

Secularization of suicide meant callous mockery of writers' deaths

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Poet Virginia Woolf dressed in overcoat, pockets filled with stones, walked into a river in 1941 and drowned. Two decades later, novelist Ernest Hemingway put his shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger. Journalist and author, Hunter S. Thompson did the same 44 years later -- celebrated authors, all who University of Alberta history researcher Jeremy Caradonna says died as literary icons.

Such stature was not the fate of a group of 18th century writers—known as Grub Street hacks—whom Caradonna calls the "embittered 'gutter Rousseaus,' " the "unfortunate bohemians" and the 'literary proletariat' of the 18th century. They too killed themselves. However, in a recently published study, Caradonna finds that while contributions by Grub Street writers were integral to a very important period in Western civilization, media reports of the time callously mocked their suicides.

"Grub Street writers were considered lowbrow writers because they were willing to do things like write erotic literature, depicting pornographic images, and politically seditious materials in which they were attacking one person or another. They were unfairly marginalized and exploited," Caradonna said.

"And the reason that they were driven to so much misery and to woefully commit suicide is because they were not given the credit for the instrumental role they played in society. These [writers](#) are integral to the very concept of the Enlightenment. They wrote for the average person and their writings helped undermine the French monarchy, more than

any highbrow argument about economics that the average person did not understand."

Grub Street and Suicide: A View from the Literary Press in Late Eighteenth-Century France, published in the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, contributes to an ongoing reexamination of history that Caradonna says departs from the so-called "great man" view of history.

"We're trying to get away from just focusing on the likes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or David Hume, for example. We're trying to look at the people who were around them, or those who were completely forgotten, the peasantry. It's called history from below. This idea has been around for a while--probably 30 years or more--but this perspective has come very late to the Enlightenment, where great man history often persists."

Provided by University of Alberta

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