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‘Anything awful makes me laugh’: Charles Lamb, Thomas Hood, and the Suicide
Joke

John STRACHAN

Last night, Mr. H, a portrait painter in Southampton Buildings, Holborn, put an end to his existence by cutting his throat in a shocking manner. It is supposed that he must have accomplished his purpose with a pallet-knife, as the edges of the cicatrice or wound were found besmeared with a yellow consistence, but the knife could not be found. The reasons of this rash act are not assigned, an unfortunate passion has been mentioned, but nothing certain is known. The deceased was subject to hypochondria, low spirits, but he had lately seemed better, having paid more than usual attention to his dress and person. Besides being a painter, he had written some pretty things in prose and verse.¹

At first glance, a reader of the *Charles and Mary Lamb Journal* might imagine that this is a contemporary news report of the death of a nineteenth-century painter – perhaps Charles Lamb’s friend Benjamin Robert Haydon, who cut his throat in 1846 (after a gunshot to his head intended to kill him failed to do so). The passage has many of the conventions of a sensationalist late Georgian newspaper report: meticulous detail, conjectured motives, periphrastically ornate language (‘besmeared with a yellow consistence’), and speculative, biographical asides. But this passage is from 1807, and nothing to do with the later suicide.

‘Mr H.’, the portrait painter of Southampton Buildings, was William Hazlitt rather than B. R. Haydon, and what we have here is a spoof news report, supposedly from

¹ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. W. Marris, 3 vols (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975-8), II: 265 (29 December 1807).

the 'Morning Post or Fashionable World', written by Charles Lamb in December 1807 in a letter to his friend Joseph Hume.² Lamb's letter is a playful hoax which lets Hume know 'what has happen'd to our poor friend Hazlitt',³ who, lamentably, has put an end to himself. This extraordinary letter was the start of a droll three-way conversation. Hume passed on news of the hoax to Hazlitt, saying that he had received some 'stuff and farrago' about his death in 'Mr Lamb's writing. I don't like that Lamb; Look to him; I hate snakes in the grass... For God's sake come down here and convince these silly fellows ... that talk about your death, that you are alive'.⁴

Hazlitt replied to Hume and Lamb in a 'humble petition & remonstrance of William Hazlitt ... shewing he is not dead', intended to establish that he was most certainly still alive, and composed in a dry and self-deprecating manner:

Not a day has passed in which he has not eat and drank like other people ... Also that he has twice attempted to read some of his own works, but has fallen asleep over them. ... It should also be especially noted that within the last three weeks he has borrowed money of his friends, which was at all times his constant custom. Again, that he has held more than one argument which nobody could understand but himself.⁵

Hazlitt's petition declares that 'he looks upon the said Charles Lamb as the ring-leader in this unjust conspiracy against him, & as the sole cause & author of the jeopardy he is in'.⁶ Indeed, Lamb himself, says Hazlitt, should be considered 'as

² *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 264-5. The epistle is addressed to Joseph Hume of Somerset House (1767-1843), Lamb's fellow London clerk, rather than the Radical M.P. of the same name.

³ *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II, 265.

⁴ Quoted in *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 266.

⁵ *Lamb and Hazlitt: Further Letters and Records Hitherto Unpublished*, ed. William Carew Hazlitt (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1909), 69-72. Hazlitt includes an inventory of his possessions, including 'A small Claude Lorraine mirror, which Mr Lamb the other evening secretly purloined after a pretended visit of condolence, & which will doubtless be found shamelessly hung up in the chambers of the fraudulent possessor ... It is probable that when charged with this irregular transfer of property, he will say that it was won at a game of cribbage. But this is an entirely false pretence'.

⁶ *Lamb and Hazlitt: Further Letters*, 77.

much a dead man as himself & the undertaker spoken to accordingly'⁷ to measure him for his coffin, were it not for a few worthwhile efforts which kept his name alive: 'A poem he wrote on Tobacco⁸ about two years ago, a farce called *Mr. H*— he brought out last winter, with more wit than discretion in it ... and some lively notes he is at present writing on dead authors'.⁹ This too is subtly riffing on the notion of self-destruction; the 'farce' Hazlitt mentions here is *Mr. H* (1806), Lamb's witty but ill-fated Drury Lane two-act comedy about a visitor to Bath who attempts, absurdly, to suppress his actual ugly, name (Hogsflesh) in polite society, insisting on the evasive 'Mr. H', thereby effecting what might be called the comic suicide of his own name, a form of symbolic death that anticipates the epistolary 'death' Lamb inflicts on another Mr H., Hazlitt himself, in the following year.¹⁰

Lamb, on seeing the second letter, reported to Hume that the personage now present in Southampton Row was none other than the ghost of William Hazlitt, newly returned from the dead. The spectral Hazlitt, 'a disembodied Spirit' who had been 'called ... from his six-foot bed of earth'¹¹ was now furnished with the truth about metaphysics and religion which had been his lifelong concern (indeed, 'one hour's separate existence gives a dead man clearer notions of metaphysics than all the treatises in the world').¹² Lamb looks forward to conversing with the zombie Hazlitt, his 'deceased friend'.¹³

⁷ *Lamb and Hazlitt: Further Letters*, 77-8.

⁸ That is, 'A Farewell to Tobacco' (1805)

⁹ *Lamb and Hazlitt: Further Letters*, 77-8.

¹⁰ It may be of course that 'Mr H.' in the Suicide Joke consciously echoes *Mr H*. the farce, which died a death, in theatrical parlance, at the Theatre Royal.

¹¹ *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 266.

¹² *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 266.

This notion is reminiscent of Lamb's later 'On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged' (1811): 'Suffice it to say ... that after hanging four minutes ... a man that is being strangled ... has altogether a different measure of time from his friends who are breathing leisurely about him'. I am grateful to Robert Morrison for drawing this passage to my attention.

¹³ *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 266

Suicide is commonly thought to be no laughing matter. This suicide ‘joke seems in questionable taste’, says Claude A. Prance, ‘although’, he concedes, ‘the victim played his part’.¹⁴ And he is right, of course; but that is also, perhaps, the point. For Charles Lamb, even the most serious or morbid subjects could be refracted through irony, exaggeration, and imaginative play. As he famously remarked to Robert Southey in 1815, ‘Anything awful makes me laugh. I misbehaved once at a funeral’.¹⁵ What E. V. Lucas calls ‘The Hazlitt Suicide Joke’¹⁶ demonstrates this tendency to the morbidly inappropriate perfectly. And the Suicide Joke is a very literary jest. Lamb’s above-mentioned letter, dated 29 December 1807, is anything but straightforward reportage. In it, he creates a verbatim newspaper parody of a sensationalist report of Hazlitt’s supposed death. The phrase ‘besmeared with a yellow consistence’, for instance, exemplifies Lamb’s grotesquely comic imagination here. Its absurdly precise and vivid diction transforms what could be a horrific, gruesome detail into a moment of darkly playful literary exaggeration. By describing the wound in such consciously periphrastic language, Lamb parodies the sensationalist and excessively formal tone of Georgian newspapers and periodicals, which delighted in minute and ornate accounts of crime and misfortune. The passage shows Lamb’s sophisticated manipulation of style: it is at once credible as a newspaper report and utterly artificial, making the reader complicit in the joke. In this exchange, Charles Lamb transforms a grotesque prank into a reflection on death, metaphysics, and imaginative possibility. The comic violence of the death report and Hazlitt’s mock indignation are inseparable from the playful philosophical

¹⁴ Claude A. Prance, *Companion to Charles Lamb: A Guide to People and Places, 1760-1847* (London, Mansell Publishing: 1983), 157.

¹⁵ *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, III: 181. 9 August 1815.

¹⁶ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols (London: Methuen, 1903-1905), 1: xii.

meditation: Lamb's humour allows the reader to confront mortality without solemnity, to consider death, even violent self-inflicted death, as a subject for ironic, imaginative engagement, rather than – or at least as well as – dread or despair.

Lamb's verbatim parody obituary is not an isolated instance of tasteless wit, nor merely a private joke among friends. He is not the only writer of his era to turn the ostensibly tragic event of suicide into a site of wit and playful literary artifice. Rather, his spoof belongs to a wider comic repertoire in contemporary print and visual culture in which suicide appears not as sublime catastrophe but as a site of absurdity, failure, and imaginative play. What Lamb exploits here – the incongruity between the gravity of self-destruction and the lightness of comic form – recurs persistently across early nineteenth-century British print culture. The Suicide Joke points toward a broader comic disposition within late Georgian and Victorian print culture, in which suicide repeatedly appears as an object of wit, satire, and grotesque incongruity. Alongside – and often in quiet resistance to – the Romantic, Wertherian elevation of self-destruction as sublime or sentimental, figures such as Lamb, Thomas Hood, George Cruikshank, and Charles Dickens developed a comic counter-tradition. This tradition deflates the prestige of despair, laughs uneasily in the face of death, and renders suicidal desperation ridiculous, bathetic, or theatrical. In this essay, I trace the emergence of a comic counter-tradition in which suicide becomes a site of wit, theatricality, and grotesquerie, focusing in particular on the work of Lamb and Hood. I argue that their uneasy laughter does not trivialise despair but exposes the cultural, literary, and emotional limits of treating self-destruction as sublime, and offers a comic riposte to one of the grimmest of human actions.

The essay examines literary and visual representations of suicide across the nineteenth century and into contemporary culture, with particular attention to humour, performance, and spectatorship. It is concerned not with suicide as lived experience, but with the cultural forms through which it has been made visible, legible, and repeatable. As the discussion will show, suicide – especially female suicide – has repeatedly been rendered available for literary consumption, commentary, and judgement, often through conventions that mix tragedy with irony, pathos with jest. The argument that follows takes such representations seriously, while remaining attentive to the ethical unease they generate. The examples of ‘suicidal humour’ that follow can make at times for an uncomfortable, even troubling, reading experience.

I

I know I’ve sunk meself in public opininn and indeed feel as if all
London was takin a sight of me. Many a man have took his razer
and cut his stick for less.

(Thomas Hood, ‘The Earth-Quakers’ (c. 1844))

The scatological English comic *Viz*, founded in 1979, features a recurring character by the name of Suicidal Syd, a gloomy youth who continually attempts self-destruction, only to be systematically thwarted in his suicidal ambitions. Eventually he resolves to live happily, only to be accidentally killed in some unforeseen – and now unwanted – manner at the end of each strip. Figure 1 shows the first five panels of the June 2008 episode of ‘Suicidal Syd’, with its customary woe-to-cheer narrative.

[image removed from repository version of article]

Fig. 1. Lew Stringer, 'Suicidal Syd'. *Viz*, No. 176 (June 2008). © Viz Ltd.

Later in this number, Syd throws himself off the top of a building, only to land on a discarded mattress. A video of this episode goes viral after appearing on Harry Hill's *You've been Framed* (a TV show featuring humorous home video clips of accidents and mishaps caught on camera), and Syd becomes a media star, only for malign fate to strike.

[image removed from repository version of article]

Fig. 2 Lew Stringer, 'Suicidal Syd'. *Viz*, No. 176 (June 2008). © Viz Ltd.

This is comedy of a particularly black hue, but its tone is by no means unprecedented. Long before twentieth-century semi-underground comics exploited such grotesque incongruity, British print culture of the late Georgian and early Victorian period developed a sustained and remarkably inventive comic discourse around suicide. Given the cultural ubiquity of self-destruction in the late Georgian age, this is hardly surprising. The Romantic era can be understood as an age of suicide, and of writing and talking about suicide. As Michelle Faubert has recently observed, 'the issue of suicide pervaded texts from the eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century, to the extent that one may speak of a distinctly Romantic-

era suicide debate'¹⁷ — a formulation that neatly captures both the ubiquity and the argumentative volatility of suicidal representation in the period.

As is well known, there was a European-wide preoccupation in this period with suicide and what one might call Romantic suicide, a trope that emerged in the 1770s around the death of the 17-year old Thomas Chatterton in 1770 and the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774, and in which self-destruction became the emblem of intense feeling and existential sensitivity. In this context, the figure of the despairing lover and the aestheticised death-scene became not isolated literary moments but culturally legible tropes, even clichés, throughout the period. *Werther* did not invent the despairing lover, but it fixed him in a set of images and gestures for the despairing (male) lover that proved extraordinarily durable.

Young Werther's suicide — prompted by unrequited love, staged with ritual solemnity, and enacted through a gunshot to the head — became a template that could be imitated, alluded to, and, crucially, recognised at a glance. The paraphernalia of despair became familiar: the melancholic sensibility, Werther's blue coat with brass buttons, his yellow waistcoat, the pistols, and the fatal shot that transforms interior anguish into spectacular bodily ruin: 'A pint of port and a pistol!' as Scythrop Glowry shouts, at his most exuberantly gloomy, in T. L. Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818); 'I will make my exit like Werter'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Michelle Faubert, *Romanticism and Subversive Suicide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 6.

¹⁸ Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*, ed Nicholas A. Joukovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 97. Scythrop is so-called by Mr Glowry 'from the name of a maternal ancestor, who had hanged himself one rainy day in a fit of *tædium vitæ* ... on which account, Mr Glowry held his memory in high honour, and made a punchbowl of his skull' (6).

The other principal literary-cultural trope of self-annihilation is the female suicide, gathering her skirts and leaping from a bridge, a convention encapsulated in Thomas Hood's famous 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844) which describes the death by suicide of a desperate and despairing 'fallen woman':

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.¹⁹

Women's suicides were overwhelmingly represented in this period as sentimental, tragic, morally cautionary and even erotically aestheticised (reaping the woeful dividend of unlicensed sexuality), and Hood's highly sympathetic treatment is no exception.

Hood's poem is by no means the only contemporary literary reference to such a grim fate, which was by far from an uncommon occurrence in the early 19th century. Indeed, it is the doom envisaged by the most famous of all nineteenth-century fallen women in English fiction, Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1838), as she contemplates the Thames with Rose Maylie: 'Look before you, lady. Look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide, and leave no living thing, to care for, or bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last'.²⁰

¹⁹ Thomas Hood, *The Works of Thomas Hood: Comic and Serious, in Prose and Verse, with All the Original Illustrations*, ed. with Notes by his Son and Daughter, 10 vols (London: E. Moxon & Co., 1869–1872), IX: 206.

²⁰ Charles Dickens, *Dickens, Oliver Twist*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 486.

Hood's leaper jumps from Waterloo Bridge (opened 1817), which by the 1840s had become the suicide magnet of all London, as Charles Mackay writes in *The Thames and Its Tributaries* (1840):

From around its arches clings half the romance of modern London. It is the English 'Bridge of Sighs', ... the 'Lover's Leap', the 'Arch of Suicide', and well deserves all these appellations ... It is a favourite spot for love assignations; and a still more favourite spot for those who long to cast off the load of existence .. To many a poor girl the assignation over one arch of Waterloo Bridge²¹ is but the prelude to the fatal leap from another... with all its vice, Waterloo Bridge is pre-eminently the 'Bridge of Sorrow'.²²



Fig. 3. Gustave Doré, illustration for Thomas Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', c. 1872. Wood engraving.

This is a visual culture as well as a print one. Fig. 3, one of Gustave Doré's set of illustrations for 'The Bridge of Sighs' depicts Hood's young woman poised on Waterloo Bridge in the moments before her jump, with St Paul's Cathedral and

²¹ A reference to prostitution, or at least fornication.

²² Charles Mackay, *The Thames and Its Tributaries*, 2 vols, (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1840). 2: 130.

dismal clouds lowering in the background. Doré's print is rather more monumental than Hood's poems and Fig. 4 shows an image contemporaneous to Hood's poem which, though not explicitly an illustration of his verses, is perhaps truer in spirit, one of the steel engravings in George Cruikshank's series *The Drunkard's Children* (1848–49) which portrays a female suicide with her flowing hair and billowing skirt falling to the Thames from what appears to be Waterloo Bridge (though it is not explicitly named as such). The force of the image lies not only in the falling body but in the presence of spectators; on the bridge above, small figures lean over the parapet, watching the woman's descent, which is a public spectacle as much as an act of personal despair. The Lambs' friend John Hollingshead once called Waterloo Bridge 'a fashionable theatre for self-destruction',²³ and here we see the theatre illustrated.



²³ John Hollingshead, 'Ideal Houses' (*Cornhill Magazine*, April 1860). Quoted in Eilidh Innes, "'The men of letters, whose shadows walk the London streets with us': The influence of Charles Lamb on John Hollingshead's Journalism', *CLB*, NS 172, Winter 2020, 13.

Fig. 4. ‘The Maniac Father and the Convict Brother are gone – the Poor Girl, Homeless, Friendless, Deserted, Destitute, and Gin-mad Commits Self Murder’. From George Cruikshank’s *The Drunkard’s Children* (1848–49).

The female jumper’s death is externalised and theatrical; the act is both a personal assertion and a public spectacle. Together, these tropes – the brooding male lover, the publicly visible female jumper – map out a somewhat gendered geography of despair. They establish not only a vocabulary for self-destruction but a set of recognisable gestures, costumes, and settings that signal extreme emotional intensity to readers and audiences. These ‘theatre[s] of self-destruction’ became well known as such, notably places like Waterloo Bridge, the Shadwell Basin, Putney Bridge (site of Mary Wollstonecraft’s unsuccessful suicide attempt in 1795), and the Serpentine in Hyde Park (where Harriet Shelley did away with herself in 1816). Indeed, Charles and Mary Lamb once lived by one such location, in their house on Colebrooke Row by the New River in Islington, home to the Lambs from 1823 to 1826 and something of a suicide hot spot. In 1808, for instance, fifteen years before the Lambs moved in, the Reverend Rochemont Barbauld, the husband of Lamb’s friend Anna Laetitia Barbauld, died by suicide by drowning in the New River, after a long period of mental illness.²⁴

The New River is, of course, well known to Elians as ‘the STREAM DYERIAN’, and so christened on account of Lamb’s droll ‘Amicus Redivivus’ which tells the story of George Dyer’s ill-fated visit to Colebrooke Cottage in 1823:

I do not know when I have experienced a stranger sensation, than on seeing my old friend G.D., who had been paying me a morning visit a few Sundays back, at my cottage at Islington, upon taking

²⁴ Including an episode with Elian echoes in 1808 where he tried to murder his wife with a kitchen knife.

leave, instead of turning down the right hand path by which he had entered – with staff in hand, and at noon day, deliberately march right forwards into the midst of the stream that runs by us, and totally disappear. A spectacle like this at dusk would have been appalling enough; but, in the broad open daylight, to witness such an unreserved motion towards self-destruction in a valued friend, took from me all power of speculation.²⁵

Such an image, though recounted with a portion of Elia's levity, cannot be disentangled from the darker whispers that haunt the New River and its 'motion[s] towards self-destruction'. Lamb, ever sensitive to the interplay of humour and pathos, both revels in the absurdity of Dyer's act while subtly acknowledging the River's melancholic associations.

Luckily Dyer is rescued by the mock-heroically named MONOCULUS, a kind of grim river-watcher, who revives the nearly drowned with strong liquor from the adjacent public house: 'day and night, from his little watch-tower, at the Middleton's-Head [he] listeneth to detect the wrecks of drowned mortality'.²⁶ Monoculus is a tireless sentinel, says Elia: 'His ear hath arrived to such finesse by practice, that it is reported, he can distinguish a plunge at a half furlong distance'.²⁷ Lamb's description of Monoculus's trained ear, capable of detecting a 'plunge at a half furlong distance', exemplifies his mock-heroic tone: a grim, mundane activity – listening for potential drownings – is elevated to a fantastical, almost superhuman skill. The grandiose diction and absurd precision create a comic tension between the seriousness of mortality and the levity of Monoculus's exaggerated vigilance.

²⁵ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 55.

²⁶ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 58.

²⁷ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 58.

John Hollingshead, in his account of the Lambs in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, specifically reports that the New River had preceded Waterloo Bridge as a tempting suicide spot:

[Lamb's] immediate neighbourhood was also peculiar. It was there that weary wanderers came to seek the waters of oblivion. Suicide could pitch upon no spot so favourable for its sacrifices as the gateway leading to the river enclosure before Charles Lamb's cottage. Waterloo Bridge had not long been built, and was not then a fashionable theatre for self-destruction. The drags were always kept ready in Colebrook Row, and are still so kept at a small tavern [Sir Hugh Middleton's Head] a few doors from the cottage.²⁸

As Eilidh Innes has recently written, 'Hollingshead's reference to the fact that "the drags", used for recovering bodies of the deceased from the river, were kept close reflects the fact that suicide was a common occurrence [in the New River]. Certainly, Hollingshead gave this as the reason the Lambs chose to leave the cottage at Islington and reside elsewhere'.²⁹

'Theatre[s] for self-destruction', especially those darkly picturesque sites possessed by a certain 'romance', to use Mackay's terminology, by their very ubiquity, become a tempting target for comic writing, and not only for English satirists. No less a figure than Fyodor Dostoevsky, writing decades later, demonstrates the enduring resonance of this performative dimension of female suicide in the opening chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), which portrays a 'certain young unmarried woman' who, 'after some years of a mysterious love for a certain gentleman... ended by throwing herself one stormy night ... into a rather deep and fast-flowing river from a lofty bank... and perished ... entirely to satisfy her own caprice, and to emulate Shakespeare's Ophelia'. Indeed, if this precipice,

²⁸ Quoted in Innes, 'The influence of Charles Lamb on John Hollingshead's Journalism', 13.

²⁹ Innes, 'The influence of Charles Lamb on John Hollingshead's Journalism', 14.

‘a chosen and favourite spot of hers, had been less picturesque... most likely the suicide would never have taken place’.³⁰ Ophelia, of course, is the queen of beautiful suicides, and perhaps her most well-known portrayal is from the Victorian period, John Everett Millais’s ‘Ophelia’ (1852). Werther and Ophelia remained the archetypal examples of a beautiful form of suicide and in a European wide context.

The performative nature of female suicide which Dostoevsky plays with is also evident in the work of another great European novelist, Charles Dickens. In the *Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) Dickens describes a nocturnal stroll to Wapping, and to ‘Mr Baker’s Trap’, the locks at Shadwell Basin (Baker was the local coroner). Here Dickens converses with a strange and sinister young man with a ‘puffed, sallow face’:

‘A common place for suicide,’ said I, looking down at the locks.

‘Sue?’ returned the ghost ... ‘Yes! And Poll. Likewise Emily. And Nancy. And Jane; ... Ketches off their bonnets or shorls, takes a run, and headers down here, they doos. Always a headerin’ down here, they is... ‘There must be somebody comin’. They don’t go a headerin’ down here, wen there an’t no Bobby nor gen’ral Cove, fur to hear the splash’.³¹

Female suicides – ‘Poll. Likewise Emily. And Nancy’ – wait for an audience before doing away with themselves, transforming the act of death from something private into a performance consciously shaped for the gaze of others, whether a Bobby or a gen’ral Cove. This passage is unusual. Plainly the joke is principally on the gargoyle ‘ghost’ here, but not only. Generally it is male suicide which is available

³⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans David McDuff (London: Penguin 2003), 16.

³¹ Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers 1859-70*, ed. Micheal Slater and John Drew (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press), 44.

for comic deflation, parody, grotesque exaggeration, while female suicide is culturally constrained into tragedy, pathos, melodrama. But not here.

That said, it is telling that the comic suicide tradition traced here is almost wholly male-authored and male-centred. While female suicide becomes a site of melodrama, sentimental pathos, and moral caution, male self-destruction – or a dark fantasy of it – is available for literary play, grotesque humour, and ironic self-parody. That gendered asymmetry is not incidental; it reflects deep cultural expectations about who is permitted to turn despair into jest. Women were far more likely to be the *subjects* of suicide imagery, not the authors of comic treatments of it. And comic suicide tends to appear in male friendship networks (Lamb/Hazlitt/Hume/Hood), in male leisure culture and what is generally but by no means always male-coded humour (parody, farce, grotesque exaggeration).

For Dickens's 'ghost', there is an insistence on an audience for suicide, something which is also evident in Cruikshank's image. And Dickens makes comic sport with the conventions of such deaths. And what is striking is how durable this configuration proves to be. The notion of suicidal acts and suicidal ideation as a form of exaggerated, performative attention-seeking — particularly in young women — has not disappeared with the decline of Victorian print culture but has simply migrated into new visual economies. Contemporary internet culture, with its reliance on rapid circulation, stock characters, and instantly recognisable stereotypes, reproduces many of the same logics of repetition and comic typology. The notion of suicidal acts and ideation as an extreme form of attention-seeking in young women survives to this day. Take this 'SpongeBob drinking Clorox' image (figure 5) which circulates on meme generators. The visual gag relies on deliberate tonal dissonance; a brightly coloured, childish character (SpongeBob) is juxtaposed

with an act of lethal self-harm (glugging bleach). This is a reusable ‘reaction template’, awaiting whatever caption the moment demands; for instance this one: ‘14-year-old girls after listening to Billie Eilish’.³² This pokes at a familiar stereotype: girls are over-dramatic, edgy, and – like the female suicides at Shadwell – performatively sad.

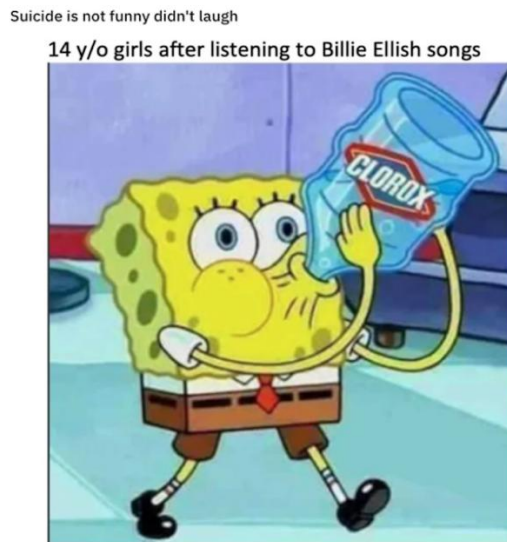


Fig. 5. ‘Suicide is not funny didn’t laugh’. ‘SpongeBob drinking Clorox’ meme (variant). Anonymous user-generated derivative image circulating on Imgflip and Memedoid,³³ c. 2023.

This twenty-first century proliferation of images mirrors nineteenth-century print culture’s recycling of visual and verbal stereotypes such as the ‘fallen women’ at the bridge new juxtapositions. Is Dickens’s dark humour to an extent surprising? One minute he is interviewing the girls and women in the Wapping Workhouse as part of his condemnation of the inadequacies of poor relief, the next he is indulging

³² The songs of Billie Eilish, like those of Leonard Cohen before her, are frequently, if reductively, associated with teenage angst. This reception involves, it seems to me, a somewhat Romantic idea of pop lyrics: the young artist is telling us how they feel, and hence the assumption that melancholy lyrics equal lived despair.

³³ Online meme-generator platforms where users create and customise memes using a large library of templates.

in comic jests about the fate of poor Polly, Jane, and Sue. But this tonal volatility in Dickens is not simply inconsistency or callousness. Rather, it can be seen as pointing to a deeper instability in how suicide is apprehended culturally: as an object of moral outrage, sentimental grief, social critique, and comic deflection, sometimes within the same textual space. Dickens's humour does not cancel his sympathy; instead, it coexists uneasily with it, registering the difficulty – perhaps even the impossibility – of sustaining a single ethical or affective response to suicide. Perhaps humour of this kind is hardly surprising. Really, what is there to be done when faced with suicide? What options does it give one beyond misery and despair? Sometimes laughter seems to be an entirely valid and honest response to its horrors. A. Alvarez, for instance, opens *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1972) with an anecdote about one of the teachers at his public school, Oundle, 'an unusually sweet-tempered, rather disorganised physics teacher who was continually talking, in a jocular way, about suicide'. This was a 'small man with a large red face', and a 'large head covered with woolly grey curls and a permanently worried smile' who was 'said to have got a First in his subject at Cambridge, unlike most of his colleagues':

One day at the end of a lesson, he remarked mildly that anyone cutting his throat should always be careful to put his head in a sack first, otherwise he would leave a terrible mess. Everyone laughed. ...

Then the one o'clock bell rang and all the boys trooped off for lunch. The physics master cycled straight home, put his head in a sack and cut his throat.

There wasn't much mess. I was tremendously impressed.³⁴

This anecdote does more than shock. It establishes the tonal instability also evident in older, comic writing about suicide, where irony, understatement and mordant wit

³⁴ A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (William Heinemann: London, 1972), 13-14.

coexist uneasily with despair. Alvarez does not moralise, explain, or console; instead, he records his ‘tremendous’ adolescent admiration with a flatness that refuses retrospective adult correction. Suicide is often a fact that resists an appropriate response.

II

Al Alvarez’s anecdote makes clear that suicide often produces not moral clarity but a deeply ambiguous response: laughter and horror can arrive together, and the laugh is not necessarily evasive or cruel. This doubleness, as we have seen, has a long history. Long before modern confessional writing exposed the instability of tone around self-destruction, Romantic suicide had already become vulnerable to parody. Even by the 1820s, the Wertherian pose – melancholy, expressive, theatrically doomed – was sufficiently codified to invite comic dismantling. We have seen Peacock’s glance and Thomas Hood was even more concerned with what one might call a contemporary anti-Wertherism. And just as Dickens manifested a duality of attitude to self-destruction (the forlorn words of Nancy and the suicidal women ‘headerin’ down’), so does the author of ‘The Bridge of Sighs’. In 1829 Hood provided the script for a successful entertainment performed at the Adelphi by Charles Matthew the Elder and Frederick Henry Yates, one of the ‘Mathews and Yates at Home’ series, the *Spring Meeting*. The ‘Spring Meeting’ lecture itself, which opens the published version, one of Mathews’s comic disquisitions on character and manners, Mathews describes an encounter with a ‘Mr Moritz, the jilted German’. This fellow is a poor man’s Werther and tells his own story in a comic Teutonese:

I was very ill-treated in *Jarmany* - I have made four attempts on my life - I wish I was dead - I wish it was all over mit me. I’ll tell

you how it vas: when I vas at Gottengen, I fell in love mit Wilhelmina, and ve vas united in one; oh! my Wilhelmina! but it vas not a happy union; when I vent home von day, I found my bosom friend on his knees before her, and kissing her hands. Oh! my Wilhelmina! ven I come in, he jumped up on his legs, and say he was very sorry, and he offer me his pistols that I might put away mit myself.³⁵

In the light of this, we then move towards Mr Moritz as a hybrid of handsome young Werther and the grotesque bungler Suicidal Syd:

Oh! my Wilhelmina! she said she could not love me, it was all owing to the stars. De next day when I got up, I found my best friend and my wife had both eloped in de stage vaggon, and took mit dem all my goots and properties. Oh! my Wilhelmina! den I set down and drink seven bots of stout brown, and smoke seven pipes; den I drink a seven ounce phial of laudanum, and tie a rope round my neck, and throw myself into de sea; and I load my pistols two loads up to *de muslins*; den I sit down and take my pistols, and draw de trigger - hem! Oh! my Wilhelmina! but de fact was, I over-kilt myself—de pistol only shot off de tip of my ear - de rope would not strangle me, and de sea made me sick, and I throw up de laudanum; so I must live and tink of my Wilhelmina.³⁶

Rather than celebrating or sympathizing with suicidal despair, Hood's humour undermines its seriousness: the Syd-like protagonist survives every attempt on his own life, vomits the laudanum, only injures his ear with a pistol, and ends up trapped in his unfulfilled longing. In doing so, Hood satirises both the extreme manifestations of Romantic valorisations of suffering and the Germanic melancholy that late Georgian English audiences found so ripe for parody, turning Werther-like intensity into farce.

³⁵ Thomas Hood, *Mathews and Yates at Home* (London: Duncombe, 1829), 15.

³⁶ Hood, *Mathews and Yates at Home*, 16.

There are other moments in Hood which take up the anti-Wertherian strain,³⁷ albeit rather more implicitly. Take ‘The Dead Robbery’ (c. 1830),³⁸ which is about a man, Peter Bunce, who tries to die by suicide, being down on his luck in financial terms. He squirrels away all the opiates he needs for an overdose:

Feigning a raging tooth that drove him mad,
From twenty divers druggists’ shops
He begg’d enough of laudanum by drops
T’ effect the fatal purpose that he had;
He drank them, died, and while old Charon ferried him,

The Coroner convened a dozen men.
Who found his death was *phial-ent*.³⁹

It transpires that this Bunce is only in a laudanum-induced stupor and awakes when a body-snatcher opens his grave. He takes up with the grave-robber and makes a successful career in the same gruesome trade.⁴⁰

³⁷ W. M. Thackeray’s 1853 effort in this manner, ‘Sorrows of Werther’, is worth citing here:

Werther had a love for Charlotte
Such as words could never utter;
Would you know how first he met her?
She was cutting bread and butter.

Charlotte was a married lady,
And a moral man was Werther,
...

So he sighed and pined and ogled,
And his passion boiled and bubbled,
Till he blew his silly brains out,
And no more was by it troubled.

Charlotte, having seen his body
Borne before her on a shutter,
Like a well-conducted person,
Went on cutting bread and butter.

The Complete Poems of W. M. Thackeray, (New York, NY: White, Stokes, and Allen, 1883, 70–71.

³⁸ I am grateful to Sara Lodge for drawing ‘The Dead Robbery’ to my attention, and for biographical and biographical details about Hood’s late 1820s work with Charles Mathews. Her account of this poem is found in *Thomas Hood and Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 129–30.

³⁹ Hood, *Works*, III: 108.

⁴⁰ As Robert Morrison has recently written, Lamb also had a ‘peculiar fascination with someone who survives an execution’; in Lamb’s case in both ‘On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged’, but also in the farce ‘The Pawnbroker’s Daughter’ (1830), ‘in the character’, Morrison notes, ‘of the aptly-named “*John Pendulous*”, who was wrongfully convicted of robbery,

While ‘The Dead Robbery’ is primarily about body snatching and the trade in corpses for medical dissection, Hood also notes that suicide is often driven not by the pangs of love but by quite the material opposite – desperate financial hardship – offering a strikingly anti-Wertherian perspective on self-destruction in this period. Bunce doesn’t die for the love of Nell, Polly, or Fanny – he does it, so to speak, for the money. In this he is not alone, as Hood explicitly notes at the start of the poem:

Of all the causes that induce mankind
To strike against themselves a mortal docket,
Two eminent above the rest we find -
To be in love, or to be out of pocket:
Both have made many melancholy martyrs,
But p’rhaps, of all the felonies de se.
By ponds, and pistols, razors, ropes, and garters,
Two-thirds have been through want of £. s. d.!⁴¹

Another of Hood’s poems dealing with suicide, his ‘Epigram’ from *Hood’s Own* (1838-9), similarly attributes some cases of suicides simply to the fact of hunger, while reflecting the fact that suicide was illegal in the late Georgian period and that would-be suicides were subject to punishment in the early nineteenth century:

When would-be suicides in purpose fail,
Who could not find a morsel though they needed -
If Peter sends them for attempts to jail,
What would he do to them if they succeeded?⁴²

News reports from the first half of the nineteenth century abound with people charged with attempted suicide, some motivated by famishment, ‘who could not find a morsel’. To give one example, from the year after the publication of the depiction of social pressure, isolation and despair in Hood’s ‘Bridge of Sighs’, the

“Executed”, and “Cut down”, before he “came to life again””. Morrison, ‘Lamb and De Quincey: Imperfect Sympathies’, *CMLJ*, No. 1, Summer 2024, 61-63.

⁴¹ There is, of course, a well-known poem by Thomas Hood in which someone dies for love, ‘Faithless Nelly Gray’, where Ben Battle does himself a mischief (‘So round his melancholy neck / A rope he did entwine’). The treatment is also in comic suicide manner, full of puns, wordplay, and absurd exaggeration that turn what might be a tragic subject into dark humour.

⁴² Thomas Hood, *Works*, 4: 84.

‘Metropolitan Police Intelligence’ accounts for 1845 contain the following account of would-be female suicide:

Attempted Suicide

A female of respectable appearance, but appearing to labour under much mental distress, who stated her name to be Hannah Haines, was brought up and charged with having contemplated self-destruction. One of the city police stated that he found the prisoner in the neighbourhood of the river Thames, in a deplorable state of mind, and when he inquired the cause of her distress, she stated that her husband had deserted her and robbed her of all her clothes, and taken away with him the servant maid.⁴³

On the surface, this is a routine police-court report, and the woman speaks only through reported speech, her voice filtered through the constable’s account. But it also preserves an entire social tragedy in two sentences, translated into official grammar. And ‘charged with having contemplated self-destruction’ is chilling.⁴⁴ The unfortunate Hannah, ‘of respectable appearance’ – code for her not being a vagrant or a criminal – ‘had struggled with adversity, and actually with starvation, until that day when her landlord threatened to seize what trifling matters of furniture she had for rent, amounting to 3s 6d’. In this distressed and hungry state, ‘she had come to the place in which she was apprehended, for the purpose of putting an end to her existence’.⁴⁵

⁴³ *Northern Star*, 4 January 1845.

⁴⁴ One is reminded of Dickens’s ludicrous-but-appalling Alderman Cute in ‘The Chimes’ (1844) who lectures Meg Veck: ‘if you attempt, desperately, and ungratefully, and impiously, and fraudulently attempt, to drown yourself, or hang yourself, I’ll have no pity for you, for I have made up my mind to Put all suicide Down! If there is one thing,’ said the Alderman, with his self-satisfied smile, ‘on which I can be said to have made up my mind more than on another, it is to Put suicide Down. So don’t try it on’.

⁴⁵ On the very same page, there is another report of an attempted suicide case:

Mary Parker, a good-looking young married woman, was placed at the bar, charged with attempting to commit self-destruction by throwing herself into the Regents Canal. A respectable middle-aged woman named Mary Ann Gooch saw the prisoner suddenly rush down the bank from the side of the bridge, and without waiting to divest herself of any of her dress, plunged headlong into the water. Without a moment’s

Hood's insistence on the materiality of self-destruction – on poverty, desertion, near-starvation and financial desperation as motivating forces – finds a parallel in George Cruikshank's teeming graphic satire 'The Blue Devils!!' (1823), figure 5, where suicide is similarly framed not as a romanticised or tragic ideal, but as a response to concrete social and economic pressures. In both works, the fanciful sentimentalism of Goethe's *Werther* is replaced with a grimly practical, if darkly comic, realism.



delay, the witness ran in after her and succeeded in catching hold of the prisoner, but the latter struggled so violently to disengage herself from her grasp that the back of the witness's dress was entirely burst open. [Parker] was the wife of a person employed in the docks and living in Pelham Street, Spitalfields, with whom she said she had a quarrel which determined her on self-destruction. A decent-looking man who said he was a prisoner's husband here stepped forward in great agitation and stated to the magistrate that he was wholly at a loss to account for his wife's conduct. The magistrate said he should commit the prisoner to jail, but at the earnest intercession of her husband, however, who promised to guard against such an occurrence in future, the prisoner ... was ultimately set at liberty and left the court with her friends. (*Northern Star*, 4 January 1845.)

Fig. 5. George Cruikshank, '*The Blue Devils—!!*'. Etching (hand-coloured), published by G. Humphrey, 27 St. James's Street, London (10 January 1823).

As Lamb writes in his 1800 poem 'Hypochondriacus', here 'Black thoughts continually/Crowding my privacy;/They come unbidden'. Cruikshank's *The Blue Devils!!* offers a pointed visual rejoinder to Romantic models of melancholy by staging despair not as ineffable interiority or picturesque externality but as a crowded, noisy, and faintly ridiculous social condition. The etching depicts a despondent man seated by a cold hearth, his head in his hand, beset by a swarm of diminutive 'devils' – grotesque personifications of mental torment. A bailiff brandishes a noose and a grinning blue imp offers an open razor, unflinching visual shorthands for suicidal ideation. Graphic satire here mobilises the iconography of self-destruction – nooses, razors, devils, coffins – not to dignify despair, but to expose it to humour and social critique.

Cruikshank's central strategy is the systematic externalisation of suffering. The man's anguish is not private or sublime; it is miniaturised, multiplied, and manifold. Alongside the grinning blue devil appear figures of socially coded judgement and obligation: civic officials, bailiffs, conspicuously pregnant women, a self-destructive painter, a deranged drunkard and the skeletal caricature of Dr Syntax. Together this ghastly procession converts melancholy into grotesque spectacle, full of causes, agents, and consequences. This is not the sufferer of Romantic reverie. No one would describe this figure as experiencing a self-destructive exaltation, and nor is he, with Keats, 'half in love with easeful Death'.

The image, indeed, refuses poetic transcendence altogether. Instead, despair is shown to have material sources. Economic precarity produces suicidal thought: a coal merchant's bill intrudes into the scene, rooting melancholy in debt and

domestic insufficiency rather than metaphysical longing. No food is visible. Law and finance press in through bailiffs and civic officials; drink appears as a failed palliative in the bottle-bearing demon; unwanted parenthood materialises in the exaggerated presence of pregnant women. These are not incidental details but lethal pressures, forces that crowd in upon the figure and make his despair both intelligible and unavoidable. Material objects further underscore this translation of interior feeling into circumstance. Beneath the man's feet lies a book bluntly titled *Ennui*, while discarded papers burn uselessly in the hearth, suggesting that melancholy has become both a named condition and a failed narrative. Alcohol, not poetic reverie, emerges as the attempted anaesthetic for nervous distress, but one that deepens rather than alleviates suffering.

In one sense *The Blue Devils!!* functions as an overtly anti-Wertherian image. Where Goethe's novel stages suicide as romantic, aestheticised, even morally elevated, Cruikshank presents despair and self-destructive desire in a fully socialised, material, and performative context. This is not Wertherian sympathy. The solitary sufferer poised to achieve a sublime extinction is replaced by a dishevelled figure besieged by creditors, temptations, dependents, and ridicule. Costume itself participates in this demystification. Werther's blue coat and yellow waistcoat converted intense feeling into cultural capital, transforming despair into a recognisable and even enviable aesthetic. Cruikshank's figure, by contrast, is reduced to slippers, a loose domestic coat, and a nightcap – attire that evokes domestic collapse rather than Romantic depth.

The paraphernalia of Romantic suicide – pistols, noble isolation, ritual solemnity – are displaced by razors, nooses, unpaid bills, burning papers, and intrusive besiegers. Despair here is not ennobling but entangling: a social condition rather

than a heroic choice. By rendering suffering crowded, over-explained, and insistently public, Cruikshank dismantles the glamour of self-annihilation and exposes both Wertherism and Keatsian death-desire as aesthetic consolations unavailable to those who are crushed by economic, legal, and reproductive consequence. Charles Mackay sees suicidal acts as providing ‘half the romance’ of modern London; George Cruikshank does not.

III

Thomas Hood was still critiquing German Romanticism and Goethe into the 1840s, when he published his fictionalised epistolary travelogue based on his visit to the Rhineland and elsewhere in Germany, *Up the Rhine* (1840). One of his letters here describes a conversation between the narrator’s uncle and his friend Markham:

‘A great many suicides’, continued Markham, ‘were attributable to Werther, who brought fello-de-se quite into vogue’. – ‘That Vairter’, said my uncle, ‘ought to have been ducked in a horse-pond’. – ‘He was a mere fiction, sir, a creature of Goethe’s’, said Markham. ‘Then I would have Gooty ducked himself’, said my uncle.⁴⁶

Plain-speaking English bluntness collides with German Romantic excess.

Markham goes on to describe a particularly ingenious German self-annihilator who contrived to commit suicide with a cannonball: ‘One fellow in the true spirit of the German sublime, did it with a forty-eight pounder, and went off with éclat. How proud some Charlotte must have been of such a Werter!’ The grotesque humour works here by pushing the language of the Goetherian sublime into absurd

⁴⁶ Hood, *Works*, VII: 165.

physical extremity.⁴⁷ Hood then moves into more overt soapbox oratory, as the comic mode is momentarily set aside:

‘Seriously’, said Markham, ‘this propensity to suicide is a reproach which the Germans have to wipe away before they can justly claim the character of a moral, religious, or intellectual people. The more so, as it is not the vulgar and ignorant, but the educated and enlightened, - Scholars, Doctors, Literati; - men that would be offended to be denied the title of Philosophers, - women that would be shocked not to be called Christians - who are thus apt to quench the lamp of life in unholy waters, or to shatter with a profane bullet ‘the dome of thought, the palace of the soul’.⁴⁸

There is a real tonal rupture here; the laughter induced by the ludicrous grotesque of death-by-cannonball is abruptly arrested, as Hood momentarily drops the mask of comic irony to confront directly what he sees as the moral consequences of Romantic self-dramatisation.

In 1843, the year in which both his deeply political lyrics ‘The Song of the Shirt’ and ‘The Pauper’s Christmas Carol’ appeared in *Punch, or The London Charivari*, Hood wrote his grim satire on the ‘dram of Satan’, ‘A Drop of Gin’, also for *Punch*, accompanied by a powerful illustration by Kenny Meadows:

Smashed, broken to bits,
With judgements and writs,
Bonds, bills, and cognovit distracting the wits,
In the webs that the spiders of Chancery spin –
Till, weary of life, its war and strife,
Black visions are rife of a razor, a knife;
Of poison - a rope- ‘looping over a linn’.⁴⁹
Gin! Gin! a Drop of Gin!⁵⁰

⁴⁷ There is an excellent discussion of ‘grotesque aesthetics in Hood’, in Lodge, *Thomas Hood*, 106-17.

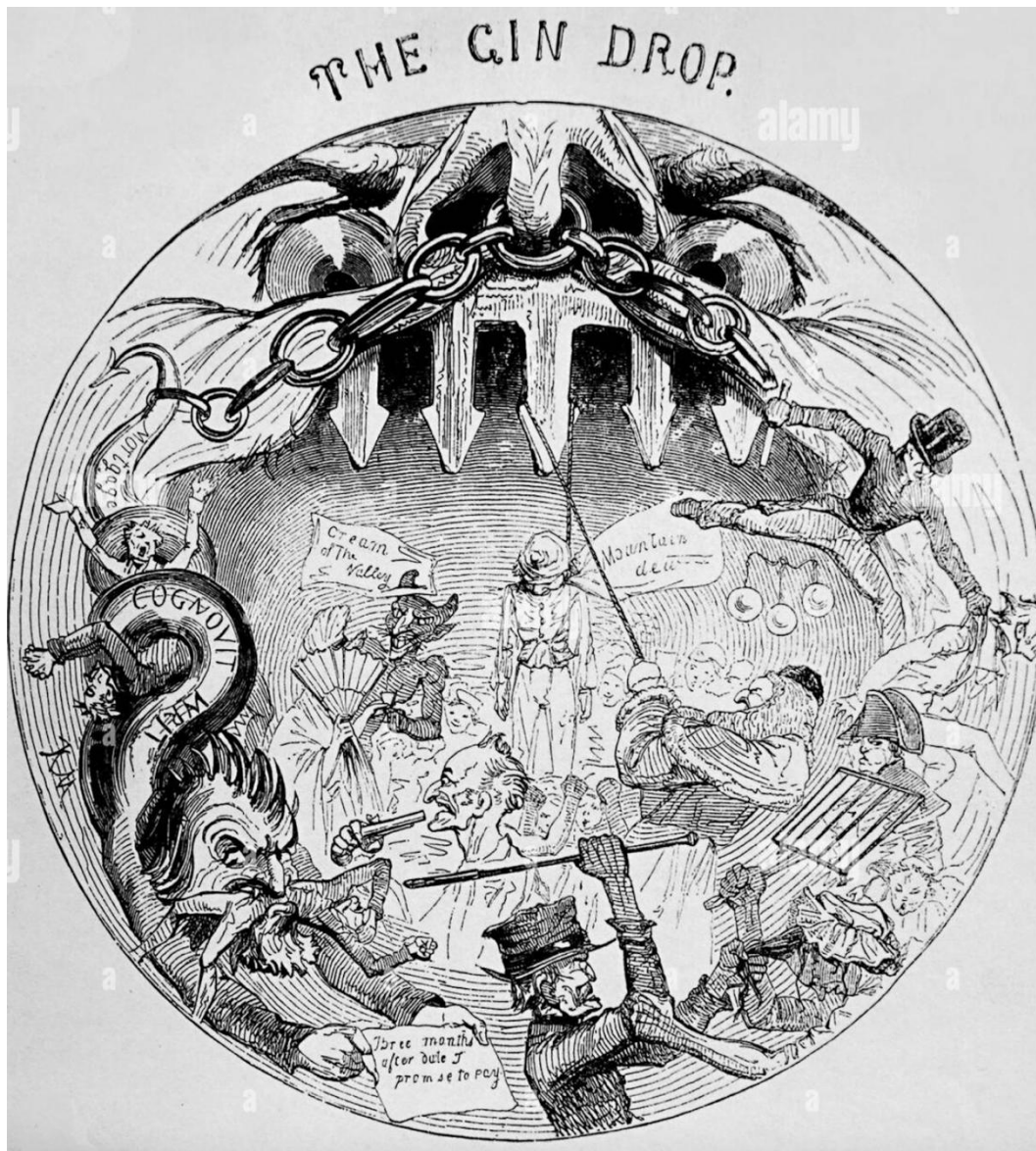
⁴⁸ Hood, *Works*, VII: 167.

⁴⁹ Leaping over a waterfall in Scots.

⁵⁰ Hood, *Works*, IX: 26. The poem appeared in the 18 November 1843 number of *Punch*.

‘A Drop of Gin’ presents the spirit as the final catalyst in a chain of social and psychological collapse, rather than the sole cause of ruin, as the drunkard is already ‘broken to bits’ by debt, legal persecution, and the dehumanising bureaucracy of Chancery. The imagery of webs and spiders strengthen the tone of entrapment, of the individual caught in a system that drains agency and hope. This pressure produces ‘black visions’ of suicide – razor, knife, poison, rope – before gin, with its own promise of oblivion, even appears.

Fig. 6, Meadows’s ‘The Gin Drop’, visualises exactly what Hood does verbally: suicide is presented as a grim inventory directly visualising Hood’s black visions, rather than hinting at them obliquely. The circular form matters, a psychic trap from which there is no exit, and confines the tormented figures in a closed, dizzying system. Hood and Meadows, like Cruikshank before them, suggest suicidal ideation as structurally induced by debt, law, poverty, and intoxication rather than as an isolated moral choice. We are given no grieving family, no sentimental deathbed, no spouse come to the rescue, and there is no redemptive pause. Most of the figures here are not calmly choosing death like young Werther; they are dragged, shoved, falling, seized by forces larger than themselves. Suicide here is grotesque, crowded, almost carnivalesque, and though laughter is possible, it is highly uncomfortable.



Joseph Kenny Meadows, *The Gin Drop*, wood engraving 1843.

Illustration for Thomas Hood's 'A Drop of Gin', *Punch, or The London Charivari* (1843).

I will conclude by returning to Lamb, and to Elia's 'Original Letter of James Thomson' (1822), which is of course no such thing, and which offers the following passage:

In and about London this month of September, near a hundred people have died by accident and suicide. There was one

blacksmith tired of the hammer, who hung himself, and left written behind him this concise epitaph: -

I, Joe Pope,
Lived without hope
And died by a rope.⁵¹

‘A corpse is always good for a horse-laugh’,⁵² Ian Jack said – disapprovingly but accurately – of Thomas Hood, and the same is sometimes true of the man Hood called ‘almost a father’⁵³ to him, Charles Lamb.

. And it certainly recalls what Lamb had previously called, in his essay ‘On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged’ (1811) ‘the general levity with which the subject of hanging is treated as a topic in this country’.⁵⁴ One of the key jokes in that piece is the fact that Pensilis, the hanged man, its supposed author, does not see hanging as anything funny, while everyone else insist on seeing it as hilarious. Pensilis⁵⁵ – Latin for ‘hanging’ – rails against the fact that ‘the ludicrous associates more forcibly with [hanging] than with any other mode of punishment’.⁵⁶ As Robert Morrison has written ‘Like De Quincey in his celebration of [John] Williams’s bloody career in “On the Knocking at the Gate”, so Lamb in “On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged” thinks it proper in this ‘sportive strain ... to play with a subject so serious’.⁵⁷ For Lamb, grim matters such as hanging, suicide, murder can be ‘source[s] of the ridiculous’. Indeed, Lamb sees a ‘predisposition’ among the English to joke about subjects so ‘serious’.

⁵¹ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, I: 171.

⁵² Quoted in Lodge, *Thomas Hood*, 105.

⁵³ Quoted in Lodge, *Thomas Hood*, 5.

⁵⁴ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, I: 57.

⁵⁵ Eric G. Wilson sees a smutty joke here: ‘Pensilis is Latin for “hanging;”, but suggests “penis”’. ‘Towards a Biography of Elia’, *CLB*, NS 174, Winter 2021, 68.

⁵⁶ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, I; 57.

⁵⁷ Morrison, ‘Lamb and De Quincey: Imperfect Sympathies’, 63.

Lamb also has Elia jest periphrastically about hanging in ‘Amicus Redivivus’ from the following decade: the uncertificated doctor Monoculus ‘omitteth no occasion of obtruding his services, from a case of common surfeit-suffocation to the ignobler obstructions, sometimes induced by a too wilful application of the plant *Cannabis* outwardly’.⁵⁸ This could not be further away, stylistically, from Joe Pope who died by a rope, but it concerns the same thing, though ‘a too wilful application of the plant *Cannabis* outwardly’⁵⁹ (that is to say hanging oneself with a hemp rope) is at first glance almost too exalted to make sense.

Since Dyer’s ‘frightful accident’, Elia is haunted by dreams of drowning, self-administered or involuntarily imposed, and Shakespeare’s Duke of Clarence leads a woeful nocturnal cavalcade:

A mournful procession - suicidal faces, saved against their will from drowning; dolefully trailing a length of reluctant gratefulness, with ropy weeds pendent from locks of watchet hue - constrained Lazari - Pluto’s half-subjects - stolen fees from the grave-bilking Charon of his fare. At their head Arion - or is it G.D.? - in his singing garments marcheth singly, with harp in hand, and votive garland, which Machaon (or Dr Hawes) snatcheth straight, intending to suspend it to the stern God of Sea. Then follow dismal streams of Lethe, in which the half-drenched on earth are constrained to drown downright, by wharfs where Ophelia twice acts her muddy death.⁶⁰

This is remarkable writing, a portrayal of a Triumph of Death and near-death plodding its watery way through Elia’s dreams, a spontaneous overflow of recalled scripture, Shakespeare and the classics vomited up in nightmare and culminating in Ophelia’s muddy demise, a performance repeated, ‘twice acts her muddy death’.

⁵⁸ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 59.

⁵⁹ This is what Hood, later, in his own cheery periphrasis in ‘The Rope Dancer: An Extravaganza’ (1834), calls a ‘quantum suffocate of twisted hemp’ (*Works*, I: 378). See Lodge, *Thomas Hood*, 128.

⁶⁰ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 59-60

What might socially habitual responses (like joke-making about executions or suicide) hide among both the general population and exalted literary figures as Hood or Lamb? Is it part of the national tendency among the British to trivialise suffering? Or is it attributable to the fact that through jokes about death or suicide, individuals can hide anxiety, fear, or grief? Or perhaps there is also an element of fatalism about this attitude – death is inevitable, so why take it seriously? This is an important issue for Lamb; in the end ‘the ludicrous associates more forcibly’ with mortal issues than with almost anything else. By his own admission, Lamb is predisposed to what he calls his ‘sportive strain ... to play with a subject so serious’. One is reminded of Leigh Hunt’s remark on Lamb in *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*: ‘One could imagine him cracking a jest in the teeth of a ghost, and then melting into thin air himself, out of sympathy with the awful’.⁶¹

‘Anything awful makes me laugh’ Lamb says, but he is not unique in feeling that way. Lamb does not say exactly how he ‘misbehaved once at a funeral’ but the compulsion to face solemnity with misbehaviour is not unknown. The comic novelist Tom Sharpe once spoke of how he felt ‘unease in church’, where he would be seized by ‘an irrational fear (never realised) that he might begin screaming obscenities’.⁶² An unaccountable urge to shout the word ‘fuck’ at a funeral is not limited to those with Tourette’s Syndrome. Both Lamb and Sharpe manifest a familiar comic reflex: a nervous, imaginative resistance to the imposed discipline of reverence itself.

⁶¹ Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), II: 236.

⁶² In an interview with Dr Anthony Clare on ‘In the Psychiatrist’s Chair’ on BBC Radio 4: see https://johnblakey.wordpress.com/2013/06/07/hair/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

A 'predisposition' to joke upon serious subjects does not abolish suffering; but perhaps it domesticates it, renders it speakable, even shareable. In Lamb's hands, the joke is never merely a joke: it is a cultural reflex that permits a society to live with death by laughing at it, even as that laughter quietly confirms how close, and how inescapable, death really is. In the end, humour becomes not the opposite of seriousness but one of its masks.