

# The development of depression's empowerment during the 19th century



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The 19th century was a time of great development, especially so in the realm of knowledge and representation of disability in literature. Although physical disabilities receive the majority of the attention, mental illness does appear in many works even though it may not be openly stated or named. Despite the lack of a clearly stated mental impairment, several works feature characters who exhibit a few, or numerous, signs of depression. While this melancholy appears to limit the ailed characters—ostracizing them from normal society and labeling them as others as discussed in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary bodies: figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*—it instead enables such individuals, allowing them to recognize and free themselves from the corruption of their respective societies.

The 19th century texts, Sheppard Lee, "Bartleby the Scrivener", and "Life in the Iron Mills" all present this type of story as each possesses a character that exhibits signs of a mental illness similar to depression that leads them to losing their life. While these three texts have such similarity, they differ in the execution and descriptions of depression and demonstrate the development of the understanding of the mental impairment throughout the 19th century as G. E. Berrios describes in his "Melancholia and depression during the 19th century: a conceptual history." Beginning with Sheppard Lee where the titular character's disinterest in activity and life is attributed to laziness, by "Life in the Iron Mills" depression is depicted as an actual illness which consumes the mind and has detrimental effects. As each character—through their "disability"—recognizes the corruption and inescapable nature of their society, they come to the decision to free themselves the only way

they can—by ending their life. While critics such as Justine S. Murison in “Hypochondria and Racial Interiority in Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee” argue that these characters are so afflicted by mental illness they cannot consciously make any decisions and has no control over themselves, the characters do display clear cognitive control as suggested by Jane Desmarais’ “Preferring not to: The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville’s.” Since each ailed character does possess control over their thoughts and actions, they are able to recognize the issues in their societies and consciously choose to free themselves from it, although each story shows the progression of this choice. Sheppard Lee, “Bartleby the Scrivener”, and “Life in the Iron Mills” display the development of representation of depression and the impairment’s empowering nature during the 19th century.

Prior to the 19th century, the term “depression” had yet to be coined; the word for such a state, “melancholy”, was used interchangeably with mania and did not recognize many aspects of the impairment (Berrios 298).

Throughout the century, the word was coined and used in many medical journals, due largely in part to the growing interest in the field of psychology.

The recognition of depression as an actual disease along with the understanding of it is demonstrated clearly by looking at the depictions of the illness in each of the three aforementioned literary pieces. Initially a state of disinterest was brushed off as laziness, but these stories reveal how the public became more aware of the symptoms of depression as these are more clearly articulated as time passes between each story. Sheppard Lee, Bartleby, and Hugh Wolfe all showcase elements of the impairment, with the

former presenting the least number of symptoms and most unclear and subtle representation.

Robert Montgomery Bird's Sheppard Lee opens with a detailed introduction of the narrator's life and behaviors. While the narrator, Sheppard Lee, chalks his disinterest in life up to idleness, his behaviors suggest otherwise. Lee drops out of school, claiming he "yielded to the natural indolence my temper" (Bird 10)—an action which suggests that the narrator finds no interest in school or the point in going. He also details his experiences trying to find a hobby and things he may enjoy, which he fails to do as everything offers little to no enjoyment. This lack of enjoyment in activities along with his indecisiveness of a hobby both act as signs that the narrator is a depressed individual. Lee also claims he is sluggish and has "as little energy as or activity of mind as ever fell to the share of a Jerseyman" (11). As fatigue and loss of energy are symptoms of depression ("Depression: Do You Know the Symptoms?"), this aspect of Lee's personality also adds to the argument that he has clinical depression. While the narrator presents these aspects of himself jovially and in a comedic manner, the underlying tone seems to be one of self-doubt and a feeling of worthlessness—another symptom of depression ("Depression: Do You Know the Symptoms?"). Lee openly states his lack of ambition and talent, and questions why his father would ever believe in him, "how my father ever came to believe I should make a figure in the world, I cannot conceive" (10). All of these aspects of the narrator's personality strongly suggest that he suffers from depression, however, due to the book being published in the early 19th century, the term was not yet coined and the impairment not yet fully realized. Therefore,

Bird's novel merely hints at the illness by presenting it as a character flaw rather than a mental illness.

By the time of Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener", the term depression had begun to be used in medical discourse, and was beginning to be studied. In this story of Wall Street, the titular character exhibits many tell-tale symptoms of depression in a much clearer way than Bird's tale. Although Melville's tale does not provide the inner workings of Bartleby's mind as Sheppard Lee does, the details about Bartleby's behaviors offer enough evidence for Bartleby's mental illness. First, Bartleby displays a harsh drop in interest in his work, beginning with an intense work ethic when he starts working for the narrator, "At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion" (6), however, Bartleby gradually grinds his work to a halt, an action which reveals one of the defining symptoms of depression—loss of interest in things one used to do or enjoy. As Bartleby's interest and desire to do work decreases throughout the story, other symptoms appear and increase in potency. Bartleby's appetite also plummets as his depression worsens throughout the story—another indicator of depression ("Depression: Do You Know the Symptoms?"). The titular character starts out eating only a few ginger-nuts a day and then gradually stops eating entirely. The character also becomes more indecisive as time passes and his mental disability seems to worsen. While quickly coming to state his repetitive phrase, "I would prefer not to" (8), a phrase which holds no command or direct statement, Bartleby later becomes more doubtful of his own decisions and

desires when the narrator is trying to convince him to leave the building. After each of his statements, Bartleby follows them up with “ But I am not particular” (26) as he is experiencing another symptom of depression— indecisiveness (“ Depression: Do You Know the Symptoms?”). As the story progresses, Bartleby reveals several more characteristics indicative of depression such as excessive sleeping and social withdrawal. All of these characteristics strongly suggest that Bartleby is a man suffering from depression.

While Melville's story provides a much clearer representation of depression than Bird's, neither fully discuss the hopelessness and mental effects of the impairment. Only until the late 19th century did literature begin to discuss these aspects of depression. Rebecca Harding Davis' short story “ Life in the Iron Mills” presents an even clearer image of depression in her character Hugh Wolfe. After being arrested for theft, Wolfe falls into a deep despair and despondency. He looks “ at himself with sudden loathing” (28) and cries bitterly. As self-loathing is a sign of depression, this begins Wolfe's route down into the mental illness. Even at the beginning of the story, Wolfe's lack of appetite suggests perhaps the mental impairment affected him before he was incarcerated. Wolfe also experiences headaches, “ He put his hand to his head, with a puzzled, weary look. It ached, his head” (32), which WebMD classifies as another symptom of depression. Wolfe's despair quickly leads to suicidal thoughts, and eventually suicide, “ He bared his arms, looking intently at their corded veins and sinews...a slight clicking sound, often repeated” (34). These suicidal thoughts, and ultimate act, solidify the claim

of Hugh Wolfe having depression as he has given up on life and sees no other possible way out of his situation.

Due to these characters' mental disability, some critics claim that such characters do not have control over their thoughts and actions, and are instead entirely consumed by mental illness. Murison's *Hypochondria and Racial Interiority* in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* argues that due to a potential mental illness, Sheppard Lee has no control over his decisions and the illness itself controls every action and thought (Murison). While this argument may hold some validity when merely considering the bodies he inhabits, the claim that a mental illness presides entirely over the mind of the impaired individual is both incorrect and abled-biased. While Sheppard Lee and his fellow depressed literary characters may struggle with thoughts that are not their own, they still have complete control of their freewill and actions as Desmarais maintains in "Preferring not to: The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville's". Desmarais refutes Murison's claim through a thorough explanation of how *Bartleby* has complete control over his words, actions, and mind, so much so that he is existing in "passive-resistance" to society and its boundaries (Desmarais). Through the phrase, "I would prefer not to" *Bartleby* relays a carefully hidden message which suggest subtle refusal to do that which he does not find interesting or valuable. If *Bartleby* can overcome whatever "psychological boundaries" (Desmarais) that are erected in his mind due to his mental disability, then so can Sheppard Lee. Rather than consumed by their impairments, they are enabled by it and able to see that which the normal people in society cannot, however, this places them at a social disadvantage.

Although each of these characters possess varying levels of depression and symptoms, they are all ostracized by their respective societies. Not only are they mentally ill through depression, but the characters recognize the flaws in their societies thus setting them apart from the ignorant norm. Through the disease, which forces one to see the pessimistic outlook of things and determine the value of specific activities, Wolfe, Lee, and Bartleby are able to see the corruption, immorality, and injustice around them. These extraordinary minds are then recognized as different and even grotesque for they exist outside of the "normate" which Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary bodies: figuring physical disability in American culture and literature* discusses. As these three characters are no longer ignorant to the dealings in their societies and possess negative views towards "the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings" (Garland-Thomson 8) and the aspects of life that these "normate" individuals adore and pursue, they are effectively categorized as others. Sheppard Lee sees the flaws in each of the activities he tries, yet his rejection of these activities causes those blind to the issues to become angry with him. Likewise, once Bartleby prefers not to do work, he is immediately objurgated by his employer and coworkers and further excluded from any social interaction. Even Hugh Wolfe, who takes some money as to allow himself to further himself in the world after recognizing only money will save him from squalor, is arrested and given an extreme sentence. All of these experiences merely further the recognition of societal problems for each of the characters and makes them decide whether or not to continue in the world.



As each character realizes more of the terrible nature of society, they all make the conscious decision to free themselves from the confines of their lives and statuses, thus gaining power over their lives. Sheppard Lee sees the flaws in the mundane activities of his peers. With hunting, he alone recognizes the expensive and dangerous nature of the sport. When he tries to race horses, he sees how it is nothing more than glorified gambling which he finds “both disreputable and demoralizing” (Bird 13). Even when Lee succeeds at politics, he quickly sees the deception and corruption lying underneath the eloquent words of the charming men and chooses to leave, “sincerely repenting the delusion that had made me so long the advocate of wrong and deception” (27). Once Lee discontinues his search for enjoyment, his final stop—while as himself—is an experience which frees him from society’s expectations and ills. While he does not face death in particular, in his body jumping Sheppard Lee loses himself and the confines of his own life, becoming free from corruption and deceit, if even for a short while.

While Lee makes the blatant decision to become another person, Bartleby makes a subtler decision—to merely waste away. Bartleby refuses all help and food, passively choosing death through starvation. While it may seem like Bartleby did not make the conscious choice, he did not opt for this form of freedom until rejected by all of society and losing complete interest in everything. Bartleby’s preferring of not doing certain things shows how he does not see value in the mundane and repetitive work so many robotically perform. Instead of continuing in his misery, Bartleby opts for a quiet, clean death, where he merely curls up into a corner of the prison yard and takes a final breath (Bartleby 38), becoming free of society’s pressures.

In harsh contrast to the previous characters, Hugh Wolfe has the most freeing experience out of all of the characters earlier discussed. He heavily debates his role in society and realizes early on he cannot escape his class and economic status. Once imprisoned he has a similar debate, realizing that nineteen years living in a prison is no life at all, but rather a form of captivity and death. Instead of living with both the shame of his actions and the despondency of his brain, Wolfe chooses a more violent death than Bartleby, choosing to cut his wrists. While onlookers are horrified, the narrator describes Wolfe's death as a "coming now quiet and coolness and sleep" (Davis 35). This sleep suggests a peaceful death, welcoming, relaxing, and freeing. Much like Bartleby's death's description being as a sleep, both character's sleep-like deaths and Lee's literal life-changing experience allow for them to finally relax and be free of society's problems and expectations.

As the 19th century continued, these three works showcase the furthering of the understanding of depression as a disabling mental illness as the depression become clearer and have more specific sources throughout each story. However, as the mental illness becomes more visible, as do the societal rejections of the disabled characters, making them social outcasts and unable to see beyond the negatives of the world. Although this aspect of the disability is problematic, through the othering of the characters, they become increasingly more empowered through it in each story. While Sheppard Lee is vague and does not really recognize an illness, by "Life in the Iron Mills" Wolfe recognizes his stationary status in society and his hopeless situation merely because of his social and economic status. This reveal is due primarily to the fact that he has depression which causes one

to feel hopeless and disinterested in activities that society deems one should. Through his "disability" each character is able to find an escape from the despondency of life to which "normate" individuals are blind. While Lee, Bartleby, and Wolfe may all experience some form of death, in doing so they find freedom, not from their disability, but the problems of their society which their disability allowed them to see.

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