Representations of suicide in urban North-West England c.1870-1910: The formative role of respectability, class, gender and morality

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ABSTRACT  In the late-Victorian period in England, attitudes towards suicide were complex. The existence of secular viewpoints encouraged compassionate attitudes to such deaths by characterising suicide as a result of mental illness or as a natural response to harsh socio-economic conditions. Yet, in contemporary society, traditional forms of cultural and moral condemnation continued to influence perceptions of self-destruction. This article examines attitudes to working-class suicide between 1870 and 1910 and maintains that the interaction between these traditional and secular outlooks was a highly complex phenomenon. Responses to suicidal deaths were multi-faceted. The extent of hostility or sympathy accorded to such deaths was dependent upon a wide range of factors that do not sit easily with either paradigm. I suggest that a dominant or homogenous attitude towards suicide did not exist. Instead, there existed different varieties of suicides and responses to them. The role of respectability, morality and gender will be portrayed as primary definers of what came to constitute a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ suicide.

KEYWORDS: suicide; working-class culture; local history; cultures of death; alcohol; secularisation; gender; respectability

Historical attitudes towards suicide have proven to be highly complex and varied. Macdonald and Murphy have shown how levels of public hostility to suicide fluctuated between 1500 and 1800 (1990). Although the Church fiercely condemned the nature of such deaths, in practice juries were often reluctant to punish the victim’s families by imposing the strict penalties recommended by law that included forfeiture of property and burial at crossroads. Instead, often they sympathetically pronounced victims as being innocent of any crime, portraying them as having acted under the influence of a disturbed mind. Yet, the ideals of the reformation fueled religious hostility to suicide and a more rigorous application of legal sanctions in England followed (Macdonald & Murphy, 1990). More lenient attitudes appear to have re-surfaced over time and the denial of Christian burial was finally abolished by parliament in Britain in 1823, although
the forfeiture of the suicide victim’s property from his or her relatives was only repealed in 1870 (Gates, 1988).

In this article, I focus upon the period 1870 to 1914. Broadly speaking, this timescale witnessed both a reduction of religious fervour, and a correspondent shift in medical and social thinking about suicidal behaviour. These factors encouraged a gradual decline in its denunciation as an act offensive to the morality of Christian religion and Victorian society (Jalland, 1996). To a certain extent, the perception of suicide as a subversive act running contrary to the Ten Commandments lessened. It also became less frequently constructed as a personal challenge to the will of God (Gates, 1988). Instead, late-Victorian ideology encouraged explanations of suicide that referenced medico-scientific concepts of mental illness and insanity, or that emphasised it as a rational response to socio-economic circumstances. Both of these factors facilitated more sympathetic approaches to such deaths (Jalland, 1996).

Despite shifts in the manner by which suicide was understood, many nineteenth-century contemporaries continued to view suicide with an element of suspicion. Suicide was still persistently identified as fundamentally wrong, as evidenced by the continued practice of families concealing such deaths to avoid social stigma (Macdonald & Murphy, 1990). Furthermore, the notion that suicide should be approached with some degree of sympathy was not a view shared by all. In fact, a lively debate existed on the subject. As the church became increasingly challenged by biblical criticism, scientific progress and religious doubt, many of its more conservative members became extremely vocal on the matter of suicide (Anderson, 1980; Anderson, 1987; Bailey, 1998). Doctors, theologians and philosophers vigorously debated whether suicide could best be explained traditionally as a moral sin against God, by broader socio-economic forces or in terms of medical categories of insanity and mental depression (Durkheim, 1897; Foote, 1881; Gurnhill, 1900; Henson, 1886; Strahan, 1893; Westcott, 1885). There appears to be no discernible straight-forward transition from one way of thinking about suicidal acts to another.

In other words, a simple transition from moral to secular attitudes is elusive and difficult to pinpoint. As Pat Jalland has suggested, attitudes towards suicide between 1870 and 1914 were subject to a process of slow, gradual change, not least because religious influence was somewhat slow to decline (Jalland, 1996). However, so far these complex public attitudes have not been explored in significant depth, which leaves open the possibility that there were many different types of suicide, and different perceptions of the act in its various contexts. This article suggests that there was no fixed, homogeneous concept of a ‘standard’ suicide or typical response to suicide. Nor did a secular approach simply supersede the traditional one. Indeed, attitudes towards suicides were heavily dependent upon various factors external to debates over morality and secularism.

Pat Jalland’s study of death in the middle-class family revealed that suicide continued to be perceived primarily as a moral crime, despite the increasing influence of secular views towards such deaths. She identified a ‘legacy of suicide’ that continued to regard such a death in the family as outside the realm of good
Christian deaths (Jalland, 1996). As Julie-Marie Strange has rightly asserted, few studies have examined the interpersonal dynamics of working-class responses to death, disposal and bereavement. She firmly links understandings of grief to the notion of respectability which permeated working-class culture and which she suggests encouraged multiple, diverse and highly individual interpretations of death in general (Strange, 2005). I will use Greater Manchester as a case study with which to explore this theme, and to complement research undertaken in the middle-class context, Attitudes towards suicides within the sensationalist press of the pre-dominantly working-class areas of Manchester and its surrounding industrial areas will be analysed. Northwest England is representative of an area which witnessed high levels of urbanisation and industrialisation, and which was subjected to strong levels of socio-economic reconfiguration. Of course, it was not the only area in England subject to such pressures, yet it does provide a representative example. Furthermore, areas such as Manchester were subject to a culture highly influenced by contemporary notions of working-class respectability and these proved to be persuasive factors in the shaping of attitudes towards various types of suicide (Bailey, 1979; Jones, 1974).

I will maintain that the language of religion and morality was not competing against the language of secularism for authority. Instead, the language and rationale of each approach were employed selectively, as both provided literary mechanisms with differing rationales with which to express diverse opinions on different varieties of suicidal acts. Which one was utilised was heavily dependent on the particular circumstances surrounding the death in question. I will also demonstrate the formative role that gender played within the reporting of such deaths. Respectability was a cultural construct which hardened gender-based differences and divisions throughout working-class communities and played a significant role in the formation of perceptions of self-destruction (Kirk, 1998).

There are inevitable limitations to my approach. Contemporary newspapers would have exhibited a tendency to report only those suicides that deemed newsworthy or controversial. Further to this, many journalistic contributions tended to repeat information given at inquests, with the inquests themselves mostly examining only those deaths considered worthy of legal inquiry. For instance, they would be most likely to concern themselves with cases of accidental, suspicious, violent or ‘unnatural’ deaths. Even then, it is thought that suicide cases account for only between 5% and 12% of these inquests (Bailey, 1998). Yet, I will show how the manner by which such deaths were reported reveals a great deal about social responses to working-class suicide. Newspapers frequently reflected the ideas and values of their audience and the local community. Hence, rather than national newspapers a variety of newspapers intended to reach a predominantly working-class audience have been chosen for analysis.

Lenient verdicts such as suicide during temporary insanity became increasingly applied, as opposed to a verdict of *felo de se*, an archaic term for suicide of persons
who were not a child or mentally incompetent. This has been accounted for by the emergence of secular trends in perceiving suicides (Jalland, 1996). The defence of temporary insanity maintained that defendants should not be held criminally liable for breaking the law because they were legally insane at the time of the commission of alleged crimes and therefore had less personal responsibility. This has been well documented. In the late-nineteenth century Anderson estimated that only around 3% of suicides were recorded as *felo de se* (Anderson, 1987). However, the lenient attitude of coroners does not take into account the fact that other sections of society often perceived the same deaths in a very different manner. Reporters articulated representations of suicide that incorporated vastly different, and often contradictory, attitudes to those forwarded at the inquest.

Late-Victorian and Edwardian journalists produced an abundance of newspaper articles adopting less compassionate attitudes towards certain suicides even where leniency had been shown in the courtroom. Journalists persistently disregarded and contradicted the verdict of a jury by employing headlines such as ‘melancholy suicide’ or ‘supposed suicide’ even when an open verdict on the death officially had been returned. The nature of the death itself, and the events leading up to it, would be graphically described in newspaper reports, making it quite clear that the victim had intentionally ended his or her own life while supposedly in a reasonably sound state of mind. By adding commentary on motivations and causative factors, journalists employed their reports as a vehicle with which to express lay views on acts of suicide, adding their own values and perspectives that often differed dramatically from those conveyed via the legal discourse of the courtroom (Bailey, 1998).

Journalistic reports might even nullify any positive outcomes of a sympathetic verdict. For instance, Richard Ashcroft, who drowned himself in the Doffcocker Lodge, Bolton in 1902 was accorded a verdict of temporary insanity, with those at the inquest displaying a compassionate opinion, believing that the victim had simply found life too miserable to cope with as a result of his exceptionally impoverished state. This verdict is in line with contemporary secular views on socio-economic conditions as a motivation for suicide. However, the *Bolton Evening News* focused instead upon the victim’s drinking habits and the fact that he had repeatedly left his family, overruling the official verdict by forwarding the opinion that ‘it was charitable to say he committed suicide whilst temporarily insane’ (*Bolton Evening News*, 9 June 1902). Often, judgement on such deaths would precede an inquest with the death being described as a suicidal act before an official verdict had been passed. Tellingly, James Hicken’s death in 1900 in Manchester was explicitly described as a suicide in the headline, and a specific cause was implied by stating that the ‘deceased has, it is alleged, lost money through book making, and he has been depressed in consequence of creditors pressing him’ (*Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 20 March 1900).

These sources demonstrate that the underlying motivations believed to have led to a suicidal decision determined the tone of reporting of that death. These were also heavily influenced by contemporary constructs of appropriate gender behaviour in a class-specific context. This is unsurprising given that notions of
Masculinity and femininity were key concerns of late-Victorian and early-Edwardian contemporaries. Showalter has characterised the period from 1870 onwards as one of ‘sexual anarchy’, within which prescribed gender roles were perceived to be breaking down, facilitating a mood of cultural insecurity characterised by fears of regression and degeneration. This encouraged a longing for stricter definitions of gender where men and women should become fixed in their separate spheres in order to preserve a comforting sense of identity and permanence in the face of the spectre of change (Showalter, 1990). Both Adams and Smith have also identified a loss of traditional, more assured forms of masculine identity and authority which was perceived as being in need of restoration (Adams, 1995; Smith, 2004). Gender defined and shaped opinions on suicide. Deviation from expected gender roles prompted particularly negative perceptions of such deaths, a process that became particularly pronounced in a period of cultural anxiety.

Historians have discussed the connection between gender and suicide in detail. For example, Minois claims that men and women have historically chosen to end their lives in different ways (Minois, 1999). The idea that men and women had a different suicide history has since been applied to the late-Victorian and Edwardian period. According to Anderson, during the late-Victorian period it was common knowledge that suicide was three or four times more frequent among men than women. The methods and motivations of a suicidal act had the potential to be entirely different for men and women; often a result of the wide differences in what was expected of them (Anderson, 1987). However, historical research has focused less fully on how considerations of gender informed lay attitudes towards suicide.

Representations of working-class suicide were highly concerned with asserting preferred feminine identity. This is especially notable within those explanations that aroused sympathy. A common way to express a lenient view towards female suicide was to describe it as part of a more general, uncontrollable female emotional problem, most commonly ‘mania’. The Bolton Evening News, for instance, reporting on the suicide of three local women in short succession, stated that ‘still another victim has succumbed to the suicidal mania which has prevailed in Bolton for a considerable time past’ (Bolton Evening News, 16 May 1889). The idea of women as victims being helplessly overpowered by external ‘manias’ confirmed irrationality and definitions of irregular mental states often assumed to be synonymous with being female, effectively freeing the victim of personal responsibility for their actions (Showalter, 1987).

Journalists were highly creative when prescribing various types of manias, and a ‘suicidal mania’ was not the only variety thought likely to lead women into contemplating death. Following Ann Hesenwood’s deliberate act of drowning in Manchester in 1890, various suggestions were put forward as possible causative factors, including the fact that she had been recently suffering from depression caused by the trauma about the illness of her son-in-law. However, the Manchester Evening News ignored these possible causes and chose to depict the story under the heading ‘Suicide from Religious Mania’, on the basis that Hesenwood sometimes
went to the Salvation Army (*Manchester Evening News*, 14 November 1980). Journalists selectively utilised the language of psychology to express a compassionate approach, provided that the victim was of good moral character. In this instance, religion itself had precipitated a period of depression.

Press representations most often placed emphasis upon the physical, rather than emotional aspects of a male suicide. This helped to re-establish the uniquely male nature of male suicide by positioning the act in the prescribed masculine role. Presumably, this also helped to divert attention away from the emotional aspects of the act, further distinguishing the differentiated gendered experiences of suicide while dissociating itself from concepts of mental illness commonly associated with the female (Showalter, 1986).

Certainly, the graphic and violent depictions of male suicides formed a striking contrast with the emotional nature of female suicide stories outlined above. For instance, in 1884, *The Oldham Evening Express* reported the ‘apparent suicide’ of an unknown man on a railway track between Manchester and Sheffield. The state of the man’s body was described as follows:

"Part of his clothing and his intestines were found entangled in the wheels. As soon as the express train had passed, the driver of the express train went to look for the man he had seen walking on the line. He found parts of the body strewed across the line. A sheet was procured from the Britannia Hotel, and the fragments were placed in it and conveyed to that house to await identification and an inquest (*Oldham Evening Express*, 27 February 1874)."

Similarly, *The Bolton Evening Guardian* described the suicide of a young man named Brettell, who committed suicide by jumping into a cupola in which iron was being melted.

"The young man took no notice, and before he could be reached, jumped in. Water was at once poured in to cool the cupola, and after some time the body was got out, in a frightful condition. The legs and arms were completely burnt off, and the trunk was shrivelled to a cinder (*Bolton Evening Guardian*, 14 January 1884)."

These examples construct male suicide as a fundamentally physical act, although this was not the only way in which masculinity was maintained. In particular cases, personal socio-economic conditions acted as the determinant factor leading to such a death. The physical nature of the working-class male suicide might also be revealed through compassionate accounts of men who chose to end their life as a result of a physical illness. Illness, particularly if it involved high levels of physical pain, was considered to be a more appropriate reason for a male suicide, and would help to ensure that the death was viewed with some degree of compassion. A sick man was often perceived as having made a rational choice due to his physical condition, in accordance with contemporary perceptions of the more rational nature of the male sex.

Typically, the physical nature of the male suicide was asserted at the expense of emotional or mental causes which may have led to the victim’s decision. For
example, John McCreary decided to end his life in 1894 after suffering from bronchitis for 16 years. Both the coroners and the reporter were unwilling to investigate fully the mental state of the victim, despite the availability of a compassionate verdict of ‘temporary insanity’. At the end of the inquest the coroner was reported to have said to the jury ‘Well gentlemen . . . I don’t think I need carry this case any further. It is evidently a case of suicide. Bronchitis and disease has brought it on. You will return a verdict that he has committed suicide whilst in a state of temporary insanity’ (Bolton Evening Echo, 21 July 1894). The emphasis on the victim’s illness ensured that the death was not specifically associated with insanity despite the verdict. Furthermore, in this instance, the journalistic representation of the death reinforced, rather than contradicted, official legal opinion.

The importance of the rational male choice should not be underestimated. A great deal of sympathy was extended to John Woodall, a seventy-five-year-old farmer, who, in 1894, violently committed suicide by cutting his throat with a razor. This was believed to be due to the fact that his nephew with whom he lived was attempting to incarcerate him in the workhouse. Woodall was portrayed as having made a rational choice to end his life rather than be institutionalised, claiming that he ‘would rather cut his throat rather than go to the workhouse’. Sympathy for the victim was extended to the point that the coroner told the nephew that ‘he hoped one day that the nephew’s conscience would strike him when he thought of how the poor man had died’ (Bolton Evening Echo, 6 June 1894).

The impact of deprived socio-economic conditions on the death was clearly based on gendered expectations of rational thought. Oppenheim has claimed that ‘unlike male nervous breakdown, the element of personal choice or responsibility was rarely granted much influence in women’. Certainly, if women were typically located on the side of irrationality then it would hardly have been considered appropriate feminine behaviour for a suicidal woman to be portrayed as having made a rational choice, and as a result it was less common that this concept would be applied to female suicides. Typically, the rational choice was perceived exclusively as a male choice (Oppenheim, 1991). Representations of female suicide were characterised by an increasing emphasis on concepts related to the psyche and it was far less common for a female suicide to share the vivid physical descriptions accorded to the male suicide. Therefore, constructs of gender roles clearly permeated depictions of working-class suicide, especially when used in conjunction with secular approaches, helping to reinforce sympathy towards such deaths.
what constituted respectability itself stemmed from working-class culture, conveying strong impressions of class pride and independence. It acted as a safeguard against insecurity, poverty and unemployment (Kirk, 1998) and imposed strictly defined gender expectations. The influence of prevailing notions of class respectability is clearly discernable within the writing of the victims themselves. Working-class suicide victims certainly appear to have continued to analyse their imminent death in relation to its moral aspects. The perseverance of religious sentiment within working-class suicide notes suggests that moral influences were still resoundingly pertinent well into the Edwardian period (1901–1910). These writings were an attempt to shape the framework in which their death would be interpreted (Bailey, 1998). For instance, Joseph Braham’s suicide note written in 1868, was read out during his inquest, and included the following excerpt:

My innocent darling children, may Heaven protect you together with your beloved mother. May God bless you and protect you all. The Lord awaking will shine His coming appearance upon you. May any disgrace from your husband’s fate never rest on any of your children. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is the Lord of One. Blessed be the glory of His kingdom for ever and ever. The Lord He is God. My poor dear father; as his mind was, so must be mine (Manchester Evening News, 11 November 1868).

In 1884, Hannah Mason, after murdering her three children and then committing suicide wrote to her family:

I say goodbye to you. I have done nothing wrong to anyone. The Lord will forgive me . . . I have prayed to the Lord to take me. I cannot lie on a sickbed and die and leave my child. I know they are gone before me. I know the end of them. I watched them die and am happy. Goodbye (Bolton Evening Echo, 21 July 1884)

Into the Edwardian period, Annie Simpson, a young working-class housemaid, wrote in her suicide note:

‘Dear Mrs Leonard - I now proceed to poison myself. I am not fit to live. May the Lord forgive me for my sin. I have tried to get on in this world and cannot live’ (Bolton Evening News, 7 June 1902).

Finally, in 1906 Elizabeth Shot, of Wigan, wrote:

‘I am sure I am not in my right senses. Goodbye and God bless you forever, and the children too, but nobody could have cared for anybody more than you have for me, and all of us. God bless you. I am sure I am off my mind. Goodbye’ (Bolton Evening News, 25 April 1906).

The above examples imply a strong sense of religious guilt on the part of the victim, implying that an awareness of how their death subsequently might be perceived morally. This influenced how the suicide victim shaped their own death. These concepts remained linked to language drawn from church-based imagery
and the New Testament, and members of the working classes might continue
to regard their morality as specifically Christian (Williams, 1984). In certain
contexts, this suggests the continuance of moral, rather than secular, views of
suicide. It was a final attempt to assert sound moral character in the face of
impending social judgement.

Not everyone was fortunate enough to be able to influence perceptions of their
ensuing, premeditated death. The manner by which this morality was conveyed
was heavily influenced by the intricate interactions that existed between gender
and respectability. The articulation of secular approaches to suicide was
conditional, being reserved for those deaths where the victim had not deviated
too far from his or her expected social norms. In the Northwest, gambling was one
form of behaviour regularly associated with male working-class suicide and did not
elicit sympathy. Moral and religious authorities contributed to the condemnation
of gambling. The Victorian and Edwardian period witnessed an intense anti-
gambling campaign that proved to be especially strong throughout the region.
Both Anglican and non-Conformist churches produced pamphlets and press
articles speaking out against betting and gambling (Clapson, 1992). Suicides that
appeared to have a connection with the loss of family income due to this leisure
activity were especially likely to be judged in relation to the victim’s gambling
habits, and the act would be portrayed in relation to its moral implications.
Fatherhood, as an index of character, was a theme running throughout visions of
the upright, sober, working-class man (Clark, 1996).

Therefore, such suicide betrayed the moral standards in place within working-
class society explicitly associated with the role of the father figure in the family.
Reckless gambling and a lack of restraint were unacceptable both within the
distinct moral code both of the middle and working classes, as well as within the
moral structure of institutional religion (Davies, 1992). Journalists and religious
authorities were equally outspoken about gambling. Notably, the Manchester
Evening News was owned at one point by the non-conformist Russell Allen who
gave evidence to the 1902 Select Committee of the House of Lords on betting,
blaming other newspapers for encouraging it (Clapson, 1992). It seems unlikely
that reporters writing for his paper at that time would be encouraged to portray
associated acts of suicide sympathetically, or to fully utilise the language of
secular thought employed by coroners and the medical profession. The nature of
the description was therefore less likely to focus upon contributing factors
such as mental illness and harsh socio-economic conditions. Such suicides were
selectively expressed in the language of moral deviance.

A comparison of the following two suicides reveals the harsh manner with which
gambling-associated suicides were likely to be conceptualised. In 1900, a grocer
named James Hicken lost all of his money through gambling and, after being
pressed by his creditors, decided to shoot himself with a horse pistol. The
Manchester Evening Chronicle condemned the person’s actions, stating that the
deceased victim left five children unprovided for. As a result, the journalist
was particularly uncompromising in his judgement of the death, refusing to
acknowledge that secular explanations may have also been responsible for the
person’s actions (Manchester Evening Chronicle, 20 March 1900). Sidney Edgley’s suicide in October of the same year forms a contrast to this story, as it describes a victim who did not appear to take part in gambling, but who also left a family unprovided for. After becoming unemployed, he decided that he would starve himself to death so that he could feed his children, stating that ‘I will not take it from my children while I am out of work. No one shall say that they went without while I fed’ (Manchester Evening News, 4 October 1900). A verdict of temporary insanity was delivered, and the newspaper chose to reflect the sympathy shown at the inquest. It would be reasonable to assume that both of these cases left the remaining family with financial difficulties, due to the loss of income of the head of the household. However, the main influence that determined the way in which the suicide was perceived, was the extent to which each man had lived a morally sound life. In such interpretations, the male victim had not made full use of his rationality and self restraint as would be expected, and had broken accepted rules of respectable behaviour.

Gender roles were also prominent when women exhibited behaviour viewed as contradictory to accepted notions of working-class respectability. Immoral behaviour was considered to be worse when displayed by working-class women and this increased the likelihood of certain forms of female suicide being viewed contemptuously. This is not to say that middle-class women who exhibited similar behaviour were not socially condemned. Yet working-class women were subject to both the judgement of their own class as well as to middle-class values of respectability (Johnson, 2001). The female alcohol-induced suicide provided one of the most common rationales for a negatively portrayed death. The seemingly excessive use of alcohol within working-class communities was a predominant concern of the late-nineteenth-century Church, as evidenced by the formation of temperance societies by all of the major denominations during the 1890s and 1900s (Williams & Brake, 1980). This problem was persistently associated with working-class culture. Sympathy was rarely extended if the victim was proven to be prone to drinking.

Yet, as has been noted elsewhere, working-class drinking was a leisure activity sharply defined by gender. This influenced judgements on seemingly associated deaths. Alcohol was central to the formation of masculine identity in working-class neighbourhoods, and to the extent that men could be identified by the places where they chose to drink as regulars. However, women were barred from the vault, usually the biggest room in any pub, which effectively formed a ‘masculine republic’ (Davies, 1992). This was because women were expected to put the needs of their families before their own as it was thought that household management should be their primary concern (Calder, 1977). This was particularly notable in the working-class environment where women enjoyed far fewer opportunities to socialise than men (Davies, 1992). Therefore, drunken working-class women were subject to even further condemnation than drunken men, as drinking was considered to be especially unfeminine and contrary to expectations of working-class respectability.
Regardless of the actual cause of suicide, be it depression, lack of money, or a failed romance, the levels of alcohol that the suicide victim, particularly a woman, had or had not consumed prior to death was always discussed in both the context of the inquest and the journalistic representation. Even where there appear to have been signs of mental illness, which would otherwise have provided a sound motivation for a compassionate representation of suicide, if it was revealed that drinking, even if moderate, had taken place beforehand, then this would dominate and cloud the report of the death. Tellingly, the *Manchester Evening News* reported the suicide of Alfred Blackburn, of Bolton, who turned his wife out of his house before hanging himself by attaching a rope to a nail in the wall. Although it was stated that the deceased had several times attempted suicide and suffered from some elusive form of mental illness, enormous emphasis was placed on the fact that he had been drinking heavily for a week. The headline itself read ‘SuicideWhilst Intoxicated’ (*Manchester Evening News*, 15 September 1890). The reader’s expectations were directed towards alcohol as the motivating cause of the death, despite the existence of other potential factors.

Often, the actions of the drunken suicidal man were presented in a particularly feminine manner devoid of masculine characteristics such as rationality and self-restraint. The intoxicated man was portrayed as having lost control of masculine characteristics such as his rationality and sense of personal choice. John Thornley’s lack of rational behaviour following his attempted suicide was emphasised in a newspaper article as follows: ‘he further stated in a rambling manner that he was lodging at Halliwell, that he had previously resided at Middlewich, and that he had not been home last night. It is surmised that he has been drinking and had rambled into Smith Street, where he was found’ (*Bolton Evening News*, 8 January 1893).

Through vivid descriptions of irrational and unnecessary violence, the drunken suicide victim was depicted as emotionally wild and out of control. A further typical example reads: ‘The prisoner who had been drinking heavily, rushed into a butcher’s shop at Windsor Bridge kept by Richard Brown and, seizing a butcher’s knife, cut a large gash in his throat. He then ran out of the shop and inflicted another wound’ (*Salford Weekly Chronicle*, 15 July 1876). Such descriptions form a sharp contrast to the descriptions of men of a better moral nature who were perceived as having made a rational decision to end their life, and whose deaths were subject to more compassion. The image of the suicidal drunk represented the feared crisis of masculinity suggested by Showalter. Drink had encouraged the loss of all rational male qualities of restraint, decorum and rationality, and had prompted a rash act of suicide.

Female suicide victims were subject to especially severe descriptions of their death which clearly outlined the moral implications of excessive indulgence in drink. Broadly speaking, some types of women were considered as being particularly ‘unwomanly’, especially if they had developed a notorious reputation for habits of drinking, fighting and heavy gambling, and where they had openly failed to conform to the styles of behaviour expected from
working-class mothers, both by their own community and to observers from the middle classes. Women were expected only to drink modestly, if at all, as heavy drinking undermined their preferred status as a good mother (Davies, 1992). As a result, the local press became particularly fond of sensational headlines when describing the deaths of working-class women including ‘Drink and Suicide - A Married Woman’s Craving’ or ‘Supposed Suicide in the Canal - A Married Woman’s Drinking Habits’ (Manchester Evening News, 3 January 1910 and Bolton Evening News, 2 April 1906). Such examples clearly show a discernible continuation of the persistence of moral judgement upon individual acts of suicide that were heavily dependent upon notions of respectable working-class behaviour and prescribed gendered roles. The extent of sympathy extended towards such death was conditional.

Conclusions

Gender concepts and notions of respectable behaviour provided the rationale for representations of working-class suicide. A local case study of Greater Manchester has suggested that a homogenous view of suicide did not exist. This complicates understandings of attitudes towards death in the Victorian period by showing that moral outlooks towards the ‘bad death’ were not simply superseded by rational, secular viewpoints. Both approaches existed side by side, and the languages of moral condemnation or secular compassion were selectively employed depending upon the particular scenario surrounding the death. This opens up various possibilities for historical analysis of suicide.

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