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Popular Depression: How Literature is Affecting the Female Image

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According to the U.S. Department of Health, adult women (18-29) are 70% more likely and girls (12-17) are three times more likely than their male counterparts to experience depression (NIMH, SAMHSA) these studies also show that the likelihood of depression increases with each new generation. A key factor in both of these studies is that “The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their places of residence”; in other words teenage girl and young women are defining themselves as depressed at a much higher rate than their male counterparts and the number is increasing with each new generation. What is missing from this information is the reason why girls and young women are increasingly identifying themselves this way. There is not a single medical conclusion to explain these statistics because depression involves biological, social, and environmental factors, a single explanation for the increasing presence of depression is unattainable. With the information in this paper, I would argue that depression has become more of a social discourse than an illness amongst young women due to the image of women as weak in society, reinforced through literature, which is compelling women to identify themselves in this way. This is certainly not to say that all women who identify themselves as depressed are mistaken, but instead to say that many women have become conditioned to identify certain indicators of depression as perfunctory characteristics of their personal selves simply because they are female. I am using Foucaultian and feminist theory to examine and explicate the view of females that is perpetuated by certain literary works in order to construct the chain of ideology that has bound the way women function for centuries.

Judith Butler offers a wonderful frame of reference for the argument of women being confined to the behaviors expected of them. “Butler refers to a situation where the subject is not
only constituted through and dominated by, but also remains necessarily tied to and reliant on, the practices and discourse of power” (Brandy 20) additionally Butler said “But, if following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we are” (Brady 21). In this construct, the discourses being referred to are of the Foucaltian theoretical perspective (referring to norms and accepted modes of behavior), as are the ideas about the subject (one not in power) and power (a dominate group). Applying this paradigm to the problem outlined here highlights women as the subject of man’s power, thus women are not only constructed by and confined to the discourses that are produced by this social system but also create themselves (personally and socially) through the discourse. We can see this effect throughout the history of literature and link female portrayals to the roles of women in that literature’s society to highlight this correlation; Shakespeare serves a starting point to clearly outline this connection.

_Hamlet’s_ Gertrude and Ophelia are weak female characters who are condemned to pain and suffering at the hands of the men in their lives. Gertrude accepts Claudius as her husband so soon after her first husband dies that Hamlet is repulsed and Gertrude herself later laments the action when she becomes aware of Claudius’ role in her first husband’s death; she tells Hamlet

_O Hamlet, speak no more!_

_Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul;_

_And there I see such black and grained spots_

_As will not leave their tinct._
Interestingly the common interpretation lent to Gertrude’s character portrays her as lustful and uncaring about the death of her husband; even pointing to her conspiring with Claudius to kill the King, yet the text itself portrays nothing of the sort. From reading the text Gertrude appears as a woman bound by the laws of her time, she is pained by her husband’s death yet cannot spare time to grieve him properly because unless she marries immediately she risks the positions of herself and Hamlet being usurped- remaining in her position as an unmarried woman was simply not an option to her, as a woman she was not considered fit to rule over anything by the standards of her time. Ophelia is a young “green girl” as her father calls her, who obeys the commands of the men in her life. When her brother and father, Laertes and Polonius, tell her (respectively) to shun Hamlet or spy on him she obeys their commands without hesitation. Hamlet’s cruel snubbing of her in the nunnery scene and her father’s death ultimately drive her mad and she commits suicide. Ophelia is portrayed as only serving the purpose of a puppet to the men in her life, she is weak and incapable which can be considered the reasons of her madness. The style of Ophelia’s madness versus Hamlet’s highlights a discourse in the society of the play; both are deemed “mad” yet Ophelia’s emotionally driven madness is consuming and renders her completely daft, while Hamlet’s madness is best described by Polonius “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (2.2.205-206) the madness of the man is considered to have “reason”. Both of these women are fairly static characters, but they both embody the notion that women are weak and unable to function in life without being bound to a man. In different ways both of these women are bound by the discourse of their society which relegate them to a position of necessary burdens which men manipulate to serve their needs and who have to chance of independent action. Women living in the time of Gertrude and Ophelia lived in a
society that robbed them of choices and enforced the belief that women were meant to be subservient to men based on their lower capacity to function in life.

Moving forward in time and literature, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë shows a slightly different situation for women, but only slightly, that is still directly linked to the discourse of power. Unlike the seemingly pathetic women who came before her, Catherine Earnshaw is bawdy and outspoken with a clearer understanding of the world around her, stemming from the adjustments made to women’s education. Women of Shakespeare’s time were drastically undereducated in comparison to their male counterparts and served a role in society of possessions belonging to men to be used as men saw fit, incapable of any sort of independence. Catherine has more freedoms to be truer to herself than women of the past, and she uses this freedom frequently. This independent behavior is not considered acceptable for a woman, however, and the negative view of this behavior is noted by Nelly Dean in her story telling, reinforcing that women should ultimately keep their ideas and opinions to themselves. Despite Catherine’s impish nature there is no doubt of her beauty as all those around her are aware of her good looks and this becomes an important factor in her representation, which echoes the “correct” way for a woman to look. Also (unlike Shakespeare’s women) Catherine is relatable and speaks to an issue the everyday woman is much more likely to encounter, being in love with the wrong man or having to choose between two men depending, of course, on which the reader is more familiar with. It is also important to note that the experiences of Catherine and to the women before her are obviously seen as things that could happen only to a woman. Interestingly enough Catherine experiences “madness,” again in only the way a woman could, which reinforces the discourse being carried forward by society of female inclination towards a very specific style of mental illness. Catherine’s illness can be looked at from two different
perspectives, the first being that she is driven mad by her emotions (echoing Ophelia) and the
second being that her madness is self-implemented for the purpose of manipulation. Discourse is
clearly illustrated by the first perspective of Catherine’s madness, but the second perspective is
more subtle in how it portrays discourse. A self-imposed madness speaks to a change being made
in the subjects of the discourse in that women have realized that this affliction they have been
branded with can work to their advantage and be a tool for manipulation over men but it also
reinforces that women need this madness to have that power over men, arguably a new type of
discourse all together. Making Catherine identifiable by nearly any female reader (which at this
time in history there are much more of than in Shakespeare’s) as well as attractive and desired
makes her behavior worthy of emulation, a key factor in literature’s sensationalizing of these
color character types that leads to women in society acting in the female models they are confronted
with. Portraying Catherine as beautiful yet not quite living by society’s expectations of her,
attempting to maneuver around male power, is almost uplifting; unfortunately the choices she is
able to make for herself ultimately lead to her own misery and death. Women of Brontë’s time
were supposed to be social trinkets and child bearers, relegated to a preordained level of
freedom, and Catherine’s story shows what can happen to a woman who steps too far out of line
and illustrates that women are obviously not as strong as they want to believe.

Today’s literature reflects a more current discourse of women in society that links
directly to the distinct majority of female depression sufferers. For the purposes of examining a
modern discourse that drives women to identify themselves as depressed Isabella “Bella” Swan,
the heroine of the Twilight Saga, is an ideal example. Focusing on Bella shows that she is
portrayed to be a troubled character, always lamenting about the difficulties that surround her
daily life. An important factor to note is that Bella has full control over the direction of her life,
as she is equipped with all the freedoms of a modern female. Regardless of this freedom, Bella laments over every situation she chooses for herself despite having the privilege of making a decision and access to the education to make a decision. This freedom to be herself and lack of direct and visible male oppression does not seem to make Bella happy; some of the best examples of this negative state of being are in the very beginning of the first novel, before supernatural complications arise, as Bella is moving and attempting to adjust to life with her father in Forks, Washington. On the drive home from the airport, Bella’s father surprises her by telling her he bought her a truck, obviously something that should make Bella happy. When he attempts to explain to her who he bought the vehicle from, he prods her memory by telling Bella the man used to go fishing with them in the summer. Bella’s subsequent inner monologue reads “That would explain why I didn’t remember him. I do a good job of blocking painful, unnecessary things from my memory” (Myers, 6). Later, after she halfheartedly thanks him, she muses “No need to tell him that my being happy here in Forks is an impossibility. He didn’t need to suffer along with me” (Meyers, 7). Bella references her “self-imposed exile” many times and clearly states that it was her choice to move, but she is completely miserable with her choice. As the book progresses, Bella continues this cycle of making her own choices and lamenting over the life she is entirely free to make for herself (in fact, her parents seldom intervene in her decision making either), this is sending the message that women will simply never be happy, mainly due to emotions clouding all female’s mental states and inciting women to be depressed-the modern term for madness. Perhaps more disturbing is that later in the series Bella does find happiness in the fulfillment of her relationship with Edward and the happily ever after they construct for themselves; which indicates that women’s happiness and escape from madness/depression is still, after all this time, dependent upon a man. Twilight unarguably infiltrated
American culture and took tightest hold on the exact age range that is currently topping the depression charts (females between the ages of 12 and 29) and the likelihood of this same group having been exposed to earlier versions of the discourse for female behavior (like the ones shown here) is very high; thus we have a historically constructed and continuously connective chain of power’s discourse on women in literature.

Many factors enter in to the risk of a young female to experience depression, and social environment is one of them. I believe that through the renforcement of male power depression has become more of a discourse than an illness amongst the female subjects due to a continuous historical portrayal of weak women in society, reinforced through literature, which is compelling women to identify themselves in this way. While this is not the case for every woman sufferer of the mental illness, many of the females identifying as depressed have been exposed to the many portrays of weak women repeatedly throughout their life and are simply living the discourse imposed upon them. While oppositions to the female portrayals discussed here can certainly be found in each period, it is important to note that the exceptions do not echo the normative structure of female roles historically known to belong in each society and thus could not be said to reflect opposition to predominant discourses of male power. The monitoring of depression statistics in subsequent years alongside an examination of the popular literature of the time will eventually be able to give more credence to this theory.