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The Pen as Your Sword: Writing Through the Lens of Depression

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The Pen as Your Sword: Writing Through the Lens of Depression

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of English
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Abstract

Tragedy is one of writing's earliest genres, and yet, why do we involve ourselves in the subject and write our own grief for the rest of the world? This thesis explores the act of tackling the subjects of mental illness and bereavement through the use of memoir, and simultaneously to analyze the use of such subject matter in contemporary fiction. Through creating a memoir of my own charting my journey through mental illness, familial death, and suicide, and analyzing the memoirs and works of those who have been through comparable experience, this thesis illuminates how grief is depicted in the written word, as well as the potential such artwork has for beginning the healing process in those who partake in it. Through the analysis of my own memoir, as well as through taking a dive into Dr. Jeffrey Berman's *Mad Muse: The Mental Illness Memoir in a Writer's Life and Work* and *Surviving Literary Suicide*, along with a case study of William Styron's *Darkness Visible* and a partial analysis of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, I hope to paint a picture of what literary grief looks like and how exploratory and transformative literature can have an impact on the mind of the writer. Through the fog of depression, the art of writing can expose us intellectually and emotionally not only to our audience, but to ourselves, be it through fiction or metaphor.

Dedications

This thesis is dedicated to Scott Lownie, my father, who passed in January of 2020. May he rest in peace. It is dedicated to every member of the Lownie family; it is dedicated to Camille O'Leary, without whom I would not find the joy I do in writing, and it is dedicated to every friend whom I have met and all those whom I have lost during my first four years at university.

It is also dedicated to Professor Jeffrey Berman, who is a constant source of fervor and inspiration whenever I pick up the pen, as well as UAlbany's entire English department.

To everyone: thank you. I find it very difficult to write without someone to write along with me.

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Introduction

Said Styron: “Let’s face it: writing is hell.” For some, this is more true than others. While most artists would profess to enjoy their craft, there is a special sort of inspiration that can be drawn from the darkest corners of the human psyche.

Memoirs and fiction have a difficult case for overlap. Authors must write what they know, either from experience, from extensive research on the lived experiences of others, or from reading other fictions that were twisted out of some lived experience, somewhere, somehow. Writing does not appear to us in a void. Some believe that writing may be used as a force of healing-- rather than ignoring past events and letting negativity in times of war, illness, and sadness fester within our minds, channeling these emotions into art can allow us to reinterpret and understand them. Perhaps “getting them out,” so to speak, could eventually help us move forward. To record an event in text is not only to share it, but to immortalize it. In writing our struggles, some of us can find the power to contain them, to conquer them, or even to control them. Fears, angers, and troubles, when converted to paper, *can* heal.

The idea of the “muse” is one that has persisted through the ages: an image that has taken many forms spiritual and secular alike, but could be described as something that lurks beyond human ability, understanding, and judgment. It has been mythologized as the force which gives each artist the motivation to create.

Many artists have individual methods of stimulating the muse. Some travel, becoming more familiar with landscapes and cultures that they can incorporate into their work. Others find their muse through the consumption of other forms of art-- going to museums, slam poetry events, and absorbing the works of others can lead to our own breakthroughs.

Some artists would say they rely on their suffering. Suffering, despite its leeching on energy and motivation, can be a source of inspiration to some. From the most tragic events, we move forward: through this philosophy, some find solace. The idea of the “tortured artist” in mainstream culture often draws from an exaggeration of this mindset-- that there are some people who draw on their experiences of suffering to write in full, and often refuse companionship and the promise of recovery in order to better tap into their personal muse. Sometimes this archetype is fictionalized, and other times the moniker has been applied to artists who suffered from some form of lifelong mental illness and eventually took their own lives. These figures are often idolized as the pinnacle of creative id in the public mindset-- artists who died in the midst of their art, and left their legacy in existing work. This would be the archetypal “mad artist.” While the romanticization of this archetype is rarely faithful to the strife and range of emotions that most artists undergo in these periods, some find a way to weave beauty from pain.

In this case, what is “madness?” The term brings to mind the unfettered scrawls across sanitorium halls, of concepts such as “sanity” and a lack thereof, but when divorced from myth and pop-culture understanding of it, mental illness is simply just that: illness. It is a condition that makes life more difficult. Just as a broken hand would make it excruciating to write, so often

too does depression, anxiety, and unnatural spirals of negative thought. However, writing in these conditions can help to heal. Many who go through this state keep diaries in order to separate ordinary thoughts from the irrational, and in immortalizing experience through memoir, authors are able to record their emotions in a way that doesn't require pure objectivity. There are ways to record these emotions in a non-clinical, non-epistolary fashion.

So, why else would anyone purposefully tap into these feelings, other than to create a compelling narrative or to work through extant emotions? Works mired in pathos have an odd sort of potential to them: they are capable of speaking to others when they too are at their weakest. Rarely does someone suffering from depression take solace in works promoting blind positivity. By working with misery and sickness, authors are able to not only chart out their own emotions, but extend a hand to others that may be in this position.

For these reasons, I have chosen memoir as the medium for my creative combined thesis. Following this deeply personal chapter, I hope to analyze it in conjunction with a number of other collected memoirs and gauge the positive potential impact of memoir as a way of processing trauma, as well as comparing it to several works of fiction by authors struggling in similar ways. How do we write trauma? Can it help? By way of this process, I have found a resounding source of solace from writing through the worst of what the human experience has to offer.

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Memoir

Said Hemingway, “There is no bigger fear than the white bull: the blank page.”

Every soul on this planet struggles with his or her own roadblocks. From apathy to anxiety, emotions and lack thereof holding back one’s processes, creativity can be blocked off by a fair amount of simple human error. Some find that working through their emotions comes easily, others may find it difficult.

When I was fourteen years old, I developed what psychiatrists refer to as “clinical depression”. It was slow, at first. It wasn’t always visible. It’s a slow monster—less like a predator of the veldt and far more like another human being. It pushes and yanks at times. Mostly, however, it is quiet. It follows. It does not stalk, and it does not hunt. It shambles; it lumbers. It moves slowly. It only catches up if you have no methods of outrunning it, but surely it has no need to take a breath itself.

Many days, I would go without eating, sleeping, or doing much of anything. In some ways, I suppose you could pin it as something not unlike a particularly nasty case of writer’s block. That impediment to productivity and creativity is there, for certain, but what differentiates depression in my mind is a complete lack of faith in one’s own attempts. Writer’s block fades with time and inspiration—one might see an especially beautiful sunrise, spend time with his or her family, or hear that one special song, and have ideas come flowing freely. One event could change the course of the matter.

When saddled with depression, the “I can’t” of normal busts in the writing period becomes a resounding “why should I?” with no clear, immediate answer. Physically and mentally: yes, I could write uninterrupted for long hours through the night and get a week’s worth of busywork and creative product finished before dawn. However, there’s a part of me that isn’t just barring me—it’s convincing me, directly, that it’s a route I shouldn’t even attempt. I can place myself in front of a blank document and have a resounding air of noncompliance when I’m in my element. Songs, moments, views: these factors all help for minute moments rather than fueling me for days and weeks on end like they used to.

Here, then, it is important to tell both any reader and myself that those walls can be surmounted. My greatest enemy lies within, and the greatest retort I can give is to rest myself and make attempt after burning attempt rather than sitting in front of blank sheets and waiting for inspiration that will not descend from the heavens while strumming a lyre. To put it another way: nobody waits for a river to come bursting forth through a dried riverbed. Rather, they look for another source of water, no matter how far it may be.

Inspiration—what used to be a pleasant expectation and regular occurrence—now takes on a variety of colors. It can be triumphant and angry, involving a struggle to slam words to paper in a limited amount of time. It’s the act of creating something great through turmoil and a heaping amount of personal effort. It can also be tainted with trepidation and sorrow, as I’m being goaded by some otherworldly force. When I first encountered these changes, I was frightened. After all, I had always found writing and the creative arts to be a deeply soul-nourishing and joyful experience, but now there was a wide range of emotions mingling with my writing.

Oddly, or perhaps not, I believe these tangled feelings improved my writing. When I was young and inexperienced, I do remember mostly writing stories of love. Some would end happily, others would not, but there was not necessarily much complexity to them. In a way, that's beautiful—innocent by the innocents is after all far more convincing than innocence feigned by the experienced. One can never return to that state, but I'd sooner consume myself than throw away mementos of simpler times. However, clearly, there is more to art than that simple emotional dichotomy. Before my diagnosis, I don't think I had ever written anything especially *angry*. Especially early on, children are taught to keep most of our non-poetic writing primarily free from emotion. Anger—throwing words violently at a page to see what stuck, recounting worse times, exploring unfairness—combined with those mementos of hope that I refused to part with—indeed made for something fantastic. Done were the days of the pure essay and the quiet romance. I knew struggle, and therefore could write struggles.

The apex of a depressive state is one of inaction. In its most dangerous form, fear takes hold of the body and becomes one's sole motivator in his or her actions. In my experience, fear was all I was able to cling to at the end of certain days. It was true that deadlines and harsh words from my parents, my teachers, or even my own mouth could drive me to tears, but crying and acting out of fear was far preferable to a state of total inaction. In this way, I had something left to care about in my darkest hour—even if it was unhealthy, I didn't want to disappoint the people that had invested in me and my work up to that point, so I let that insecurity keep me moving. After

all, the moment I stopped caring about my success would be the point where everything would fall away from me. In those moments, if one is not afraid of failure, why be afraid of anything? What could there be left to lose but a reputation that no longer matters?

The sneaking petrification of inaction is what creeps up the most on a victim of depression. Like the disease itself, that immobility comes in small enough doses that a sufferer might not notice until it's too late. What's one deadline passed? What's a single failure? Why go out when you could stay in? Why try when you could *not*? Countering this aspect of the disease involves careful self-examination, often with the help of a companion or a certified professional. If there is one thing psychiatrists are typically good at, it's teaching their patients to detect their own irrationality.

Feelings of worthlessness can also crop up unchecked when they are limited to one's internal thoughts. However, revealing them to a crowded room full of trusted friends or family can shine a light on just how unfounded our deflated senses of self-worth can be. The common comparison to a funhouse mirror is apt-- our self-image can become warped and skewed by depression, leading us to exaggerate the severity of our own flaws. We are often surrounded by those we love, and they are typically always willing to tell us how much we mean to them. Self-justification was one of my major demons. If there is one thing that depression is particularly good at convincing its sufferers, it is that they are right in their preconceived notions of weakness and inferiority.

For a time, I had accepted depression into my life—welcomed it. In my twisted worldview, I hadn't thought of myself as deserving of kindness by my friends, my family, or even the professionals hired to help me. I'd lie directly about my condition, as many sufferers do. Like a vector for mold, I felt most comfortable when left in the dark and undisturbed. I let depression grow over me like an infectious mold, seeing it as a punishment for past failures and a motivator for self-improvement rather than the source of standards I could never live up to and would only breed more failure as a result.

Suicide attempts have an odd humor to them, in retrospect. You don't always realize you've made one until after the fact. Planning and reasoning, while generally present, are mired with as much nonsense as one would have in a dreamlike state. There's premeditation, but it doesn't always make sense, especially under the cover of illness. My brush with death has come before, and while I hope it will never arrive again, there are precautions that I can take against it. My old cause was always time sneaking up on me—seeing destruction or failure in my future, whether it be my family life, my career, or my sense of satisfaction with myself. My mind had to be held down from throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bathwater—deciding that matters would only be getting worse from here and that there was no use in trying to stick around in that kind of a life. Failure was apocalyptic—one misstep felt like it could split a family or send me out on the streets.

Reality, though, is a different monster than the one constructed by the mind. It can be cruel, but rarely does a single failure spell doom for everyone involved. I would make great leaps in judgment to somehow conflate a low grade on a paper or exam with bankruptcy or unrelenting shame. As a result, I became stingy with the funds I did have, and I often derided myself harder than needed when a project didn't go my way. This mental state led me to the above inaction—why bother trying when anything less than perfect isn't worth it?

I was often praised for not 'getting a big head' about praise, and it took a keen eye to recognize that I was taking no pride or enjoyment in the work I completed, regardless of merit. Humility had breached a barrier into outright self-disparagement. To improve, it took the work of close friendships with others like me to reconstruct my sense of identity. I couldn't look at myself without a sense of disappointment, and I had to stop myself from retreating back into my mind and re-covering myself in that moldy, broken feedback loop of thinking I would never be happy because I was undeserving of happiness.

Suicidal ideation is the apex of depression and anxiety. In a twisted sense, my encounters with it were one of the greatest sources of literary inspiration for me throughout my career as a writer. At first, it wasn't clear why—I found solace in turning my old shame into new creation. There were times when I, too, was averse to taking medication. Not every prescription or dose worked for me, and I was also afflicted by the age-old fear that maybe the drugs would change how I acted towards others or even take away my inspiration entirely.

In practice, nothing could be further from the truth. Medicine combined with proper care from a specialist greatly improved my ability to work under pressure such as deadlines, took the stress out of daily life chores such as shopping and going out with friends, and overall gave me the capacity to look at life under a new scope. Nothing is a cure-all and nothing in relation to these disorders is quick, but by slowly taking one step at a time, I've been allowed a new place in the world. However, the temptation to eschew the treatment does remain—I created some incredible works under the veil of depression, and while rationally I'd never wish myself into that state again, there are waves of desperation that can hit, encouraging me to drop the progress I've made in favor of going back to that dark corner. Sometimes I forget everything I've learned along my journey, if only for a moment.

My own experience with therapy was, for the most part, a positive one. When I eventually became honest with my primary specialist, she did listen to my troubles with an open ear without making presumptions. I was cycled through a seemingly-endless stream of medications and dosages, but she was always willing to hear any reports of progress that I had to offer. The medications I was prescribed would often have terrible side-effects, interfering with my health in myriad ways-- one caused insomnia, another caused frequent and ghastly nightmares, and many others caused a lapse in diet wherein I would have no desire for food at all. My weight would fluctuate to the lower end of the scale, enough to worry my family into believing I suffered from an eating disorder. I have heard countless horror stories of others with doctors who refused to listen to them or prescribed medication that caused unbearable side-effects or dangerous interactions with other medication. Each day, I thank some power that I was able to avoid such an awful experience.

One treatment that served as some inspiration was being asked to keep a diary. Up until that point, the thought of a diary hadn't appealed to me at all. Even when I accepted the offer of a little gray paperback, my memory was poor, and I'd often forget to make daily entries. I placed it on my desk, and there it would sprout cobwebs and grow a fine coat of dust until my darkest moments.

"Write what you feel," I had been asked. In moments when I felt an urge to self-harm, I would instead pick up a pen and carve those urges into the page. Most of it was madness: ink-stains, jagged marks, and stream-of-consciousness rambling about the violent emotions I felt at the time. I open up those ancient diary pages today and I am reunited with all of the anger, ennui, and frustration I had felt at the time. I remember, when I read the cutting words I wrote, how it felt to want to peel away my own skin and grasp for something salvageable beneath it all. I have logs of the weeks I languished in a sleepless daze, the months I spent in a dream-like fugue while trying to accomplish my allotted tasks at school, and experiencing every other side-effect from the medicine I had been prescribed during those difficult years. It's hard to say how much it helped, in the moment. Even so, I am pleased to be able to look back on the obstacles I cleared.

Years later, I was a college freshman. Once again, in Prof. Jeffrey Berman's classes, I had been tasked with the same assignment: to write as I felt. He encouraged each of his students to write diaries regarding their emotional responses to various prompts, always with the reminder that we could forgo a subject if it brought us too much pain. Alternatively, if we felt particularly outgoing, we were allowed to have our diaries read aloud to the class. I considered passing the opportunity on many occasions; would retreading that ground be cathartic or painful?

I would eventually take the opportunity. The thought of being able to provide a sense of solidarity and comfort to others who shared my circumstances propelled me forwards, and here I find myself continuing to that end even today.

Despite everything, I do not believe I would have chosen to relive my life free of depression, given the chance. I don't doubt I would be able to achieve more. I would likely have spared myself a good deal of trauma and heartache. However, every event and trauma I have experienced up until this point has become foundational to the character I display today, and I wish to spin the worst of my story into something that can be used to help others rather than harm myself. Through writing, I may flower, and through pain, I still blossom. I have seen the cruelest side of the human mind, and I will spin it into something of beauty.

Reflection & Analysis

Authors throughout the world have gone through similar plights to me. Some of them older, some of them younger, some of them surviving their journeys and others succumbing before their times. My own journey isn't finished as of yet, but here begins the exploration of my own journey as well as those of some that ended differently. Every work on parchment is in itself a battle for dominance with one's imagination; wrangling it and bringing it to the paper are challenges even when one's inspiration isn't severely hampered by illness. For sufferers, though, this battle becomes tangible.

Written works, especially those with as much personality as memoirs, fiction, and poetry, each carry a piece of their authors within them. Nowhere is this clearer than in works channeling such problems as depression onto their pages. I'm putting myself down on the paper, publicly, for the first time to a larger audience. I am not yet a great writer, though I hope to be. However, by exploring this thicket full of other writers that have come into contact with similar struggles, perhaps other sufferers worried about their muses can take guidance in understanding the specifics of what writing while ill tends to look and feel like.

In the opening section of Jeffrey Berman's book *Mad Muse: The Mental Illness Memoir in a Writer's Life and Work*, he discusses the importance that the genre of mental illness memoir carries.

Just as I have made my own illness and trauma into fuel for literature in the case of the truncated memoir above, Berman speaks of authors who have created mental illness memoirs: "In effect, these authors have it both ways: writing about madness ingeniously fuses their demons and angels together into a single work." (7) Some writers are able to draw on illness to incredible effect, and memoirs are one of the most efficient ways to channel it. While writing with mental illness can be a Sisyphean task, at moments the effect of writing from a place of vulnerability can shine through and touch an audience in an otherwise impossible way. Despite this potential, exploring one's own mindscape through creative pursuit is a difficult act.

“Mental illness memoirs, however, are among the most difficult to write, mainly because of the stigma and shame that continue to surround mood disorders such as depression and manic depression,” (10) Berman observes here that the mental illness memoir, as a genre, is oftentimes ignored or stigmatized because of the subject matter in the first place. Literature tackling darker aspects of the human condition has been placed on many trials throughout history, but even many scholars who otherwise sing the praises of memoir as a genre seem to bypass and ignore the sizable chunk of mental illness memoirs. (11) In spite of memoir being upheld as a way to process the past by transforming it into something artistic and mappable, why is mental illness memoir so often treated as ranting and raving? In years past, especially before the prior decade, mental illness was rarely spoken about outside of a purely clinical setting, if at all, and was discussed as a topic of memoir with far less frequency than physical illness. Many critics of the genre also call for a “happy ending.” Some works of mental illness memoir end on notes of recovery and hope, but many others are a diary of trauma leading up to the worsening of depression or even suicide, and critics question exactly what service works such as these can serve in terms of education. Despite this, I believe that every work of memoir has something to contribute in terms of furthering discussion of the human experience. Do those who write to the song of illness deserve to have their works be declared unnecessary? Contrary to this mode of thought, I believe that memoir provides a service not only to the reader, but to the author. Memoir has value outside of analysis-- it has meaning in a deeply personal sense that few other genres can gouge to the depth of.

Memoir also provides a venue of self-discovery, along with the discussed aspects of self-disclosure and solidarity. Berman writes: “One might not have predicted at the beginning of their

careers that they were struggling with depression, manic depression, or schizophrenia, but after the publication of their memoirs, one can see, retrospectively, how illness catalyzed their work, and how they used their writing in the service of recovery and health.” (13) One of the ways in which writing a memoir may benefit authors is by making the path through their illness tangible. Just as by discussing one’s condition with a therapist or other professional can assist someone in recalling signs of illness and recovery, memoir can provide the same in many respects by tasking an author to map out the progress of his or her own condition. This can even reveal signs of discontent that were present before a diagnosis, and create a more accurate picture of what an author may have been weathering during a specific period of life.

“Nevertheless, I believe that memoirs of mental illness offer an insight into how authors regard their struggle with mood or thought disorders, how they use illness in the service of creativity, how they attempt to express the inexpressible, and how their stories cast light on the darkest of subjects.” (18) Memoir serves a unique purpose in this respect: it gives readers a window into the mind of an author to help understand the writing process, and it gives the author a place to quietly process emotions both past and present. More so than fiction, a memoir gives its readers a unique window into the life of its author with no veneer of metaphor. In this way, memoir can often be a more effective tool for speaking about the effects of mental illness, as it allows the author to give a direct narrative of his or her own experience.

Jeffrey Berman’s *Surviving Literary Suicide* also gives several prime examples of how authors have a tendency to confront similar subjects to those encountered in mental illness memoir in the fiction they write. Often channeling experiences from their own lives into their focal characters,

some authors write stories of loss, suffering, mental illness, and suicide-- sometimes with full knowledge of the subjects they draw from, and other times in the dark as to the meaning of what they convey.

Chiefly of importance to analyze are the works of authors who have committed suicide, whose works often hold a key part of understanding their condition at the time of their writing. Comparing the work of mental illness memoir to several well-known suicidal authors such as Plath and Hemingway, Berman finds that many of the themes explored intersect with those of mental illness memoir such as those in William Styron's *Darkness Visible*. Both authors explored themes of suicide and self-harm in their work for years before they would later commit suicide themselves, as will be discussed further in the ensuing essay on Hemingway.

Styron & the Addled Author

William Styron's own memoir, *Darkness Visible*, was a landmark for literature on depression. Within the pages, he described his own tangle with depression, defining the symptoms to his readers by way of his own experience and sharing a story that many find familiar-- that of losing one's capacity to feel joy. Beginning from a lingering feeling of inherent wrong during an international trip, this imbalance in emotion eventually leads down a path of self-harm and hatred. However, despite Styron's reputation for the exploration of the worst that this disease has to offer, his memoir ends on a surprising note of hope.

He first describes his base condition: “Of the many dreadful manifestations of the disease, both physical and psychological, a sense of self-hatred—or, put less categorically, a failure of self-esteem—is one of the most universally experienced symptoms, and I had suffered more and more from a general feeling of worthlessness as the malady had progressed.” (Styron, 11) Within my own memoir, I described similar feelings-- without any feelings of progression, and while constantly feeling stuck in an emotional flatline, I found myself worthless and unable to name for myself any redeeming qualities. The association between depression and suicide’s association is most often attributed to this-- the dissociation with oneself and one’s value, the idea of the body becoming cumbersome and the mind wandering to create a whole of something without a purpose. All goals feel impossible to reach, and even those that are just seem to disappear without fanfare as they are accomplished. It often takes but a single negative experience to bring every positive thought of the past month falling away to nothing in one’s mind.

The strange phenomenon occurring between art and depression is also referenced by Styron. “Despite depression’s eclectic reach, it has been demonstrated with fair convincingness that artistic types (especially poets) are particularly vulnerable to the disorder—which, in its graver, clinical manifestation takes upward of twenty percent of its victims by way of suicide.” (Styron, 33) Perhaps it is that artists’ mindscapes appear so clearly in their art, but it is impossible to sideline the dozens of great authors, poets, and artists who have succumbed to an illness that they have placed on display in their work intentionally or otherwise-- an idea that will be returned to in greater detail at a later point in the discussion of Ernest Hemingway.

He also takes a moment to consider the nomenclature of the illness. (35) “Depression,” as a word, doesn’t quite describe the condition with any of the severity he felt with it. It is here wherein he begins comparing depression to a storm of sorts: something not necessarily violent in nature, but nonetheless severe with the necessity to be treated as such. The name “depression” involves something that can be climbed out of alone, something that can be navigated around, whereas depression as an illness is nothing of the sort. It is an unnatural darkness. The depth of the hole is not betrayed by the name.

“There were also dreadful, pouncing seizures of anxiety.” (41) Styron gives an example of irrational anxiety brought about by sound-- specifically, a flock of geese. He describes his mood as “...aware for the first time that I had been stricken by no mere pangs of withdrawal but by a serious illness whose name and actuality I was able finally to acknowledge.” Depression and anxiety are closely linked neuroses among many sufferers, and the circumstances necessary to set off panic on some level or another are often mundane and non-threatening. In my own experience, simple stimuli such as hearing my own name being called or a dog’s barking threw me into a state of inconsolable anxiety, and I would frequently need to excuse myself from social events for fear of one of these attacks occurring. These incidents are not at all a unique experience among sufferers, but this provides little consolation to those experiencing heightened anxiety and heart rates. This fight-or-flight response to mundane situations may seem uncooperative with depression’s typical symptoms, but one must also take into account the third potential option when faced with something that feels like danger: to *freeze*.

Perhaps Styron's most famous description of depression is the following: "The madness of depression is, generally speaking, the antithesis of violence. It is a storm indeed, but a storm of murk." (43) Depression applies a sort of numbness over emotion-- as I described in my own memoir, it promotes inaction. There can be days, weeks, or months at a time where no significant change in the emotional landscape is felt. This time can feel "lost"-- memories of what has been experienced in this time may be difficult to recall due to the lack of change in emotions-- or, in the moment, it may seem to drag on for a painfully long time due to the lack of meaningful stimulus. In part for this reason is why Styron then describes how many, especially creatives, fall into the use of alcohol to self-medicate and restore some sort of emotional balance. Alcohol may unshackle one's inhibitions and change someone's emotional state for a time, giving a moment of release for those plagued with the storm of murk. However, rarely is it enough to combat depression alone, and it is through excessive consumption of alcohol that many sufferers of depression find themselves in another pit-- that of addiction.

After discussing the horrors of insomnia, Styron compares depression to a physical experience:

"What I had begun to discover is that, mysteriously and in ways that are totally remote from normal experience, the gray drizzle of horror induced by depression takes on the quality of physical pain. But it is not an immediately identifiable pain, like that of a broken limb. It may be more accurate to say that despair, owing to some evil trick played upon the sick brain by the inhabiting psyche, comes to resemble the diabolical discomfort of being imprisoned in a fiercely overheated room. And because no breeze stirs this caldron, because there is no escape from this

smothering confinement, it is entirely natural that the victim begins to think ceaselessly of oblivion.” (45)

This is one of the reasons why depression has such an alarming fatality rate-- despite its existence purely in the mind and through chemical imbalance, it can be *felt*. It is not simply an emotional stasis, but a physical one. Without the ability to sleep properly, the human body's efficiency falls out from beneath it and results in a loss of potential in the physical world as well. Perhaps if the illness were only confined to emotions, it would be more livable to some, but to many the inability to eat or sleep regularly impacts every single facet of their lives, regardless.

Throughout *Darkness Visible*, Styron goes into occasional detail regarding his medical experience with depression. Some of this process is explored through a veneer of humor: specifically, his experiences with the psychiatrist he has nicknamed “Dr. Gold.” (46) While he finds many of his interactions with the doctor to be fruitless, reduced to lukewarm, friendly platitudes and an exchanging of medication rather than a way to talk about the way he felt at the time, he finds a way to convey this weakness through humor. He describes his plans for tool-assisted suicide in an almost comically-alarming list of increasing severity and their intrusivity is compared to how many might think of sexual fantasy. (47) He regularly pokes fun at Dr. Gold's sheer uselessness at treating him, touting his wife's own status as a confidant as far more useful than Dr. Gold's presence had ever been. Specifically, he goes on to reminisce about how Dr. Gold's expectations for him to turn away a new medication with the side-effect of impotence floored him. “Putting myself in Dr. Gold's shoes, I wondered if he seriously thought that this juiceless and ravaged semi-invalid with the shuffle and the ancient wheeze woke up each

morning from his Halcion sleep eager for carnal fun.” (52) The humor in these passages is wry, certainly, but it’s enough to evoke a smile out of someone who has been in a similar scenario.

After being checked into a mental institution, Styron describes his stay as something healing, despite the failure of his earlier prescription to make significant changes in his mental state. (63) This is where, in solitude with others, he begins to make his fullest recovery to date. Though he bemoans the activities he is forced to participate in, he finds that having emotions about them in the first place-- even annoyance-- begins to create a break in the state he had been enduring for so many years beforehand. It was a road paved with errors in prescription, diagnosis, and treatment, but for Styron, at that point, it was crucially survivable. For many, it is crucially survivable. It is not forever.

Styron takes the time to reflect on a potential end to a depressive state. “Even those for whom any kind of therapy is a futile exercise can look forward to the eventual passing of the storm. If they survive the storm itself, its fury almost always fades and then disappears.” (62) In the lives of Styron and many other sufferers, depression is not necessarily a constant emotional beatdown. It has its intermissions and its tacets, and the way it can fade out after a period which once seemed unsurvivable is like the quick changes of uncertain weather. In his comparison between depression and bad weather throughout his memoir, he also references the fact that weather patterns are an ever-changing skyscape. If depression is a storm, it can be drawn-out and destructive, but never always pouring down with the same fervor to it. He follows up more directly with: “It is of great importance that those who are suffering a siege, perhaps for the first

time, be told—be convinced, rather—that the illness will run its course and that they will pull through.” (65)

Signs of depression sometimes appear before they can be detected in a material sense. According to Styron, “I was stunned to perceive how accurately I had created the landscape of depression in the minds of these young women, describing with what could only be instinct, out of a subconscious already roiled by disturbances of mood, the psychic imbalance that led them to destruction.” (67) He finds that in his novels, before he recognized depression in himself, themes and representations of it had appeared in his work. Was it his predisposition to it, from his own father? Was it simply a manifestation of the disease before it became visible? Whatever the case may be, there’s a curious melancholy in trying to detect where depression originally reared its head within one’s lifetime. In many cases, it is not until depression has passed that one can accurately gauge when it began and ended. For many, their first recovery will not be their last.

Finally, Styron states that those who survive depression “bear witness to what is probably its only saving grace: it is conquerable.” (71) Not only is depression a survival illness: to defeat it is an achievement in and of itself. It’s an invisible one-- but those who have managed to recover must not forget their struggle. Perhaps that is one of memoir’s intrinsic values-- it represents a mountain climbed, a storm weathered, and a challenge conquered. He chooses to remind us of this in order to reaffirm that those who have experienced depression should be visible-- it is just as significant an illness as the sorts that are weathered, and it can even be fatal. To defeat it should be celebrated, and in essence, I believe that that’s exactly what *Darkness Visible* sets out

to do. It shades depression as to make it visible, and in that visibility gives its survivors something to be proud of. This is one lens through which depression must be discussed.

In spite of this conclusion of hope, Styron's depression would return to haunt him once again after the completion of his memoir. As he himself had previously written, "depression has a habit of recurrence," (65) and as fate would have it, Styron could not hold onto the joy of recovery forever. This may cast *Darkness Visible* in a different light-- but I believe its point still stands. Despite Styron falling into the dark a second time, his memoir doubtlessly helped thousands of individuals as well as the medical community garner a fuller understanding of depression as an illness and an experience.

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Hemingway & the Paternal Specter

Suicide, while discussed in William Styron's work, takes center stage in much of Ernest Hemingway's fiction. His own father had committed suicide-- an act for which Hemingway could not forgive him-- but he himself would later take his own life. Throughout Hemingway's lifetime, he would grapple with the subject of suicide in many of his works, including his short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and his final full length novel: *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

For Whom the Bell Tolls was Ernest Hemingway's last novel and perhaps the most poignant of all his works. Many literary critics agree that Hemingway's writing abilities dampened as he grew older: many complaints exist about *For Whom the Bell Tolls* being needlessly wordy or

descriptive in places where a reader might expect Hemingway to use his trademark concise style. This, along with many of the book's details, lends to the idea that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* could reflect some of Hemingway's life up to that point, citing his battle and upcoming loss against depression. The book explores the subjects of mental illness, loss, parental issues, war, and death in grave detail, examining their toll and effect on its protagonist's mental state.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is set up as a war story, placing themes such as self-sacrifice and a focus on the groups rather than individuals at a paramount. Herein, issues of self-worth are interwoven. Robert Jordan, the book's protagonist, shows clear symptoms of depression even from the very beginning of the story—he's shown in a way that places his flaws at the story's center in sharp contrast to the themes we have already been sampled from the genre of the work. Jordan is introduced to the audience like so:

“The young man, whose name was Robert Jordan, was extremely hungry and he was worried. He was often hungry but he was not usually worried because he did not give any importance to what happened to himself and he knew from experience how simple it was to move behind the enemy lines in all this country.” (3)

From the very beginning, it's shown that Jordan has a habit of eschewing the importance of his own well-being, foreshadowing from the story's start that he doesn't believe in the value and importance of his own life. This exact wording reads like a textbook example of clinical depression. Jordan is heavily characterized through this idea of apathy towards himself and his

main virtue is proposed to be selflessness. His apathy is pitied, but it's what allows him to sacrifice himself for the benefit of other characters.

Throughout the novel, Jordan is first seen taking a resentful view towards suicide, reminiscing on how the death of his father was the cause of many of his problems in his early life. Jordan's hatred of his father throughout the story is shown as an example of "cowardly death" versus "honorable death": a common parallel in war stories. Jordan's own father was depicted as a coward who cared only about his own life, while Jordan by the end of the novel aspires to have his end be in direct opposition to that. The first instance where his father's death is described, Jordan unceremoniously confirms that he killed himself in order to "avoid being tortured." (67) He's not treated with the kind reverence that parental figures in literature often are, being shown directly as a coward who would opt out of staying alive and accompanying his family only to escape the threat of potential pain. In times the suicide is brought up afterwards, it's in a frame of Jordan remembering it with a sense of hatred and lingering resentment. Jordan's own death is indeed set up as a direct inverse: giving oneself up for the safety of others rather than ending one's life just as an "escape."

However, by the book's end, the tone in which Jordan refers to his father's suicide has changed. Specifically, narration states: "He understood his father and he forgave him everything and he pitied him but he was ashamed of him." (340) From this, a reader can surmise that while Jordan no longer holds direct resentment towards his father after observing so many horrors of war firsthand, he still sees the suicide as an act to be ashamed of—it's still considered by him to be a cowardly act, and Jordan's own death is still set up in direct contrast. This is shown most

directly in a passage where he describes his lingering feelings towards his family: “Have a little confidence, he told himself. And you, last night, thinking about how you and your grandfather were so terrific and your father was a coward. Show yourself a little confidence now.” (394) Compounded with that, he even shows hesitation towards killing himself in the final pages to avoid a more painful fate at the hands of his foes:

“Oh, let them come, he said. I don’t want to do that business that my father did. I will do it all right but I’d much prefer not to have to. I’m against that. Don’t think about that. Don’t think at all. I wish the bastards would come, he said. I wish so very much they’d come.” (469)

As Robert Jordan’s death approaches, Hemingway takes us through his final thoughts—he reminisces on the comrades he is helping towards escape, and through this he is reasoning why he should die—reflecting directly the sort of mindset one pages through before deciding to take one’s own life. one of the most pertinent sections appears on the book’s very last page:

“Think about them being away, he said. Think about them going through the timber. Think about them crossing a creek. Think about them riding through the heather. Think about them going up the slope. Think about them O.K. tonight. Think about them travelling, all night. Think about them hiding up tomorrow. Think about them. God damn it, think about them.” (471)

Here, Robert Jordan’s incoming death is set up as a sacrifice to his comrades. He has to encourage himself to take his own life, and the context of the novel as a war story encourages and glorifies the action that he is about to take. The idea of the “heroic sacrifice” is an oft-

celebrated action in fiction, and in both religious and moral texts, the idea of sacrificing one's well-being for others is thought of as an act worthy of reverence. In many ways, this is true—but the way Hemingway writes it echoes the thought patterns that occur directly before the act of suicide, up to and including convincing oneself that the world is better off without them.

Jordan's suicide becomes not only seen as a heroic act, but "the right thing to do"—ostensibly not a bad message in a war story, but Jordan's own past aligns enough with Hemingway's own that the parallels can be made to a successful mundane suicide influencing the world in a positive way. The book's attitude on suicide at its end seems to be one of ambivalence—Jordan's father's death is never resolved as anything other than harmful and Jordan himself doesn't have a "moment of realization" that reveals his father as acting out of Jordan's best interests, but Jordan's death gives the audience a small peek into his mind and characterizes his death as overwhelmingly selfless and good.

Despite Robert Jordan's outright damning of the act of suicide after discussing his father, his purposeful sacrifice at the novel's conclusion would appear to contradict his emotions regarding the act. Does the rebuttal of suicide lie in its "cowardly" nature? Is suicide justified if one allows himself to die for a purpose in service to others rather than in solitude? His last moments reflect his contentment to the audience, and the novel does nothing further to damn him after he speaks his last. As discussed by Berman in *Surviving Literary Suicide*, Hemingway's attitude on suicide could be fickle. "Hemingway portrays Robert Jordan's death wish as heroic, but he felt no compassion for Dorothy Parker, whose suicide attempts he mercilessly satirized in his 1926 poem 'To a Tragic Poetess.' The poem reflects and reinforces several dangerous myths about suicide, including the belief that those who talk about taking their own lives do not actually go

through with it. (Berman 2) He appears to have had differing standards for men and women, as well as specific ideas for what a “just” suicide was. In Hemingway’s eyes, would his own upcoming death be a moral one?

While Hemingway may have thought that suicide is a cowardly act, rarely is there truth to that belief. Most of the time, suicide is not rooted in fear alone. Rather, it is most often rooted in a profound sense of hopelessness, as explored in *Darkness Visible*. It is not an act of cowardice or of running away from one’s earthly duties. Thoughts of suicide are often borne from an incapability to support the impossible weight that mental illness places atop the trials of daily life. Depression is capable of making every action a person takes feel meaningless. It can seed doubts in one’s relationships, faith, and even the very doctors and medications capable of digging through the impossible weight that it imposes.

Despite Jordan attesting to forgive his father for his act of suicide, he is not necessarily a reliable narrator. Throughout the book, Jordan’s father is placed in opposition to his paternal grandfather as well as the grizzled guerilla fighter, Anselmo. The heroism of these two represent everything that Jordan believes a man and father figure should be: respectable, intelligent, and most of all: courageous. Both are described with language that attests to their bravery and unwillingness to retreat from poor circumstances.

Just as Styron explores the subject of depression through memoir, Hemingway and other authors do something similar by using fiction to represent events in the history of their lives. This can unveil attitudes towards themselves, towards their illnesses, and towards death itself.

Perhaps, as Berman suggests: “Jordan thus views writing as his creator did, as a form of venting in which one is magically unburdened of poisonous thoughts. It is not the talking cure but the writing cure that Hemingway affirms, a cure that worked remarkably well until the end of his life.” (Berman 117)

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Conclusions

Depression, an elusive and implacable storm, is best treated by professionals, with a strong helping of stability in one’s life and being surrounded in the conditions one needs to thrive. There is no way to strike it down through force. However, coupled with those necessary resources, depression can be fought against in solidarity with the pen rather than the sword. Literature has been a line through which humans have always managed to communicate togetherness in some form, and memoir and fiction may function just the same. To take part in art alongside those suffering from the same illness can be a quiet line of reassurance that this, too, shall pass. It can be a way of expelling emotions violently onto the page in an act of rebellion. It can heal ourselves and it can heal others, in part, and it captures sufferers in a moment of great vulnerability that they choose to share with their readers. Demonstrated by Styron, writing can raise awareness of depression and show those with it elsewhere and elsewhere that they are capable of recovery. In contrast, Hemingway and other fiction written with the lens of depression can reveal aspects of the illness that may not have been detected even by the writer at the time. In my own memoir, I hope to kindle solidarity within some listener from afar who

has undergone similar experiences to my own and reassure them that they are not alone in this moment, nor ever forward. To use literature for constructive efforts, for oneself or for others: what greater pride in this world is there?

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