Ethnographic encounter with historical source material: 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844) by Thomas Hood

By Xena White

The 18- stanza poem 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844) was written in the early Victorian Era by Thomas Hood. It takes a progressive stance on the subject of a woman who due to her fall, commits suicide by drowning. The iconography of this poem must be understood not as a depiction of how female suicide took place in reality, but rather of how it took place in Victorian consciousness. Strongly gendered views on suicide constructed this representation and between the 1840s and the 1880s, the fallen woman drowning herself became an essential trope of 'a new iconographic vocabulary' (Meessen 2017: 8). Hood's depiction then can be seen as referencing the dominant image of the time. But for an understanding of the implicit and explicit attitudes expressed within 'The Bridge of Sighs', we have to look to Hood's position within society. Born in comfortable mediocrity, and early inured to narrow fortunes (Rossetti 1900) Hood lived a relatively easy life and became well established in the literary community. His social world predominantly consisted of male writers such as Charles Lamb, Thomas Persson De Quincy and his brother-in-law was the poet John Hamilton. The activist undercurrent of the poem first appears as contrary to the educated male metropolitan perspective on the drowned woman. His position within that community puts him in a good place to comment upon it. To unpack the social purpose of the sympathetic tone Hood takes we must look at the prospective audience to which it is aimed. Although the media within which the poem was initially published is unknown, around this time, Hood was starting a publication of his own, *Hood's magazine*, and was also working as the editor for the humourous magazine, *Punch* (Rossetti 1900). The Victorian fascination with suicide was spread across both high and low culture, and in 1836 the press was becoming accessible to new audiences after the fourpenny newspaper duty was dropped to a penny (Rose 2002: 31). Despite this, in 1840, thirty-three percent of men and fifty percent of women were illiterate (Loyd 2007). The implication of this being that the male metropolitan educated class from which he originates is likely to be the audience to which its purpose is directed. Finally, in unpacking the authenticity of 'The Bridge of Sighs', it is relevant to note that it constitutes a very small portion of Hood's work which deals with more serious subjects. Well established in his comic work, commentators soon after his death have alluded to the fact that he was more prolific in this style as it appealed to popular public taste and thus 'compelled him to lay aside the tragic lyre too often,' (Thomas Hood the Younger 1868: vi). At the end of his career, unwell and close to his death, his intention to take up the 'lyre', supports the sincerity of his sympathetic tone. His positionality and audience represent the patriarchal views of his time and the inferred poetic voice and audience (surveyor) as male, is important in understanding how attitudes

of gender within 'The Bridge of Sighs' are through the lens of the male gaze. The point at which patriarchal ideology is challenged or reinforced becomes the point of interest concerning the world-view of gender construction and the wider implication of this view within anthropological feminist theory

We begin in the time and place of Victorian dominant cultural consciousness, where 'fictions about women and suicide seem more prevalent than facts' (Meessen 2017: 19). In Hood's fiction, he attempts to create a corrective vision of the woman self-murderer as a victim within the society that engineered her. Through this, we inadvertently gain a window into Victorian patriarchal attitudes on gender and gendered suicide. Hood first introduces us to the woman when she is already dead. Yet her death is not just her own, it is impersonal as she is anonymized as one of many regrettable suicides, specifically female, and thus through her self-murder, she joins these others in fictional sisterhood. Initially dead - the state of ultimate passivity, the male reader-surveyor, is called to act upon her physical and spiritual body, compassionately taking her up from her fall. Together, they take her out of the water, without deliberation and replace thoughts of her sin with the sadness of her death. We then become aware of the social landscape to which she is a victim. Although told not to think critically of it, her nature is the first culprit leading to the deterministic reality of her death. Her rash disposition explains her revolt against the values of the social system. Her family is the second explanation, importantly however the family she is situated within first is Eve's family, emphasizing the gendered cause of her death. Next, it alludes to her sexual promiscuity as they are told to tie-up her hair- the focal point of a woman's sexuality, which had 'escaped' (32) the 'comb' (32) containing it. Then, she is ostracised from the family unit and speculatively a lover, who all resemble the entity to which suicide could have been resisted. Finally, as Christians, the readers are called upon for their collective responsibility in her death. She stands for the first time by herself outside of the safety of the hearth and finds discomfort in her surroundings. Discomfort in all but the bridge and the river, to which she is compelled to go. She makes her first and only active move and leaps from the judgment of our world, consumed back into nature. Only now in her death, 'pure womanly', (20) she is restored to a level of respect. Beyond this she is young, slim, and beautiful. Directed to think of her in this state, and of the immortality of man, they must act again on this now passive body, her beauty showing the ease of her death. Necessarily the body must be physically revised by hand to prepare for the ceremony of death. They leave now, passive themselves, transmitting her sins to God.

What the 21st-century reader might find peculiar in Hood's narrative is the seeming desire to depict the fallen woman as a victim, with no desire to change the suggestion that the fallen woman is inherently sinful and has no other option but her suicide. Darnton (1991) has suggested that 'when you realize you are not getting something... that is

particularly meaningful to narratives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it' (Darnton 1991: 78). Her particular suicidal motives and methods are especially meaningful to Hood's sympathetic narrative so this will be our point of entry to gaining insight into Hood's attitudes on gender.

'Victorian representations of suicidal methods and motives were the products of a deeply gendered and widely-accepted dichotomy of suicidal behavior' (Deacon 2015: 24) and Hood's stereotypical fallen woman exemplifies this. Hood does not depict a suicide, but a woman's suicide. Her primary motive made clear is a suicidal intention inherent in her as a woman. 'All slips of hers' (27) are accounted to her being 'One of Eve's family' (28). Without mention of any sins actively committed, her narrative is impersonal in its reference to all women collectively across time, whom which in its biblical reference are is the type of creature who falls by nature. With this biblical reference then, the attitude created is that sin is essential to feminine nature and is a likely feminine suicidal motivation. The naturalizing of sex differences informs a belief that the genders should then have separate realms of existence. Another motive illuminates this view. It is reiterated many times that she is 'houseless by night' (62) and estranged from family relations. It is not then wholly her lack of personal economic or emotional support as stressors that is alluded to, but her displacement from her 'right' place in society, the domestic space to which she stands outside. Ostracised at the time of her suicide, she stands in the dark outside the houses of others which are 'light,' (58) 'From window and casement' (59). His isolation of her from the domestic sphere reinforces the attitude that was 'commonplace in the nineteenth century, that the traditional patriarchal family unit was the best defense against self-destruction' (Deacon 2017:13). Additionally, Hood is suggestive of her having a lover, a 'dearer one' (40) 'and a nearer one,' (41) which is not seen as a fact of her motive but an assumption of those finding an explanation of her suicide. Victorians were obsessed with finding a story of seduction or abandonment to accompany a suicide. Margret Moyes committed suicide by jumping from the Monument in London in 1839, and Jane Cooper's jumped from the same monument three years later. These were two such cases where during the inquest of both, the newspapers 'all eagerly discussed the possibility she had been a victim of seduction' (Deacon 2017: 30) consulting acquaintances, workplaces and coroner's reports in the desire to find seduction as an explanation to fit a cultural narrative. The assumption being that rather than taking her life rationally, she was under the vice of her inherent emotional nature. Hood's woman does not deliberate on her decision; it is made 'rashly' (3) and 'swiftly' (69) carried out. The motives of Hood's self-murderer then give us a window into how he viewed femininity. The world he depicts is one in which she is at the mercy of her essential nature as a sinful, irrational, and emotional woman. Relevant to the conditions in which it was produced, he reinforces the patriarchal ideology that women are made inferior, either by nature or by virtue of their dependency on men. This worldview is further elaborated on by

the *modus operandi* of her suicide.

The symbolic ramifications of her suicide by drowning is relevant in understanding Hood's feminization of suicide. Bachelard notes that water can be seen as 'the true matter of a very feminine death' (Bachelard in Meessen 2017: 32). This is in representation rather than reality as the preferred methods of female suicide were poisoning or hanging (Meessen 2017: 26). Her death by drowning is thus symbolic of her femininity. Firstly the act of drowning in water has rich biblical imagery of baptism and that relates to the redemptive nature of suicide that our woman experiences. Only after her death, she 'Now is pure womanly,' (20) the emphasis on the 'now', (20) referencing the immediate transformative nature of her suicide cleansing her sins. Beyond this, however, the symbol of water constitutes many associations of femininity that Hood has already alluded to in the women's suicidal motives. The fickle, fluid, fertile, and passivity of water make the method of being consumed by it seeming fitting for her death.

Thus far Hood seems to create a quintessential depiction of femininity and feminized suicide that embodies the patriarchal views of the time. How this relates to his tender tone of compassion is 'where to grasp' and 'unravel' a further level to his system of gendered meaning. In aiming to create compassion in the reader, which is likely to be male, he makes the woman a victim. The effect of this being, she no longer possesses agency. The exception to this is in her actual act of suicide in which she 'plunged boldly' (72) to her death. This active motion cuts across the rest of the poem in which she is either still, when alive, or ultimately passive in death. The implication of her action is significant as her suicide is that which gives her the 'now' (20) 'pure' (20) status. Fallen women who committed suicide were considered more sympathetically than those who lived in shame and dishonor (Auerbach 1980: 50). This very fact demonstrates the marginality of her agency and also limits the progressiveness of Hood's asking for our sympathy.

The marginality of her agency is in committing suicide, yet this is her only honorable option. In asking sympathy for her in her already pure state, where no sympathy is asked for pre-death, Hood reconstructs the convention that women will only receive sympathy through this singular redemptive resolution to their sin. This tone of compassion takes away from the agency given to her on an even deeper level. The passive nature of her body creates a relationship with the male reader surveyor who through this compassion can act upon her body both physically and mentally. This avenue endows the male reader with the authority to 'take her,' (13) and 'touch her,' (13) handing over the agency to the man and fulfilling their patriarchal desire to control women. This is most predominant in the last few stanzas where the men prepare her body for death, they 'smooth' (87) and 'compose' (87) her 'limbs', (84) 'close' (88) her eyes, and 'cross her hands' (100) 'over her breast.' (102) Being framed as a kindness to the woman conceals their control over her. Her objectification is also clear through the eroticization of her body. Despite having just committed

suicide, her beauty shines through. Physically she is 'slenderly' (7) 'young and so fair,' (8) her body shape is exposed by her 'clinging' (10) 'garments.' (9) All of these erotic elements such as the wiping of her 'poor lips' (29) would be culturally inappropriate if they occurred explicitly in an art form. Berger (1972) discusses how Eve's fall, as told in Genesis, is the time at which women are made subservient to man and become aware of their nudity. In art forms expanding time, Eve's fall is depicted as a moment of her shame but the shame in these representations is in relation 'to the spectator' (Berger 1972: 49). The Christian moral necessity to depict the fall of Eve offers an avenue of spectatorship for the audience, to look upon the fallen women, who would not be able to be depicted nude without this biblical message.

The fall of Hood's woman and the audience's passing judgement on her can then be regarded in the same way. This is exemplified not only in the poetic voice or audience participation of spectatorship but also by fictional spectators who accompany the poem in the form of etches. Lord Fitzgerald's etched illustration in '*passages from the Poems of Thomas Hood*' (Fitzgerald 1858 (in Meessen 2017: 54) depicts an exclusively male group surrounding the passive body of the woman, their voyeuristic expressions replacing the compassion that the poem prescribes. Thus the sight of her as an object, 'stimulates the use of it as an object' (Berger 1972: 54). The perspective the source offers explicitly is that women have natural sex differences that lead to a different and subordinate role in society. In relation to this, the opinion is that despite their nature or reason for suicide, if they commit suicide then we should treat them compassionately. The way this latter perspective manifests in the poem shows us the implicit objectification of women. The extent to which this was the intention of Hood in his poem is difficult to isolate. The gendered system of meaning created by the poem does however seem to strongly correlate to the patriarchal perspective of the time in which it was produced.

The patriarchal desire to control women, exemplified in Hood's poem, has been an extremely relevant topic in both historical and contemporary feminist anthropological debates. The source manifests the view that inherent sex differences are an explanation for the subordination of women. This explanation has been used as a ground from which the patriarchy maintains gendered inequality. This is relevant to the ambitions of second-wave feminists. They saw the ability to relate gendered difference to something which is not inherent in sex as an avenue for changing gendered inequality. Rosaldo (1974) took up this debate and examined the separation of the domestic and public spheres. She utilized this separation to find an explanation of the subordination of women which is not rooted in their 'essential' nature as Hood suggested, but

instead as rooted in the sexual division of labour. The source however is perhaps even more significant in anthropological debates due to the questions it raises about the objectification of women.

There are wider implications for what is implicitly shown within the source, both in the local culture the source was produced in but also across time, in all patriarchal societies. The implication of the source that I have shown here is that men survey women, and thus women survey themselves. Taking a Foucauldian understanding of the body as a mechanism for social control, we can see how the perspective of the poem could be embodied in the lives of women. Embodying this perspective, women would survey themselves to stay on the path of virtue through fear of suicide. As the Samaritans worried, if they believed they had sinned then they would be more likely to commit suicide, as the glamorization of it promised 'young girls both a reinstatement of their respectability after death as well as the attention they had often craved for in their difficult lives' (Meessen 2015: 56). This self- surveillance still structures the consciousness and behaviour of women today.

Due to the patriarchal desire of control, Benson (1997) has explored how we unconsciously self-discipline ourselves through body monitoring in alignment with dominant cultural values. This self-surveillance can then get out of control leading to issues such as anorexia. She details the clear gendered inequality within this, as under patriarchal forms of control this self-disciplining is more prevalent in the lives of women. Pitts (2003) explores this through body modification. She looks at narratives of real bodies which have been sites of physical abuse and show's how they try to claim their bodies back through scarification, piercings and tattoos. Despite their acknowledgement that they are acting with agency, they are inevitably a recipient of objectification through fetishization in commercial and artistic domains, 'being constructed as the object of the male gaze' (Jones in Pitts 2003: 56). 'The Bridge of Sighs' then not only offers us an invaluable insight into systems of gendered meaning and specifically the feminization of suicide within the dominant Victorian cultural consciousness of its time, but it gives us insight into how the relationship between the male surveyor and the female object of surveillance still structures the consciousness of many women today.

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APPENDIX

**Arthur Quiller-Couch,
The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse. 1922
The Bridge of Sighs
By Thomas Hood**

ONE more Unfortunate,
Weary of breath,
Rashly importunate,
Gone to her death!

Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care;
Fashion'd so slenderly,
Young, and so fair!

Look at her garments
Clinging like cerements;
Whilst the wave constantly
Drips from her clothing;
Take her up instantly,
Loving, not loathing.

Touch her not scornfully;
Think of her mournfully,
Gently and humanly;
Not of the stains of her,
All that remains of her
Now is pure womanly.

Make no deep scrutiny
Into her mutiny
Rash and undutiful:
Past all dishonour,
Death has left on her
Only the beautiful.

Still, for all slips of hers,
One of Eve's family—
Wipe those poor lips of hers
Oozing so clammily.

Loop up her tresses
Escaped from the comb,
Her fair auburn tresses;
Whilst wonderment guesses
Where was her home?

Who was her father?
Who was her mother?
Had she a sister?
Had she a brother?
Or was there a dearer one
Still, and a nearer one
Yet, than all other?

Alas! for the rarity
Of Christian charity
Under the sun!

O, it was pitiful!
Near a whole city full,
Home she had none.

Sisterly, brotherly,
Fatherly, motherly
Feelings had changed:
Love, by harsh evidence,
Thrown from its eminence;
Even God's providence
Seeming estranged.

Where the lamps quiver
So far in the river,
With many a light
From window and casement,
From garret to basement,

She stood, with amazement,
Houseless by night.

The bleak wind of March
Made her tremble and shiver;
But not the dark arch,

Or the black flowing river:
Mad from life's history,
Glad to death's mystery,
Swift to be hurl'd—
Anywhere, anywhere

Out of the world!

In she plunged boldly—
No matter how coldly
The rough river ran—
Over the brink of it,

Picture it—think of it,
Dissolute Man!
Lave in it, drink of it,
Then, if you can!

Take her up tenderly,

Lift her with care; Fashion'd so
slenderly,
Young, and so fair!
Ere her limbs frigidly
Stiffen too rigidly,

Decently, kindly,

Smooth and compose them;
And her eyes, close them,
Staring so blindly!

Dreadfully staring

Thro' muddy impurity,
As when with the daring
Last look of despairing
Fix'd on futurity.

Perishing gloomily,

Spurr'd by contumely,
Cold inhumanity,
Burning insanity,
Into her rest.—
Cross her hands humbly

As if praying dumbly,
Over her breast!
Owning her weakness,
Her evil behaviour,
And leaving, with meekness,

Her sins to her Saviour!