

Dark tourism: a school visit to Flanders



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Abstract: Neither dark tourism nor bereavement research have examined how visits to sites of death and suffering ('dark tourism') can intersect with grief for deaths unrelated to the site. This autobiographical account by an undergraduate student recounts how a school visit to Flanders prompted a cathartic healing of her grief for a personal friend who had died some months earlier. Powerful and healing emotions were experienced not only at battlefields and cemeteries, but also in her encounters with soldiers' art and poetry.

Keywords: war, catharsis, teenage bereavement, art, poetry, pet loss

As we mark the centenary of the First World War, this personal account by a final year Social Sciences undergraduate at the University of Bath reflects on how a school trip to Flanders unexpectedly helped her grieve the death of a close friend. Those who visit sites of mourning without any direct personal connection are often dismissed as 'grief tourists' and their tears as 'lacking authenticity'; this piece shows how something more profound can sometimes occur. The article prompts us to ask whether sites commemorating man's inhumanities can elicit, in visitors without a personal loss commemorated by the site, not only reflection and sorrow but also grief.

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Dark tourism, also known as thanatourism, 'is the act of travel to sites, attractions and exhibitions of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre' (IDTR, 2013); it comprises a topic within the broader academic study of tourism, notably at the University of Central Lancashire's Institute for Dark Tourism Research. Every year millions of people flock to dark tourism sites; they have done so for years and will arguably continue to do so. We might imagine dark tourism to be fairly new; this not so, ancient Rome's Colosseum being a case in point (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

I myself participated in this phenomenon on two school history trips to the war graves and battlefields of the First World War. For me these were very personal experiences, with emotional motives; here I reflect upon the grief that pervaded my second trip to Belgium. I found that it is possible to grieve for someone you never actually knew, and that perhaps this is what leads some people to visit death sites. And I found that dark tourism can provide emotional release, with the visitor gaining some kind of perspective and understanding. Though there is a cultural and historical literature on how battle sites affect veterans and those bereaved by war (eg. Walter, 1993; Winter, 1995), contemporary tourism research (Ryan, 2007) has not studied in depth how visits to such sites can intersect with grief for deaths unrelated to the site, while bereavement researchers rarely examine such places as sites eliciting grief of any kind, let alone unrelated griefs. In some journalistic accounts of sites of mourning for celebrities and murder victims, visitors with no personal connection are dismissed as 'grief tourists' and their tears as 'grief lite', 'lacking authenticity'; in my experience, something more profound can occur, at least in the case of battlefield visits.

Bereavement may be defined as the experience of losing a loved person, grief as the distinctive emotion that results, and mourning as the behaviour to which bereavement gives rise. In the case of dark tourism, however, both grief and mourning may be present even though, for the visitor without a personal

loss commemorated by the site, there is no bereavement. If mourning is an action, then the visit itself could be seen as mourning, with grief coming from the emotions resulting from the visit. However, this statement assumes that the visitor felt an emotional connection to the site; not all people do, for dark tourism sites have become so common, and so popular, that many people have become numb to their emotional effects (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). More sensitively, we can begin to question what effect these sites can really have on visitors lacking a personal connection to them. After interviewing several visitors to a memorial park in Kenya, Gaya (2013) outlines various reasons for visiting this site. Many of her main themes transfer to most dark tourism sites, and are as follows; history, catharsis and peace, curiosity, novelty seeking, remembrance, education, cultural heritage and identity, and death and dying.

This helps us distinguish between visitors to dark tourism sites. There are those directly and personally bereaved by the tragedy commemorated by the site. An example is the UK government subsidised trips that began in 1985 'for widows who had yet to visit the graves of their husbands killed forty or seventy years earlier in the First and Second World Wars' (Walter, 1993 p63). Types of visitors will vary according to the site, but arguably those who have experienced direct loss related to the site have the most justification to visit. We could also argue that this group are not tourists, just as we would not be classed as a tourist when visiting a loved one's grave.

There are also those who have experienced a personal bereavement which was unrelated, but who, perhaps unexpectedly, find emotional release and perspective at the site. Others visit as a tourist, and feel a deep emotional connection unrelated to bereavement. An example is student Jack Fletcher who reflected upon his experience at Chernobyl, 'one of a handful of places on Earth that you could actually call a dystopia. While you're there you do get a strange feeling. I felt a sense of gladness that myself and my family haven't had to experience horrors like those in Chernobyl.' (Coldwell, 2013). Further examples are the thousands of school children who visit Flanders every year, as my own school did. These children may have limited experience of personal bereavement, but still find the visit emotional. Dark tourists do not need to be specifically or consciously motivated to visit for the site to profoundly affect them (Walter, 2009): 'dark tourism doesn't need dark tourists... It just needs people who are interested in learning about this life and this world' (Stone, quoted in Coldwell, 2013). Among visitors, and particularly in school groups, there are also inevitably those who visit as a tourist, but gain no emotional experience as a result. The social phenomenon of taking photos of oneself posing inappropriately at dark tourism sites exemplifies this, as in Jason Feifer's Tumblr, 'Selfies at Serious Places' (Feifer, 2013).

A battlefield visit

Although technically I lost a family member in the First World War, and feel a very strong connection to him, I never personally knew him. On my second visit to the battlefields I was still grieving for

a close friend who had died in a hiking accident just after his seventeenth birthday, and struggling to come to terms with a variety of conflicting emotions. My trip was about eight months after Andy died, and the initial ceremonious mourning was over. As a group of sixth formers we were going through denial and transition in the form of silence, which meant grieving in public no longer seemed appropriate; we were back to day-to-day life, being strong. I'm not sure I even realised how much I was still grieving for him, and perhaps it is only in hindsight that I can make these connections. I am thus interested in exploring Gaya's (2013) notion of catharsis and peace as a result of visiting these places, particularly war graves. Catharsis is 'the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions' (Oxford English Dictionary). Through expressing strong emotions to their visits to the Nairobi park commemorating a 1998 terrorist bomb attack, Gaya's interviewees found peace of mind and gained perspective during their time there, and this is how I would view my own experience with dark tourism.

My catharsis went much further than just being allowed the chance to cry over the deceased; I genuinely believe that having just experienced a personal bereavement I was able to connect to my surroundings in the battlefields on a much stronger level than I would if I was not already grieving. My senses were heightened, and I could truly understand the pain of those left behind, the sorrow, the social unity, and the cultural identity that the war had shaped for those connected. I guess this is empathy at its most obvious. I could feel the aches and pains really in me, and knew how whole nations had felt as we trudged round endless cemeteries for numerous countries' men. As a result I was able to understand my own feelings, and found great comfort in not being alone. Where I could no longer talk to my friends and family, and perhaps never actually did, I could use my imagination to conjure up people who had felt the same. The battlefields made me empathise, and as it affected so many people it brought perspective. Empathy, perspective, catharsis and emotional release were my personal outcomes. Dark tourism and experiences like this connect the living with the dead through emotion and understanding; I became at peace with my own feelings, and with the reality of death and my friend being gone.

Zimmerman and Rodin's (2004) discussion of the denial of death thesis highlights the collective fear of death that Western societies have created, but also the gradual movement towards acceptance of death through structures such as palliative hospice care. Perhaps we can make a direct link between this acceptance and the curiosity and willingness shown by visitors to dark tourism sites. As a society we are frightened of death, but we accept the necessity to accommodate it and therefore seek explanations from sites where death has happened, and further to this, seek ways to connect with the dead. Five pieces of sociological evidence are outlined by Zimmerman and Rodin (2004), three of which are seemingly over-ridden in visits to dark tourism sites, and certainly were during my visit to Belgium. Firstly, 'the taboo on conversation about death'; we discussed the dead from the minute we got on the bus until weeks after

we had returned. Despite not knowing the dead personally, this was a clear acceptance of death. Stigma can surround those who are dying or have died, and there was a clear transition from fear to acceptance of death throughout the trip. Secondly, 'the segregation of the dying from the rest of society' can be questioned, and is certainly not applicable to all societies; the battlefields and cemeteries are an integral part of Belgium and northern France, socially and economically. Thirdly, Zimmerman and Rodin highlight 'the decline in mourning rituals', but if we refer back to the link between bereavement and how visitors can be seen to mourn at dark tourism sites, we can suggest this form of tourism is a modern way of dealing with bereavement. I mourned the dead during my trip to the battlefields, and – through my cathartic experience – subsequently found a new way of grieving a personal friend.

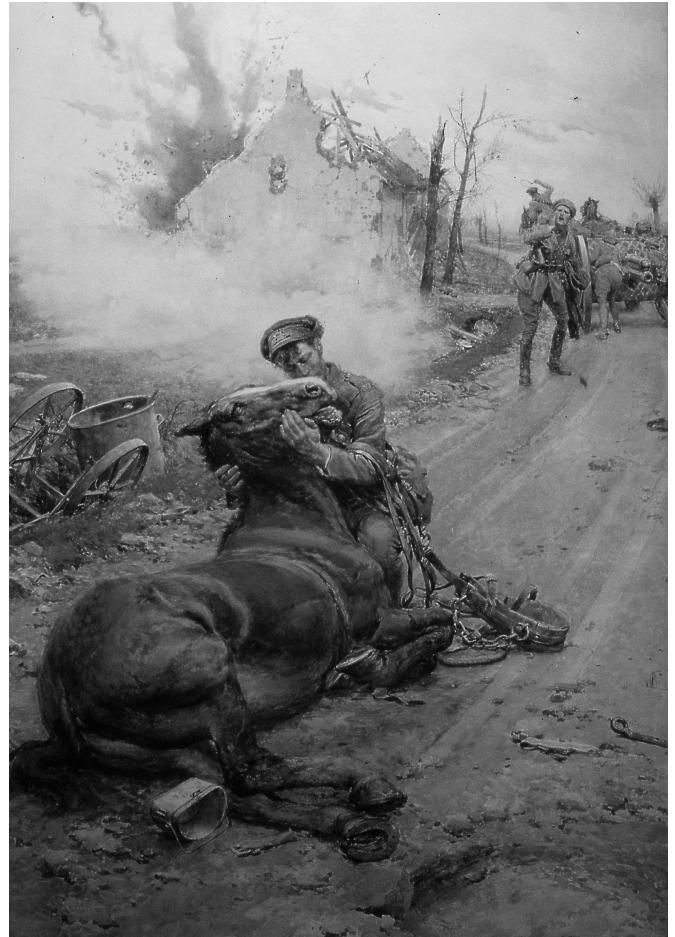
Although Zimmerman and Rodin discuss the denial of death in a medical context, I suggest it can be transferred to several different death-related social situations, with dark tourism signifying the opposite of denial on a large scale. Perhaps our curiosity, reinforced by our lack of exposure to death, drives us to seek it out through dark tourism (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). 'Because death is under a medical gaze, it's been privatized. We [now] connect with mortality through tourism' (Johanson, 2012).

Music, painting, poetry

As well as the numerous cemeteries and battlefields that we visited, there were several other significant activities we partook in that strengthened our understanding of the Great War, and thus our attachment to those who had passed away; we actively sought out a connection with the dead. It's perhaps in these most significant memories that I had my deepest emotional catharsis, beginning to feel more at ease with what the death of my friend meant sociologically, psychologically and physically. Whilst in Belgium we stayed in a place called Talbot House in Poperinge, close to Ypres and behind the location of the British frontline. Founded by Reverend Phillip 'Tubby' Clayton, Talbot House, or Toc H, was used as a safe house by soldiers passing through Poperinge on their way to and from the front line. It remains as a timepiece, completely preserved and now used as a bed and breakfast and museum for visitors to the battlefields. Even Harry Patch, the final surviving British soldier of the First World War was a visitor and 'visited the house before his death in 2009 and was able to sit in the same lounge chair he'd last sat in while talking to friends in 1917' (Thomson, 2012 p272). My friend and I stayed in one of the soldiers' bedrooms in the main house, believed to be haunted. Every evening of the trip we gathered round the piano in the main dining room, just as the soldiers' would have done themselves, and sang the old war songs in an attempt to lift our spirits following the day's emotional hardships. Our tour guides aimed to replicate the energy and comfort that the soldiers would have found through music and singing together, and it certainly seemed to work for us.

If catharsis is classically found through music and the arts, two examples of war poetry further (see p7 opposite) linked

me to the dead. The first is a poem called *The Soldier's Kiss* by Henry Chappell, which was linked to The 'Good-Bye, Old Man' painting of the dying horse. A copy of the painting takes pride of place in the Toc H dining room, and so our tour guide read us the poem on one of our evenings there. Having myself had horses at the time, I found it a particularly moving poem, reinforced by the brutality of the picture, and opening up another dimension, the bond between human and animal – particularly close and comforting for some young soldiers far from home – and grief at the shattering of that bond.



"Goodbye, Old Man", Fortunino Matania (1881-1963) The original painting was commissioned in 1916 by The Blue Cross to raise money in this country to relieve the suffering of war horses in Europe.

The second example is John McCrae's famous poem *In Flanders Fields*, which was read on a number of occasions on my first trip and quickly became my favourite poem. On my return to Belgium we visited Essex Farm and the bunker where McCrae died, and I was offered the chance to read the poem there aloud. To read the exact words that had been written by McCrae roughly ninety years on was another powerful experience, reinforced by the visualisation of the place that he had actually been, and a fondness for the author that stemmed from my first battlefields trip.

By associating yourself with the trauma and the realism of the war, your own problems begin to seem insignificant. It cleanses you, giving you time to think and prioritise. I had recently lost one friend, yet just two or three generations before me, people had lost whole communities. I remember standing in Tyne Cot, for

the second time in my life, and being so overwhelmed by the loss around me, but also beginning to feel at ease with my own life again. Such emotions are inexplicable, but felt by millions of others who have similar experiences. As one visitor to the underpass where Princess Diana died said, 'I went and stood at the junction and, although it was busy with traffic, there was a poignancy to it. There is something quite powerful about being at a scene where something like that took place' (Paris, 2013). We can draw similarities between these feelings and those when we lose someone close; this is grief, and it therefore seems possible to grieve for someone you never knew. You are there to acknowledge the bravery, the sadness, the atrocities, but also there to shed light on your own life and regain an understanding of how lucky we now are. We will never be completely safe; places such as Ground Zero, natural disasters, battlefields and other dark tourism sites remind us of this. Each place holds its own history, its own meaning, and its own social grounding for its visitors. There is something within us that consciously or subconsciously embraces the emotions resulting from bereavement, or through the closeness of death. We are blessed with creative imagination, and through poetry, music and physically treading in the footsteps of the dead, we can connect with them so powerfully that we feel them just the other side of an invisible shield. ■

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A Soldier's Kiss

Only a dying horse! Pull off the gear,
And slip the needless bit from frothing jaws,
Drag it aside there, leaving the road way clear,
The battery thunders on with scarce a pause.

Prone by the shell-swept highway there it lies
With quivering limbs, as fast the life-tide fails,
Dark films are closing o'er the faithful eyes
That mutely plead for aid where none avails.

Onward the battery rolls, but one there speeds
Needlessly of comrades voice or bursting shell,
Back to the wounded friend who lonely bleeds
Beside the stony highway where he fell.

Only a dying horse! he swiftly kneels,
Lifts the limp head and hears the shivering sigh
Kisses his friend, while down his cheek there steals
Sweet pity's tear, "Goodbye old man, Goodbye".

No honours wait him, medal, badge or star,
Though scarce could war a kindlier deed unfold;
He bears within his breast, more precious far
Beyond the gift of kings, a heart of gold.

Henry Chappell

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

John McCrae