

## Consider the Blonde Head Severed: Subverting Beauty in Victorian Literature

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While glorification of the womanly ideal of the Angel in the House was wide-spread in Victorian culture, there co-existed with this glorification a resistance to the ideal among nineteenth-century British authors of both sexes. Furthermore, the close association of blonde hair with the kind of holiness usually attributed to angels elicited among some Victorian writers a corresponding urge to desecrate the beauty of the blonde heroine in particular. This essay argues that the urge to desecrate the beautiful blonde can be seen as a kind of sub-theme in Victorian literature, a sub-theme that turns the female blonde into a victim of violence, violence that is often portrayed as her own fault. However, while the destructive violence that the blonde inspires may be interpreted as misogynistic, it also has larger connotations, in that it is not only anti-female but anti-aesthetic as well. My essay argues that the urge to destroy human beauty is not far removed from the urge to destroy beautiful things, a hypothesis that I demonstrate through an analysis of specific works by George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Christina Rossetti and Bram Stoker.

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As numerous commentators have noted, the feminine ideal of nineteenth-century Britain was summed up in the phrase “the angel in the house,” an epithet derived from a long poem in praise of his wife by Coventry Patmore.<sup>1</sup> The angel in the house was a creature of the male imagination, embodying all the virtues of self-sacrificing womanhood. She was chaste and virtuous, she was passive and sweet; she was solicitous, domestic, gentle, caring,

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1. See, among others, Gilbert and Gubar’s extended discussion of the feminine ideal and its monstrous opposite in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 20-44. In *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Nina Auerbach observes that Victorian glorification of the Angel in the House is something of an anomaly. Traditionally, angels were gendered as male and they were often depicted as martial figures until about the fifteenth century. Furthermore, one of the traditional attributes of angels was their ability to roam freely wherever they chose, whereas by definition, the Angel in the House was confined to the domestic sphere, which she seldom left. See Auerbach (70-71).

self-denying, self-effacing, altruistic, beautiful – and, more often than not, she was blonde.

It is the last of these attributes that I take for my topic here. What I intend to argue is that while glorification of this womanly ideal was certainly widespread in Victorian culture, there co-existed with this glorification a resistance to the ideal among nineteenth-century authors of both sexes. Furthermore, the close association of blonde hair with the kind of holiness usually attributed to angels actually elicited from Victorian writers a corresponding urge to desecration. I intend to demonstrate that this urge can be seen as a kind of sub-theme of Victorian literature, a sub-theme that turns the female blonde into a victim of violence, violence that is often figured as her own fault. I would like to suggest, however, that while the kind of violence I will be discussing can certainly be interpreted as misogynistic, I believe that it does in fact have larger connotations, that it is not only anti-female but anti-aesthetic as well, that the urge to destroy human beauty is not so very far removed from the urge to destroy beautiful things.

In order to make this point, my essay is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the commodification of the blonde-haired woman, with the attempt to diminish her through objectification. The second section discusses the kind of physical violence meted out to blonde women in Victorian literature, a violence that both victimizes and desecrates the woman, turning her into the focus of both misogynistic and anti-aesthetic impulses.

The commodification of the blonde in nineteenth-century literature is closely linked to the larger theme of the historical commodification of women through marriage. In her gloss on Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories of kinship, Elisabeth Bronfen writes:

The Woman is bartered in the first place so that a bond between father and brother and bridegroom may be established and the existence of the community ensured. This act of exchange is in turn symbolic, for the Woman is bartered not only as a physically real body but also as a sign referring to something more and something other than her corporality [...] Woman is valuable *par excellence* because of her double function as body and as trope, as semiotic source and economic stake, blurring any fixed boundaries between these two functions. (225-26)

Nineteenth-century British literature is particularly prone to illustrating the connection between female commodification and the semiotics of sexual barter through its focus on the blonde heroine. Since blonde hair is readily associated with the colour of gold, the blonde woman can be easily allegorized into a trope for speaking about money and wealth.

Of the major Victorian authors George Eliot perhaps goes the furthest in exploiting the connection between blonde hair and currency. In her short story "Brother Jacob," she names her heroine Penelope, which is immediately shortened to Penny. As if this allusion to money were not strong enough, Eliot describes her heroine as a blonde, but a blonde with something of the fake about her, since we are told that "her yellowish flaxen hair did not curl naturally [...] but its bright crisp ringlets were smooth, perfect miniature tubes" (1536). In other words, Penny's name alludes to money and Penny's hair is likened to a thing. In fact, Penny herself is described as "a small round thing" (1536). Over and over again, Penny's humanity is made secondary to the images her blondness represents. At the same time, we are told that Penny is meant to embody the feminine ideal. Explaining why the story's disagreeable protagonist, David Faux, is attracted to Penny, Eliot writes that "the Ideal, as exhibited in the finest waxwork, was never so closely approached by the Real as in the person of pretty Penny [...] Like the waxen ideal, she had round blue eyes, and round nostrils in her little nose, and teeth such as the ideal would be seen to have, if it ever showed them" (1536). It is unclear in this passage whether Eliot's irony is aimed at the ideal or at Penny herself, a confusion that is underlined when Penny is equated to the mass-produced pastry that David Faux concocts in his confectionery shop. We are told that David finds Penny's prettiness "comparable to the loveliest things in confectionery" (1538). Penny's pretty blondness, in other words, brings out in Eliot the urge to dehumanize her heroine by comparing her to money, to small round things, to waxwork, to food. Penny compares to everything but the human, and while this may illustrate Eliot's contention that the female ideal as embodied in Penny cannot be human because it does not exist, this message is conveyed with a degree of animosity towards Penny that seems to punish her for no better reason than that she conforms to the blonde ideal. It is no surprise then that at the end of "Brother Jacob" poor Penny suffers the final humiliation of having her future bridegroom exposed as a thief and a liar by his mentally defective younger brother Jacob.

Eliot's hostility to blondes is a feature of several of her novels. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the insipidly sweet, obedient, fair-haired Lucy is contrasted to the darker, more passionate and far more intelligent heroine, Maggie Tulliver. In her long short story, "The Lifted Veil," the narrator's murderous wife Bertha is a blonde. In *Middlemarch*, the blonde Rosamond Vincy is not only shallow, flirtatious and superficial, but materialistic, conniving, self-centered and manipulative as well. In Eliot's memorable analogy, Rosamond sucks the life out of her husband like the basil plant that flourishes on a murdered man's brains. Similarly in *Daniel Deronda*, the blonde spoiled heroine, Gwendolyn Harleth, makes a bad marriage because she is misled by her vanity into

believing she can control a husband who is even vainer than she is. Eliot punishes her by leaving her alone and widowed at the novel's end, while Daniel Deronda, the man she desires, marries the dark-haired Mirah.

But Eliot is too intelligent a novelist not to exploit the positive symbolic potential of blonde hair when it suits her literary purposes. In *Silas Marner*, published in 1861, Eliot quite deliberately equates blonde hair with gold in order to demonstrate that the love of a human being is the only wealth worth having.

In this novel about a miser who is redeemed through his love for a golden-haired child, Eliot suggests that Silas Marner's obsessive hoarding of his money before the arrival of little Eppie is not merely a turning away from human contact, but a suppression and sublimation of the wish for fatherhood. Eliot describes Silas's gold guineas, his silver crowns and half crowns as his "unborn children" (21), which he attempts to nurture as he would a child: "His gold, as he hung over it and saw it grow, gathered his power of loving together into a hard isolation like its own" (42-43). The theft of his gold leaves Silas bereaved and in despair, as if he had lost a child. But when the baby Eppie crawls away from the body of her dead mother into Silas's hut, Eliot makes explicit the equation between the gold of Silas's stolen guineas and the gold of Eppie's hair. When Silas, who is short-sighted and given to catatonic fits first sees the child, he literally mistakes her blonde hair for gold:

To his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were gold on the floor in front of the hearth. Gold—his own gold—brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away! [...] The heap of gold seemed to glow and get larger beneath his agitated gaze. He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of the hard coin with familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft warm curls. (110)

The equation of golden guineas and golden hair recurs throughout the novel, as Eliot insists on her metaphor that human wealth is located in human affection. As Silas says, "The money's gone I don't know where and this [child] is come from I don't know where" (121). Eliot even returns to the imagery of the angel in the house in order to equate the golden-haired Eppie with one:

In the old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put in theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's. (131)

But while Eppie's role in *Silas Marner* is clearly positive, the very fact that

Eliot loads her down with so much symbolic significance, most of it based on her golden hair, suggests again a kind of commodification in which the essence of the blonde woman is subsumed by the colour of her hair. "Woman" is of course the wrong designation for Eppie, since we never follow her life beyond her wedding day. But even in late adolescence, she never really comes alive as a complex human being. Her significance to this novel lies entirely in her symbolic worth, in her ability to redeem and humanize Silas, a significance that is inseparable from her being blonde, female and young. Eppie does not exist outside of this symbolic function. She has no humanity outside it. And so, despite Eliot's clear intentions to portray a positive figure in Eppie, Eppie in the end is as much dehumanized and commodified as Penny is in "Brother Jacob."

Eliot is not the only Victorian writer to exploit the symbolic association of blonde hair with gold. A similar comparison occurs in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," published in 1862. In this long poem about two young sisters trying to resist the allure of goblin men who want to sell them fruit that will corrupt them, both sisters are blonde—or as the text prefers to call them, "golden haired." But one sister falls prey to the call of the goblin men and the other does not, thus providing Rossetti with two opposing examples of the imagery associated with blondness—the angelic and the fallen. Here is a description of the sisters before their fall:

Golden head by golden head  
 Like two pigeons in one nest  
 Folded in each others' wings,  
 They lay down in their curtained bed:  
 Like two blossoms on one stem,  
 Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,  
 Like two wands of ivory  
 Tipped with gold for awful kings. (184-91)

As the imagery of this extract makes clear, the two sisters are doubles, doubles not only in looks, but in angelic innocence and purity as well. One sister, Laura, hears the cry of the goblin men hawking their forbidden fruit and she cannot resist the urge to buy some. But she has no money. To this the goblins respond:

"You have much gold upon your head,"  
 They answered all together:  
 "Buy from us with a golden curl."  
 She clipped a precious golden lock.  
 She dropped a tear more rare than pearl. (123-27)

In other words, the hair on Laura's head is as good as currency—in fact, it is currency. If one understands the goblin market here as analogous to the marriage market, then certainly Laura's golden hair enhances her worth and therefore her ability to "purchase" male attention. In a culture that values blonde hair as a sign of beauty and equates female beauty with female worth, blonde hair does indeed have exchange value in the same way that money does.

In terms of Rossetti's poem, however, the kind of male attention that Laura's hair purchases is dangerous and destructive, since no sooner has she eaten of the goblin fruit than she sickens to the point of death. Even her golden hair loses its lustre and becomes "thin and grey" (277). Only her sister Lizzie can save her. Lizzie runs to the goblin men offering to buy more fruit for Laura, who is pining away. Instead the goblins try to get Lizzie to eat their fruit, but she is the stronger sister and holds out against all their attempts to force the fruit into her mouth. The result is that the juice of the fruit runs all over her body. Returning to Laura, Lizzie cries:

"Laura ...  
Did you miss me?  
Come and kiss me.  
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew  
Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me." (464-74)

In other words, Lizzie redeems her sister through turning herself into another kind of commodity, this time an edible one.

The centrality of the episode in which Laura cuts off her hair to pay for the fruit can be seen by the fact that this is the scene that Christina Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel chose to illustrate for the frontispiece to the first edition of "Goblin Market" (1862) (Figure 1). It is interesting as well that the male Rossetti's drawing features a very adult-looking Laura cutting off her own lock, whereas the text implies that the sisters are prepubescent. In many cultures, hair-cutting is associated symbolically with the loss of virginity, because it signals the loss of corporeal integrity, which is why religious Jews—to take one example—shave off the bride's hair just before the marriage ceremony. Catholic nuns too, cut off their hair when they become the brides of Jesus. Cutting off hair that is golden, however, has the added dimension of assigning a monetary value to a part of the body, and so suggests that the rest of the body is also for sale. It defines as marketable the woman's body on which the hair grows and thereby not only cheapens the body but cheapens the very idea of purity with which gold is associated.



While the diminishment and commodification of the blonde can be found in the work of both female and male authors, it is primarily in the work of male authors of this period that the dehumanizing of the blonde shades into something darker and more disturbing. For instance, take the scene in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, where the blonde and angelic Ada Clare has her hair lasciviously fondled by the repulsive Krook, the owner of a foul rag and bone shop. "Hi!" says Krook: "Here's lovely hair! I have got three sacks of ladies' hair below, but none so beautiful and fine as this. What colour and what texture!" (100). Krook then proceeds to draw one of Ada's

tresses through what Dickens calls his "yellow" hand—yellow here standing as the dirtier flip side of "golden." Krook's running his yellow hand through Ada's golden hair evokes another aspect of the thematics of the blonde, namely, the ease with which the golden hair and all the lofty, purified and sanctified things it stands for may be tarnished and soiled by the dirty yellow hand that strokes it.

While Krook's leering at Ada makes the sexual threat implicit in this scene clear enough, Dickens adds an even more horrific touch by punctuating the encounter between Ada and Krook with the entrance of Lady Jane, Krook's cat. The cat's name is an allusion to Lady Jane Grey, who was beheaded in the Tower of London in the sixteenth century. Krook is a dealer in body parts, in cat-skins and human hair. He regards Ada's hair as a desirable commodity because it is beautiful, but this is beauty that only acquires value when it is severed from the head that makes it grow. Krook's stroking of Ada's hair does not merely equate the pretty with the blond, it also locates the angelic associations thus evoked within the desecrating context of execution. And not just any kind of execution, but a decapitation—that is, an attack on the part of



**Figure 1.** Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Frontispiece to the first edition of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" 1862. This figure is copied from *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Second Edition. Volume 2B: *The Victorian Age*. New York: Addison, Wesley, Longman, 2003 (1619).

the body that most sins with its beauty – the head that contains the hair.<sup>2</sup>

If it is true, as Elisabeth Bronfen suggests in *Over Her Dead Body*, that “the idea of beauty’s perfection is so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration, fragmentation and insufficiency” (61), it is equally true that the destruction of beauty serves as a means of redefining the aesthetic and conferring on disintegration, fragmentation and insufficiency a value of their own.

The urge to destroy the beautiful, especially the beautiful woman appears as a theme early in Victorian literature – for instance, in Robert Browning’s 1836 poetic monologue, “Porphyria’s Lover.” The poem is spoken by the lover of the title, who is otherwise unidentified, but who turns out to be insane. He describes how, during a stormy night, Porphyria comes to his cottage, shuts out the cold and makes the “cheerless” grate blaze up with warmth. In other words, the poem begins with Porphyria enacting the role of the angel in the house. She makes the cottage cheerful, warm and bright.

But it quickly becomes apparent that Porphyria does not otherwise adhere to the doctrine of pure womanhood, because her intentions in coming to the speaker’s cottage are sexual. She sits down next to him, bares her shoulder as if to seduce him and loosens her damp hair. Her lover’s response to this show of seductive affection is to strangle Porphyria with her own yellow hair, which he winds three times around her neck, turning her hair into the instrument of her own execution. He then manipulates her body, opening her blue eyes, described as being “without a stain” now that they are dead, and resting her dead head on his shoulder. The poem ends with an indictment of God:

And thus we sit together now,  
And all night long we have not stirred,  
And yet God has not said a word. (58-60)

One way of understanding the lover’s act here is to follow Elisabeth Bronfen’s suggestion that,

The moment of eroticism is in some sense synonymous and interchangeable with that of death, and by implication, the feminine object of desire corresponds in her lover’s fantasies to a corpse. The feminine body produces an irritation in her lover that can move either in the direction of masochistic self-destruction or of sadistic violence directed outward. (184)<sup>3</sup>

2. This section on *Bleak House* and the later one on *A Tale of Two Cities* have appeared in a different context in my essay “Executing Beauty: Dickens and the Aesthetics of Death.”

3. The passage occurs in Bronfen’s discussion of Prosper Mérimée’s story “Carmen.” Her remark about the nature of Don José’s possessiveness could equally well apply to Porphyria’s lover: “Ironically, while José desires to be ‘sure’ of the living Carmen, her dead body is the only form of security he can attain” (186).



Clearly, this poem denigrates the notion of sexual union, the thing men are traditionally supposed to desire from beautiful women, and replaces it with a sterile possessiveness. What the lover wants here is not Porphyria's living body but her beautiful corpse. As he says of the moment when he strangles her: "That moment she was mine, mine, fair / Perfectly pure and good" (36-37). In other words, only death can both eternalize Porphyria as her lover's possession and at the same time keep her pure forever. Once Porphyria has been strangled, time stops ("all night long we have not stirred") and even God suspends judgement.

Far from crowning her living beauty, Porphyria's golden hair becomes the means of her execution. The fact that she is strangled with her own hair means that her body supplies the instrument of its own destruction and therefore of its own retribution, thereby absolving the murderer of the crime. In fact, Porphyria herself unpins her hair and uses it to entice her lover by allowing it to fall seductively on her naked shoulder. She herself is therefore made complicit in her own destruction. Furthermore, her hair subsumes her identity. She is her hair — and her hair is what destroys her.

Dickens taps into similar imagery in *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel about the French Revolution. There the revolutionary named Jacques Three takes great delight in imagining the decapitation of the novel's blonde heroine, Lucie Manette. " 'She has a fine head for [the guillotine],' he says. 'I have seen blue eyes and golden hair there, and they looked charming when Samson [the executioner] held them up'." To which the narrator adds: "Ogre that he was, he spoke like an epicure" (388).

In this chilling juxtaposition of beauty and execution, Dickens merges the concept of unnatural death with that of aesthetics — the living woman's present beauty exists only to enhance the pictorial qualities of the tableau of her death. Furthermore, the passage implies that Lucie's beauty, as embodied in her blue eyes and blonde hair, is the very thing that makes her deserving of execution in the first place, that the blonde head containing the blonde hair must somehow be severed from the body that gave it life in order for its full aesthetic potential to be realized.

Judicial executions are examples of what Dickens called "unnatural death," that is, of death imposed by the state. Execution imposes a man-made end on a natural process, and in this sense it is related to art, where human skill and imagination exploit the natural for raw material and transform it into the aesthetic. Beauty is here created at the expense — quite literally — of life. At the same time, the imagined execution constitutes a desecration of beauty, beauty here being made synonymous with female innocence. We are being asked to shudder at the thought of the angel defiled, and that shudder incorporates frissons of simultaneous horror and arousal. The scene balances on the border between aesthetics and pornography, where the quality of the emotion that is

being evoked purges the base of its lasciviousness through the reader's moral outrage at the desecration involved.

There is, of course, an irony in the fact that Jacques Three's statement is a compliment—it is a tribute to Lucie's beauty. But it deliberately turns inside-out the usual association of human beauty with human life, thereby transforming Jacques Three's leering admiration into the opposite of a far nobler sentiment—esthetic appreciation. In this way, Dickens suggests how short the distance is from esthetic appreciation to lecherous desire to the wish to destroy the thing that attracts. By calling Jacques Three an epicure—that is, someone with a discriminating taste in food—Dickens further confounds the horror of execution with the refinement of aesthetics.

As Regina Janes has pointed out in "Beheadings," her essay on the symbolism of the guillotine, severed heads have power in a way that the severing of any other part of the body does not, because unlike other body parts, the severed head alone contains the identity of the individual—as well as the message that that identity has been expunged (249-50). But in the fantasized decapitation of Lucie, Lucie's identity is immaterial. She is subsumed by her attributes, especially the attributes of golden hair and blue eyes. It is this that adds piquancy to the image of Lucie's beheading. In other words, for the living woman to realize her full potential as a beautiful creation, she must die.

My last example of the urge to desecrate the blonde comes from the end of the century, with the demonizing of yet another blonde and beautiful Lucy, this time the heroine of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This Lucy becomes the innocent victim of the vampire Count Dracula, who sucks so much blood from her body every night that she eventually wastes away and dies. But after her death, Lucy turns into a vampire herself and thus is reborn in the image of the man who corrupted her. Her "undead" vampirish preying on other innocents can only be stopped by having a stake driven through her heart and her head severed from her body, an act of mutilation that is performed by the same group of four men who professed to love Lucy when she was alive.

Lucy is one of two heroines in the novel; the other, the dark-haired Mina, also becomes the victim of the Count, but Mina survives her ordeal, whereas Lucy does not. Part of the reason for Lucy's excessive punishment after death may lie in the fact that even though, when she is alive, she is innocent of any actual sexual indiscretion, her blonde beauty has nevertheless attracted the amorous attentions of three eligible young men, all of whom propose to her on the same day. The fact that Lucy is so attractive to men suggests, not that she is necessarily promiscuous, but that she has the potential to be so. In the simple fact of her attractiveness lies her threat. The fact that this threat is closely allied to the transgressive nature of female sexuality can be seen by the fact that

Stoker makes Lucy a sleep-walker. The symbolism of Lucy's night walking is hard to miss, since it means that every evening she leaves the chaste security of her own solitary bed and goes wandering, unconscious, out into the world, eventually falling victim to a predatory male, the vampire Count Dracula. While the Count sucks the blood out of her body by night, the three young men who love Lucy, as well as the elderly Dr. Van Helsing, who is also attracted to her, work to restore the blood to her by day, transfusing their own manly fluid into her depleted female body.

Despite the undeniable sexual allusions in the act of both sucking blood from the body and transfusing it back into the body, what is noteworthy in *Dracula* is the avoidance of all actual mention of sex. Strictly speaking, there are no sexual acts in this novel, yet the narrative is permeated with sexuality. But it is a deviant sexuality, a sexuality that occurs without genital contact. In *Dracula*, it is other parts of the body that are engaged in acts of sinful union, the mouth, the neck, the blood vessels. Lucy, described by Van Helsing as "this so sweet maid," is thought by Van Helsing to be committing polyandry, because she has had the blood of four men transfused into her. In fact, Van Helsing even muses that by giving her his blood, he is committing adultery with her, thereby suggesting that blood transfusion is analogous to sexual union and that blood itself is analogous to semen.

If Lucy's predatory potential is kept in abeyance while she is alive, it is under no such restraint after she has died and joined the ranks of the "undead." Then the promiscuity that was latent in her comes to the fore as she embarks on her vampirish career. The only way to defeat her is to drive a stake through her heart and sever her head from her body. There can be no stronger statement of the need to punish the woman who attracts than this act of vengeance and mutilation carried out by the same four men who had loved her in life.

In his essay on prostitution and Jack the Ripper, Sander Gilman makes a related point, namely, that the image in this novel of Count Dracula as seducer is paralleled by what was believed in the general culture—namely, that in the act of seduction the male transformed the innocent female into a copy of himself, in the same way as Dracula's victims become vampires themselves. The innocent young thing becomes the prostitute as seductress, infecting other males, just as her first seducer has infected her with the disease of licentiousness and its attendant venereal contagions (264-65).

The only apparent hope for redemption is destruction of the thing that allures. In the process what gets destroyed is not only the woman herself, but the beauty that she represents. The literary blonde of the Victorian era thus embodies the ambivalence of men's attitudes towards female beauty, as well as the ambivalence of women's attitudes towards their own idealization and

objectification. She represents the human wish to both exalt and trample the innocence of the angel, and by extension the ambivalence of all human attitudes towards beauty in general. In "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), Edgar Allan Poe famously remarked that the death of a beautiful woman is "unquestionably" the most poetical topic in the world (752), thereby suggesting that poetry incorporates the wish to destroy as part of the impulse to create the aesthetically pleasing. This wish on the part of nineteenth-century authors to make poetry out of the destruction of living beauty suggests the power that beauty has to evoke wonder and awe – and at the same time – the power that it has to evoke the lust for destruction.

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