



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



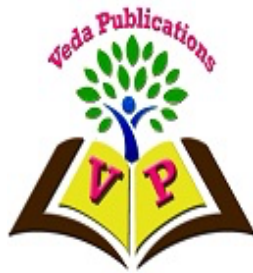
## COMMUNICATING THROUGH GRIEF: THE EFFECTS OF WRITING IN THE VICTORIAN AND GILDED AGES

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2024.11304>**ABSTRACT**

Grief is a complex emotional response to loss and is expressed in many ways. Mourning stationery, mourning cigarettes, hair wreaths, and mourning rings, on the more expensive end, were objects used to signal a public display of grief, but writing had a profound influence on the Victorian and Gilded Ages, but even in death, there was money to be made in death during the Victorian and Gilded Ages. The world of commerce was quick to recognize the money to be made from this unexpected and unprecedented run on all things funeral. As the production of mourning tea sets reveals, taking tea and thinking about death were two cultural practices that could be done simultaneously. An important legacy that remained in mourning was letter writing and stationery during the Victorian and Gilded Ages, which was based on the writer and recipient of expressive papers, and has been maintained as a tradition through modern times as a form of expression and healing. As mourning became more expressive, handwritten notes and letters reached peak popularity during the second half of the 19th century and became fashionable for people as being characterized by having an elegant simplicity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Grief is a complex emotional response to loss, often associated with the death of a loved one. However, it can also arise from other significant life changes, such as the end of a relationship, loss of health, or a change in life circumstances. It is a deeply personal process, with no right or wrong way to grieve. While grief is often associated with feelings of sadness, it can also manifest in a range of other emotions, including anger, guilt, fear, and even relief. Writing is an expressive means for mourning and has been found through the use of tea, dress, and letter writing; along with the socioeconomic status of the person in mourning.

### Tea and Mourning

Victorian mourning, when done properly, seeped into every aspect of daily life, including teatime. During a period of great social and economic change, catalyzed by the Industrial Revolution, tea and mourning were two things that were able to unite the Victorian populace across every socioeconomic level. According to Julie E. Fromer, author of *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England*. "Tea crossed class lines, appearing at the humblest suppers and gracing the table of Queen Victoria, creating a universal English habit." As with the varying levels of tea taking, the practice of mourning took on different levels of extravagance depending on the social status of the person in mourning.

To mourn publicly in the Victorian Era was to mourn expensively. Wealthy widows, the lodestars of outlandish mourning rituals, could be expected to closely mimic Queen Victoria's infamous mourning practices. A wealthy widow mourned her husband for a period of two years following his death. She would be outfitted in a monochromatic wardrobe of raven, drab and without an ounce of shine, otherwise known as "widows' weeds," during the first year of this period. This attire was coupled with a strict withdrawal from social frivolities. The second year of her mourning saw a gradual lightening of attire; the black dress was eventually replaced with eggplant, mauve, and dark grey fabrics. Yet even after her two dedicated years to outward mourning, a widow might continue to mourn her husband by hosting an annual dinner in honor of his death and memory, as Chris Woodyard details in *The Victorian Book of the Dead*.

The poor widow, while not able to afford such displays of luxury, saw to it that she would not to be

excluded from this cultural practice. There was paramount importance to mourning : failing to mourn properly was taken to mean that her marriage was invalid. In the case that she could not afford an expensive mourning gown, the poor widow would have dyed one of the dresses she already owned. Such a dress would also come in handy for any future deaths she might be expected to mourn for, such as for one of her young children, an event that was as probable as it was tragic : half of all children born in the early nineteenth century would die before the age of 10, as Thomas W. Laqueur soberly reveals in *The Work of the Dead*. In addition to attire, a myriad and plentitude of mourning objects were accessible on a variety of economic levels.

Mourning stationary, mourning cigarettes, hair wreaths, and mourning rings, on the more expensive end, were objects used to signal a public display of grief, but writing had a profound influence, but even in death, there was money to be made in death during the Victorian and Gilded Ages. The world of commerce was quick to recognize the money to be made from this unexpected and unprecedented run on all things funeral. This economic foresight triggered a surge in British manufacturing. Mass production of every kind of ephemera to commemorate Prince Albert, including "plaques, busts, plates, handkerchiefs, and even special mourning tea sets," commenced. As the production of mourning tea sets reveals, taking tea and thinking on death were two cultural practices that could be done simultaneously. The dead were never erased, for the Victorians. Their memory was kept alive through these mementos long after their bodies had been buried under the ground.

These two seemingly dissociate practices have made the Victorians' legacy stand the test of time. Teatime is synonymous with British cultural identity and heritage, and as the Death Positivity movement gains traction in the United Kingdom and in the United States, historians, death professionals, writers, and artists are looking to the Victorians for guidance when it comes to doing death 'properly,' and working through grief.

### HISTORY OF PAPER IN MOURNING

Perhaps the most Victorian of all the Victorian letters is mourning stationery. Death and especially early death was a common occurrence in the 1800s, and mourning the dead was a way of life during the Victorian era. Being in mourning not only dictated what you wore and did and didn't do, as it



determined what type of letters you sent. Mourning stationery had a black border around the edge of the paper and the envelopes. The distinctive envelope served a couple good uses. It notified the letter carrier of its somber and important contents, which encouraged extra care and protection during transit. Similarly, it gave the recipient some warning of the news it held, giving time to sit or find privacy before reading. It was an art form, shrouded in strict etiquette and common practice for many middle and upper-class men and women. This post sets aside most of the etiquette and briefly outlines what Victorian era stationery actually looked like and what it was used for, especially the color of paper.

The color of paper had changed over the decades. Earlier in the Victorian period, colored and lightly tinted and scented papers were fashionable, and mostly, if not exclusively, used by women. Floral embellishments, fancy finishes, and edges lined in gold, silver, or other colors were also in trend in the earlier years but fell out of fashion in favor of simple family crests and monograms. By the 1890s, embellishments were considered to be in bad taste for most circumstances. One thing that everyone seemed to agree on, no matter the year or occasion: high quality plain white or cream paper in a nice thick weight was always the most elegant choice. Lady Gertrude Elizabeth Campbell, *Etiquette of Good Society* stated in 1893, that "there is a fashion in letter-paper and envelopes which is ever varying as to size and shape, sometimes small, at other times large; now oblong, now square; but one thing never alters, and that is the desirability of using good thick paper and envelopes, whatever the shape may be." For personal correspondence, note-paper was used. For either men or women's stationery, the best letters were kept simple, with the focus on high-quality paper and excellent penmanship. One author goes as far as to say both paper and envelopes should be of fine quality. It conduces to fine penmanship, and perhaps inspires the writer with fine thoughts.

Envelopes, no matter what style of letter or note paper was used, the envelope must always match. Sometimes two envelopes were used; the inner envelope would be made of the same paper as the letter, and the outer protective envelope would be a bit hardier stock, sometimes in a buff color. Envelopes were sealed with wax up until the end of the century, and while women could use a variety of colors such as gold or blue, men could only use red. Black wax was used if the writer was in mourning. By

the end of the 1800s, gummed envelopes replaced the need for wax. Black ink was always used, and by the end of the century, anything else was seen as distasteful. Some earlier passing trends allowed for women to write in colored inks, with violet being a popular choice for some time. Quill pens were not as common as steel pens, but they were still used by some of the more talented writers. The stub pen was also viewed as a good choice for someone with the skill to wield it gracefully. The type of pen used wasn't nearly as important as the neatness, elegance, and grace of the penmanship.

### MOURNING STATIONERY

Perhaps the most Victorian of all the Victorian letters is mourning stationery. Death and especially early death was a common occurrence in the 1800s, and mourning the dead was a way of life during the Victorian era. Being in mourning not only dictated what you wore and did and didn't do, as it determined what type of letters were sent. Mourning stationery had a black border around the edge of the paper and the envelopes. The distinctive envelope served a couple good uses. It notified the letter carrier of its somber and important contents, which encouraged extra care and protection during transit. Similarly, it gave the recipient some warning of the news it held, giving time to sit or find privacy before reading.

The Mourning Stationery Envelope is an example of a black bordered mourning stationery envelope. However, mourning stationery wasn't used just for death announcements, it was also used for all letter writing the bereaved did in the year or two after their loved one's death. Even the thickness of the black border could indicate important information about the loss. In some cases, the closeness of the relationship between the writer and the deceased would be conveyed through the width of the border. For example, a mother mourning the loss of a child would have a thicker border than if she were mourning the loss of a cousin. In some cases it conveyed to the reader how much time had passed since the death occurred, starting with a thick border early in the mourning period, and gradually thinning out over the course of the year or years. However, these social rules varied over time and geographically, and eventually gave way to most people using simple, thin bordered stationery for all mourning purposes.

Within American history, letter writing became popular during the second half of the 19th century



and was due to three main factors. Literacy rates were higher than ever, mail could be delivered quickly across large distances thanks to the newly completed rail system, and the invention of the postage stamp made sending mail more affordable to all classes. After the turn of the century, much of the stationery that people used was plain and uniform, and greeting cards and postcards started to gain popularity. Over time, telegraphs, radio, and the telephone made letter writing as a primary method of passing news obsolete, except during war, where letter writing remained very popular throughout the 20th century.

For these reasons, it's clear that the Victorian era was truly the pinnacle of letter writing, at least in American history. Though letter writing today is certainly not the most efficient way to spread news or make an announcement, it has certainly stood the test of time. We still often send wedding invitations, birth announcements, letters of condolences or congratulations, and birthday cards in the mail with care. When we do take the time to handwrite a friendly note or quick letter, it is always received as something special. The physical nature of the notecard, the quality of its paper, the writer's distinct penmanship, and the fact that it's the only copy in the world just like it, all make the reading experience more personal, and more special and unique, which was found to be true during the Victorian and Gilded Ages.

### The Letter Edged In Black

Letter writing and stationery during the Victorian and Gilded Ages was based on the writer and recipient of expressive papers known as Mourning Stationery. Its border signified an important sociological phenomenon. These marked papers were immediately identifiable by a black border surrounding the page, and were often accompanied by a black-bordered envelope. The recipient would instantly understand that the sender is in mourning. Though this practice has its origins in the seventeenth century, it became popular in the Victorian era and remained in vogue for much of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century. As the mourner would begin to write on such special paper with a thick black border around his or her stationery, which would narrow over time.

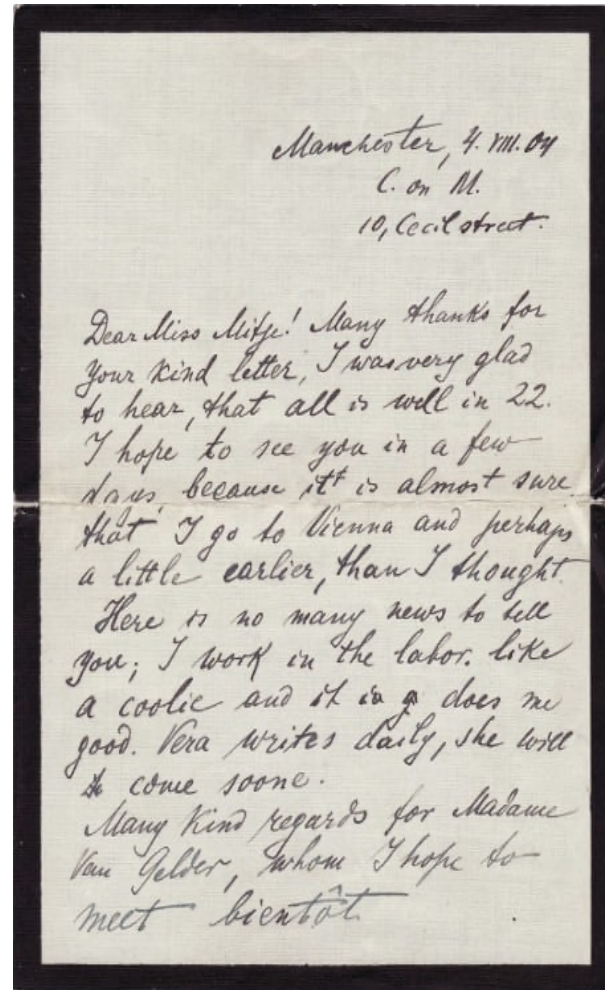


Figure 1: Thick black line around mourning stationery.

By 1921, in her *Book of Etiquette*, Lillian Eichler Watson maintains that white stationery was "correct for all occasions, and mourning is not an exception." If one were to opt for a black-bordered mourning stationery, she opines, it ought to be narrow; a border nearly an inch wide is "in bad taste." When it comes to thank-you cards, she echoed the Victorian idea of lessening the border during the morning period, or keeping it consistent, but narrow, until it was discarded altogether.



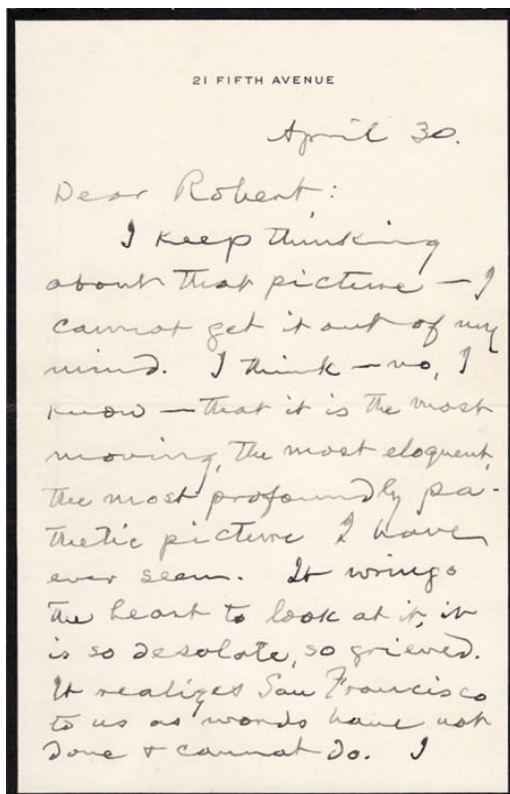


Figure 2: A thin black line around mourning stationery.

Black borders around print have been a powerful signal of bereavement in American culture since the nineteenth century. Not being confined to personal correspondence, nineteenth century newspapers would run death announcements with a border of black. Tellingly, Mark Twain explains in this letter that he can't deliver a "light and nonsensical speech" to be printed in the paper, along with the "black bars of mourning" on the occasion of President Garfield's death. Indeed, Hattie Nevada's 1897 song, *The Letter Edged in Black*, has been covered by many artists throughout the years, preserving the idea of a black-edged letter or envelope as a portent of bad news or mourning well after the custom had fallen out of favor in the United States.

Mourning stationery, especially envelopes, were very common during the Victorian Period. During this time, the recipient of the letter had to pay in order to receive it. These mourning envelopes, with black trim around all of the edges, served as a message to the recipient that someone had died and that they needed to find the money to pay for the letter. Consequently, many people of the lower reaches could not afford to pay for their letters. As time progressed, writing had changed in its customs and

conventions that led from being a traditional means of communicating and expressing to a modernized tradition.

### MODERN DAY WRITING

The Victorians used an array of customs and conventions that included black-edged stationery during an era of high mortality. Writing helped them to get through frequent bereavements. Since the Victorian and Gilded Ages, that are valuable to the customs of the Eighteenth and Nineteen Centuries. Even in an age of texting, email, and social media a handwritten letter of condolence is still recognized as an indispensable and time-honored way of conveying thoughts and good wishes to a person in mourning. The act of writing, choosing stationery, the use of pen and ink, and addressing the envelope sends a strong message of concern and empathy, as condolence letters are essential. Guided and detailed writing can not only help us process what we've been through and assist us as we envision a path forward; it can lower our blood pressure, strengthen our immune systems, and increase our general well-being.

Writing is a form of expressive writing that has been shown to heal us. It is a certain kind of guided, detailed writing can not only help us process what we've been through and assist us as we envision a path forward; it can lower our blood pressure, strengthen our immune systems, and increase our general well-being. Expressive writing can result in a reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression; improve our sleep and performance; and bring us greater focus and clarity.

These effects of writing as a tool for healing are well documented. Pennebaker and Evans, studied the impact of a certain kind of writing on mental health. Since then, over 200 research studies have reported that "emotional writing" can improve people's physical and emotional health. In classic studies, subjects who wrote about personal upheavals for 15 minutes a day over three or four days visited doctors for health concerns less frequently and reported greater psychological well-being. In a 2009 study, a six-week writing intervention increases resilience, and decreases depressive symptoms, perceived stress, and rumination among those reporting trauma in the past year. Thirty-five percent of the participants who began the program with indicators of likely clinical depression ended the program no longer meeting this criterion.



Writing as an intervention may seem counterintuitive, since writing is viewed as being about negative experiences has a positive effect, narrating the story of a past negative event or an ongoing anxiety “frees up” cognitive resources. Since trauma damages the brain tissue, but that when people translate their emotional experience into words, they may be changing the way it is organized in the brain.

Writing matters, both personally and professionally. In a moment still permeated with epic stress and loss, we need to call in all possible supports. Those who’ve suffered profoundly, whether they’ve lost income, loved ones, well-being, may not wish to chat about it casually with coworkers for fear that those who didn’t experience that level of loss and are now rushing to parties and vacations can’t relate. The difficulty of expressing of emotion out loud can be readily given a voice through writing, since it allows for the writer to avoid processing what had been experienced in life. Writing minimizes the impact of the most profound traumas and crises of our lives. Healing is essential to our collective wellness, and expressive writing has already proven to be a tool for enhancing well-being in teachers and other full-time workers.

According to a July 2020 writing study by researchers Emily Round, Mark Wetherell, Vicki Else, and Michael A. Smith, a course of “positive expressive writing,” meaning writing specifically about intensely positive experiences over three consecutive days, not only reduced “state anxiety” immediately post-writing but improved work-related well-being and job satisfaction four weeks later. Researchers call for further work on the effects of expressive writing on organizational outcomes suggests that writing may even enhance work quality and creativity in the workplace. “Creativity is a basic human response to trauma and a natural emergency defense system,” writes Louise DeSalvo in *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, a book that famously draws on the myriad scientific studies about the efficacy of using writing as a restorative tool that was recognized since the Victorian and Gilded Ages.

### WRITING THAT HEALS

Expressive writing has changed since the Victorian and Gilded Ages. It is expansively defined as writing that helps us make sense of our thoughts and emotions. Established writers know this intuitively. Expressive writing can take myriad forms,

including journaling, memoir, poetry, even opinion or thought pieces, but *what* you write matters less than *how*.

The most healing writing, according to researchers, must follow a set of creative parameters. Most importantly, it can be just for you. It must contain concrete, authentic, explicit detail. The writer must link feelings to events, on the page. Such writing allows a person to tell a complete, complex, coherent story, with a beginning, middle, and end. This made writing beneficial in both the Victorian and Gilded Ages and even now. In the telling, such writing transforms the writer from a victim into something more powerful: a narrator with the power to observe.

The difference between a victim and a survivor is the meaning made of the trauma. Following the Holocaust, for instance, many survivors wrote accounts of their experiences. Victor Frankl, whose 1946 book *Man’s Search for Meaning* was written over a period of nine days, was originally published under the title *A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*. This type of immersive, reflective writing process can help us piece ourselves back together after even the most unimaginable times. In writing our stories, we retain authorship over our lives.

Writing has long been recognized as a form of therapy. It provides a safe space for expressing emotions, exploring thoughts, and making sense of experiences. When dealing with grief, writing can serve as a powerful tool for healing and growth. Writing allows for the expression of emotions that may be difficult to verbalize. It can provide a sense of release, helping to alleviate the burden of unexpressed feelings. Furthermore, writing can help to organize chaotic thoughts, providing clarity and perspective in the midst of grief.

### BENEFITS OF WRITING DURING GRIEF

Writing during grief can have several benefits. It can help to process and understand emotions, provide a sense of control, and facilitate healing and growth. Let’s explore these benefits in more detail. Writing can help to process and understand emotions. Grief can bring a whirlwind of emotions that can be confusing and overwhelming. Writing provides a space to explore these emotions, helping to make sense of them and understand their source. It can provide a sense of control. Grief can often feel like a chaotic and uncontrollable process. Writing provides



a means to navigate through the grief journey at one's own pace. Lastly, writing during mourning in the Victorian and Gilded Ages facilitated healing and growth. By expressing emotions and exploring thoughts, writing can lead to insights and revelations that can promote healing. It can also foster a sense of connection with the deceased, helping to maintain a sense of their presence and influence in one's life.

Grief is a deeply personal and profound journey, one that can be overwhelming and isolating. However, writing can serve as a powerful tool to navigate this journey, providing a space for expression, exploration, and healing. Whether through journaling, letter writing, poetry, or storytelling, writing can help to process emotions, provide a sense of control, and facilitate healing and growth.

## CONCLUSION

Death is a universal experience, yet the way we mourn and commemorate the departed. It is an inevitable part of life. Funeral traditions have been an integral part of human culture for centuries, serving as a way to honor and commemorate the lives of those who have passed away. These customs provide solace and closure for grieving families and communities. However, just like any other aspect of human civilization, funeral traditions have evolved over time, adapting to societal changes, cultural shifts, and advancements in technology have changed not only grief, but how grief has changed communication through writing, which is both therapeutic and empowering for individuals as far back as the Gilded Ages and has progressed over the years.

During the Victorian era (1837-1901), mourning rituals reached their peak in terms of elaboration and formality. The death of a loved one was seen as an occasion for public display of grief and respect. Mourning attire, such as black clothing and veils, was worn for an extended period to signify mourning. Elaborate funeral processions and memorials became common, and the practice of sending sympathy cards gained popularity.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, grieving women generally wore heavy black outfits that included veils and bonnets; sometimes there were necklaces, or bits of jewelry that contained the hair of the deceased. Both male and female mourners often used special stationery with black borders for correspondence helped readers to signify

the depth of the writer's mourning and at what stage, a heavy black edge identified as the early stages of mourning. A thin black thin showed that mourner was in a later stage of mourning. Over time, the borders would narrow, to show readers that the bereaved party was slowly recovering. Today, writing has taken a different tone through the use of Legacy Writing. During the Gilded Ages, it was tradition to wear black for one year, and to use mourning stationery for that year.

The importance of writing as a means of therapeutic expression has remained a timeless tradition for people. Writing, as an expressive tool, was invaluable not only today in communicating thoughts and feelings, but also during the Victorian and Gilded Ages as a social etiquette and common practice for many in the middle and upper-class.

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Cristina Guarneri is an adjunct professor at Montclair State University, English Department. She completed her Ed.D. in Education from Seton Hall University in 2009, and her M.A. in Creative Writing and English in 2018. Dr. Guarneri received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing and English, with a Certification in Professional Writing in 2021 from Southern New Hampshire University. She has provided writing seminars and workshops throughout the Tri-State



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