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## DEADLY ATTRACTION, OR WHY CULTURE GLAMOURISES FEMALE DEATH AND MISERY

### ABSTRACT

Depression is not sexually stimulating, yet there exist multiple cultural representations of deeply unhappy women, who reach the height of their beauty when suicidal, or dead. From Ophelia, damsels in distress and swooning Victorian hysterics, ending with contemporary fashion, female suffering is glamorized. My paper answers the question why female depression is presented as sexy by culture. I seek the explanation in gender stereotypes as well as the tradition of 'heroic melancholia'.

KEYWORDS: culture, depression, fashion, melancholia, women

### STRESZCZENIE

Depresja nie jest czynnikiem zwiększającym atrakcyjność, jednak wiele kulturowych przedstawień ukazuje kobiety, które wydają się szczególnie powabne w chwili samobójczej śmierci. Zaczynając od Ofelii, poprzez mdlejące wiktoriańskie histeryczki, skończywszy na współczesnej modzie, cierpienie kobiet jest gloryfikowane. Tekst odpowiada na pytanie czemu kobiety cierpiące na depresję ukazywane są jako atrakcyjne. Odpowiedzi należy szukać w stereotypach płciowych i tradycji 'heroicznej melancholii'.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: depresja, kobiety, kultura, melancholia, moda

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Illness is seldom, if ever, attractive. Evolutionary psychology would explain this phenomenon claiming that mating with a sick partner equals wasting energy as the offspring resulting from such a union (if born) is likely to be disadvantaged, either by inheriting the illness or having insufficient parenting or both. What can be said about physical illness applies even more to mental disorders. Statistics demonstrate that a diagnosis of mental illness dramatically diminishes one's chances of forming an intimate relationship and staying in one (G. Thornicroft 2007: 35). First, most individuals avoid dating people with mental diagnoses, due to their

being 'unsuitable'. Second, the behaviour of the mentally ill may put an additional pressure on a relationship – Graham Thornicroft argues that “prior mental illness in one partner substantially increase[s] the risk of divorce” (37). Keeping this evidence in mind, it is a paradox that culture frequently presents mental illness, especially depression, as sexually titillating. Literature, visual arts and fashion often portray depressed, and even suicidal women, as beautiful. The reasons for this tendency can be found in the tradition of ‘heroic melancholy’ that dates back to Aristotle as well as in the beauty ideals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which glamourized sickly females. The Romantic and Victorian fascination with misery as a synonym of refinement could be due to the transfer of associations which surrounded consumption. TB was to attack the sensitive and genteel while good health and appetite stood for vulgarity. Also contemporary gender stereotypes encourage behaviour that, by medical standards, violently departs from mental health. Women are expected to be docile, selfless and emotional. Moreover, they should sacrifice their needs to those of others, avoid confrontation and self-assertion. Confidence, self-reliance and rationality are seen as unfeminine. Analysing the roots of ‘melancholia chic’ and its manifestations, I will try to explain why I find the cultural glamorization of women’s misery dangerous.

#### HEROIC MELANCHOLY

The tradition of heroic melancholy (as well as the name of the affliction) goes back to the ancient Greek humour theory. According to Hippocratic medicine, phlegm, blood, yellow and black bile are the four humours which allegedly constitute a human body, determining one’s temperament and health. Their imbalance leads to pathology. Especially the excess of black bile (Greek *malaina chole*) is dangerous as it affects the mind, making one fearful, withdrawn, and gloomy (R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky and F. Saxl 2009: 34–35). The humour theory dominated European thinking until the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its repercussions can still be visible in many linguistic expressions. Simultaneously, however, there appeared a theory suggesting that individuals of exceptional talent can be found among the melancholics. It can be dated to the famous thirtieth book of *Problemata (Problems, 350 BC)*, which is attributed to Aristotle but in most likelihood was not authored by him. The philosopher ponders there: “Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such extent as they are infected by the diseases arising from the black bile?” (quoted in C. Lawlor 2012: 33). The perception of an artist or scholar who exhibited intellectual depth, creativity and sophistication combined with pensiveness and suffering became widespread. In the Renaissance, the Englishman Robert Burton, the Italian Marsilio Ficino and the German Albrecht Dürer toyed with the idea that the condition of melancholy can have its benefits. It

offered distance from trivial affairs of the world, love of science, and nonconformity, soon becoming a mark of distinction. It became fashionable to complain of the affliction. The English pre-Romantic Graveyard poets cherished sadness, so did the fans of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrow of Young Werther* (1774), who occasionally went as far as committing suicide. The conviction that a melancholic male, sensitive and prone to emotional outbursts, is socially acceptable and even admired was popular till the Victoria era.

As Peter Kramer observes in *Against Depression* (2005), although most societies nowadays realize the biomedical basis of depression, the tradition of 'heroic melancholy' still has a powerful grasp on our imagination. The belief that suffering is somehow ennobling and that it contributes to creativity, especially in the arts, seems impossible to eradicate. As the author of the seminal *Listening to Prozac* (1993), Kramer has frequently been asked about the applicability of mood-disorder medication to famous depressives. He has observed that most people assume Prozac would have destroyed the talent of, let's say, Vincent van Gogh or Søren Kierkegaard, irrevocably impoverishing Western art and philosophy. People tend to believe the suffering of depression is the price one has to pay for sensitivity, insight, profound vision, depth, etc. "By convention", Kramer writes, "intellectuals are European pessimists. They are darkly complex. They are ill at ease in society. They struggle against inner demons" (2006: 102). It is deeply ironic that those who cannot cope with their own lives and solve their own problems become authorities to whom others turn to find out how to life.

### DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

The stereotypical sufferer from melancholy was a male scholar, as very few high-born women could receive any education while the social roles imposed on them prevented them from getting involved in any artistic or scientific activity. Yet, the allegorical personification of the affliction was predominantly female. In literature, John Milton's "Il Penseroso" (1645) can serve as an example. As Raymond Klibansky observes, his heroine is pure and wise, even glamorous (260). Although the woman in Dürer's famous engraving of 1514, *Melancholia I*, cannot be called erotic, she is definitely aesthetically pleasing with her long, loose wavy hair and clear complexion. Nevertheless, many later paintings and prints imitating Dürer's depiction are undeniably sexy. The woman personifying melancholy is often depicted either completely naked or in tight clothing which emphasizes her voluptuous body. Her face is pretty, breasts full and hair curly. As Elaine Showalter reminds her readers, "the woman with her hair down indicated an offense against decorum, an improper sensuality" (11). Allegories of melancholy bear resemblance to later portrayals of Romantic Crazy Kates, Crazy Janes, and Crazy Anns – seduced

girls who lost their minds when their lovers abandoned them or died, 19<sup>th</sup> century versions of Ophelia – an archetypal example of love melancholy (S. Gilman 1996: 127). Painting Ophelia drifting dead in a river was one of the favourite themes of the Pre-Raphaelites. A variation of the subject would be another female corpse – the death of the Lady of Shalott from Alfred Tennyson’s poem of the same title (1842). Their faint note of eroticism would later bloom on the pages of Photographic Iconography of the Salpatrière and André Brouillet’s painting *Charcot at the Salpatrière* (1887). Swooning, half naked women with loose hair faint after a series of sensuous fits – usually to land safely into doctor’s arms. In Tony Robert-Fleury’s *Pinel Freeing the Insane* (1876), the central female figure is also displaying her bosom among a group of fully dressed males in overcoats. Due to her insanity she is clearly unaware of her inappropriate lack of clothing, which makes her vulnerable and, unconsciously, provocative. The same can be argued about Ophelia or hysterical patients. Hamlet’s abandoned beloved is often shown in incomplete clothing while Charcot’s patients were examined partly undressed. Medical students feeding their eyes on the subjects’ youth and beauty do not seem to realize their gaze is inappropriate as it takes advantage of the patients’ unintentional lack of decorum. As Simon Cross observes, the artistic interpretation of female insanity and the seemingly objective psychiatric photography both feed on the same stereotypes on linking sexuality with madness (57–69). Thus, the tradition which started with Dürer’s sombre female figure finishes with frivolous images of naked bodies. Madness and sexuality combine in a paradoxical union.

The link between sadness, pain, and eventual death, and sexual appeal is best exemplified in the Gothic tradition. A perfect damsel in distress is beautiful because she is sad, abandoned and prosecuted. Her eyes fill with tears to give them more lustre, her skin is pale to emphasize her clear complexion, and her poor appetite makes her more fragile-looking. Ann Radcliffe describes the beauty of the heroine of *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) in the following words: “The languor of sorrow threw a melancholy grace upon her features,” as if it was obvious that misery is elegant (2013). In order to be attractive, a Gothic heroine needs to be helpless, passive and in no control of her surroundings – features dangerously similar to depressive symptoms. According to Edgar Allan Poe, “the death (...) of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (2013). As reading of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry and fiction proves, a little suffering preceding death will only improve the final effect. Ironically, the true value of the woman’s character and the appreciation of her charm was only possible when she was gone from this world for ever. Just like Hamlet admits having loved Ophelia when she has drowned although he scorned her when she was alive, Lancelot first notices the Lady of Shalott when she is stone cold in her boat, and the unnamed addressee of Christina Rossetti’s “After Death” (1862) looks at the dead speaker with affection which he lacked before. Insignificant in life, a women’s existence gains value when it expires; unfortunately, that can hardly be seen as a consolation.

The sexual fantasies surrounding a dying woman can be found not only in the arts. Brant Wenegrat observes “nineteenth-century men honoured and worshipped women whose hold on this world seemed tenuous” (63). Sensitive nerves, poor appetite, lack of vigour in women were seen as tokens of refinement restricted to upper class members. Wenegrat also enumerates “physical stamina, resistance to disease and stress, vigorous movements and loud speech, or a pink complexion” among markers of poor breeding (Ibid.). The attitude to food was probably the most striking of all. Though in the previous centuries abstaining from nourishing meals, especially red meat, had a religious significance, and many mystics and hermits practiced excessive fasting, never before did lay women refrain from eating. The current obsession with dieting and the promotion of one, extremely slim, body shape for women have their roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gentlewomen were supposed to ‘eat like birds’ and have a frail figure. “Appetite was regarded as a barometer of sexuality” so eating little, avoiding heavy or spicy meals suggested purity of spirit and self-restraint (J. Brumberg 2000: 172). Stimulating foods were believed to fuel unnatural sexual passions. Moreover, doctors claimed that genteel women have a more sensitive to men digestive system and could not cope with more solid nourishment (Ibid., 171). Undeniably, wearing a corset that squeezed one’s waist made eating more painful for upper class women. The fashion for the ultra-feminine hour-glass figure condemned women to idle and invalid lifestyle even further. Few activities could be pursued in such underwear.

Being slim – and physically weak – signified one lived a life of leisure and affluence. Likewise, a pale complexion meant one seldom appeared outdoors, which again suggested no manual, farm labour was expected of him/her. To look more sickly white, many women drank vinegar or used arsenic to whiten their skin (B. Ehrenreich and D. English 2005: 119). Though the cultural associations connected with skin colour changed, the link between slim figure and wealth only strengthened. In contrast, working class women were perceived as robust – that is, vulgar. They enjoyed their food (as they seldom had enough of it), which suggested insatiable carnal appetite. Their menstrual periods and pregnancies, allegedly, did not affect their performance as maids or factory girls. Social Darwinism made a similar differentiation between white and non-white women. “At war, at work, or at play, the white man is superior to the savage, and his culture has continually improved his condition. But with white woman the rule is reversed. Her squaw sister will endure effort, exposure and hardship which would kill the white woman” (S. Stall, quoted in Ibid., 126). Sojourner Truth’s powerful speech of 1851 drew on that ‘scientific’ observation (2015). “Ain’t I a woman” asks a black slave, a mother of thirteen and a worker. Exploitation of the lower classes and women of colour went hand in hand with the debilitation of the upper class ladies.

Literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century shows innumerable examples in which stamina and health are seen as unladylike. For instance, when Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) walks several miles to visit her sister, Jane, her muddy dress

and coloured cheeks are sneered at by the fashionable society. Jane, on the other hand, has caught a cold riding a horse in the rain – a sure proof she is a proper gentlewoman. The only young aristocrat in the novel, Anne de Burgh, is a virtual invalid, which is probably a consequence of her distinguished birth. “To have it insinuated or said that a woman was robust constituted an insult”, as Brumberg observes (183).

Still, though some positive associations with melancholy might have applied to men’s character, it did not apply so much to their looks. “Gradually, the tubercular look, which symbolised an appealing vulnerability, a superior sensitivity, became more and more the ideal look for women – while great men of the mid- and late nineteenth century grew fat, founded industrial empires, wrote hundreds of novels, made wars, and plundered continents” (S. Sontag 1990: 30). As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English demonstrate, the gender bias reflected the pseudoscientific assumptions about the role of men and women in the society and served as an explanation why women should not be allowed to receive education and financial independence. It would not only spoil their hypersensitive moral nature and modesty but also irrevocably damage their looks (B. Ehrenreich and D. English 2005: 138–144). The atrophy of the uterus and breasts and the development of a muscular figure would not only make it unlikely for her to find a mate but biologically impossible to beget and nurse a child. Thus, upper-class women had to lead a life of invalidism otherwise the human race would diminish.

Some of the aura surrounding nervous indisposition coincided with myths connected with consumption. According to Susan Sontag, the illnesses that are most likely to be used as metaphors are those which are mysterious and not curable. This explanation matches madness like no other medical complaint nowadays. Despite the enormous progress in medicine in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, mental disorders remain heavily disputed as their aetiology and course of treatment are contested. As Sontag analyses, TB attacked those who were “genteel, delicate, sensitive”, somehow too good to live in the corrupt world (Ibid., 28). Similar associations surround the melancholic:

Like the mental patient today, the tubercular was considered to be somehow quintessentially vulnerable, and all full of self-destructive whims. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century physicians addressed themselves to coaxing their tubercular patients back to health. Their prescription was the same as the enlightened one for the mental patients today: cheerful surroundings, isolation from stress and family, healthy diet, exercise, rest. (Ibid., 63–64)

Curiously enough, the first modern anti-depressant, iproniazid, was developed as an antitubercular drug, as Kramer reminds the readers in *Listening to Prozac* (47). It made people with TB feel more energetic and increased their appetite. When more successful medication to deal with consumption was introduced, the invigorating properties of iproniazid found a new group of consumers.

Even those 19<sup>th</sup> century heroines who are not medically ill (at least initially) follow the path of a melancholic damsel in distress. Beautiful and dreamy, they long for something unspecified that will lift them from their mundane environment. They choose a lover who is both unwilling and unable to satiate them, soon to find themselves abandoned or/and ostracized by the society. Unable to return to the lives they used to have, they opt for suicide. Such is the lot of Emma Bovary (of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* 1856), Anna Karenina (of Leo Tolstoy's novel of the same title, 1873–77) and Emma Pontellier (of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* 1899), in a nut shell. Their self-inflicted deaths used to be interpreted by contemporary readers and critics as a fit punishment for adultery and abandonment of children as all three women shed their responsibilities in search of selfish, sensual enjoyment. Later critics, especially feminist, preferred to see these deaths as acts of defiance and martyrdom. Instead of being ostracised by the patriarchal society, those women chose death. Such an interpretation, however, falls into the trap of romanticising suicide and depression that often accompanies it – the very trap feminist should be avoiding as equating suffering and death with liberation is a blind alley. Apart from glorifying these fictional suicides, feminist icons include authentic figures of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, opposing the tendency to idealise women's madness, wrote that "the madhouse is a somewhat troubling site for establishing a female pantheon" (37). The morgue, one can only add, is even less so. The affirmation of an untimely death of a healthy and intelligent human being, who could have lived a long and fulfilling life is a misunderstanding.

#### CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS

The tendency to equate sickness with beauty and sex appeal can be seen in two well-known 20<sup>th</sup> century novels: Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934) and Erich Maria Remarque's *The Black Obelisk* (1956). The main male characters in both books fall in love with insane women whose charm is related to their illness. The relationship between Dick Diver and his wife Nicole is loosely based on the Fitzgeralds: Francis, a promising yet initially poor writer and Zelda, a rich Southern *belle* who suffered a nervous collapse. Dick, an ambitious and talented young psychiatrist is attracted to a stunningly beautiful young schizophrenic. The girl is not only fresh and charming but also immensely rich – and clearly besotted with Dick. Her wealthy family encourages their romance as they believe a doctor-husband would protect Nicole's health. Dick's impoverished background is even seen as an advantage – they can buy his services, using and despising him at the same time, and he can 'overlook' the fact that her illness developed as a result of an incestuous relationship with her father in which she seemed to be a willing

accomplice. In return for his care, Nicole's money will buy him a comfortable life and an opportunity to pursue his scientific interests. The marriage is happy at the very beginning as Nicole's innocence, devotion and dependence on Dick make him feel special. Nevertheless, he soon becomes bored with the lazy lifestyle they lead, takes to drinking and flirting with other women. Moreover, his wife seems to get better and realizes Dick's ambivalence. It is impossible to interpret which member of the couple is taking advantage of the other, yet Nicole manages to overcome her problems while Dick does not.

The representation of a madwoman as irresistibly seductive because of her illness, a *femme fatale* who is fragile, vulnerable and yet powerful, can also be found in *The Black Obelisk*. The main character, Ludwig, who works part time as an organist in a lunatic asylum chapel, befriends a young patient, Genevieve Terhoven. She suffers from complete amnesia and embraces a new identity of Isabelle. The girl is truly glamorous, not only because of her youth and beauty, but also because of her dress. She wears expensive furs, evening dresses, golden sandals and jewellery – inappropriate both in terms of the time of the day and circumstances. Despite her gorgeous looks, Isabelle appears sensitive, immature and frightened. Simultaneously, she can occasionally be sexually provocative. As all the women Ludwig knows 'on the outside' are materialistic and practical, Isabelle's tenderness and poetic charm win his heart. Nevertheless, when she gets healthy, she does not recall her ill persona and does not even recognize her lover. She treats him with polite indifference, clearly observing his lower-class status and ill-fitting second-hand clothes.

Ironically, both heroines are lovely and loveable only when ill. Then, they completely depend on their healthy male lovers, light up in their company and seem to live only for them. When healthy, they are like pretty dolls: conventional, predictable, boring. They no longer need their companions and see their faults objectively. Dick is a bit of a parasite and lacks decisiveness; Ludwig is a sensitive yet impractical young man. When the women are ill, however, they do not realize that and devote themselves unconditionally to men whom they would not have chosen otherwise. A madwoman, in her helplessness, vulnerability, innocence and trust is, in many ways, an easier and less demanding companion than an independent and healthy woman.

## FASHION INDUSTRY

The fascination with ill-looking women is probably most conspicuous in contemporary fashion. Much has been written about the promotion of anorexia and paedophilia in the fashion industry as the great majority of models are undernourished pre-adolescents depicted in erotic poses. Nevertheless, even a quick glance through

glossy magazines or a look at the billboards demonstrates that the majority of models advertising beauty products, or walking the catwalk, look depressed. Sunken cheeks, pale complexion and smoky eyes can be explained by excessive thinness, but why do they never smile? Givenchy's International Artistic Director, Nicolas Degennes's work can serve as a case in point. Indeed, what can you expect from a company that launched a *Dahlia Noir* fragrance? Naming a new perfume after a victim of one of the most heinous crimes in history is not just provocative – it is abominable. Likewise, Yves Saint Laurent's make up and perfume is usually advertised with the use of images of women who are completely indifferent to their circumstances, tense and morose. Karl Lagerfeld's Spring 2013 collection for Chanel was inspired by melancholy, as the designer believes it is the most elegant and stylish thing of all (K. Lagerfeld, quoted in E. Dziewiela 2013: 83). One can only add in Lagerfeld's defence that he clearly confuses melancholy with nostalgia, as his collection is old-fashioned in its use of lace and feathers, not gloomy as such. Designers' fascination with sadness, though, can be exemplified when Wolfgang Joop criticized Heidi Klum, a well-known Victoria's Secret model. He complained that her hips are too broad, breasts too big, and that she smiles too much (A. Szewczyk 2013: 54). Another top designer, Thierry Mugler, has said that the writer Amélie Nothomb is for him the embodiment of 21<sup>st</sup> century elegance (K. Staszak 2013: 99). Needless to say, Nothomb, a former anorectic, wears only black and still has only one meal a day. She equates the feeling of physical hunger with intellectual sophistication and emotional passion while being satiated inspires, laziness and complacency. Nothomb draws these conclusions observing artefacts from Oceanian islands. Those where food was scarce produced sophisticated art while the inhabitants of fertile grounds were idle as "a man whose stomach is full [...] is not in the habit of making an effort" (A. Nothomb 2007: 6).

Lauren Weisberger's satire on the fashion industry, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), also notes the sombre appearance of women employed at the *Runway* (a fictitious equivalent of *Vogue*) magazine. When the main character arrives for her job interview, she looks in astonishment at all the glamorous people working in the office. Her attention is first drawn to how gorgeous all the women look: slim, perfectly made up and immaculately dressed. Simultaneously, however, they are all distressed and obviously uncomfortable physically and emotionally. Part of it may be caused by the oppressive atmosphere of the office, hectic workload and the psychopathic boss. Part of it, however, is the association between stylishness and sadness:

a tall, thin girl emerged from behind the glass doors. A calf-length leather skirt hung from her hips, and her unruly red hair was piled in one of those messy but still glamorous buns on top of her head. Her skin was flawless and pale, not so much as a single freckle or blemish, and it stretched perfectly over the highest cheekbones I'd ever seen. She didn't smile. She sat next to me and looked me over, earnestly but with little apparent interest. Perfunctory. (L. Weisberger 2004: 17)

Robert Galbraith's (pseudonym of J. K. Rowling) detective story *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013), which deals with an investigation into the apparent suicide of a supermodel, gives an identical depiction of women employed in fashion. They all give the main character "cold, blank stare[s]" and appear irritated when they are expected to do their job of showing somebody in or bringing in tea and biscuits (R. Galbraith 2014: 303). In any other reception area, a haughtily indifferent, or even hostile, assistant would probably be immediately reprimanded on her attitude. A cheery voice and inviting smile are a part of the job description of any secretary. In the world of fashion, however, the opposites are apparently in demand. Although Weisberger's and Rowling's books are works of fiction, authentic accounts confirm their depiction of 'cool' women. The pun is fully intended here as stylish and emotionally reserved go hand in hand here. A Pan-Am flight stewardess recollected that on Continental airlines "it was the norm for flight attendants ... to behave most haughtily or at least cooler than their American counterparts" where friendliness was the norm (S. Gundle 2009: 243). An air of superiority was synonymous with sophistication and elegance also in European fashion industry in the 1960s and 1970s. The once-famous mannequin, Bettina, remembers that "models never smiled" and stood aloof when posing (Ibid., 279). The legacy of this tradition can still be observed in fashion photography and the cat-walk – the girls never appear to be enjoying themselves.

One could argue the unsmiling and reserved depiction of women in *haute couture* is a counterpart to the always cheerful and infantile female of the mass culture. Yet, the women in fashion behave in a manner that resembles *belle indifférence* of depression, not just boredom or lack of involvement. They appear not to care to be posing half-naked, often in provocative circumstances. The already mentioned YSL ads always feature young women who are involved in sexual activity yet they show no trace of desire or excitement. They rather allow sex to be performed onto them than get involved in it in any way. They clearly exhibit "lack of appropriate concern" towards their safety and well-being, which is deeply unsettling for the observer (T. Burns 2014: 296).

Tracing the notion of glamour in culture, Stephen Gundle, borrowing some ideas from Simone de Beauvoir, derives modern celebrity cult of pop stars, actresses and models from the 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon of a courtesan (95, 215). The high-class prostitute whose favours could be bought only by the wealthiest men was famous not only for her stunning looks and conspicuous display of jewellery, but also for the apparent indifference (Ibid., 89). The rumour was they were sexual frigid so men coveted them not for the sake of the quality of sex life they offered but because they affirmed their status. Their promiscuity was not a result of insatiable desire or high libido but rather emotional boredom and interest in financial gain. Likewise, innumerable *femme fatales* would ruin men financially without offering them any affection or passion. Early film stars, such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich not only impersonated such women on the screen but cherished aloofness as an integral part of their image.

Though the courtesans belonged to the *demi-monde* and would not be received in the residences of the aristocrats, they frequented opera houses and theatres. Their choice of clothing would be imitated, in a subdued manner, by elegant women of the upper classes. When some of their appeal was claimed by the film stars, the popularity of female charm based on languor and nonchalance spread worldwide. For Carol Dyhouse, the concept was inseparably linked with “a witty, risqué, devil-may-care confidence” which was as essential as red lips and a sequin dress clinging seductively to a “curvaceous but slim figure” (36). Nevertheless, as Kramer warns, the features of character that signal independence and courage may as well spring from anhedonia.

### DANGEROUS CONCEPTS OF BEAUTY

Presenting depression, especially in females, as something seductive and advantageous is a very dangerous practice, not a mere “sentimental fantasy”, as Sontag refers to figurative understanding of illness (3). First, it encourages unhealthy behaviour among young women who believe that in order to be attractive they must be complex and have tangled emotional responses. Elizabeth Wurtzel in *Prozac Nation* (1994) recalls that her career as a depressive started as an attempt to appear ‘interesting’ through being indifferent and superior:

I was all belts and bows and ties and fabric, always weighted down by so much stuff, and this was in the beginning of the Reagan-era optimism of the early eighties, the time of lightheartedness and good tidings and bright colors. When all the other girls adorned themselves with plastic earrings and accessories in turquoise and yellow and chartreuse and hot pink, there I was in everything cold and dark, silver and lapis hanging from my ears like an old throwback to the sixties or the seventies, or maybe to an unhappy time and place that everyone who surrounded me didn't remember or had never been to in the first place. (96)

It would be an oversimplification to assume that Wurtzel would not have become depressed had she worn cheerleader lycra outfits, yet if she had not associated depression with stylishness, her adolescence might have been much less turbulent.

Cultural scripts tell women that the only thing they can do with their lives is to be beautiful and unhappy, and the only reward they will reap for conforming is even more misery, or even death. A few erotic thrills might come in between, as they did for Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary or Edna Pontellier, yet that makes the woman's downfall even more inevitable. Glamourizing depressed women devalues the lives of those who are not weak, passive and unable to cope with abandonment but ‘carry on’, appreciating what life has to offer.

## CONCLUSIONS

Edgar Allan Poe took it for granted that a “certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true Beauty”, though he added the reasons for it remain unknown (1982: 898). His opinion can be seen as doubly wrong as there is nothing beautiful in being miserable but it is relatively easy to see the roots of this mistaken belief. Since time immemorial, culture has repeatedly stressed that experiencing pleasure, accepting life without frustration and, simply, feeling well, can do for the animal world, but not for people. Human beings who are happy must be shallow, conformist, vulgar, stupid, or even deluded. Alongside the tradition of heroic melancholy in European culture, one can trace a parallel one of ‘ignoble happiness’. Starting with Plato’s ideas that laughter does not become a wise man, through the innumerable biblical fragments denouncing it, to Christian saints who advocate sadness and tears as the only proper conduct for believers, joy is perceived as evil, or, at best, shallow (J. Sieradzan 2005: 118–119). Later secular philosophers are no different in their criticism of happiness. Probably the most famous example would be provided by the frequently quoted aphorism of John Stuart Mill’s, who claimed that utilitarianism (understood as the production of pleasure and absence of pain) is a doctrine “fit only for swine” (P. Kramer 1994: 264). The assertion that people who are fulfilled, emotionally and mentally healthy, at peace with themselves and others, in other words those who enjoy themselves, must be by definition morally deficient is seldom questioned. We tend to accept Hamlet’s words that the world is

... an unweeded garden

That grows to seed: things rank, and gross in nature

Posses it merely. (W. Shakespeare 2001: 35)

as a profound philosophical truth. The fact that Hamlet is a depressed, self-centred teenager who has had very few life experiences and breaks down at the first unhappy, yet entirely comprehensible, event that happens to him makes few people question the validity of his opinions. Female gender roles especially encourage a degree of uncertainty, passivity, inertia, self-denial and dependency upon on others that are a serious hazard to mental health. The female identity is inseparably intertwined with that of a victim. Ironically, culture glamourizes features that are not rewarded in real life, as depressed individuals seldom live a fulfilling life. The cult of melancholic, oversensitive and physically weak women is a patriarchal trap preventing women from fully enjoying their lives, from seeking competitive employment and from demanding equality in relationships.

The superficial similarity between ‘ordinary’ mourning and depressive symptoms makes the matter even more controversial. When is pain a healthy, predictable

reaction to loss and disappointment and when is it just biochemical and devoid of meaning? The same can be argued about the value of insight ‘gained’ through depression. It indeed makes people introspective but since their memories are distorted, accompanied by obsessive feelings of guilt and worthlessness, the value of the insight gained by such introspection is far from valuable and constructive. One needs to realise one’s strengths and weaknesses and have some degree of control over one’s behaviour in order to benefit from introspection. Can conclusions about the meaning of life and human relationships achieved in a depressed state be valid? Are they a result of shrewd thinking or distortion and dulled senses? These questions cannot be satisfactorily answered, yet glamourizing pain for the pain’s sake devaluates the meaning of resilience and joy in human life, presenting them as possible only for those who are not deep enough to know better. Moreover, if the same people who make the distinction between normal and pathological benefit financially from medicalising nearly all lasting mental discomfort, the questions are no longer purely academic.

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