for acceptable masculine grief – the treatment of the corpse becomes instead a device used to define the character of the lover, with sinister implications. She becomes not a person but a gothic trope, victimized and brutalized in body and memory. In Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Stoker’s *Dracula*, the dead sweetheart is valued more dead than alive, and the resulting corpse becomes a catalyst for subversive sexuality, a fetishistic object that legitimizes a fascination with the ultimately vulnerable woman. For the characters of Lucy, Annabel Lee, and Catherine, the greatest violence of their narratives is not death itself, but the dehumanization of their memory, and the persistent objectification of their corpses.

According to Philippe Ariès in *The Hour of Our Death*, depictions of death in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century become increasingly more violent, erotic, and violently erotic.

… the little death of sexual pleasure is confounded with the final death of the body: *Sweet is death, who comes like a lover*. The confusion between death and pleasure is so total that the first does not stop the second, but on the contrary, heightens it. The dead body becomes in its turn an object of desire. (373) ¹

The nineteenth-century sees a major shift in attitudes towards the dead, changing cultural reactions and its representative art within only a few generations (Ariès 442). What once is a carnal fascination with the corpse, and the erotic space of the tomb, becomes a romanticized shift in personal relationships, and a longing for the perfect unity that can come only in a life after this. In “The Age of the Beautiful Death,” Ariès cites *Wuthering Heights* as the missing cultural link between the overtly sexualized corpses and violated graves of eighteenth-century artwork, and the morally grounded “beautiful death” of nineteenth-century novels (443). In Heathcliff, Ariès reasons, the reader can witness the “macabre eroticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” when the Byronic lover demands Catherine’s coffin be opened after eighteen years, and the “beautiful death of the nineteenth century” in Catherine’s mysteriously preserved corpse.

In chapter eleven of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Linton dies after delivering an infant daughter. Though vivacious and churlish in life, her body recalls images of sweetness and purity: an image that brings comfort to Nelly Dean.

¹ One such narrative tells the story of a knight who exhumes the corpse of a scorning sweetheart, kisses her, and, as he reasons that he may “touch her bosom … for the first and last time,” discovers that she has been buried alive and is about to deliver a child (Ariès 376). A purportedly true tale from eighteenth-century surgeon Antoine Louis, cited in the same chapter, goes even further, recounting a young monk’s erotic wake with the corpse of a beautiful young woman, who produces a child nine months later, as she, mysteriously, revives after the monk’s departure.
Edgar Linton had his head laid on the pillow, and his eyes shut. His young and fair features were almost as death-like as those of the form beside him, and almost as fixed; but his was the hush of exhausted anguish, and hers of perfect peace. Her brow smooth, her eyes closed, her lips wearing the expression of a smile. No angel in heaven could be more beautiful than she appeared… (Bronte 128)

Here, Nelly Dean recalls a consistent gothic trope: that of the beautiful corpse, and the tragically beautiful mourner. The tableau of Edgar Linton sleeping next to his wife’s body is one that gives the narrator peace of mind, as Catherine’s repose is suggestive of sound morality, and thus the assurance that she will continue on to a peaceful life after death. Nelly says, “no angel in heaven could be more beautiful,” arguing that beauty is itself an indicator of values and value, and that the present appearance of the corpse speaks to the condition of the departed’s soul at the moment of death. Catherine’s death mask is one of peace and beauty, foreshadowing the place in heaven in which her husband wishes to find her at his own death. Yet this definition seemingly fails to consider Catherine as she lives, and instead favors potentially fictitious memories narrated by a grieving husband. Having lost a woman he claims to love, Linton, with the narrative support of Nelly, rewrites Catherine as a doting wife, innocent of conflict and free from spite. The Catherine they mourn is not the Catherine who fights with Nelly, sneaks in a former lover, and shares self-centered words of avarice as her parting wishes.

As questionable as Linton’s memory may be, it is Heathcliff – the Byronic pagan tempest of a lover - who plunders Catherine’s memory, and abuses the corpse she has left behind. Catherine’s body, like her heart in life, is an object of consternation: after her death her husband spends the days before his wife’s funeral sleeplessly guarding her open and flower-strewn coffin, while Heathcliff haunts the grounds beyond her door (131); Edgar’s space of mourning is that established in Victorian culture, of proper presentation and social expectations- Heathcliff’s the wild landscape that defines his tempestuous relationship with the deceased.

When Nelly allows Heathcliff proximity for mourning, he violates the arrangements of the husband in order to confirm his own definitive role as chief mourner: “Heathcliff had opened [Catherine’s locket] and cast out [Linton’s light curls], replacing them by a black lock of his own. [Nelly twists] the two, and enclosed them together” (Brontë 131). His actions, rather than that of a bereaved lover seeking solace through a token connection to the deceased, are an act of conflict and aggression towards Edgar Linton. Catherine’s burial with the locket is an act for the living – a memorial connection intended to console he who is left behind. Catherine herself is gone, and has no use for such trinkets. Heathcliff here is projecting his role of lover onto Catherine’s corpse, asserting himself despite her past choice of husband. He does not privilege the woman she has become – Mrs. Edgar Linton – but rather the memory he wishes her to be. Nelly, for her part, attempts to temper the conflicting claims by twining the locks.
Heathcliff continues his assault when his nemesis himself dies, asserting his dominance over the dead by thwarting burial arrangements. What’s more, he seeks further violation and control by opening Catherine’s coffin, recalling Ariès’s tales of licentious exhumation.

“I’ll tell you what I did yesterday! I got the sexton, who was digging Linton’s grave, to remove the earth off [Catherine’s] coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again – it was hers yet … I bribed the sexton to pull [Linton’s coffin] away…” (Brontë 220)

Catherine is described in the moment of reveal as herself, improbably preserved in the instant of her beautiful death. Narratively, this account is suspect, as the reader has only Heathcliff’s word that the corpse he exposes - and lusts over - has not, in eighteen years, succumbed to decomposition in any way. Instead, I suggest that Heathcliff is legitimizing his continued ardor for Catherine’s remains in their present form; when Nelly asks “And if she had been dissolved into earth, or worse, what would you have dreamt of then?” Heathcliff brazenly answers, “Of dissolving with her, and being more happy still!” (220). This proclamation does not follow his previous claim of mental peace inspired by a glimpse of Catherine’s preserved face; he would be more happy to dissolve into Catherine’s decomposed ooze than to lay beside her intact remains, as he could then be truly united with her fleshly form in a way that the living can never achieve, thereby confirming his place as the better lover, an inextricable part of his fictitious romance, forever.

Previously dehumanized and objectified by the actions of both husband and friend, Catherine’s corpse is further threatened in Heathcliff’s fantasy; dissolving into the earth, as Nelly imagines, would provide Catherine’s body with autonomy, forever removing it from the performances and demands of the living, and leaving only a memory to be manipulated and rewritten. Yet Heathcliff will not allow Catherine’s remains to escape his control, and he determines to follow her sliding into the soil, tainting her biological markers with his own, and asserting his dominance in the assistance that they must always remain together.

Yet Heathcliff is not the only lover in Gothic fiction to enter the tomb of his sweetheart, and there are those who are guilty of even greater assault upon the body and memory of the once beloved.

On page and screen, Dracula's Lucy Westenra is presented as vivacious and mildly scandalous in her flirtations, the kind-hearted coquette who, through the malicious interference of the titular villain, is denied the matrimonial legitimacy she is “due.” This is an act of violence indeed, as

…novelists increasingly represent the female flirt as a social menace… The coquette looms large as an individual whose connotations of danger – an admixture of theatricality and power – coupled with her
Lucy is well loved by those around her, and the contention between this love and her forward behavior generates a sense of anxiety over the character’s moral and social well-being. As demonstrated by their willingness to accept Lucy’s choice of husband in a moment of token agency, so long as she does choose, her sweethearts anxiously urge the legitimization of the coquette through marriage to a proper husband, to preserve her reputation and remove the social threat of her inappropriate behavior. Dracula’s actions to disrupt this process of legitimization are reprehensible not only for the taking the life of a young, well-loved woman, but for the subsequent damnation that is defined by the wantonness she first cultivates when alive; the great tragedy of Lucy’s death is that she dies not as a proper wife, but as a flirtatious coquette, and awakens to personify threatening feminine sexuality.

When Lucy dies her mysterious death, her character is defined by a sense of beauty that has its roots in her life. Her corpse is praised by undertakers, and her fiancé finds it difficult to tear himself from her lifeless side, “tak[ing] her dead hand in his and kiss[ing] it, and ben[d]ing over and kiss[ing] her forehead” (Stoker 152). When lead away by Dr. Seward, he “fondly look[s] back over his shoulder at her,” entranced by the visage of Lucy at her wake. Arthur’s attraction to Lucy continues after her apparent death, and is palpable in his desire to maintain physical contact and caresses with her remains.

When the party of vampire hunters, including Arthur and the infamous Van Helsing, investigate her hypothesized resurrection, their observations continue to code her corpse in sexuality: it is said that “death had given back part of her beauty” (147), she is called “beautiful” and “lovely” as her corpse is prepared, and when she rises as an unholy spectre she becomes “radiantly beautiful” (178), with a “voluptuous smile” (188) and “voluptuous wantonness” (187). In life, this sexuality is something to be tamed by marriage and childbearing, redefined as the purview of her husband, who can guide her towards respectability; in death, her seductiveness is unconquerable, and entirely her own, allowing the men to vilify the attractive woman before them even as they lust for her and wish to heed her invitations. Though Arthur once proclaims “Not for the wide world will I consent to any mutilation of her dead body” (184), it is his hand that accepts the task of said disfigurement. In the moment of Lucy’s violent second death, Arthur defines himself not unlike Othello: he who must

2 Wharton renovated the … conception of the flirt as malevolent femme fatale, and engineer of her own and others’ destruction. (In Bram Stoker’s Dracula, for example, the self-described flirt Lucy Westenra lacks the virginal strength to ward off Dracula’s repeated attacks and is gruesomely killed twice, then decapitated.)” (Kaye 161)
act righteously and morally in the face of the evil the sweetheart has become. His
sense of self and strength comes from his proximity to the beautiful corpse, and the
power he now has over Lucy’s remains. The violence for which he is responsible is
even more explicit than that of Heathcliff:

Arthur placed the point over the heart, and as I looked I could see its
dint in the white flesh. Then he struck with all his might.
The Thing in the coffin writhed; and a hideous, blood-curdling screech
came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and
twisted in wild contortions; the sharp white teeth champed together till
the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam. …
And then the writhing and quivering of the body became less, and the
teeth ceased to champ, and the face to quiver. Finally it lay still. …
There, in the coffin lay no longer the foul thing that we had so dreaded
and grown to hate …, but Lucy as we had seen her in her life, with her
face of unequalled sweetness and purity. (192)

A “Thing,” the corpse is no longer regarded as Lucy, but a tangible threat to decency
and morality: she is literally dehumanized, her memory threatened by the visage of
the supernatural figure she has become. In death, Lucy will not remain in place,
wandering from her (male-selected) coffin (176) and feasting on the production of
legitimate sexuality (children). It is only through this final penetration and mutilation
at the hand of her lover that the narrative can confirm her acquiescence: by
participating in the slaying of Lucy, Arthur defines himself as a morally righteous
mourner who sidesteps conventions in order to protect the appropriately virginal
“sweet purity” (190) of his former sweetheart.

Despite the intrusion on Catherine’s corpse and the violence of Lucy’s second death,
it is arguably Annabel Lee who is most victimized by the treatment of her remains. In
Poe’s romantic epitaph, the titular maiden is mysteriously and ominously absent:
though the narrator insists upon the love the two share in life and health, her words
are not represented, and her own declarations are related only through the lens of
memory and oration: “she lived with no other thought/Than to love and be loved by
me” (Poe 5-6).

The narrator of Poe’s final poem waxes eloquently of the idealized love he shares
with Annabel Lee, arguing that though “She was a child and I was a child” (7) that
their love is greater than that of even “the winged seraphs of Heaven” (11): celestial
and, it seems, all-consuming - at least for one partner.

3 ‘… is there none amongst us who has a better right? Will it be no joy to think of hereafter in
the silence of the night when sleep is not: “It was my hand that sent her to the stars; it was the
hand of him that loved her best; the hand that of all she would herself have chosen, had it
been to her to choose”?’ (Stoker 191)
The great hindrance in this enigmatic romance is Annabel Lee’s untimely death, marked by “her highborn kinsmen” coming and “[bearing] her away” (17-18). In a narrative context, Annabel Lee never actually lives; the poem which describes her serves as her tomb and memorial, with the narrator serving as the sole voice of authority in her history – a history that focuses on her death and burial. Of significant preoccupation is the disposal of her remains following her illness, the narrator lamenting the actions of her family, which represent a physical divorce of the purported sweethearts. Annabel Lee’s remains become a site of proprietary violence and aggression as the narrator’s decries the actions of her family who come to collect her remains only once she has passed, presumably taken against the narrator’s will; the lamentation of the text is less concerned with her initial loss than the loss of her corpse, as it is “shut … up in a sepulcher/ In this kingdom by the sea” (19-20). Here, his critical rhetoric suggest a desire to hold and to keep against the will of her family, not unlike Heathcliff’s embrace of Catherine both at her death and in her grave – a desire which the poem’s narrator similarly sees to fruition.

Though dismissive of her living memory and questionable in its assertions, the text does not become outwardly abusive and intrusive until the final stanza, in which the narrator proclaims that:

…all the nighttide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,
   In her sepulcher there by the sea –
   In her tomb by the side of the sea. (38-41)

In the text, Annabel Lee’s memory is fragile, left to the oration and expostulations of a single other. Once placed in her sepulcher, her body is likewise at its most vulnerable, no longer animated, and exposed to the will and actions of those who will claim ownership, as demonstrated first by her family, and then by her purported lover.Remarkably, when she dies she becomes a bride – a role undefined in her lifetime, as the text fails to establish an institutional relationship prior to line 39 (instead developing the sense of innocent and childlike affection). Yet, within thirty-nine lines, her definitive role undergoes a dramatic shift, from a loving child to a dead wife. The marriage, however, is absent in the early narration, suggesting that this role and identity is one that is projected after her demise, and enacted not by a social institution, but by the narrator himself within the textual space he creates. As a corpse Annabel Lee has no voice with which to accept or reject the advances of the narrator, and is subject to the narrative he crafts, her eulogy quickly becoming her epithalamium as he physically and narratively establishes the self he desires of her.

Not unlike Heathcliff’s following Catherine’s ooze into the earth, the narrator takes ownership of the myth of romance, determining the “true” desires of the dead sweetheart, and defending a sense of possession over the woman’s remains once she is no longer able to express her own desires. Like Heathcliff and Arthur both, the tomb of the sweetheart is defined in “Annabel Lee” by the narration of the speaker,
the young woman’s tomb becoming her bridal chamber as the private space of the
tomb is utilizes as an intimate space for creative reconstruction. In a position of
power, and admittedly a bit mad, the narrator takes possession of the figure he claims
to have loved, and makes of her remains exactly what he will, and anything he will, as
even the sanctity of death affords the maiden no protection.


