

The culture of eating disorders in Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted*



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Marya Hornbacher's memoir *Wasted* was published when she was only twenty one years old, and describes her struggle with eating disorders throughout her adolescence. Her experience is greatly influenced by the fact that she is a woman in a repressive society. She demonstrates that her illness was a result of the patriarchal culture that she lived in, and not her biology. She argues this by showing the effects of the media's portrayal of unattainable body images on young women, the consequences of a father who is not able to understand his daughter growing up, and the imbalance of power between the genders.

As a woman growing up at the end of the 20th century, the female gender was faced with many more ideals of the "perfect body" than males. Beauty magazines are a motif throughout the narrative and symbolize her lust of having a body that is unrealistic. She first reads them at "nine, ten, eleven years old", and is consumed with reading "[d]iet tips for teens, [and] staring at the paper doll figures of clean, hairless, grinning girls" (Hornbacher 44). These unrealistic body expectations made her feel imperfect, and as a result she tried to change herself by doing exercises and calisthenics at night. She does these activities throughout the novel, however it never changes how she sees herself. As she inspected herself in the mirror at only eleven years old, she states "my body was wrong—breasts poking through my shirt, butt jutting, all curvaceous and terribly wrong. Everything was wrong" (Hornbacher 44). She later mentions in reflection that the fact that she went through puberty so early may have predisposed her to developing eating disorders, since her body did not live up to the standard in magazines, nor was it like any of her classmates' (Hornbacher 52). Her early development

caused her body to grow faster than all of her friends, and even faster than her mind was able to mature. The distance between her and her classmates is emphasized during her sex education class, when they are initially learning about menstruation: “ Eeew, say the blond girls during sex ed class as we watch the screen [...] meanwhile, under the desk, I am surreptitiously bleeding” (Hornbacher 48). This passage is a metaphor for this point in her life, as changes are happening to her and her body before she is able to learn about them herself, at a time when others cannot seem to understand or relate to her situation. All of these impacts are governed by the fact that she is a young woman living in a patriarchal society. The number of magazines showing how to develop ‘ the perfect body’ are disproportionately catered to women, and women also begin puberty earlier and have more radical changes throughout puberty. These factors combined escalated her insecurities around her body image, which eventually pushed her to try and change her body through drastic measures and develop eating disorders.

The relationship between a father and a daughter is a very special one, as it is the first, and often strongest bond that a young woman makes. He has the most influence on her self confidence, and self worth early in her life (Sutherland 2014). Marya’s unstable relationship with her father caused unrest in her life, and was a factor in leading towards eating disorders. Even as a child, she was never able to be certain in what mood she would find her father: “ I could not guess who I would find: my father, loving and cheerful and wanting to play? My father, red-faced and screaming at my mother? Kicking the dog?” (Hornbacher 21). This constant instability left an impression on young Marya. Having an unstable father can “ affect a child’s

sense of control over their life and self-image” (Sutherland 2014), which she demonstrates throughout her development. When Marya reached the age of puberty, her father became much more aggressive. He “grilled [her] with inappropriate questions. He went digging through [her] drawers, [her] garbage, read [her] notes, grounded [her] for truly minor infractions” (Hornbacher 67). This oppressive behaviour began when she was first developing habits of bulimia, and since she often uses it to feel in power, it is clear how this invasion of privacy results in her trying to find other ways to gain power over her life. Psychologists will later label her father’s actions as a condition known as ‘emotional incest’ (Hornbacher 67). Her father is uncomfortable over her starting puberty and becoming a woman that he obsesses over her actions and feels like she is hiding things from him, similar to a jealous lover. Her father even goes so far as to ask her to buy a bra because he believed she was becoming too “busty” when she was in the fifth grade (Hornbacher 48). His uneasiness resonated with young Marya causing her too to feel uncomfortable with her own body during such an impressionable time of her life and affected her psychologically. In reflecting on what caused her eating disorder, she says “The only thing I can come up with is that maybe, in some small way, my anorexic body was an apology to my father for having become a woman” (Hornbacher 229). This passage demonstrates the extent that his actions, although seemingly not extreme, resonated deeply in her self image due to the strength of their relationship.

Many times while in a session of bulimia or reflecting on her illness, Hornbacher discusses on how it gives her a sense of power over herself. This is greatly influenced due to being a woman, and the fact that currently in

society she feels like she has a lack of power, and uses her eating disorders as a way to reclaim power. This hunger for power persists throughout her life, which can be seen when she is much more sexually active than the average thirteen year old: “ the very idea that you can control a man’s body was intoxicating; that you could make his head turn, [...] lean just so, [...], and he’ll be caught” (Hornbacher 83). This demonstrates a young woman who is fighting back against a patriarchal society where she is almost powerless relative to the men in her life. This small victory and temporary control over men gives her a ‘ high’ and encourages her to continue to sleep with ‘ greasy men from the city’ (Hornbacher 70). She later reflects on this behaviour and thinks, “ why must the power of the female body cancel the power of the female mind? [...] What if she is both?” (Hornbacher 84). These self empowering thoughts were only met with criticism from her friends, who told her that she was getting too “ militant with this whole feminism thing” (Hornbacher 85). Despite her many attempts to gain power in her society, she is either met with criticism and rejection from friends, or can only feel it in short bursts of lovemaking, which is followed by feelings of objectification. Being cornered into this repressed position, she feels as though she can regain power over herself by controlling her food, and she takes this to an unhealthy level. Towards the end of the 20th century, literature slowly shifted from the consensus that eating disorders are caused solely by brain chemistry, and towards the idea that culture and family life have an affect (Hornbacher 52). Therefore demonstrating the unfair distribution of power among the genders, and how this affects the self-image of certain groups, such as women like Marya Hornbacher.

Throughout her narrative, Hornbacher was able to demonstrate that her eating disorders were not caused due to some innate neurological imbalance in her brain, but in fact the culture she was brought into. A combination of the ever present, impossible ideals that society is filled with, as well as a turbulent relationship with her father, and the lack of power she has in her life since she is a woman all contribute to her obsessive control over her food intake and body. Hornbacher argues that society makes people, especially young women, feel flawed and in need of attaining certain standards of beauty through different forms of media, such as beauty magazines. Such images are especially targeted towards young women, who living in a male-dominated society feel as though they must look a certain way in order to feel worthy and beautiful. As seen through the relationship between Marya and her father, the powerful males in a woman's life have a strong impact on a woman's view of self-worth. Her father's disapproving view of her body causes her too to be dissatisfied with the way that her body looks. Her lack of power causes her to obsess over small ways that she can regain control and power in her own life, such as limiting her food intake or having sexual relations with multiple different men.