

At the Edges – A Place and A Space For Tears:

Exploring the Framing of Depression in Contemporary Western Culture

By

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore the contemporary Western framing of depression as an illness requiring treatment. This understanding of depression is examined through a hermeneutic study of the depression literature, focussing primarily on medical and sociological academic literature, but also including one popular website. Drawing on Weberian social theory, I argue that the dominant cultural understanding of depression allows only one story to be told: that of depression as an illness necessitating medical treatment to facilitate a cure. However, depression can also be understood as part of the suffering that constitutes what it is to be human. While contemporary approaches to depression are valuable, they are also restricted. I suggest an inclusive interstitiality of different stories would expand the current framing of depression.

I draw on Weber's analysis of the causal and codified nature of Western rationality and of the total world-view of the secular West deriving from religious antecedents to analyse the current framing of depression. In addition, I employ Derridean concepts of the Western proclivity for logocentrism and Levinasian concepts of the Western impulse to change Other into Same to augment the Weberian analysis to demonstrate how dominant approaches to depression are influenced by both historical and cultural factors 'specific and peculiar' to the Western way of viewing the world. This approach embeds depression within the historical-cultural milieu of the West, which I argue provides a predominantly exclusive and scientifically based view of depression as illness. I demonstrate this through an exploration of historical influences, interpretative positions, the assigning of meaning, and information produced for the public. Finally, I proffer some possibilities for future directions.

The meta-perspective provided by this approach facilitates, for example, an appreciation that contemporary medical science inherited its belief in a total world-view from Western religious antecedents. Such a world-view results in the contemporary framing of depression functioning as though depression can *only* be viewed from the medical-scientific perspective, which is considered, *a priori*, to be the correct perspective. Establishing this meta-perspective enables the contemporary

framing of depression to be situated firmly *within* its historical-cultural background. Through this re-interpretation of contemporary approaches to depression the study provides another perspective on depression: one that is historically and culturally grounded, one that challenges current perspectives and opinions, and one that encourages respectful dialogue and debate.

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**Hence loathèd Melancholy
Of Cerberus and blackest midnight born,
In Stygian cave forlorn
‘Mongst horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy,
Find out some uncouth cell,
Where brooding darkness spreads his jealous wings,
And the night-raven sings;
There under ebon shades, and low-browed rocks,
As ragged as thy locks,
In dark Cimmerian desert ever dwell....**

Mirth with thee, I mean to live.

*(L'Allegro, John Milton)*¹

**But hail though goddess, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
Whose saintly visage is too bright
To hit the sense of human sight;
And therefore to our weaker view,
O'erlaid with black, staid Wisdom's hue....**

And I with thee will choose to live.

*(Il Penseroso, John Milton)*²

¹ Milton 2007: 15-19

² Milton 2007: 19-24

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