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Misery Lit — A Recent Fad or a Genre with Long-standing Traditions?

Abstract
Misery literature is frequently perceived as a new genre, which emerged in the United States in the 1990s. It is usually defined as autobiographical non-fiction dealing with a traumatic childhood and life's adversities yet many of most famous misery memoirs have been discredited as fakes. Nevertheless, many traits of the genre features have long existed in the history of literature. This article seeks to analyse the roots of misery memoirs, present their characteristic plot structure, explain their commercial popularity and warn of the dangers they might entail.

abuse, autobiography, fake, misery memoir, trauma

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Literary critics and journalists worldwide have recently noticed — and often lamented — the growing popularity of the genre nick-named misery lit (abbreviation from misery literature) or, less scathingly, misery memoirs. These autobiographic accounts of painful lives indeed fill the shelves of respectable bookshops, high street newsagents and supermarkets alike. The most common response to them is an outcry about their sensation-seeking character, inferior literary quality, dubious authenticity of the stories and pecuniary motivation of their authors. Moreover, since they are perceived as a new literary form, critics and scholars make passing judgements about the voyeurism/exhibitionism of popular culture, and marketing trauma kitsch.

Modern beginnings of trauma culture

Anne Rothe in her pioneering work on the role of victimhood in popular media, entitled *Popular Trauma Culture. Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media* (2011) expresses a conviction that the fascination with first-person testimony of enormous suffering can be traced back to the broadcasting of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 (Rothe 2011: 1). The harrowing accounts publically made by Holocaust survivors reached multiple viewers, and, in Rothe's opinion, transformed the way media and audiences reacted to the pain of others. She believes American radio, television, and the press, presenting the dichotomous relationship between a blameless, good victim versus a guilty evil perpetrator, "generated the dominant paradigm that would subsequently be employed to represent the pain of others in the mass media" (Rothe 2011: 7). That paradigm would involve apolitical and individualistic depiction of pain without its social and economic foundations. She further argues that the manner in which Holocaust stories were framed later influenced popular day time television talk shows and misery literature. Pain became a commodity to sell and the growing public demand made the product evolve from accounts of Nazi atrocities to child abuse, mental illness, drug addiction, sexual indulgences, and plastic surgery leading eventually to modern freak shows. Rothe places the birth of misery literature in the 1990s.

Older roots of misery literature

Although Rothe's insights into the commercial exploitation of suffering are profound, her conviction that the prurient interest in violence, sexual perversion and misery is a recent fad, proving the moral corruption and voyeurism of contemporary society, appears to be unfounded. Even a cursory glance at the great literary classics proves that both theatre audiences and readers have always loved macabre plots. Greek mythology is filled with rape, zoophilia, incest, murder, cannibalism, deliberate self-harm and sadistic torture. Medieval ballads often deal with heinous crimes committed on each other by family members while folktales are seldom any better. For instance, several versions of *The Sleeping Beauty* combine adultery, rape and apparent necrophilia (Bettelheim 2010: 225–36). In Renaissance tragedy taking someone's life, preferably of an allegedly unfaithful lover or a rival sibling, is so frequent one would hardly find a play in which these themes cannot be found. Clarissa, the title character of Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel of 1748 is kidnapped, imprisoned in a brothel, drugged and raped, only to die several hundred pages later, due to mental exhaustion and shame. Her earlier equivalent, Pamela Andrews of *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) fares much better since her abductor and seducer, Mr B., does not proceed in his attempts at raping her when the girl faints out of fright. She finally marries him, after he has reformed his libertine ways, yet the novel focuses much more on her misery than the happiness that follows it. The Gothic novels plots' stretch credibility even further through their accumulation of weirdness, death and irregular sexual unions — the storyline of Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) would be too tedious to mention.

Explicit descriptions of injustice and suffering, especially performed by individuals of authority upon their helpless charges, such as orphaned children, were a permanent feature of Victorian novels. Aunt Reed hates little Jane Eyre, her cousin John bullies her and the Reverend Brocklehurst publically humiliates the girl accusing her of being a liar. Charlotte Brontë does not spare her title heroine further degradations, physical and mental. She suffers cold and hunger as a child at the boarding school, yet adulthood does not bring her much consolation. Scorn and ridicule are common at an aristocratic house where she works as a governess. Charles Dickens exceeds at the multiple portrayals of abandoned, hungry, ill, or even dying children. The death of little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) or the potential fate of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) are known to readers worldwide as standing for the Victorian love of sentimentality and mawkishness. Helen Burns in the already mentioned *Jane Eyre* (1847) provides yet another example of a pure, deeply spiritual and unspoilt child, too good to live long in the corrupted world. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the main character is raped as a teenager, gives birth to an illegitimate child, who dies at infancy. As a result of her loss of virtue she is shunned by the other villagers and exposed to lurid sexual proposals. Her idealistic husband abandons her just after their wedding as soon as he learns about her premarital sexual experiences. Deprived of any means to support her numerous siblings and a widowed and evicted mother, she becomes a kept mistress of her former rapist. After killing him in a fit of despair, Tess is caught, brought to trial and hanged. The way the Victorian characters' suffering is presented is clearly designed to move the readers to tears. Even though they might well be aware their feelings are manipulated by the writer, this knowledge does not prevent them from clutching to a tissue.

Obviously, the tear-jerking of the Victorian fiction, as well as the thrills offered by sensational Gothic novels or medieval ballads differ from contemporary misery literature in scope, aim and methods employed. Yet all these texts prove that the undeniable joys of reading about someone's immense misery — the more sordid the better — is far from new. In some cases, the suffering is a long prelude to future bliss, but often it is the end in itself.

Mythical Thinking

Anne Hawkins Hunsaker sees in misery literature a proof of mythic thinking that cuts across ages and cultures (Hawkins Hunsaker 1999: XIII). Constructing life in terms of death and rebirth, tribulation and reward (or, occasionally, failure) is common in most biographies, irrespective of their more specific generic characteristics. Captive or slave stories, conversion narratives, pathographies, misery and grief memoirs are all similar in the way they provide evidence that a true transformation is possible only after a crisis — in order to resurrect one needs to be crucified. Such stories are united in their "need to communicate a painful, disorientating and isolating experience" (Hawkins Hunsaker 1999: 10) without which the triumph of the protagonist would not be possible. "Melodramatic plot structure and particularly the redemptive-happy ending" console the readers and convince them of the existence of a just and safe world (Rothe 2011: 98).

The same arguments could help to explain the unprecedented popularity of illness narratives. Most of them, according to Arthur Frank's (1997) classification, fall into the categories of quest or restitution stories. In order to reach an insight, reconsider one's life priorities, and regain balance one's existence has to be endangered. Life after the illness is presented as better, happier and more fulfilling, even if it is accompanied by pain or disability. In that aspect they mirror accounts of spiritual conversion, in which the newly discovered religion, with its strict rules and mortifications, offers inner freedom and solace.

Immediate forerunners

The 1990s are undoubtedly a time when fascination with misery lit erupted. Yet, there have been at least three instances in the history of 20th century American literature when disturbing accounts of unusually grim lives flourished. The first of them and simultaneously the most critically acclaimed in the confessional literature movement of the 1950s and 60s.

The publication of Robert Lowell's collection of poem entitled *Life Studies* (1959) is usually seen as the birth of confessional poetry movement. His open discussion of mental health issues, sexual transgressions and dysfunctional family relationships, which bore a striking resemblance to the poet's own biography, were labelled "confessional" by one of the reviewers (Kane 2006: 255). Writers who took part in Lowell's poetry workshops, most notably Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman, also adapted the confessional mode. Deborah Nelson (2002) explains the phenomenon of the sudden public exploration of the most intimate matters by several factors, among which the popularity of television and psychoanalysis look most convincing. Talk shows and sit-coms frankly dealt with many issues that used to be taboo. Omnipresent TV sets also intensified the appeal of film as a form of mass entertainment. The links between the moving pictures and psychoanalysis are multiple. Not only were they both born in the same time but also

> [f]ilm, even from its silent days in the 1920, has proven to be an art form particularly suitable for handling intimate psychological subjects. It is a medium of observation, the almost clinical recording of human behaviour, with every nuance of expression and gesture enhanced in the close-up. As a highly controlled flow of images, film is uniquely able to reflect the flux of mental and emotional experience (Fleming and Manvell 1994: 49).

Moreover, after the Second World War many psychiatrists who moved from Europe to the USA to escape the Holocaust helped to establish psychoanalysis as an official, scientific method of dealing with any mental discomfort, be it a serious psychiatric illness or just vague dissatisfaction with one's life circumstances (Shorter 2005: 185). Public discussion of anal and oral stages, penis envy and sexual problems started being perceived as a legitimate subject in expert discourse.

Nevertheless, poetry is not a commodity demanded by mass audiences, so it might be argued confessional poetry did not really affect the general public much. Yet, Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), did meet with instant success among young female readers. Even contemporary woman recognises Esther Greenwood's story as a reflection of their own struggles with patriarchal society, sexual initiation as well as problematic relationships with authoritarian mothers and patronising boyfriends. As a majority of the authors of misery memoirs are women and their target audience is nearly predominantly female, *The Bell Jar* can be seen as an early prototype of the genre though it does not focus on childhood abuse.

The book which contributed to the shape of many misery memoirs of horrific childhood was *Sybil* (1973), written by Flora Rheta Schreiber, a New York journalist. It was marketed as a case study based on many years of therapy performed by a psychiatrist, Cornelia Wilbur. Her patient, whose identity was hidden under the pseudonym Sybil Dorsett, suffered perverse abuse and dissociated into several alters. *Sybil*'s popularity was enormous — "within four years it had sold over six million copies in the United States and hundreds of thousands more worldwide" (Nathan 2011: XII). There have been two film adaptations of the book (the second one as recent as 2007), both immensely popular. Although psychiatry has known relatively few cases of dissociation before (though the subject was occasionally addressed in literature and cinematic productions), an epidemic of multiple personality disorder spread across the USA after the film's premiere (Showalter 1998: 144–170). *Sybil* also contributed to the exploration of the subject of childhood trauma, sexual abuse and repressed memory.

Curiously enough, the book which had such an enormous cultural impact has been proven, beyond doubt, to be a fabrication. Debbie Nathan (2011) managed to conduct a thorough investigation of the case going through psychiatric session transcripts and medical records. In all likelihood, Shirley Mason (Sybil Dorsett of the book) was never abused and, apart from mild psychosomatic complaints, depression and issues with adjustment, never had any serious psychiatric problems. Repeatedly drugged by her psychiatrist, with whom she formed a strange bond, she was led to believe she dissociated. When she tried to deny the diagnosis, she was manipulated into believing denial is a natural part of therapy and healing. The motivation of the psychiatrist is probably more complex. Extremely ambitious, she wanted to become famous for discovering a new illness and

pioneering therapy. She might have even believed her theories or simply saw in them a way of becoming respected and wealthy.

Another famous example of a text dealing with the subject of repressed memory and incest is Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House* (1987). It is an interesting example as it was published before the misery literature boom and was authored by a professional writer. The story is written down in two types of font: standard one, for real memories and italics, for the reconstruction of recovered memories that have been supressed since childhood. Fraser claims to have been sexually assaulted by her father and, in order to cope with the experience, she split into two personalities. Her memories resurfaced when, as a middle-aged, apparently happily married woman she embarked on an affair which a much older man, her school friend's father. This infidelity cost her her marriage. Yet, in tune with what Rothe calls "popular trauma culture", Fraser is of an opinion that "past victimisation in general and child abuse in particular explain any and all present dysfunctions (2011: 114). She does not consider herself a conscious agent in the affair, due to her childhood experiences.

Narratives of abuse, in order to keep the readers' attention, needed to raise the level of violence and perversion. The descriptions of sexual activity became more and more graphic and frequent, the age of the victim younger and younger, the person of the violator more and more perverse in his tastes. Gradually, as probably the audiences got used to three year old girls abused by a gang of priests and wanted even more, stories of Satanic Ritual Abuse appeared on the market. The most well known, initially regarded as authentic but now widely discredited are *Michelle Remembers* (1980), co-authored by Michelle Smith and her husband Lawrence Pazder and *Satan's Underground* (1988) by Lauren Stratford. Both women had had psychiatric histories before they published their memoirs, which, surprisingly, did not immediately cause much suspicion as to their credibility. While Smith writes "only" about taking part in satanic rituals, witnessing human sacrifices and seeing Lucifer materialise while Stratford, though missing meeting the Dark Lord personally, recalls being tortured and impregnated to produce babies for future sacrifices in snuff films. She also "had horns and a tail surgically attached to her" (Wenegrat 2001: 191). Both women believe they had repressed these memories yet suffered mental and emotional problems the cause of which became evident when the memories were returned to them in therapy. Needless to say, Stratford believes she was pregnant three times during her college years yet fails to explain why no teacher or classmate recalls her being pregnant. Both books were obvious fabrications and it appears nearly impossible to accept how anyone could treat them as authentic biographic accounts.

Obviously, the salacious interest in the pain of others, involving a mixture of pity and superiority, that accompanies the phenomenon of misery literature, is also reflected in talk shows. One could falsely assume it is a relatively recent type of entertainment, connected with the development of television. Yet, freak shows and circuses have existed much earlier. The governors of Bedlam, the London hospital for the mentally ill, encouraged members of the public unrelated to the inmates to visit the premises since the late 16th till 18th century (Arnold 2008). The small fee they paid helped the hospital's finances and was thought to fulfil an educational role. Madness was viewed as a result of personal overindulgence, so the visit should scare the viewers into leading moderate lives. In many

ways those who wanted to see a bearded lady, Siamese twins or the Hottentot Venus were not much different from those who read about incest or watch anorectics discussing their eating habits with Oprah Winfrey.

The mis lit boom

Rothe and others observe that the peak of popularity of misery memoirs took place in the 1990s, with the publication of such books as Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"* (1995), and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996). Both books were not only followed by film adaptations and sequels but also innumerable imitations: *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) by James Frey, *Surviving with Wolves* (2005) by Misha Defonseca (pen name of Monique De Wael), *Kathy's Story* (2005) by Kathy O'Beirne, *Please, Daddy, No* (2007) by Stuart Howarth, *Don't Tell Mummy* (2007) by Toni Maguire and seventeen, so far, books authored by a social worker using a pseudonym Cathy Glass (*Damaged* in 2007, *Cut* in 2009, *Mummy Told Me Not To Tell* in 2010). Joel Rockett, of the *Bookseller* magazine, expressed his surprise at the sale figures of non-fiction. "It's quite rare to see a genre come out of nowhere and to establish itself as core stock" (Esther Addley: p.m). Initially, the memoirs were written by unknown individuals who claimed to have survived horrendous childhood abuse, be it neglect, torture, or rape and by people who, as a result of severe early life trauma, battled drug addiction and homelessness. They all followed the same pattern of first-person chronological narration, explicitly gruesome descriptions of abuse and little linguistic sophistication. Even the covers seemed uncannily alike: "a washed-up close-up of a particularly pretty child's face on a pale background with a title of the book in handwritten script" (Esther Addlay: p.m.). Soon, celebrity autobiographies followed. Famous musicians, actors/actresses and sportsmen/women confessed how they managed to overcome childhood difficulties, eating disorders or drug dependence and achieved success (Liz Bury: p.m).

The sudden increase in misery autobiographies coincided with the growing academic interest in life-writing. Letters, diaries, memoirs and travelogues, which used to be of limited interest to historians as primary sources but not to critics, became a legitimate area of research for literary scholars. Simultaneously, psychology embarked on self-studies, analysing how individual identity is formed and maintained, what the role of memory in that process and how a form of a narrative is employed to store life experiences. It is sufficient here to mention such scholars as Jerome Bruner, Paul John Eakin, James Olney or Philippe Lejeune. In psychological counselling Michael White and David Epston (1990) came up with narrative therapy to help people with psychiatric problems re-structure the understanding of their illness. The same year James W. Pennebaker published his seminal book *Opening up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others* about the therapeutic potential of journal keeping and other autobiographic forms of expression. Thus, the popularity of stories about endurance and survival was a popular culture response to the general *zeitgeist*.

Forgeries and fakes

Nearly simultaneously with the publication of inspirational memoirs, as they were called by some, came disclosures of their unauthentic status. As many of the plotlines appeared highly improbable, journalists started investigating the facts. They explored factual evidence such as birth certificates, medical records as well as conducted interviews family members, friends, neighbours or school teachers of the allegedly neglected and exploited

individuals. It turned out many of them were fabrications as the events described in them never took place. The discoveries that both Pelzer's and O'Beirne's autobiographies were works of fiction caused a public outrage (Jordan: p.m.). De Wael

> admitted she had made it all up. Her parents weren't resistance fighters. She didn't spend four years wandering alone across Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Romania and Yugoslavia, through Italy across the Alps to France and back to Belgium. She isn't even Jewish (Ed West: p.m.).

The same applies to almost every misery lit classic.

Obviously, literary fabrications are not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, the reception of the works, previously loved and rewarded, dramatically changed when it was revealed they are works of fiction. It proves that their popularity depended solely on the assumption they are true stories, not that they are good stories, or well told stories. Nobody would even assume Shakespeare is not a great playwright because of multiple geographical and historical inaccuracies detected in his plays. Yet, in the case of misery memoirs, the autobiographical pact appears to be crucial for their evaluation. Rothe recalls how Ellie Wiesel withdrew his initial review of Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird* (1965) when he learnt it was not a work of fiction but an autobiography (2011: 86). He wrote another one, much more favourable. Ironically, the text is indeed a novel and often given as a classic example of a literary hoax. Similarly, James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) was originally rejected by seventeen different publishers when they were told it was a work of fiction. The publisher who eventually accepted it, on false credentials, as an autobiography, admitted he would not have done so had he known the text was a novel. Its sales, however, were not drastically affected when it was revealed as a confabulation (Rothe 2011: 107).

Although most of the criticism against the misery memoirs concerns the issues of authenticity and the fact that their authors invent stories of horrific abuse to increase the sales, these texts pose a much more serious threat. After all, literary forgeries have always existed. As classic examples of literary dishonesties, Rothe enumerates (among others) the practice employed by early novelists, such as Daniel Defoe or Samuel Richardson to disguise their novels as found manuscripts, 19th century slave narratives, wow and new journalism (2011: 100–103). Even the books that tell a real story, like the 1978 *We Children of Banhof Zoo* [*Wir Kinder vom Banhof Zoo*], an apparent autobiography of Christiane F. to whom the book is commonly attributed, are often ghostwritten by journalists, breaking Lejeune's autobiographical pact. Likewise, people applaud the genres offered by reality television (talk show, competition reality game show, documentaries) even if they realize these are often directed and even scripted. Theatrical wrestling fights are fixed, talk show guests are instructed or even coached what to say, characters appearing in a documentary are in fact amateur actors — still the public reacts to these shows as if they were real. Confabulations and fakes (as well as parodies) "signify", as Rothe explains,

> which objects are aesthetically or commercially most valuable in a given culture. Hence, they should not be regarded solely, or even primarily, as individual transgressions, but as artifacts that are indicative of the zeitgeist they embody in concentrated form. Forgeries thus constitute ideal objects of analysis for examining such ephemeral phenomena as cultural trends (2011: 99).

Thus, the fact that a text is an exaggeration, confabulation or pure fiction should not be a main criterion of its evaluation. No autobiography is capable of giving an unbiased, truthful and always factual account of one's exploits. Furthermore, some writers may choose to incorporate communal experience into their individual story although particular events did not happen to them in person. Such was the case of the controversial autobiography of the Guatemalan activist, Rigoberta Menchú. Though not accurate in factual terms, it nevertheless drew the public attention to the fate of the Mayas (Rothe 2011: 104). The embellishments were made to create a more dramatic and powerful account, not to win commercial success.

Criticism

The more serious accusations that can be made against misery memoirs is their reinforcement of trauma myths. Susan A. Clancy (2009) analysed the popular scripts about incest and child abuse and noticed that most of their ingredients are inaccurate. The majority childhood incest does not involve violence; children are usually ambivalent about the attention their given and, although they find sexual intimacies unusual, they do not necessarily perceive them as inappropriate. Dissociation and repression of memories connected with abuse does not probably happen at all. The realisation of the true nature of the sexual character of their past experiences comes in adolescence, when teenagers are able to comprehend what happened to them. It is then that the traumatic experience takes place and various mental and emotional problems may follow — but the link between mental illness, criminality or addiction is neither obvious nor direct. Needless to say, Clancy repeatedly stresses that the child is never responsible for the sexual activity and that abuse is one of the most heinous crimes imaginable. Still, since most films and memoirs present the story differently, people who have been abused cannot identify with its cultural representations. It makes them feel dirty and unworthy once again — since they often loved the perpetrator and did not fight or scream when seduced, they are led to believe they were encouraging or even welcoming the abuse.

Furthermore, misery memoirs show abuse as individual, not systematic. The book perpetrator is presented as violent without any apparent reason, usually due to his/her mental illness. The stereotypical depiction of violence as caused by mental disorder is contributing to stigma and prejudice against people living with psychiatric diagnoses. There is no evidence that the mentally ill commit more violent crimes than the "healthy" people (Thornicroft 2007) nor that mentally ill mothers neglect their children more than mothers without psychiatric problems (Thornicroft 2007: 38). Confusing madness with badness eliminates the need to address the real factors responsible for domestic violence: faulty parenting patterns, economic tensions, gender inequality, class issues, inability of the state to provide support and supervision to those affected by violence, especially women and children. Since all grief memoirs finish with a happy note — the perpetrator was punished, the victim survived the abuse, grew up, published his/her story and became a celebrity — the reader may reach a conclusion that such 'poetic justice' takes place naturally and that society does not need to do anything to correct its wrongs.

Finally, most misery literature is unbelievably tedious and badly written. Most of them defy Leo Tolstoy's famous opening line from *Anna Karenina* that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" since it turns out misery is even

more unified than happiness. They are uncannily explicit in their gruesome descriptions of sadistic abuse, scenes of rape and torture are not only long but full of physiological detail which do not seem to serve any function apart from evoking disgust and outrage in the reader. When it is done once or twice, it achieves its aim, when it is done repeatedly, it becomes unbearable. Wallowing in descriptions of self-harm, drug addiction, alcoholism and sexual transgressions can be indeed labelled as "merchandising pain", exposing one's failures to win fame and money (Warren St. John, quot. in: Eakin 1999: 152).

Finally, as Rothe observes, the predominantly fake misery literature assumes "that truth is subjective and emotional, rather than rational and referential" (2011:151). The problem with such reasoning is that communicating genuine distress, which undoubtedly many of the authors of the misery griefs experienced, through confabulation not only diminishes the credibility of the particular story but also of the whole notion of trauma. Dismissing yet another memoir as forgery, one may simultaneously dismiss the physical and emotional pain behind it. It may also be curious and worth analysing why so many individuals do not address their painful life stories directly but instead choose to hide under an invented persona and improbable miseries. Is our culture so saturated with titillating, extreme accounts of horror and abuse, that 'ordinary' painful experiences of, let's say, a lonely childhood, a moderate disability or a problematic but not necessarily sadistic relationship so insufficient to attract attention?

To conclude, misery literature only appears to be a new, unprecedented phenomenon. In fact, it is as old as storytelling itself but recently is has acquired a few modern twists. The development of modern technology created the opportunities to enhance visual images and sound. Special effects create creatures and landscapes unknown in reality, Photoshop produces unbelievably beautiful bodies, musicians use playback and audio recordings can be manipulated to mean anything the editor wants them to mean. Fake news are hardly distinguishable from real news. Thus, it should not be surprising that many audiences want to experience something raw and authentic, not scripted but based on real-life. Ironically, in their quest for authenticity they turn to a genre that is not only heavily formulaic but also, in most cases, the plots of which are entirely confabulated.

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