Impact of Tuberculosis on Victorian England

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Project Website: https://tuberculosistimes.wordpress.com/
Known under a variety of names, such as consumption, phthisis, and the “White Plague,” tuberculosis ravaged the population of the Western world throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the leading cause of death. Along with its devastating mortality rates, victims were afflicted with excruciating and painful symptoms, including severe fatigue and persistent coughing that often resulted in the coughing-up of thick phlegm and blood. Despite these devastating effects of the disease, tuberculosis became known as a fashionable and sought-after illness during the nineteenth century, causing one to question the explanations and factors that led a destructive and fatal disease to become trendy and coveted. The pale, thin, and fragile figures of tuberculosis victims were regarded as beautiful, leaving others with the desire to replicate these appearances and even wishing to contract the disease in order to achieve what became known as a tubercular aesthetic. By focusing on nineteenth century Victorian England, as I have done in my research, tuberculosis is revealed to have impacted various aspects of culture. Fashion trends adapted to prominently feature one’s thin, nearly nonexistent waist, beautiful, sensitive heroines suffering and dying from the disease could be found throughout literature and art, and debates and discoveries concerning the threatening disease dominated news sources. Tuberculosis’ widespread impact on and prominence within English Victorian society reveal the fascinating and often surprising effects infectious diseases can have on peoples and cultures.
Awareness and knowledge of tuberculosis far predates the nineteenth century, as Europeans knew of the disease and its affects since ancient times. However, the spike of victims and deaths in the late eighteenth century garnered an increased concern for the cause and nature of tuberculosis. This outbreak led to a large number of debates concerning one’s susceptibility to the disease, including whether contracting tuberculosis was a matter of inheritance or miasma. With the dawn of the nineteenth century, tuberculosis was established as the deadliest infectious disease.\(^1\) While many within England were concerned about the spread of this painful and fatal ailment, others longed to contract the disease to achieve the attractive appearance and romantic characteristics attributed to tuberculosis victims. Writings, debates, and discourses by scholars concerning this topic credit the rise of the tubercular aesthetic to two prominent causes: the outward appearance of tuberculosis victims that matched Victorian beauty standards and the influence of the Romantic poets, responsible for depicting tuberculosis as a glamorized disease within their works. Historian Carolyn Day emphasizes the impact tuberculosis had on beauty standards in Victorian England as “tuberculosis enhances those things that are already established as beautiful in women.”\(^2\) Among these features were red lips and cheeks, pale skin, and thinness that resulted from loss of appetite and weight loss. Day’s research also involves the evident trend seen in fashions throughout the nineteenth century that attempt to highlight or mimic the appearance of tuberculosis symptoms by utilizing corsets to emphasize the narrowness of a woman’s waist.\(^3\) However, the discovery of tuberculosis’ bacterial nature and its damaging effects on one’s organs in the late nineteenth century also affected fashion, ushering in new,

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3. Ibid.
“healthier” corsets that featured elastic bands and increased comfort. Throughout the nineteenth century, the impact of tuberculosis can be found in the beauty standards and fashion trends of the time, asserting the disease’s role in Victorian culture and society.

Regarding the Romantic poets’ influence on the tubercular aesthetic, several scholars, such as Clark Lawlor and Katherine Byrne, credit the poets with carrying the chicness and admiration of the disease into the nineteenth century. One of the most prominent Romantic poets, John Keats, died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, leading his contemporaries to credit his heightened intelligence and talent to the disease. Associations such as these were further strengthened by representations of tuberculosis in poetry and literature. Byrne asserts, “Romantic poetry sought to find beauty in the ‘horror’ and ‘melancholy’ of consumption.” In doing so, the painful symptoms of tuberculosis were idealized and death from the disease allowed one to die a “romantic death.” Poets were not the only artists who depicted tuberculosis in their works, as heroines in many Victorian novels suffer and eventually die from tuberculosis. Meanwhile, famous artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edvard Munch created works that prominently featured beautiful women afflicted with tuberculosis. This growing presence of thin, beautiful, and dying women throughout literature and art strengthened the exposure of tuberculosis’ supposed physical and mental benefits. The representation of tuberculosis in popular culture, including fashion, beauty, and art, all contributed to the sought-after tubercular aesthetic within Victorian England, a significant development concerning the diseases’ ravaging effects on the victim and his or her body.

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In accordance with previous studies and research on this topic, I discovered just how prominent and impactful tuberculosis was not only on those afflicted with the disease, but on all of Victorian society, as its influence can be found in the art, literature, fashion, and science of the time. Therefore, I came to consider the tubercular aesthetic as a cultural phenomenon, becoming increasingly glorified in popular culture and sought-after by many, despite the obvious risks of the disease. I chose to focus specifically on nineteenth-century English Victorian society, as the tubercular aesthetic was especially prominent within England, and to explore how tuberculosis’ wide-reaching influence affected a certain society. For my digital representation, I created a lifestyle blog to effectively communicate Victorian society’s fascination with the disease, including the various effects tuberculosis had on aspects of daily life. In addition to my WordPress website, I attempted to utilize the social media platforms of Twitter and Instagram in order to mimic the need present in today’s society to receive immediate updates on important health issues, as well as less pressing popular culture news.

My Twitter page, The Tuberculosis Times, utilizes digitalized articles from The London Times that were originally published in the nineteenth century in order to present the debates, research, and discoveries concerning tuberculosis in a clear, concise, and chronological manner. While the limitation of 140 characters per tweet was originally a challenge considering the amount of information I wished to present in each post, it ultimately forced me to focus on the essential information within the article. Meanwhile, for my Instagram account, Tuberculosis Trends, I compiled illustrations originally published in Harper’s Bazar from 1867 to 1898 in order to demonstrate the fashion trends throughout nineteenth century Victorian England that attempted to imitate the coveted figure, including the thin, accentuated waists of tuberculosis

7. Newspaper articles were accessed through The Times Digital Archive 1785-2000, Gale Cengage Learning.
victims.\textsuperscript{8} Utilizing Instagram was especially useful in depicting this aspect of my argument, as I was able to present visuals that clearly depicted the impact tuberculosis and the tubercular aesthetic had on fashion. In addition, the other aspects of my blog, including the page containing various representations of tuberculosis in nineteenth century art and entertainment, as well as the informational page about the disease, provide my audience with a comprehensive and visual representation of my argument.

Overall, as my project focuses on various visual aspects of Victorian culture, the use of a digital application allowed me to clearly represent these components in a way that a traditional research paper would not have allowed. I also found that creating my blog on WordPress allowed me to neatly organize the different aspects of my topic by utilizing subpages. Along with these assets, the information presented on my website is far more concise than could be presented or organized within a written paper. Without the addition of my lifestyle blog and social media accounts, I do not think my argument would be as impactful or comprehensible. Through the exploration of my digital representation, I believe viewers will discover tuberculosis to be a cultural phenomenon within Victorian England due to the rise of the tubercular aesthetic and its myriad of representations in art and entertainment, a surprising legacy for an infectious and fatal disease.

Bibliography


"Dr. Koch On Tuberculosis." The Times [London, England], November 15, 1890.


The London Times Articles Used on Twitter Account


Cara,

This is such a great project. It is deeply researched but you’ve been able to go beyond the secondary literature through the creation of this website. I think this is the sort of topic where a non-historian might doubt the general claims, but you have compiled the evidence to demonstrate TB’s cultural influence. Well done!

- Use of digital tools—how does the effective use of digital media help us understand something about the role of disease in history that a traditional paper cannot? (40%) 40/40

  Your project makes the case for the standalone effectiveness of a web-based project!

- Appearance and user friendliness of the project (20%) 20/20

  Excellent layout—good combination of scientific information and historical newspapers esp.

- Quality of clarity, writing, and thoroughness of research (40%) 39/40