

Romanticism in american literature

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Tennyson, in "The Princess" describes, under the diagnosis of catalepsy, probable temporal lobe epileptic dreamy states with deterioration which serve as a adaptor of sexual and moral ambivalence, the poem's central theme. It seems that Tennyson knew such seizures from his own father who had been given a diagnosis of catalepsy. Poe gave his Bernice in the novella of the same title a diagnosis of epilepsy as a reason for a premature burial.

However, there was a good deal of unlikelihood in this, and when he came to this theme in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and in "The Premature Burial" he chose instead a diagnosis of catalepsy which fitted better with the plot.

The fits of the title character in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, ignored as catalepsy, would today rather be seen as epileptic twilight states. It would seem that this author drew from contemporary dictionary descriptions which described conditions similar to Marner's fits under the heading of catalepsy.

In Eliot's "Legend with a realistic treatment", the twilight states are a central factor in the plot and explain Marner's reclusion and passivity. In *Poor Miss Finch* by English realist Willie Collins, the postgraduate seizures of Oscar, one of the main characters, their cause, their treatment with silver nitrate, and the subsequent disconsolation of his kin are central supporting elements of a perfectly constructed plot. Collins gives an exact description of a right averse seizure with secondary generalization, and how to deal with it.

In none of these works seizures are seen in a negative light. They rather evoke reactions of sympathy and support. Keywords: Anglo-American literature, disease in fiction, romanticism, realism, Tennyson, Poe, George Eliot, Willie Collins.

Introduction

The romantics were fascinated by unusual behavior and exceptional psychic phenomena. Psychiatric illness was threatening and unexplored UT also had the attraction of the morbid and was a poetic treasure chest.

For the literature in the realistic period, illness remained an important theme in general because the dark sides of life were not to be neglected, and we can thank the great English realists for sometimes being the first to give us De- tailed descriptions of pathological conditions, such as developmental dyslexia in Dickens' Bleak House Jacob, 1992). For this reason it is not surprising to find epilepsy represented in literature written in the middle of the nineteenth century. Here we also meet the term catalepsy and a relationship between the two diagnoses warrants our examination.

Alfred Tennyson (1808-1892) was one of the main literary figures in the middle of the last century in England. The pair of terms seizures and catalepsy in his " Princess" (1847-1851), a long narrative poem, has gently been pursued by an American philologist, Barbara Herb Wright (1987), who is married to a neurologist. The Princess" first appeared in 1847, and in a reworked second edition in 1848. In the third edition in 1850, six songs were added between each of the chapters and in the fourth edition Weird seizures' are mentioned for the first time but then as an essential element of the composition. The literary studies' dispute about this element's artistic value and function, as well as the author's refusal to comment on the question, has been depicted in detail by Ms Wright. Tennyson called his work a 'medley.

The structure is multifaceted, and it has allegorical, discursive and ironic elements. The story uses the story-in-story technique. On the first level, the story narrator and a group of fellow students visit the castle of one of the students. The student comes from a very old family and has found an ancestor in his family tree, a lady who, 'miracle of noble womanhood' (p. 154), has defended the fortress in full armor and weapons against its foes. At a garden party Lila, his friend's sister appears, 'half child, half woman' (p. 55; the half ND half motif, the 'inebriate' is a basic motif of this work), and decorates the statue of a warlike ancestor with her head scarf and silk stole while talking about women's oppression and the founding of a radical Amazon state. In the next seven chapters the seven students tell the story of such a community: The prince and princess of two neighboring kingdoms have been engaged to marry since their childhood. When the father of the prince sends for the bride-to-be with pomp and presents, her father writes a letter saying she wants to live alone with her women, and not wed.

When the elderly king, father of the prince, hears this, he wants to declare war but the prince sets off to clear up the situation himself. Two friends accompany him, also to help him in the event that he should have seizures. The seizures are the result of a curse on his family, laid on them long ago by a man who a former ancestor had burned as a sorcerer because he cast no shadow: none of their blood should know the shadow from the substance, image from reality, and one 'should come to fight with shadows and to fall' (p. 157).

For this reason Wakingdreamswere an old and strange affection of the house' (p. 57), and the curse manifests itself in the prince as Weird seizures' (p. 157) which are marked with deterioration experiences. The prince hears from the princess' gentle, peace-loving father that she has withdrawn to their summer castle, founded a women's university and now holds a purely female court: no male being may enter the area under penalty of death. But the prince and his friends dress up as girls and go there. They are discovered and have to flee.

The fact that the prince has saved the princess from drowning does not help. During this time period the prince has two seizures without the princess noticing. The first happens at their second meeting when he is overwhelmed by her royal appearance, her foot on a tame leopard, before they ride out together. During their excursion his love, previously unnoticed, blossoms. The second seizure happens when he lets himself be despicably thrown out by her, even though he not only saved her life, but is also convinced by and willing to accept the equal rights of women.

Both times the princess appears to him as a shadow in his seizures, whereas otherwise he admires her for her uncompromising consistency and loves her because she sticks to her cause in a more straightforward manner than others. War is declared, the prince and one of the princess' brothers defending the princess fight against each other along with 50 of the best knights on both sides. The prince remembers the prophecy that one of his family will fight against shadows, gets a seizure, and goes into battle

although he is still in a dreamy state. He and his group of men lose the battle.

He is seriously injured, and experiences his long recuperation period as a continuation of the seizure. After clearly winning the war, the princess becomes less rigorous in her attitude and takes care of the 288 prince and all of the other injured on both sides. The prince and princess forgive each other and the question of dream or reality, shadow or substance, becomes a question about who the princess really is, what her essence is. Is it the masculine unwillingness to compromise with which she tries to demonstrate her rationality or rather the other side, which allows for feelings of pity, gratitude, love, and duty?

As this is decided, the prince's seizures cease and he changes into a stronger, more masculine person. He can convince the princess that her holding a purely female court was not right for her, not genuine, only a copy of the male world. The prince and princess, until then both a cross between male and female, discover one another. They also both find their own selves in the recognition that man and woman remain incomplete, only half of a whole, as long as each attempts to be whole alone, or as long as one sees the other as the dominate or superior one.

The court physician diagnosed the prince's seizures as 'catalepsy (p. 1 57). We now know that Tennyson used, or at least owned, Quinsy's medical dictionary of 1804 (Wright, 1987)), which defined catalepsy as 'a sudden suppression of movement and perception where the DOD is immobilizers (freezes') in its present position'. This comes in seizures, lasts a few minutes,

seldom up to a few hours, and at the end the patients do not remember anything that has happened during the seizure. It is as if they awake from sleep (Wright, 1987).

Interestingly enough, the prince's seizures are described completely differently: Others notice nothing, he even fights in a battle during a seizure. Only his perception is altered. This change in perception usually only lasts for a short time. It seems to him as if he is surrounded by ghosts and he himself only a shadow of a dream. The princess appears to him as an incomplete sketch, her leopards as a fantastic painting, other people as empty masks. Things are present and not present at the same time, a scene just experienced happened and at the same time did not happen.

He is unable to tell the difference between reality and illusion. Ms. Wright (1987) was the first to suggest that epileptic seizures were being described here and she is without doubt correct: These are focal seizures of the temporal lobe with illusionary experiences of De-realization and diversification - a type of seizure that was underscored in medicine at Tennyson time. How did Tennyson know about them? There were several cases of epilepsy in his immediate family, for example his father, as can be seen by a letter describing his situation which fits the diagnosis of temporal lobe epilepsy.

We also know that doctors told the family that his seizures were 'catalepsy rather than epilepsy (Wright, 1987). This could have been intended to calm the family or make the diagnosis sound less threatening. On the other hand, it is also unknown how clearly a distinction between the terms catalepsy and

epilepsy was made in the early nineteenth century (Teeming, 1971)¹.

Trances also play a securing role in the rest of Tennyson work, and it is well known that he often set himself into trances by repeating his own name.

But the description of the subjective seizure experiences in the "Princess", whose origin and terminology seem to be explained by Wright, stands alone, and the seizures have their special literary sense as metaphor for the indecision and insecurity that leads to the main theme of the story.

Edgar Allan Poe: "Bernice", "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Premature Burial"

The possibility that Poe was also a model for Tennyson and the use of catalepsy as a motif in his writings cannot be excluded.

Tennyson was deeply affected by Poe, admired him, and contributed substantially to the literary acceptance of the American in England - in nineteenth century something not to be taken for granted. (The 1 .

Something similar may have been true, in the public mind, for the terms epilepsy and apoplexy. Thackeray in "Inanity Fair" seems once to have mixed them up (Wolf, 1995), and simple-minded Joe Gager, in Dickens' "Great Expectations" says his father went off in a purple elliptical fit, obviously meaning apoplectic. ²⁸⁹ Other way around, Poe's lyric was influenced by Tennyson. Poe created a figure with the diagnosis of epilepsy, Bernice, in the story carrying her name in 1835. The story belongs to a group of dismal fatalistic novellas, and he needs a progressive physical and mental illness for Bernice, which would also make it plausible for her to appear dead. The story is told in the first person from the point of view of Usages. Usages lives in a lonely mansion with his beautiful cousin Bernice. Bernice has 'a species of

epilepsy not infrequently terminating in trance itself - trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution' (p. 172).

In a reversal and projection that is not typical for Poe, Usages does not explain these trances but rather his own, which are trances or daydreams induced by concentrating on coincidental objects or meditation on trivial words. Bernice and Usages become engaged. In the progression of her disease Bernice loses her beauty. One day in her altered condition she silently stands in front of him. In an unexpected smile of peculiar meaning her splendid white teeth which have remained perfect are exposed and their overleaf image becomes the focus of a monomania, a daydream of his lasting several days.

During this time he is vaguely aware that she has seizures one ironing. In the evening she appears to be dead and so is buried. His state of trance continues. Finally, he awakens out of his trance with a bad feeling, a vague recollection of a deed, of the shrill cry of a woman's voice. He learns from a menial who is wild with terror that Prince's grave has been violated, and that she has been found in her grave still alive: There is a spade leaning on the wall next to him.

As he opens a little box that he finds on his table without knowing how it got there, dental surgery instruments fall out together with thirty-two small, white, and ivory-looking substances' (p. 77). Behind the similarity of Usages' and Tennyson self-induced daydreams and trances no hidden allusions should be suspected. These things are a part of the type of psychic experiments that the romantics were enthusiastic about. Nevertheless, the

affinity in motif and the relationship to epilepsy that both authors created are worthy of being mentioned.

Poe must have noticed that it was unlikely for someone known to have epilepsy to have seizures in a familiar environment in the morning and on the same evening to be declared dead and buried. He prepares the reader by mentioning some pages fore that Bernice, in most cases, recovered from her seizures surprisingly rapidly, but the construction remains dubious. Perhaps this is the reason he gives Madeline of Usher another diagnosis to allow her to be mistakenly buried alive a few years later in "The Fall of the House of Usher". She has transient affections of a partially cataleptic character' (p. 82), and this leaves more room for the unlikely. Madeline appears only once before her apparent death. The narrator, a friend of her brother Redbrick, talks about her appearance: she 'passed through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared' (p. 182). She is not described in more detail (unusual for Poe); foremost is the feeling her appearance leaves in the narrator and her brother observing her: 'A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps' (p. 182). Her appearance causes her brother to sorrowfully bury his face in his hands.

Later they lay her in her coffin although there still is 'a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, as usual in all maladies of strictly cataleptic character' (p. 186). In spite of the improbability, Madeline manages to fight her way out of the coffin, and presents herself in silent reproach to her brother who must have suspected she had not really been dead. Poe must have been virtually

obsessed with the idea of being buried alive: It plays an important role, for example, in the early tale "Algeria", and later became a theme in a own story with the title "The Premature Burial".

This begins with reports about actual live burials and leads to describing the fear associated with waking up in a coffin after being buried. The narrator, who believes that such things happen more often than people suspect, tells his own story of being ill with increasingly frequent and long cataleptic seizures, trances, semi-syncope, and 290 his growing fear that he will be buried in such a state. He takes extensive organizational precautions to prevent such an incident, but it does not calm him in the least.

He talks about a further symptom, a disassociated awakening with very slow reorientation, preparing the scene for a cathartic experience ending the entire terrible episode: He awakens one day in a tight wooden chamber in total darkness with the smell of damp earth around him, and experiences the real horror of being buried alive. He remembers that he had been on a hunting excursion when a storm arose and that he fled to a barge laden with garden McCollum and went to sleep in a very tight berth.

Now he can shake away his fear - and he also loses the catalepsy which had perhaps been less the cause than the consequence of his fears (p. 271).

Here the construction of the disease history - especially with the final considerations - is really convincing. Nevertheless, this tale is one of Poe's less familiar stories and literally not fully satisfying due to the approximate balance between reported facts and fiction being only loosely connected.

Poe apparently did not use Quince for his catalepsy motif, but another source, since his descriptions are completely different. They seem to be based on a tradition that Could and Pyle (1896) summarize: 'Catalepsy, trance and lethargy, lasting for days or weeks, are really examples of spontaneously developed mesmeric sleep in hysteric patients or subjects of incipient insanity. It is in this condition that the lay Journals find argument for their stories of premature burial'.

George Eliot: " Sills Manner"

In contrast, it seems that George Eliot (pseudonym or Mary Ann Evans, 1819-1880) also used Quinsy's Medical Dictionary or a similar source to describe the seizures of the title figure in Sills Manner (1861), because her description corresponds much more exactly to Quinsy's definition than Tennyson. In Sills Manner the seizures of the title figure, a poor linen weaver, are an important structural element of the story. They are conditions that can last from a few minutes to an hour or more, and which are described in the book as trance or cataleptic seizures.

When Manner has such a seizure he falls into an unconscious and snootiness stiffness with an empty look in his eyes. The seizures leave him with amnesia and Manner is not even aware of having had a seizure. At first, his community, a 'narrow religious sect', the middle point and content of Manner's life, where he is respected for his faith and exemplary life style, interpret the seizures as a mark of his being specially chosen by God, as visitations of divine origin.

But as the man who Manner thinks of as his best friend becomes his rival, he uses Manner's seizures to discredit him in the community by indicating his seizures might also have satanic origins (p. 0). Furthermore, he deals a devastating blow by blaming Manner for a theft that occurs during a death wake when Manner is in a trance. Manner is exiled and emigrates to a faraway region where he sets up his weaving loom in a hut at the edge of the village (up. 11-15). There he lives a secluded hermit-like existence for 15 years.

Despairing of God and his fellow man, he only thinks of his work and of his treasure of gold, sovereigns, that he has managed to scrape together by living so frugally. In this village he is also known for having fits and this contributes to his role as an outsider. When Manner leaves his hut on an errand one stormy evening, someone steals his treasure, leaving him empty-handed for the second time. But in contrast to the first time, he becomes integrated into the community because the members have pity on him (p. 03). Then a third event happens, when he is in a twilight state which falls over him while standing in the open door of his hut: When he awakens from the trance he perceives a vague, golden shimmer in his hut that he at first believes must be the expected return of his gold coins; but it is the golden hair of a little orphan girl who has sought shelter in the hut (p. 1 51). He accepts the child and raises her with the help of a neighbor and a happy time starts now and lasts into his old age.

The treasure is also found again. It is discovered - and the reader is told this early in the story - that the father of the child and the thief are the same

person. All these motifs are woven together in a very complex manner and build into an artful design interwoven with the golden threads that make a legend. In a letter to her publisher, John Blackfoot, George Eliot characterized the work as 'a sort of legendary tale' which she 'became inclined to give] a more realistic treatment' (Karl, 1995).

The disease is of utmost importance in explaining the necessary static and passivity of the title figure which would normally be unnatural. It also allows for unexplainable events to happen which contribute to the story's legendary quality. *Sills Manner* is one of the most perfect of the literary works in which an epileptic disease is an essential stylistic element. Today we use the term *cataplexy* to describe a condition of motionless rigidity which can occasionally be observed over a longer period of time with androgenic psychosis or with severe life-threatening brain diseases.

The seizures with impairment of consciousness from which *Sills Manner* suffered would today no longer be classified as *cataplexy* but as twilight states, and epilepsy would primarily be considered the cause. A recent biographer of Eliot (Karl, 1995) talks about *Manner's* epileptic fits as a matter of course. It seems as though Eliot did not use direct observation in describing *cataplexy* but relied on the lexicographic definition. This included certain epileptic phenomena and *cataplexy* and epilepsy were probably not strictly separated at that time.

Earlier, *cataplexy* had even been considered a variant of epilepsy (Teeming, 1971). AS we have seen in the case of Tennyson, *cataplexy* may sometimes have been used as a euphemism for epilepsy (see above).

Willie Collins: " Poor miss Finch"

Willie Collins (1824-1889), a friend of Charles Dickens, is considered together with Dickens and George Eliot to be one of the great English realists of the nineteenth century. His *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) is one of the books in which epilepsy plays a key role in the construction of the plot. Oscar loves the beautiful, capricious, and blind Lucille who also loves him.

His twin brother, the ruthless Nugent tries to be his rival. Their voices are indistinguishable and they have the same features to someone who looks at them or touches them. An eye specialist appears on the scene who is able to make Lucille see by operating on her. Like some blind people, Lucille can imagine colors, loves everything light and hates everything dark. This almost leads the bad Nugent to succeed because he argues that when Lucille will see Oscar she is sure to despise him: His skin is discolored to a blackish blue as a result of the treatment of his epilepsy with silver nitrate (p. 3). Oscar fears the day she will be able to see him but argues nevertheless unselfishly and generously for the controversial operation. Lucille then reacts completely different than expected and there is a happy end. In this novel Collins was particularly interested in the discoveries that had been made throughout the 18th and 19th century about what people born blind or who became blind in early childhood could sense or experience and how, after successful operation on their eyes, they reacted and learned to create a visual environment.

These reports deal extensively with theories about the conception of space and the construction of visual space, and with Molybdenum's problem, whether a congenitally blind person who had learned to extinguish and name

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forms like a sphere and a cube by touch would be able to distinguish and identify these forms visually if the faculty of sight was recovered (v. Sender, 1960). Collins was more interested in the sys- 2.

The villagedoctorwho has been called to the scene is mildly made fun of by the author: the sages of the village urge Manner strongly to smoke a pipe " as a practice 'good for the fits'; and this advice was sanctioned by Dry. Kimball, on the ground that it was as well to try what could do no harm - a principle which was made to answer for a great deal of work in that gentleman's medical practice" (p. 91). Manner follows this advice faithfully even though he actually dislikes tobacco and it doesn't really help. 92 ecological and moral responses of his characters to such an event. His description of the tests and tasks that are given his heroine by her doctor shows that he conducted thorough research for the story. Likewise, the epilepsy is not just there but the result of a brain trauma (p. 68) from a robbery which has its own function in the carefully constructed story. In order to make the blackening of the skin more credible people with the same coloring appear marginally twice in the story (up. 3, 269). Is that exaggerated? Apparently not.

The treatment of epilepsy with silver nitrate was very common until the middle of the nineteenth century. One of the affected in Collins' book says there are hundreds of people disclosure as I am, in the various parts of the civilized world' (p. 84), and the English neurologist Todd complained that so many patients showed in the disconsolation of their faces the indelible marks of the ineffective treatment they had undergone (Teeming, 1971). Collins

thinks better of Oscar and allows the treatment to be successful: His epilepsy is cured (p. 0).

Conclusions

Four authors from two consecutive epochs of literature in the English language gave four completely different pictures of illness: In Poe, the romanticist, the epileptic and cataleptic conditions are more conjured up than described, whereas not the seizures themselves but the motif of a slow physical and mental deterioration are a point of focus. The epileptic and cataleptic states are essential elements to the gloomy mood that seem to drive these stories into inevitable fatalistic catastrophes.

Tennyson depicts subjective perception of seizures and has resalable found an authentic source so that we can correct the diagnosis of catalepsy. Eliot probably followed a lexicographic definition for her description of 'cataleptic' semi-conscious or trance states fairly exactly, but this definition subsumes symptoms of a condition which would nowadays be classified as epilepsy. Collins is furthest away from Poe. He virtually gives us a clinical case study with a matter-of-fact description of a seizure which begins with a wrenching aversive movement towards the right and the calm attitude of the doctor mastering the situation at hand.

The diagnosis is given in a short and concise sentence, the etiology and therapy are a part of the case history in this realistic novel. Whereas with the earlier authors the distinction between epilepsy and catalepsy appears somewhat blurred, which may be typical for the time, Collins' description of (post-traumatic) epilepsy and a focal seizure is fully correct. These four

significant authors from the middle of the nineteenth century also handle the function of the seizures in the structure of their works very differently. Poe uses seizures as a reason for the supposed death and subsequent live burial.

Tennyson uses De-realization during seizures as a metaphor for his basic motif of half and half, and for the indecision in the main characters. Once these are overcome, the seizures disappear. In Eliza Follen's work, the occurrence of recurring seizures is necessary for the plot of the story, they are an important element for the legendary aspect and a reason for Silas Marner's timidity and resolution to fate. For Collins, who like Dickens laid special value on clean construction in his books, Scar's epilepsy is a central supporting element which combines many associations in a perfectly structured story.

In none of the authors' works are the seizures indifferent, a mere curiosity or spectacle. Nor are they seen in a negative light. They rather evoke reactions of support, and sympathy with 3. A frightful contortion fastened itself on Scar's face. His eyes turned up hideously. From his head to foot his whole body was wrenched round, as if giant hands had twisted it, towards the right. Before I could speak, he was in convulsions on the floor at his doctor's feet. 'Good God, what is this!' I cried out. The doctor loosened his cravat, and moved away the furniture that was near him.