

A Melancholic Depressed Person: A Kristevian Approach to “The Depressed Person” by David Foster Wallace

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Abstract

"The Depressed Person" by David Foster Wallace is a monologue that is told in the third person point of view. It is a narration of the person's struggles with depression. This paper aims to demonstrate that not only she is depressed, but also, she is melancholic. The melancholia that is defined by Julia Kristeva happens when somebody loses his/her object of love in infancy. As an infant has not entered the realm of the Symbolic yet, it feels the loss but cannot comprehend it through language. Hence, when one grows up, he/she becomes melancholic, feeling a hint of deep sadness and loss but is unable to understand the reason. Another symptom of melancholia is the inability to communicate properly. All the processes mentioned are experienced by the narrator of "The Depressed Person". She feels that she has been abandoned in her infancy, however, cannot specify it and blame her depression on her parents' lack of attention to her in her childhood. She also finds it extremely hard to communicate with other people and finally does so because of her therapist's insistence. It is therefore concluded that she is melancholic based on Kristeva's idea of melancholia.

Keywords: Melancholia, Julia Kristeva, "The Depressed Person", David Foster Wallace, Depression.

Introduction

Depression nowadays is a very well-known phenomenon. According to WHO (World Health Organization), depression is a pandemic sickness, which 300 million people in the world suffer from (Depression). David Foster Wallace, a contemporary American writer, has written a short story called "The Depressed Person", which has been published in a book called *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). The story artfully describes the conditions of a seemingly depressed woman, having a hard time bearing her sadness and not being able to reach out to others properly. It is very close to the experiences of actual depressed people since Wallace himself struggled with it. Throughout the story, the characters are just mentioned by the job or the condition they have. The woman is called the depressed person, her therapist's name is not mentioned, and her friends whom the depressed person talk to are called the "support system". She is suffering from the lack of attention from her parents during childhood and has been basically a battlefield of their conflicts. She cannot communicate freely with others and her therapist advises her to share her feelings with the support system. Despite the rare occasions of communicating with the therapist and her friends, the depressed person feels very alone; this feeling intensifies as her therapist kills herself. This incident is an entrance for the person to a new phase in her life: hating her therapist for doing so, reaching out to the support system more frequently, and becoming open to being judged and seeing herself clearly. This story is narrated in a way that we become heavily engaged with what is happening to the depressed person and her thoughts and reflections on different subject matters.

Many psychoanalysts discussed that this illness, which as it is mentioned by Freud and other theoreticians, "depression, or melancholia as it used to be called, is a mourning for something lost" (MacAfee 60). Julia Kristeva later on, in her book *Black Sun* (1987), explores the roots of this depression and melancholia and explains what the lost thing is. She clarifies that the depressed person mourns over a Thing, and not an object; as he/she experiences the loss, on one hand, the whole world becomes meaningless, and on the other hand, s/he finds no place for "I" in it (Keltner 53). In other words, they find no subject position in the symbolic system (ibid). Trying to explain the conditions of a melancholic person, she mentions in her book that "I am trying to address an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself" (3). Hence, the depressed or melancholic person has some behavioral signs that can be traced, according to Kristeva, one of which is that s/he hardly speaks or communicate with others (MacAfee 63). This essay tries to demonstrate how the depressed person in Wallace's story is melancholic according to Kristeva's idea of melancholia, and also trace the way she feels, reacts, and deals with her problem.

Melancholia in Kristeva's View

As well as her other books, such as *Powers of Horror* (1980) and *Tales of Love* (1983), Julia Kristeva begins *Black Sun* by recounting a personal description of melancholia and depression. Trying to describe the two, she says "the terms melancholia and depression refer to a composite that might be called melancholy/depressive, whose borders are in fact blurred, and within which psychiatrists ascribe the concept of "melancholia" to the illness that is irreversible on its own (10). She comes to explain why a person gets melancholic and what are the symptoms (Keltner 52). There is a certain time that every infant experiences "chora". Chora is "the psychic space in which the infant resides and in which it expresses its energy" (MacAfee 35-36). Chora are maternal spaces when the mother is the primary caregiver for her child

(ibid). During infancy, a child's energy is oriented toward its mother, who is not yet an "object" for the child's subject (ibid). A subject-object distinction has yet to be established and the child experiences the world as a whole without differentiation (ibid). Lacan describes the child as being in an imaginary realm, Freud would describe the child as having primary narcissism (ibid). The melancholia that Kristeva talks about has its roots when the child, which is totally unified with the mother, not being able to set apart his or her being from the mother, is abandoned by her; for instance, she dies, becomes absent from the family or gets depressed in a way that she cannot care for the child as before (MacAfee 59). The mother goes away from the infant's life without his/her knowledge of the otherness of the mother and without the ability to name her (ibid). The child feels pain without being able to explain or say it (ibid). Later on in his/her life, s/he recovers from this and may have a usual life. However, in adulthood, due to some trauma s/he may get caught in a serious depression, causing him/her to sleep more and speak less (ibid).

Entering this psychological phase, the "depressed narcissist feels flawed, incomplete, and wounded" (MacAfee 61). Because of experiencing the wound before thethetic break (before s/he enters the symbolic order, starting to recognize himself or herself as an individual and to use language), the depressed person cannot identify his/her problem, that is "the loss of interest, even inability, in speaking" (ibid). This person is mourning, but not over an object. S/he is mourning over a Thing, the loss of the attachment to the maternal body before it turns out to be the other. Therefore, "the inability to accept loss reveals that the primal Thing resists signification, resists entering the movement of language" (Keltner 53). Consequently, the melancholic person has difficulty communicating, due to the detachment from the maternal figure in his/her childhood.

The Melancholic Depressed Person

As it was mentioned in the introduction "The Depressed Person" is written by David Foster Wallace. It is a short story and part of a book called *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

(1999). It is about a depressed woman who is struggling with her environment and her own feelings. The story is told in the third person view, but it is being said by the depressed person herself. We can see how she feels, what she thinks and believes throughout the story very accurately. This accuracy is the proof for the fact that it is being told by her, though she doesn't refer to herself as "I" or even her real name, but as "the depressed person". This character in my belief is a melancholic one. She has experienced abandonment in her childhood and currently has difficulty communicating with other people. Firstly, the abandonment she refers goes back to the time when she wanted to get an orthodonture, but the parents wouldn't pay for it. Each of them refuses to pay because they want the other one to do it, and they also accuse each other of being unloving and uncaring. During her childhood, the depressed person's parents got divorced and used her as a pawn in their sick games (Wallace 17). In her early childhood, the depressed person had required orthodontic treatment, and both parents claimed - with some justification, as the legal ambiguities of the divorce settlement implied - that one would be responsible for her orthodonture (ibid). They each vented this vengeful rage over the other's petty, selfish refusal to pay on their daughter, who had to hear them both repeatedly tell her that her other parent was unloving and selfish (ibid). Each of the parents had privately expressed to the depressed person that, if need be, s/he would be willing to pay for all the orthodonture they needed and then some, since it was, at its core, not about money or dental care, but the principle (ibid). The depressed person always took care when she was an adult, as she tried to explain what happened during the cost of her orthodonture, as well as the impact that struggle had on her emotional well-being, to a trusted friend (ibid). The issue may have only appeared to be just that to each parent (that is, a matter of principle), though unfortunately not a principle that would have taken her needs into account in receiving the emotional message that her parents' fights over petty points were more important than her health (ibid). Hence, from one perspective, what happened constitutes some form of neglect or abandonment of the

child or outright abuse (ibid). She expresses the overwhelming feelings she had experienced in many parts of the story, in different ways and situations. Here, she does not want to blame this memory of her parents over and over again and says "Blame Game" seemed too simple to her, and she was tired of hearing about her parents' endless blame and recrimination over her as if her valid feelings and needs were no more than a battlefield that they could use against each other (ibid). Despite displaying much greater interest, passion, and emotional availability in their hatred towards each other than toward the depressed person herself as a child, she confessed to still feeling this way sometimes (ibid). To attract the attention of her parents, she finally has to sob and weep and beg them to do what is necessary for her health. Describing this situation, she says that a professional arbitrator had finally been hired by her lawyers to negotiate the settlement of their mutual costs of her orthodonture when her parents finally agreed to split the costs (20). And yet also, in the year that the depressed person's father had remarried, he—in either a gesture of rare uncompromised caring or a coup de grâce which the depressed person's mother had said was designed to make her own feelings of humiliation and superfluousness complete—had paid in toto for the riding lessons, jodhpurs, and outrageously expensive boots the depressed person had needed to gain admission to her second-to-last boarding school's Riding Club, a few of whose members were the only girls at this particular boarding school whom the depressed person felt, she had confessed to her father on the telephone in tears late one truly horrible night, even remotely accepted her and had even minimal empathy or compassion in them at all and around whom the depressed person hadn't felt so totally snout-nosed and brace-faced and inadequate and rejected that it had felt like a daily act of enormous personal courage even to leave her room to go eat dinner in the dining hall. (20-21)

The depressed person suffered from the lack of attention from her parents in her childhood, and I believe she has also endured the abandonment of the maternal body in the imaginary order. She cannot recall the incident

in her infancy of course, but she knows that something has gone wrong; and because of her inability to explain it, she sticks to the incidents she does remember, such as the passionless behavior of her parents towards her health issues. At the beginning of the story, she declares that “Instead of describing or expressing the pain's profundity or utterance to those around her, the depressed person described circumstances that were somehow related to the pain, its etiology and cause, hoping to at least convey to others something of its context, its shape, and texture (17). In some other parts of the story, she enunciates her lack of ability to discover the cause of her unpleasant feelings:

The depressed person averaged four interpolated apologies each time she recounted for supportive friends this type of painful and damaging past circumstance on the telephone, as well as a sort of preamble in which she attempted to describe how painful and frightening it was not to feel able to articulate the chronic depression's excruciating pain itself but to have to resort to recounting examples that probably sounded, she always took care to acknowledge, dreary or self-pitying or like one of those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their “painful childhoods” and “painful lives” and wallow in their burdens and insist on recounting them at tiresome length to friends who are trying to be supportive and nurturing, and bore them and repel them. (17-18)

Therefore, this character is melancholic, suffering from the desertion she felt before her thetic break.

As we have a melancholic/depressed person in the story, she ought to have the symptoms of one. Throughout the story, she tells us how much difficulty she has talking with others and communicating. It is through the help of her therapist that she hardly reaches out to her friends or support system. It was impossible for the depressed person to express or share his/her pain, so his/her suffering was intrinsically horrific (17). Due to the advice of

her therapist to talk more to her friends, she felt great pain and agony each time, worrying to make others bored and frustrated. Around a half dozen friends helped her cope with her unceasing psychic agony and feelings of isolation, and she shared with them at least the contextual outline of her feelings of isolation. When she telephoned them, the depressed person always apologized for her state of mind beforehand. There was a fear that she was making them feel inferior or making them feel self-pitying or repellent or removing them from what they enjoyed, vibrantly lived, and without a great deal of pain (18). Former acquaintances and roommates of the depressed person often expressed the wish that he or she could be a little kinder to herself (19). Depressed people often respond to these requests by crying involuntarily and confessing she is just one of those dreaded types of people everyone dislikes who talk endlessly and simply about themselves, and with whom it takes several increasingly awkward attempts to end the conversation. While on long-distance calls, the depressed person said she was all too aware of what an inconvenience she was to her friends, and she was always grateful to have a friend to speak with and to turn to for support and nurturing, even if for a brief time. Prior to that friend's full, joyful, active life taking precedence and requiring her to put the phone down (19). Thus, based on how the depressed person describes her current situation and the way she feels, I concluded that she is a melancholic character, suffering from abandonment in her infancy and struggling with the inability to communicate well, and when she does, agony and humiliation overcome her.

Conclusion

Julia Kristeva's idea of a melancholic person is that she has been deserted from the maternal body in the time when she was experiencing imaginary order. In imaginary order, for the infant, there is a sense of unification with the mother; the baby has not realized that the mother is the other and she is a separated individual being. Thus, the desertion impacts the later stages of her life. In her adulthood, for example, she starts to feel a deep sadness and loss, and the inability to find the cause of it.

She cannot bring to the language what she is feeling because the loss had happened before the time she entered into the realm of language. Therefore, the person becomes depressed or as Kristeva says, melancholic.

The same procedure happened to the main character in the story "The Depressed Person". The abandonment happened to her, but she cannot remember it, therefore as she says, she tried to link the sadness and depression to the events that she does remember, such as the lack of attention she experienced when she needed her parents for her health issues. She feels extremely lonely and it is by the encouragement of her therapist that she tries to reach out to some friends and talk. But the result is agony and humiliation. She is a melancholic character, experiencing the

excruciating feelings a melancholic person usually feels.

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