

The Victorian age was named for England's Queen Victoria. She took the throne in 1837 and died on January 22, 1901. Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, died of typhoid in 1861. During this period of forty years, the Queen was in mourning. She remained in full mourning for three years and dressed the entire court that way. The Victorian era reflected the Queen's prudish ethics as well as, most visibly, her personal taste in mourning.

Victorian mourning fashion was aimed mainly at women, widows in particular. The fashion had a way of isolating a widow in her time of need just as the Queen had done. For the first year, a woman who was in mourning was not allowed to exit her home without full black attire and a weeping veil. Her activities were initially restricted to church services. But mourning attire was the perfect way to show the wealth and respectability of a woman. Some went so far as to dress their servants for mourning when the head of the household passed away. Middle and lower class women would go to great lengths to appear fashionable in times of mourning. Dying clothing black and then bleaching them out again was quite common. The industry of mourning became so vital to tailors that rumors were spread concerning the bad luck of recycling funeral attire. Hair art also developed in the Victorian era to allow family members to keep mementos of their departed loved ones. Mourning clothing was an unmistakable and intricate part of life in the 19th century. The act of proper Victorian mourning seems an art today. Certain lengths and stages of mourning as well as colors and fabrics all contributed to this language.

Stages

In nineteenth century England, a widow was expected to remain in mourning for over two years. The rules were slightly less rigid for American women.

Full mourning, a period of a year and one day, was represented with dull black clothing without ornament. The most recognizable portion of this stage was the weeping veil of black crepe. If a woman had no means of income and small children to support, marriage was allowed after this period. There are cases of women returning to black clothing on the day after marrying again.

Second mourning, a period of nine months, allowed for minor ornamentation by implementing fabric trim and mourning jewelry. The main dress was still made from a lusterless cloth. The veil was lifted and worn back over the head. Elderly widows frequently remained in mourning for the rest of their lives.

Half mourning lasted from three to six months and was represented by more elaborate fabrics used as trim. Gradually easing back into color was expected coming out of half mourning. All manner of jewelry could be worn.

The standard mourning time for a widower was two years but it was up to his discretion when to end his single stage. Men could go about their daily lives and continue to work. Typically young unmarried men stayed in mourning for as long as the women in the household did.

Mourning for parents ranked next to that of widows; children mourning for their parents or parents for children being identical. One year was the standard length: six months in crepe, three in second, and three in half mourning. Second mourning, without full mourning, is suitable for parents-in-law. After one month in black, lilac should follow.

Young children were never kept more than one year in mourning. No female under the age of 17 was to wear creped full mourning.

Fabrics

Most of the fabrics associated with Victorian life are no longer in use today, partially due to the invention of modern synthetic fabrics, but also because many Victorian fabrics are too expensive to manufacture today.

A full widow's weeds (archaic word for garment) in the mid 19th century required a crepe dress with a plain collar and broad weepers cuffs made of white muslin, a bombazine mantle (cloak), and a crepe bonnet with veil for outdoors. A widow's cap was for indoor use.

Crepe, used for the veil and trim, is the fabric most associated with mourning. The fabric is made from silk and similar to crepe de chine; in this instance "crepe" refers to the crinkled surface of the lightweight fabric. Mourning crepe was made from gummed tightly twisted silk threads. It was a volatile and hazardous fabric. In the rain, it would shrivel and practically disintegrate. Rainproof crepe was introduced at the turn of the 20th century, but

it didn't change things much. Constant breathing through the fabric caused many respiratory health problems.

Dresses were made from henrietta and melrose trimmed with crepe. Henrietta cloth was a twilled fabric with a silk warp and worsted weft that has the appearance of a twilled front and smooth back, and the feel of cashmere. Melrose was a linen named for the town in Scotland it came from. Bombazine was used by the less affluent in the beginning of the Victorian era. It was a fabric that mixed silk and wool.

As the crepe wore out it was removed and replaced with fresh material. An economical woman could use an old dress in full mourning; some women dyed a dress black for this purpose.

Caps, cuffs, and collars could all be made from lawn. The name comes from the town Laon in the north of France. The fabric is a linen that was used mainly for garments worn by the clergy. A fine, sheer, plain-weave cotton, made from high quality yarns. For the less affluent, collars and cuffs were also made from muslin, a variety of cotton weaves originally made in the Middle East. (Today's muslin is incredibly coarse by comparison.)

Cuffs of lawn were 9" long, according to the size of the wrist. The fabric was not intended to overlap, but to meet; they were fastened with two buttons and loops placed at the upper and lower edges. These large cuffs were referred to as weepers because one could use them to wipe the nose during crying fits.

Mourning handkerchiefs were made from cambric. It is a plain, soft linen fabric, sometimes also woven in cotton, with a slight lustrous finish on the face of the cloth. Cambric is woven in the north of France in many grades from fine to coarse.

Petticoats were made from silk and stuff. Stockings were of cashmere, silk, or balbriggan. Balbriggan eventually came to refer to the underwear made from the cloth. It was a lightweight, single weft knitted cotton fabric often lightly napped on one side. The fabric is inherently elastic, hence the undergarments, but it ran easily.

Gloves were constructed from kid, leather made from a young goat, also known as kidskin. It is incredibly soft and supple. Towards the later half of the 19th century, wearing fur became fashionable in America. Mourning women were only allowed the blackest animal pelts. This included black sealskin, the darkest sheared beaver, and astrakhan, which was the curly pelt of a newborn Persian lamb.

Colors

The color black best represented the Victorian act of mourning because it symbolizes the absence of light and in turn, life. It was an instantly recognizable sign that a loved one had departed this life. It is also said that wearing black for mourning comes from a Roman idea; the mourners could prevent being haunted from the ghost of the deceased by cloaking themselves in black.

Black was not the only color that signaled mourning. In full mourning, white was used for cuffs and collars. By half mourning a woman had a bevy of colors to choose from, by comparison. Grey, mauve, purple, lavender, lilac, and white could all be implemented. Deep reds such as burgundy were also fashionable in the late Victorian era. Subtle prints using any combination of these colors were also allowed. This trend was more popular in the south because of the weather. Dressing in full white, including the weeping veil, was a sign of mourning in the tropics.

Extract from Victorian Mourning Garb by Kyshah Hell For full article please visit the following link http://www.morbidoutlook.com/fashion/historical/2001_03_victorianmourn.html

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