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## Seduced by the “Dark Turn”

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# Seduced by the “Dark Turn”

## **Abstract**

Last year, I attended a Civil War Conference that highlighted what has become known as the “Dark Turn of the Civil War.” Basically, the turn is a shift in focus from the shiny-bugles-and-gleaming-bayonets interpretation of the Civil War to revealing the ugly underside of the Civil War, emphasizing themes of death, destruction, and loss. At the time, I remember thinking, this is a good thing, Civil War history does tend to be overly romanticized as the glorious American tragedy. One panel that bothered me, however, featured a discussion on “Dark Tourism.” I had never heard of Dark Tourism, and I remember being wary of whatever was about to happen. One man on the panel had led ghost tours in Gettysburg; another had worked for a museum exhibit of a Viking village, working with perfumers to recreate the authentic smells of a Viking latrine. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Seduced by the “Dark Turn”



Photo of fallen soldiers taken after the Battle of Gettysburg.  
Timothy H. O'Sullivan [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

*October 31, 2014*

*by Sarah Johnson '15*

Last year, I attended a Civil War Conference that highlighted what has become known as the “Dark Turn of the Civil War.” Basically, the turn is a shift in focus from the shiny-bugles-and-gleaming-bayonets interpretation of the Civil War to revealing the ugly underside of the Civil War, emphasizing themes of death, destruction, and loss. At the time, I remember thinking, this is a good thing, Civil War history does tend to be overly romanticized as the glorious American tragedy. One panel that bothered me, however, featured a discussion on “Dark Tourism.” I had never heard of Dark Tourism, and I remember being wary of whatever was about to happen. One man on the panel had led ghost tours in Gettysburg; another had worked for a museum exhibit of a Viking village, working with perfumers to recreate the authentic smells of a Viking latrine.

Although I still have no idea how to take the Viking stuff, the comments made by the former ghost tour leader haunt me to this day. He tacitly implied that the Park Service's efforts to portray complex historical interpretations to the public were too mentally exhausting for the average tourist, who, instead of wanting to engage with the big questions of Civil War history, would rather have fun learning about the Civil War through the means of a ghost tour. One of the main points the panel argued was that Dark Tourism was the new way of tourism, a "fun" and "spooky" way for tourists to engage with the past. I left the panel disgusted by the macabre fascination with death and the exploitation of the very real suffering of men and women living from 1861-1865 to sell a few tickets and walk around town at night with a goofily-clad individual holding a lantern and telling ghost stories that usually are not true.

And now, historians are being seduced by the Dark Turn. What began as a sincere effort to de-sanitize and de-romanticize the Civil War has turned into a macabre offshoot of Battlefield Gothic. Books with titles like *Living Hell* (subtitled *The Dark Side of the Civil War*) take aim at the glorification of war and seek to destroy any notion of a "good war" by barraging the reader with tales of venereal disease, exhaustion, and mutilation. The result, however, is an equally romanticized version of the Civil War, though in an inverted and somewhat strange way. The Civil War has now become an outlet for sick fascination with death and morbid focus on the mutilated dead. This is achieved by taking the war out of its social and political context as well as disregarding individual fighting motivations. Yes, it is incredibly important to acknowledge the suffering and destruction of the Civil War, but exalting it above all else distorts the Civil War and exploits very real suffering of the soldiers who strongly believed they were fighting a war for a distinct purpose.

The romance of Death and the alluring paramour of Destruction threaten to rip the Civil War out of its historical context and turn it into cheap entertainment for the morbidly fascinated.

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