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‘Pity Party’: Metaphors for a Banned Emotion

Abstract: Metaphors for self-pity illustrate how physiological experiences and cultural influences combine to shape representations of a ‘banned’ emotion. Figurative expressions for self-pity have religious roots, as can be seen in an analysis of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. This study focuses on the family of metaphors used to represent the self-pity (or lack thereof) of four female characters in Western literature and film: Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Miss Kilman in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Jordan O’Neil in Ridley Scott’s *G. I. Jane*, and Annie Walker in Paul Feig’s *Bridesmaids*. Literary scholars’ and psychologists’ descriptions of self-pity are analyzed as well. In both literary and scholarly writing, figurative expressions for self-pity associate it with darkness, decay, and willfully impeded motion. Although biologically grounded and based on comparisons of psychological to physical wounds, these metaphors carry ideological freight. They represent self-pity as a perverse ‘holding-on’ and pressure people to ‘let go’ of their grievances. By implying that loud sufferers cripple themselves, they deny people in pain the right to blame anyone but themselves for their anguish.

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A friend from Trinidad once told me of the day his grandmother got into a fight. She was worried about her daughter’s health, and as she walked home, her face expressed her troubled thoughts. As she crossed a town, a drunken man approached and blew a burst of breath in her face. “Fix your face!” he cried. The grandmother punched him, and he landed on his back, staring up at her still unhappy countenance.

I begin with this story to raise a question: *what are the politics of telling someone what to feel?* Commands to ‘fix’ miserable expressions often demand not just smiles but culturally driven emotional overhauls. In this analysis of metaphors for undesirable emotions, I focus on Anglo-American culture. Many cultures worldwide, however, carry programs of emotional hygiene analogous to bans against spitting or urinating in public. For the greater good, one should not express certain feelings, because they spread germs and smell bad.

Goethe’s Werther issues a hygienic plea in his impassioned speech against ill humor. “Let us consider ill-humor a disease, and inquire whether there is no

remedy for it”, he urges (Goethe 1989: 48). An unhappy acquaintance—whose girlfriend Werther has intrigued—protests, “You called ill-humor an evil; I feel that is overstated” (Goethe 1989: 48). Werther responds:

Not at all [...] things that do harm to oneself and one's neighbors deserve the name of evil. Is it not enough that we are unable to make each other happy? Must we also rob each other of the pleasure our hearts can all still give at times? Just show me the man who is out of humor but has the decency to conceal the fact and bear his ill-temper alone without destroying the happiness of those around him! (Goethe 1989: 48–49)¹

Werther is hardly one to talk. He leaves the room in tears, and Goethe's novel chronicles his sorrows as his unrequited love for a married woman leads him to suicide. In arguing that one should hide one's emotions to preserve the social good, he may be trying to convince himself.

This essay will examine metaphorical patterns in the representation of self-pity, a ‘banned’ emotion. While it focuses on literature and film, it juxtaposes literary descriptions of banned emotions with those of psychologists and other academic scholars. The study introduces a larger project analyzing words for emotions in which one ‘wallows’ or ‘indulges’: self-pity, prolonged crying, hatred, grudge-bearing, and repressed rage. In the metaphors for these emotions, bodily impulses dance with cultural dictates, and it can be instructive to compare the scientific and literary ‘members’ of this metaphoric family. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have argued convincingly that metaphor pervades everyday language, and that human conceptual systems have metaphorical bases (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 3). Their claim that underlying metaphors come from bodily experiences is more troubling, since human bodies vary so greatly. Still, there can be no doubt that expressions such as ‘the heat of rage’ have their roots in widely shared human sensations. At the same time, cultural formulas shape individuals’ understandings of their inner experiences – to a point. Metaphors for culturally undesirable emotions provide ideal ground on which to study the interaction of bodily urges with cultural formulations.

¹ The original German reads, “Wir wollen es also, fuhr ich fort, als eine Krankheit ansehen und fragen, ob dafür kein Mittel ist? [...] Sie nannten den bösen Humor ein Laster; mich deucht, das ist übertrieben. – Mitnichten, gab ich zur Antwort, wenn das, womit man sich selbst und seinem Nächsten schadet, diesen Namen verdient. Ist es nicht genug, daß wir einander nicht glücklich machen können, müssen wir auch noch einander das Vergnügen rauben, das jedes Herz sich noch manchmal selbst gewähren kann? Und nennen Sie mir den Menschen, der übler Laune ist und so brav dabei, sie zu verbergen, sie allein zu tragen, ohne die Freude um sich her zu zerstören!” (Goethe 1986: 37–38)

I call these negotiated experiences 'emotions' rather than 'affects' or 'feelings' because of their personal and social dimensions. The distinction between 'emotion' and 'affect' varies with discipline and has sparked debates among humanities scholars. Following Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg, Sianne Ngai has written that, "emotion requires a subject while affect does not" (Ngai 2005: 25). According to Brian Shouse, "affect is not a personal feeling. Feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal*" (Shouse 2005: 1, original emphasis). The representations I will analyze involve self-awareness in two senses: consciousness of an 'I' who is experiencing a feeling, plus awareness of cultural pressures to mold it. This analysis constitutes only one of many valid ways to study human emotions in literary and scientific fields.

In the early 1960s, psychologist Silvan Tomkins characterized human affects as a motivational system granting more degrees of freedom than were offered by basic drives (Tomkins 1995: 34–35). In an insightful analysis of human emotional life, he pointed out the flexibility of the affect system and the relative independence of affects from their stimuli (Tomkins 1995: 54). Tomkins proposed that there are eight basic affects common to most human beings: "1) Interest-Excitement, 2) Enjoyment-Joy, 3) Surprise-Startle, 4) Distress-Anguish, 5) Fear-Terror, 6) Shame-Humiliation, 7) Contempt-Disgust, 8) and Anger-Rage" (Tomkins 1995: 74). Recently, Ruth Leys has criticized humanities scholars' reliance on Tomkins' 'basic emotions' view, which some empirical studies have contradicted (Leys 2011: 439).² According to psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett, scientific studies of emotion now indicate that emotions are "conceptual acts" or "emergent phenomena that vary with the immediate context", not "entities" or "natural kinds" common to all human beings (Barrett 2006: 21). Certainly none of the emotions I examine here could be considered purely 'natural'. Rather than being born, they have been made from momentary impulses, tormenting memories, and cultural dictates about what to do with them.

As Sianne Ngai has shown in her finely crafted study, 'ugly feelings' are not the emotions of powerful people. Ngai examines literary and cinematic representations of "envy, anxiety, paranoia, irritation, [...] 'animatedness,' and [...] 'stuplimity,'" which she calls the "rats and possums rather than lions" of human feelings (Ngai 2005: 2, 7). All of these feelings, she argues, are "interpretations of predicaments" that involve "suspended agency" (Ngai 2005: 3, 12). Cultural

² Adam Frank and Elizabeth Wilson have protested that Leys fails to grasp some of Tomkins' main points and that she is "bundling" the distinctive affect theories of Tomkins, Paul Ekman, Brian Massumi, and others without doing justice to their complexity (Frank and Wilson 2012: 874, 870).

representations of these feelings ensure that they are read as character flaws rather than legitimate criticisms of social injustice (Ngai 2005: 21). Depictions of these emotions draw attention *to* the person having the feeling, and *away* from the inequities that caused it (Ngai 2005: 126). Emerging from frustration, ugly feelings communicate the mental states of people suffering from “withheld doing” (Ngai 2005: 34). Ngai’s political assessment of these feelings applies particularly well to one she does not analyze: self-pity. If envy and anxiety are possums and rats, this is the skunk of human emotions.

Scholars in the social sciences and humanities have avoided this *Stinktier* as though its spray might pervade those who probe it. Most psychological and literary analyses of self-pity since the 1970s have voiced cultural condemnations, but the terms in which they have done so are revealing. Joseph McElrath’s 1973 reflection, “Plumbing the Swamp: The Modern Mode of Self-Pity”, argues that a rejection of modernist self-pity enabled the social action of the 1960s. He recalls his urge to “break out of the truly walled enclosure of the self”, where he feared that he might “suffocate” (McElrath 1973: 54). What was the alternative, he asks, “a delicious swim in a pool of self-pity?” (McElrath 1973: 59). McElrath accuses Hemingway of “cosmic self-pity” and poet John Berryman of “slobbering sorrow” (McElrath 1973: 53–54). He is hardest on poet Rod McKuen, who created:

That terribly alone, alienated narrator, alone in his one-room flat – poor Rod, feeling mighty low-down, so low-down with life that he had to pull the shades, get away from that life-out-there that is so sad. Poor Rod, in his blue sneakers and mohair sweater, alone in his room, picking his scabs, opening the wounds that life has given him, whining for a down-and-out generation. (McElrath 1973: 60)

Like many North Americans, McElrath associates self-pity with swamps, enclosure, stagnation, and restricted motion. He contrasts it with productive social action. Robert Peters’s attack on contemporary poets fourteen years later offers some of the same images, excoriating poets for failing to see beyond their own pains. Peters singles out Charles Wright, whose poems repeat the terms “windowless”, “doorless”, and “isolate misery” and show “claustrophobic and depressing narcissism” (Peters 1987: 40). In an anxiety of influence, McElrath and Peters see self-pity in the senior writers of their time while upholding the political engagement of 19th-century poets.³

Literary scholar Eric P. Levy offers a psychoanalytic narrative of self-pity, depicting the sufferer as trapped between two mirrors. One mirror reflects his

³ I refer to Harold Bloom’s theory that poets establish their identities by defining themselves in contrast to those of the previous generation (Bloom 1997: 5–6).

parents' image of himself as worthless; the other, his "worthiness for love" (Levy 1994: 18).⁴ Although the space between them is narrow, he will not come out, because forming social bonds and assuming responsibilities entail a risk of being hurt. Levy compares the self-pitying person to a mummy wrapped in a filthy bandage, a creature gorging itself on garbage, and "an anxious gardener who stifles growth because he fears being overrun by his plants" (Levy 1994: 20, 25, 26). "Life immerses one in change", asserts Levy, but in his narrative, change is what the self-pitier most fears (Levy 1994: 23). Although he claims to want love, "fulfillment is dreaded as a voracious snake that would swallow and absorb his identity" (Levy 1994: 26). Levy concludes his narrative – which is based purely on insight – by asserting that the only cure for self-pity is "recogniz[ing] [one's] exploitation of [one's] own pain" (Levy 1994: 28). To escape his self-imposed confinement, the self-pitier must realize that "the renunciation of weakness imposes the responsibilities of strength" (Levy 1994: 28).

While these three male literary scholars condemn self-pity with metaphors of stasis, psychologist Miriam Elson offers a different view. Like the scholars of literature, she crafts a narrative, but in her story, self-pity is a necessary stage rather than a weakness to overcome. From the perspective of Self Psychology, she argues, self-pity is a reasonable response to an unfulfilled need (Elson 1997: 5). An unloved child may develop a weak psychic structure that must be shored up later in adulthood. When individuals who "retreat to self-pity" depend excessively on other people, they are attempting to restore a sagging structure (Elson 1997: 6). Rather than being told, "stop feeling sorry for yourself and grow up", they should be encouraged to progress through this essential stage (Elson 1997: 5). "Self-pity is a step toward mature empathy", Elson asserts (Elson 1997: 10). Her experience as a clinical social worker showed her that ordering patients to pull themselves up by their bootstraps did not help them to develop the self-esteem they needed.

Self-pity involves self-nurturing, often after excruciating pain. Controlling, expressing, and sharing narratives of painful experiences can help one heal – as can protesting the unfairness that caused them. Manifesting and describing one's hurt forces those responsible for it to confront the pain they have caused. For the disempowered, publicly baring one's wounds may be the only course of redress available. The keynote in condemnations of self-pity is a drive to blame individuals for their own pains. For those who have suffered, self-pity can be empowering, as long as it does not last a lifetime. Rather than a walled-in cell, it might be

4 I use the masculine pronoun here because Levy does, although the representations I will later analyze involve women.

conceived of as an altar with pictures, candles, and food offerings. The candles burn to ensure that injustices are not forgotten. Certainly most cultural representations of self-pity have deep religious roots.

Muddy, Slimy Sins

Vivid narratives in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions associate banned emotions with foul-smelling muck. Their stories of risks, rewards, and punishments differ, but they craft similar metaphors to make readers *feel* the suffering that culturally objectionable emotions bring. In the thirteenth century, Catholic theologians identified seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth (“Seven deadly sins”). Although self-pity does not appear on this list, it bears a close affinity to many of these human inclinations, especially pride and anger.

In the fifth circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, the wrathful suffer in the River Styx. The richly symbolic, inverted cone of Dante’s hell metaphorically reenacts moral offenses in a way that evokes physical sensations. Organized as a descending series of shrinking, concentric circles, the *Inferno* houses sinners hierarchically according to the gravity of their crimes (Sinclair “Dante’s Hell”: 17). Those who have committed the most heinous sins against God lie the deepest. The wrathful fume between the avaricious and prodigal above in the fourth circle, and the heretics below in the sixth. In Dante’s system, their anger is a sin of incontinence, worse than financial greed but not as bad as heresy.

Guided by the Roman poet Virgil, the shocked protagonist reflects on what he sees:

I, who had stopped to gaze intently, saw muddy people in that bog, all naked and with looks of rage. They were smiting each other not only with the hand but with head and breast and feet and tearing each other piecemeal with their teeth. The good Master said: “Son, thou seest now the souls of those whom anger overcame; and I would have thee know for sure also that there are people under the water who sigh and make the water bubble on the surface, as thine eye tells thee wherever it turns. Fixed in the slime they say: “We were sullen in the sweet air that is gladdened by the sun, bearing in our hearts a sluggish smoke; now we are sullen in the black mire.” (Dante 1979: 105)

This scene of people biting each other in purplish-black water might scare any angry person straight. But in its forward momentum, the passage carries the reader to the more disturbing prospect of the wrathful bubbling in the mud. These sinners can only “gurgles in their throat, for they cannot get the words out plainly” (Dante 1979: 105). In the “filthy pond between the dry bank and the swamp”, they “gorge themselves with the mire” (Dante 1979: 105). Here Dante’s metaphorical

translation of repressed anger to physical experience closely resembles modern description of self-pity. Dante’s angry, isolated people with their mouths full of mud are the metaphorical ancestors of Levy’s self-pitiers “gorging on garbage” (Levy 1994: 25).

Dante’s translator John D. Sinclair argues that in the structural logic of the *Inferno* (deeper = more sinful), those who bubble alone in the mud have committed a greater offense than those brawling:

Incontinencies of the flesh do not sink the souls so deep in Hell as those of the spirit, and [...] the worst of all that class of sins is the sluggish, persistent bitterness of the souls which are so mastered by their resentments that they refuse the light of the sun, the goodness of God. (Sinclair “Note”: 108)

The real sin of the wrathful is refusal to forgive: to pardon those who have hurt them, in their perspective. Rather than seeing their pain as part of a divine order and trusting God to make amends, they arrogate vindication to themselves. But lacking the power to find justice—as they see it—they rage inwardly and refuse the social bonds that might broaden their perspective and bring relief. As Dante depicts them, their crime is preferring the immediacy of their own emotions to faith that God will make things right.

In the Puritan tradition, which advocates personal religious experience, the protagonist falls into the muck. John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) depicts Christian’s allegorical journey toward salvation, symbolized by a distant “Wicket Gate” and “shining light” (Bunyan 1987: 12). Accompanied by Pliable, Christian leaves his wife and children to struggle toward the far-off goal. The narrator, who describes a dream vision of Christian’s quest, reports:

They drew near to a very miry Slough that was in the midst of the plain, and they, being heedless, did both fall suddenly into the bog. The name of the Slough was Despond. Here therefore they wallowed for a time, being grievously bedaubed with the dirt; and Christian, because of the burden that was on his back, began to sink in the mire. (Bunyan 1987: 16)

The weight of Christian’s pack, symbolizing original sin, constitutes the greatest threat to him in this scene. Pliable abandons him, so that Christian is “left to tumble in the Slough of Despond alone” (Bunyan 1987: 16). He thrashes his way to the shore nearest the Wicket Gate, but his burden keeps him from climbing out. He can do so only when Help extends a hand, asking, “[b]ut why did you not look for the steps?” (Bunyan 1987: 16). Christian answers, “[f]ear followed me so hard, that I fled the next way, and fell in” (Bunyan 1987: 16). His explanation differs from the narrator’s, which mentions only “heedlessness”, or inattention. Christian reveals that he overlooked the bog and the steps across it because he was afraid.

Like Dante's tale, Bunyan's involves multiple voices and layers of narrative mediation. The curious narrator intervenes in the story and asks Help why the path to salvation is not better maintained. Assuming the role of Dante's poet-guide, Help explains:

This miry Slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore is it called the Slough of Despond: for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place; and this is the reason of the badness of this ground. (Bunyan 1987: 17)

The Catholic and Protestant allegories have more in common than filthy water. "Despond" derives from the Latin "de" and "spondere", implying abandonment of a promise: "to lose heart or hope, be dejected" or "to give up" (COED 1983: 260). Falling into a bog from which one can't escape works as a vivid, suggestive metaphor for the bodily work of fear. Whereas anger immersed Dante's sinners in mud redolent of their own failings, Bunyan's land in the Slough because of doubt. Unwary travelers fall in when they cannot quite believe that God will rectify the world's pains and injustices. Bunyan stresses the burden of original sin, which ensures that no one can escape the bog without aid. The two scenarios bear a strong affinity: one sinks into silt if one fails to trust God. Without faith, there is no solid ground.

When one aligns Dante's narrative with Bunyan's, the ancestry of self-pity metaphors emerges in 3D. The fourteenth- and the seventeenth-century writers both associate sin with dark, foul-smelling water and formless muck. More significantly, they condemn a certain attitude toward human pains: doubt that they form a part of God's order, and that God will make things right. Dante's representation of hell and Bunyan's image of despond emphasize the immobility and isolation caused by rage and fear. Self-pity involves both anger and dread: rage that the offenses against one have gone unavenged; and fear that they will never be redressed. The emotion also involves a suspicion that further human contact will bring fresh offenses.

The Vanity of Sorrow

Grounded in the Christian tradition, Charles Dicken's portrait of Miss Havisham has shaped many subsequent representations of self-pity. The dry witch of *Great Expectations* (1861), however, is hardly a powerless character. The brewery heiress might have used her life productively, but she chose to make it a monument

commemorating an emotional crime. In Dickens' hands, Miss Havisham works as an almost entirely unsympathetic character. Only in some readers might the acuteness of her suffering win some sympathy despite her manipulation of others.

According to Pip's companion Herbert, Miss Havisham was "a spoilt child" (GE 178). Her mother died when she was an infant, and her father indulged her. He later married his cook, who already had a son, but after his mother's death, Miss Havisham's half-brother grew up "riotous" (GE 178). His stepfather disinherited him, and Miss Havisham's half-brother resented her from then on. In Herbert's account, the half-brother conspired with "a showy-man", who courted her and with whom she fell in love (GE 179). Her suitor extracted money from her, and Herbert's father, Matthew Pocket, warned her not to marry the man, but "she was too haughty and too much in love, to be advised by anyone" (GE 179). On her wedding morning, she received a letter in which her fiancé "heartlessly broke the marriage off" (GE 180). It would be ungentlemanly for Herbert to say so, but his account implies that Miss Havisham deserved her fate.

The heiress responds by freezing time, creating perverse structures to regain control. She stops the clocks at twenty minutes to nine, the moment she read the crushing letter. She remains in her wedding dress with one shoe off and one shoe on and leaves her wedding feast to rot. Worst of all, she adopts and raises Estella to break men's hearts and summons Pip to suffer as Estella's victim. Dickens's descriptions of Miss Havisham emphasize contrasting extremes, physical manifestations of her emotional state. She shuts herself in her decaying mansion, leading a "life of seclusion", yet she seeks an audience for her never-ending performance of the pain she once felt (GE 51). In the evocative passages depicting Miss Havisham, Dickens usually invites the reader to simulate Pip's sensations rather than the old woman's. This choice of perspective affects the reader's judgment of Miss Havisham. Represented by her victim, she fails to convince one that she has been a victim, too.

Many vivid leitmotifs link Dickens's creative descriptions, but one stands out unmistakably. "You are not afraid", Miss Havisham asks Pip, "of a woman who has never seen the sun since you were born?" (GE 57). Like Dante, Dickens shows that the rage Miss Havisham fosters consigns her to darkness. By the time Pip encounters her, she has reached a stage in which her component substance – suggesting her emotional state – can no longer tolerate sunlight. Recalling his first impression of her, Pip says, "she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust" (GE 59). References to spurned daylight also initiate the novel's emotional climax, in which Estella defies Miss Havisham and the old woman realizes the futility of her vengeful life. Pip reflects:

In shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; [...] in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; [...] her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased, as all minds do and must and will that reverse the appointed order of their Maker; [...] And could I look upon her without compassion, seeing her punishment in the ruin she was, in her profound unfitness for this earth on which she was placed, in the vanity of sorrow which had become a master mania? (GE 394)

Pip compares Miss Havisham's "vanity of sorrow" to vanities of penitence, remorse, and unworthiness, all emotions likely to corrode personalities. Certainly "vanity" is the passage's key word, indicating both pride and futility. Miss Havisham has dedicated her life to commemorating her pain and cannot imagine anyone else's. More than love – for which she once so much longed – Miss Havisham wants revenge, and she tells Pip that when she is laid dead on the bridal table, it "will be the finished curse upon him" (GE 87). The "vanity" of her actions, in both senses, comes from her lack of a sympathetic audience. Her ex-fiancé Compeyson does not know or care that his wedding feast is rotting; she is performing only for herself. With Christian phrasing, Dickens creates an Inferno for the living in which an angry, isolated soul bubbles alone in the mud.

Miss Havisham's unsustainable emotional state builds narrative tension, since Dickens's descriptions make clear that her unstable structure must collapse. On the decaying table, Pip watches "speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies running home to [the centerpiece], and running out from it, as if some circumstance of the greatest public importance had just transpired in the spider community" (GE 83). The spiders' frantic, social movement suggests the natural forces that Miss Havisham cannot control despite her efforts to freeze time. After a lifetime effort to maintain rigid structures, the tattered "Witch of the place" ignites (GE 83). Pip describes her "running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high" (GE 397). Fire, absent from Dante's fifth circle of hell, burns out the rage of the self-pitying heiress. She dies more of nervous shock than of burns, still attempting to control those who might pity her. In the last moments that readers spend with her, she is demanding that Pip write, "I forgive her" (GE 398–399).

Through this representation of a vain, unhappy character, Dickens has helped shape the Western cultural understanding of self-pity. He associates the despised emotion with darkness, decay, stagnation, and rigidity – above all, with willfully arrested motion. Miss Havisham's vanity of sorrow fuses the sins of anger and pride. Eric P. Levy echoes Dickens when he asserts, "[i]nside the subject's suffering is an aristocratic vanity: 'Can there be misery loftier than mine?'" (Levy 1994: 27). Like Dante, Dickens uses evocative metaphors to convey the self-induced suffering of those who reject the social and divine orders and try to build orders of their own.

I Pity Other People More

An unpleasant smell brings Miss Kilman to mind, an odor that develops in the absence of sunlight. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, she bubbles out of Clarissa's consciousness through the tarry scent of Elizabeth's dog. The recollected smell of Grizzle leads to Miss Kilman's scent, which suggests "sitting mewed in a stuffy bedroom with a prayer book" (MD 11). Even in this first reference, Miss Kilman emerges as a foil to Clarissa Dalloway. Wealthy, dynamic Clarissa and poor, clumsy Doris Kilman compete for the affection of Elizabeth, Clarissa's daughter. The mother and the history tutor offer contrasting views of life: a field of surging possibilities, or an unjust realm of suffering in which people are arbitrarily assigned roles.

Miss Kilman has been badly hurt by historical events beyond her control. During World War I, she was asked to leave school because of her German background. Her German name, "Kiehlman", suggests both "Kiel" (keel) and "Kehle" (channel, throat, or gorge). Anglicized, it brings to mind murder and barely repressed rage. Miss Kilman fails to keep an even keel. She burns with "hot and turbulent feelings which boiled and surged" and resents rich Mrs. Dalloway, whom she believes has had an easy life (MD 121). Despite the injustice of her stunted education, Miss Kilman has completed her degree, and in her judgment, "her knowledge of modern history [is] more than respectable" (MD 129). Like Miss Havisham, she focuses on the past.

Woolf's exhilaratingly original narrative technique juxtaposes Miss Kilman's self-perceptions with Clarissa's and Elizabeth's reflections on her. Many references involve hybrid viewpoints, coming partly from one character and partly from another. Readers first encounter the history tutor through Clarissa, a propos of her musty smell:

[Miss Kilman] had been badly treated of course; one must make allowances for that. [...] She lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be, all her soul rusted with that grievance sticking in it, her dismissal from school during the War – poor embittered unfortunate creature! (MD 11–12)

Clarissa Dalloway tends to echo other characters' language; her thoughts suggest the internalization of Miss Kilman's complaints and discussions with others about them. One suspects that "her soul rusted with that grievance" is a second-hand metaphor. Miss Kilman's thoughts about herself take a different tone, direct in their anger, muffled unsuccessfully by Christianity:

She had been cheated. Yes, the word was no exaggeration, for surely a girl has a right to some kind of happiness? And she had never been happy, what with being so clumsy and so

poor. [...] So now, whenever the hot and painful feelings boiled within her, this hatred of Mrs. Dalloway, this grudge against the world, she thought of God. (MD 120–121)

In their human contradictions, Woolf's loops through Miss Kilman's consciousness are both tragic and funny. This annoying disaster of a woman strikes one as uncannily familiar. As Elizabeth grows disillusioned with Miss Kilman, the reader may groan in sympathy: "‘Law, medicine, politics, all professions are open to women of your generation,’ said Miss Kilman. But for herself, her career was absolutely ruined and was it her fault? Good gracious, said Elizabeth, no" (MD 127). Like Elizabeth, the reader wants to shake off Miss Kilman but is hindered by the manipulative guilt she fosters. Though she appears in relatively few scenes, her roots reach deep into the novel's structure.

The pity Miss Kilman demands is invoked earlier by an ageing housewife on a park bench. Watching a pretty girl who has just arrived in London, old Mrs. Dempster wishes she could advise her and reflects on her disappointing life:

For it's been a hard life, thought Mrs. Dempster. What hadn't she given to it? Roses; figure; her feet too. (She drew the knobbed lumps beneath her skirt.) [...] But, she implored, pity. Pity, for the loss of roses. Pity she asked of Maisie Johnson, standing by the hyacinth beds. (MD 26–27)

In her one-day exploration of life's value, Woolf takes the reader through minds that have lived dreadful lives. With an unfaithful husband and an alcoholic son, Mrs. Dempster regrets having made the one choice her society allowed her. She "implores" witnesses to pity her ruined life and body, recalling their once fragrant freshness. As with Miss Kilman, Woolf calls the reader's attention to her physicality, her "knobbed lumps", to ground her suffering in imaginable sensations.

Miss Kilman has a socially objectionable body. It moves gracelessly; it takes up too much space; and it smells. She imagines it as a curse upon her and bears a "violent grudge against the world which had scorned her, sneered at her, cast her off, beginning with this indignity – the infliction of her unlovable body which people could not bear to see" (MD 126). At the same time, she also uses her body to express defiance. In a passage that wavers between Doris's point of view and Clarissa's, we learn, "Miss Kilman was not going to make herself agreeable" (MD 122). Unlike Clarissa, who has a "small pink face", "delicate body", and "air of freshness", Miss Kilman does not "dress to please" (MD 122, 120). Big and clumsy, she perspires noticeably, maybe because of her eternal mackintosh coat. Because she views food as her one comfort in life – "except for Elizabeth" – she eats as much as she wants (MD 126). In the funniest scene in which she appears, she fixates on pastries as Elizabeth starts to doubt her:

It was her way of eating, eating with intensity, then looking, again and again, at a plate of sugared cakes on the table next them; then, when a lady and a child sat down and the child took the cake, could Miss Kilman really mind it? Yes, Miss Kilman did mind it. She had wanted that cake – the pink one. The pleasure of eating was almost the only pure pleasure left her, and then to be baffled even in that! (MD 127)

As the narrative viewpoint shifts from Elizabeth to Miss Kilman, the reader senses the girl’s disillusionment with her tutor’s mind. She has just compared Miss Kilman’s body to an “unwieldy battleship”, and her withdrawal from the narrative role suggests her disgust with an adult who resents a child for eating a cake (MD 127). Miss Kilman has lost Elizabeth’s confidence when she declares, “I don’t pity myself. [...] I pity other people [...] more” (MD 129).

Throughout this scene, Woolf maintains the focus on Miss Kilman’s unhappy body. As Elizabeth prepares to leave, “her large hand opened and shut on the table” (MD 128). The stuffed, abandoned tutor feels that she is “about to split asunder”, and her “thick fingers curled inwards” (MD 128–129). When Elizabeth departs, she feels the girl “drawing out [...] the very entrails in her body, stretching them as she crossed the room” (MD 129). Finally Miss Kilman “blunder[s]” and “lurch[s]” off alone, losing her way among the store’s commodities (MD 130). If the reader feels any sympathy for Miss Kilman, these intensely physical descriptions will evoke it. The hand opening and closing suggests her frustrated will, her sense of emotional helplessness. The more visceral horror of entrails drawn out conveys the hell in which she lives. “Sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed at me”, Miss Havisham tells Pip (GE 87). In these representations of self-pitying characters, the emotional worlds they inhabit *hurt*.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, more is at stake in the representation of Miss Kilman than a wronged woman’s refusal to please. The scenes in which she appears lead to those in which Septimus Smith, the traumatized veteran, confronts social expectations. The fat tutor parallels the suffering soldier in an odd but compelling way. Both are victims of the war, and both resist pressures to be happy from people who can’t imagine their sufferings. The least sympathetic character in *Mrs. Dalloway* is not Miss Kilman but the “priest of science” Sir William Bradshaw, who lectures Smith on the need for proportion (MD 92). In a passage that begins from Sir William’s perspective, a narrative voice takes over and reflects on his mantra:

Proportion has a sister [...] Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace. [She] offers help, but desires power. (MD 97–98)

The narrator links “proportion” to colonialism and authoritarian rule, implying that one person’s proportion is another’s oppression. When Smith leaps to his death to elude his doctors, he rejects a narrative alien to his suffering. With her

self-righteous complaints, Miss Kilman challenges the doctrine of proportion in her own unpleasant way. The badly dressed tutor of history refuses to make herself agreeable.

Not Sorry for Herself

Master Chief Urgayle walks among his recruits, reciting a poem by D. H. Lawrence:

I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.
A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough
without ever having felt sorry for itself. "Self-Pity"⁵

Urgayle means to intimidate the would-be Navy Seals, who stand rigid like Lawrence's heroic bird. At the same time, he inculcates them with his philosophy, of which "Self-Pity" forms the core. No one who pities himself will survive the training they must undergo. No one focused on his own pain can be trusted to perform a job in which people's lives depend on his actions. Urgayle pauses before Jordan O'Neil, the first female officer to attempt Navy Seal training. In Ridley Scott's *G. I. Jane* (1997), O'Neil triumphs because she agrees with Urgayle. She never dwells on the wrongs she has suffered and channels all her energy toward achievement. In the words of film scholar Linda Ruth Williams, *G. I. Jane* depicts a "war with [O'Neil's] personal weakness" (Williams 2004: 182).⁶ Mud and water abound in this modern journey through hell, and Scott's camera invites the viewer to share O'Neil's pain. With its frank look at what gender integration demands, Scott's film is forward-looking, even daring. In its representation of emotions, it is more conservative, depicting self-pity as self-strangulation. O'Neil's self-overcoming is emotional as well as physical; self-love is transformed with her muscles into a lean survival instinct and sheer devotion to her team. The film depicts no possible gain from self-pity, aiming to celebrate strength more than challenge social injustice.

"I expect a certain amount of pain", says O'Neil. Jordan wants to be a Seal because male officers with less time in rank are being promoted over her, and she

⁵ In "Self-Pity", Lawrence likely drew on Walt Whitman, whose "Song of Myself" reads: "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd. [...] They do not sweat and whine about their condition" (Whitman 1892).

⁶ Williams argues that *G. I. Jane* depicts one individual's body-oriented "female self-overcoming" rather than a struggle to open the way for future female Seals (Williams 2004: 173).

has no chance for advancement without combat experience. Although her primary aim is to build her career, she tries not to draw attention to herself. She tells her partner, "I'm just not interested in being some poster girl for women's rights". O'Neil applies to the program because she wants a chance to compete on an equal footing with men. Scott's film explores what "equal footing" means, in all of its troubling implications.

Film scholar Sarah Hagelin argues that *G. I. Jane* re-educates audiences to see violence against women – only in military training – as potentially empowering rather than annihilating (Hagelin 2013: 73–74). She discusses the cultural context in which the film was released: the Tailhook scandal (1991), the Shannon Faulkner case at the Citadel (1995), and the military's Don't Ask Don't Tell policy (1993) (Hagelin 2013: 88, 91, 74). In 1990s popular culture, it appeared that biologically based sex differences would require "special treatment" for female soldiers; the issue of homosexuality was suppressed (Hagelin 2013: 90–91). Scott's challenge in *G. I. Jane* is to show what equal treatment in a rigorous training program might mean. His film implies that the "insidious condescension" of gender norming is the real threat to equality – and to the military – not the advent of female soldiers (Hagelin 2013: 89).

It is hard at first for male and female viewers to identify with O'Neil, whose endurance of physical abuse it hurts to watch. In the course of her training, she is waterboarded, forced to eat garbage, and beaten until blood runs between her teeth. O'Neil wins viewers' sympathy not so much through her endurance of pain, as through her *reaction* to it. She never tattles or complains, not even when invited to. Instead, she "offers her body for punishment like a man's" (Hagelin 2013: 96). Instinctively generous, she shares the food she has snatched and invites team-members to step on her back to scale a wall. It is difficult not to like her when after 24 hours of grueling training, she bites into a hoarded biscuit and writes, "Why I Love the U. S. Navy", as the dim lights and opera music Urgayle has ordered lull other recruits to sleep. O'Neil struggles at first, but she takes control of her training, demanding that her special treatment be ended. She shaves her head, bunks with the male recruits, and works in her free time to overcome her lack of upper body strength, about which Urgayle taunts her.

The male soldiers vary in their responses to O'Neil. Cortez sexually harasses her and drops her in training after she has enabled team-members to climb a wall. McCool, who is African American, accepts her, recalling his grandfather's mistreatment in the navy of the 1940s. The base commander openly expresses his disgust that O'Neil is being forced on him by politicians. Urgayle, who in the film's climactic scene beats her senseless, is the only one who consistently gives her the equality she demands (Hagelin 2013: 99). In training designed to prepare Seals for capture and torture, he beats her uninhibitedly and does his best to

break her will. Urgayle hits her just as he would hit a man to prove a point: the threat to the military lies not in female soldiers' weaknesses, but in male soldiers' responses to female suffering. "She's not the problem. We are", he tells his fellow officer, and mashes her bloody face against the fence confining the trainees.

O'Neil fights back, breaking Urgayle's nose with a kick and rasping "[s]uck my dick!" when he tells her, "[s]eek life elsewhere". Refusing to accept the "proportion" imposed on her, she wins her team-mates' and the audience's sympathy. O'Neil could quit the navy and take her sufferings to the press, but in the film's vision, "a strong woman (a real feminist) doesn't complain" (Hagelin 2013: 101). O'Neil's real enemy isn't Urgayle but Senator DeHaven, the female power-broker who picks her as a test case. DeHaven arranges to have her removed from the Seals in order to preserve five Texas military bases and consequently, her senate seat.⁷ When O'Neil learns of DeHaven's betrayal, she quits the Navy Seal training program. She is willing to undergo any level of abuse but will not persist as an object controlled by others. Ultimately, Urgayle shows her more respect than DeHaven, since his challenges and confrontations are direct, if painful. O'Neil responds to DeHaven much as she did to Urgayle, with a blow that could "deface" her opponent. O'Neil threatens to go to CSPAN, not to voice her sufferings to but expose foul play. Defeated, the senator arranges for her return to the Seals, and O'Neil successfully completes her training.

Although conscious that "we are the problem", Urgayle initially fails to trust O'Neil in combat. Rather than letting her take on a Libyan foe, he sets off a battle in which he is wounded, and O'Neil proves herself by dragging him to safety. In the film's final moments, O'Neil finds a gift from Urgayle: the medal he once earned, marking "Self-Pity" in a book of Lawrence's poems. Literary scholar Mike Chasar reads the return of "Self-Pity" as a sign of Urgayle's emotional growth (Chasar 2011). Whereas initially, Urgayle sees uncomplaining animals as superior, Scott's shot of the circled, unmarked poem in the end suggests a new understanding of people's capacity to feel that his interactions with O'Neil have taught

7 Although *G. I. Jane* avoids a full confrontation with homosexuality, it raises the issue of lesbianism. DeHaven's staff take photographs that falsely suggest a relationship between O'Neil and the female base doctor, and flirtatious DeHaven may be drawn to O'Neil herself. When DeHaven notices the photograph on O'Neil's application, she calls her "top drawer [...] with silk stockings inside". DeHaven meets O'Neil in her private chambers and greets her in a loose dress. Sipping whiskey, she tells her that the "place is getting to remind me of an old whorehouse". Presumably DeHaven wants a conventionally attractive test candidate who doesn't look like a lesbian, as Sarah Hagelin argues, but she may also be following her own inclinations (Hagelin 2013: 91).

him (Chasar 2011). Uragyle may have grown, but the film stands firm in its rejection of self-pity and complaints. O’Neil survives her training because she directs her energy toward improving herself rather than reflecting on how the navy has hurt her. If one person reaches out to another, the film implies, it should be to help him climb a wall, not to recount her sufferings.

You Made Your Own Mess

In the emotional climax of Paul Feig’s *Bridesmaids* (2011), Annie Walker sits weeping on her mother’s couch. “Wilson!” she sobs, mourning with Tom Hanks in *Castaway* (2000) as his companion soccer ball bobs off on the waves. Then Megan appears with nine puppies and rejects Annie’s claim that she has no friends. “I don’t think you want any help,” challenges Megan. “I think you want a little pity party. [...] I am life, and I’m going to bite you in the ass!” In a bizarre sequence reminiscent of Dante, Megan wrestles with Annie and bites her behind. She is pleased to see Annie fighting back. “I’m just trying to get you to fight for your shitty life”, Megan tells her. “You’ve got to stop feeling sorry for yourself, because I don’t associate with people who blame the world for their problems. Because you’re your problem, Annie, and you’re also your solution”. The wrestling match marks a turning point in the film’s narrative and in Annie’s life.

In many ways, *Bridesmaids* is a progressive film. It depicts women seeking sexual pleasure and violently expressing their anger. Motherhood comes across as an abusive hell rather than an ideal state for which women long. In the outrageously funny bridal fitting scene, women explode in bursts of diarrhea and vomit from the designer dresses sewn to contain them. Although the film does not focus on race, it presents close friendships and marriages between characters of different races as ordinary and expected. But *Bridesmaids* is also a didactic film, showing the victims of economic downturns how to behave.⁸ In the film’s ideology, one cannot control life, but one can control one’s *response* to hardship. Rather than brooding on how one has been wronged, one should ask, “[w]hat have I done wrong?” and change one’s ways. In its representation of self-pity as self-induced paralysis, *Bridesmaids* locates blame in individuals and stifles criticism of the socio-economic system in which they live.

⁸ In a presentation at the 2013 International Society for the Study of Narrative conference, Diane Negra identified *Bridesmaids* as one of several recent films suggesting how women should respond to the 2008 crash. Some of these films show salvation through a return to traditional women’s crafts, such as cupcake-baking.

When one seeks the steps that led Annie to her mother's couch, the trail is not hard to trace. She lost her bakery in the economic crash of 2008, and along with it, her boyfriend, her money, and her apartment. The graffiti which has transformed her bakery's sign from "Cake Baby" to "Cock Baby" might be read in several ways. It could be a patriarchal jeer, indicating that she should give men pleasure rather than run a business, but it also shows her emotional stagnancy. Figuratively, the "Cake Baby" was Annie's child, the living product of her creative energy. Since its "death", she has been dissipating her energy in a demoralizing, purely sexual relationship and an unfulfilling job. The film follows Annie's disastrous choices as her best friend Lillian's Maid of Honor. In hilarious sequences, she competes with Helen Harris III, the wife of Lillian's fiancé's boss, to make Lillian's wedding unforgettable. For the bridal fitting luncheon, Annie chooses a Brazilian restaurant that leaves the bridesmaids retching – and worse – in a small sink. Her fear of flying, which suggests her emotional stasis, leads her to mix alcohol with pills and wreck the bridesmaids' trip to Las Vegas. Unsurprisingly, Lillian asks Helen to replace her as Maid of Honor. As Annie's anger builds, she loses her job for verbally abusing a customer who believes a girlhood friendship will last forever. She fails to repair her dying car's tail-light, so that she is stopped by highway patrolman Nathan Rhodes. Her worst mistake is rejecting warm-hearted Nathan after only one passion-filled night. Rhodes expresses serious interest in her and urges her to bake again.

Despite her mistakes—or more likely, because of them—Annie is a sympathetic character. In some respects, her competition with rich, groomed Helen brings to mind Sianne Ngai's analysis of *Single White Female* (1992). Envy plays a role in both films, and both focus on white women's class differences rather than race (Ngai 2005: 167, 171). In *Bridesmaids*, however, the audience shares Annie's perspective rather than that of the character who is envied. Although Annie would love to have Helen's money, she does not want to emulate Helen. The desire to have never collapses into the desire to be, although envy permeates Annie's hatred of Helen (Ngai 2005: 139). The film's shots of Milwaukee, with its Harley Davidson factory, bring to mind the working-class female friends of the 1970s, Laverne and Shirley. Here Annie and Lillian grew up together, and Annie's humble shower gift to Lillian (a box of her favorite Milwaukee treats) comes across as more genuine than Helen's offering, a pre-paid trip to Paris. The audience groans but roots for Annie as she wrecks the Parisian bridal shower Helen has crafted.

Annie, however, has a flaw that must be fixed: she is resistant to change. She may have learned to maintain fictions from her mother, who attends AA meetings although she doesn't drink and still calls her ex-husband's new wife a "whore" although the two have been married for twelve years. In a confrontation early in

the film, Helen argues that people change with time, and Annie, that they do not. "I wish things were the way they used to be", she sighs to Lillian. "After I went under, I just kind of stopped". Annie rejects Nathan because his efforts to help her make her feel like an object: "I don't need you to fix me!" she cries. The film represents self-pity and withdrawal as self-destructive, since to survive, one must change as the world moves on. In an analysis of *Sideways* (2004), which depicts a similarly complex, emotionally suffering male character, film scholar Natalie Reitano describes him as "withdrawing into the citadel of self-pity" (Reitano 2005). *Bridesmaids* also represents self-pity as enclosure. In Annie's resistance to the flow of time, she might be a Miss Havisham in the making.

Annie's "cure"—after the motivational bite—involves admitting her mistakes, taking responsibility for her life, and reaching out to others. Its logic follows that of Alcoholics Anonymous, which so fascinates her mother. Rooted in religion, the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous call for "a searching and fearless moral inventory" of oneself and a vow to "make amends" to all those one has wronged ("Twelve Steps"). "Your problem is you don't see you hurt people", says Nathan, who serves as a figurative as well as a literal highway patrolman. Once awakened, Annie gets her tail light fixed and tells her mother that she loves her. She introduces her mother to the friendly mechanic, helping her to progress emotionally as she is doing. Annie even bakes Nathan a carrot cake, although his wound proves hard to heal. On the wedding morning, she helps Helen find Lillian, who has withdrawn into her old apartment, horrified by the expensive spectacle her wedding has become. "Everything's going to change", moans Lillian. Annie, who has needed help for most of the film, now rallies to motivate Lillian: "Things are going to change, but they'll be better. I'm going to be fine. You need to blaze the trail for me and report back on everything that's coming". With these thoughts, they simplify Lillian's frothy dress and embrace the wedding.

Unbeknownst to Lillian, Helen has arranged for her favorite girlhood singing group to perform. At the reception, the band Wilson Phillips sings its 1990 hit song, "Hold On":

I know this pain.
 Why do you lock yourself up in these chains?
 No one can change your life except for you.
 Don't ever let anyone step all over you.
 Just open your heart and your mind ...
 Don't you know things can change,
 Things will go your way
 If you hold on for one more day ...
 You could sustain,
 Or are you comfortable with the pain?

You've got no one to blame for your unhappiness.
 You got yourself into your own mess...
 Don't you think it's worth your time
 To change your mind? ... (Phillips, Ballard, and Wilson 1990)⁹

As the characters rejoice, the band's buoyant music carries the film's metaphorical message. After a socioeconomic and emotional jolt, feeling self-pity – reflecting on one's pain and its external causes – is tantamount to chaining oneself up. Instead, one should face the real cause of one's problems: oneself. Self-pity means self-imposed immobility at a time when movement is essential. At the same time, the lyrics figure survival as a fierce, determined grip. Surviving in a world that could 'bite' one at any time demands both willingness to move and tenacity to hold fast. Only one voice disrupts this metaphorical logic: that of Lillian's African American father. "I am not paying for this shit", he declares. Apparently, one person is not convinced.

Holding on and Letting Go

These representations of self-pity by creative writers, literary scholars, and psychologists present it as a compound of anger and fear. If one aligns the literary and scientific descriptions, one sees that their family resemblance carries across disciplinary fields. An overview of these figures is presented in the summary below:

A delicious swim in a pool (McElrath 1973: 59)
 Withdrawing into a walled enclosure (McElrath 1973: 54; Reitano 2005)
 Picking scabs (McElrath 1973: 60; Reitano 2005)
 A mummy in a filthy bandage (Levy 1994: 20)
 Gorging on garbage (Levy 1994: 25)
 A gardener who stifles growth (Levy 1994: 26)
 Retreat (Elson 1997: 6)
 Living immersed in mud (Dante 1979: 105)
 Rejecting sunlight (Dante 1979: 105; Dickens 1998: 394; Reitano 2005)
 Falling into a slough (Bunyan 1987: 16)
 Rotting (Dickens 1998: 82)

9 HOLD ON. Written by Carnie Wilson, Chynna Phillips, and Glen Ballard. ©1990 EMI Blackwood Music Inc., Smooshie Music, and Universal Music Publishing Group. All rights on behalf of EMI Blackwood Music Inc. and Smooshie Music administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC., 424 Church Street, Suite 1200, Nashville, TN 37219. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Soul rusting (Woolf 2005: 12)

Entrails drawn from one's body (Woolf 2005: 129)

Enchainment (Bridesmaids)

This array of images, similes, and metaphors is as complex as the emotion that spawned it. Still, some patterns can be seen. Like the dynamic emotions these figures try to describe, they show a certain affinity. Most associate self-pity with impeded motion: living locked in an enclosure, enchained, mired, or wrapped up tight. Many compare self-pity to a dungeon's darkness, decay, and filth: rotting, festering, or rusting. The more creative outliers in this family represent self-pity's perverse pleasures: in some circumstances, immersion in a cool liquid can be "delicious". Picking at one's scabs may bring a feeling of grooming and control. Some of these figurative expressions communicate the visceral feel of self-pity: gorging on food that sickens one, or having one's entrails ripped out. Above all, in the context of their narratives, they indicate stasis by perverse choice. They suggest not just confinement, decay, and stifled growth, but a will to stifle oneself in protest.

Probably, this pattern has biological roots. When people who have been psychologically wounded struggle to express their pain, they may refer to darkness, decay, and immobility. It is not surprising that those suffering from emotional wounds often describe their pain in terms of physical ones. Behaviorally, people who have been felled emotionally or physically tend to seek shelter and lie still. But how does one describe an emotional state in which one *wants* to think about one's pain, and make it as apparent as possible to others?

Human biology cannot fully account for people's creative use of language, not even within a single culture. Certainly metaphors for self-pity and other 'banned' emotions have some physiological grounding, but their dynamic, living substance is nourished by culture. In the West, especially in Anglo-American cultures, metaphors representing self-pity as willed stasis reflect a hygienic model of emotions. According to this model, a 'you' separate from the emotions is responsible for policing them. Traditional metaphors for a controlling human will command people who have been hurt to 'let go' of their pain, and not to 'hold on' to their anguish. In this system of cultural logic, people who voice their pain are reproached for failing to control their emotions. Their unhappiness might spread, and its infectiousness could disrupt the social order. Like the grandmother from Trinidad, they are told to fix their faces, since expressing woe is an offense against others.

In this system, worse than the refusal to 'move on' and 'let go' is looking beyond one's self for the cause of one's pain. In the United States, metaphors commanding listeners to 'let it go', 'move on', and 'not hold on to' one's anguish have gone viral since the 2008 crash. This cultural attitude toward emotions, in

which individuals betray others by complaining, forms part of a socio-political outlook attributing social woes to individuals' 'poor choices'. As Sianne Ngai has argued, representing 'ugly feelings' as character flaws deflects attention from a social system's failures and invalidates what could be trenchant criticism (Ngai 2005: 128). Banning inconvenient emotions serves the interest of those who benefit from the status quo and do not want to be confronted with the pain they have caused. At bottom, the command to 'let it go' is an order to shut up.

In a system in which social responsibility and emotional maturity demand containment, expressing one's pain loudly brings offense. It may also be one's only way of seeking justice, of protesting a social system in which one is exploited and abused. "Tears demand a reaction", reflects Tom Lutz in his cultural study of crying. Tears "are meant to offer an irrefutable argument" (Lutz 2001: 19, 25). When one cannot punch the person who orders, "fix your face", one can always cry more loudly.

Metaphors, rooted in a range of human physical experiences, are shaped by culture in their growth. Often, as in these descriptions of self-pity, they dictate as well as describe behavior. In literary and especially in scientific texts, culturally condoned metaphors carry authority. Descriptive figures characterizing emotions rarely serve everyone's interest. It is vital to question their implications and aptness as their branches grow and spread.

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