

The Experience of Depression

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The following passages may be helpful for self-diagnosis. They may also be helpful as a reminder that you are not alone, that others have been where you are, and have escaped. Do they seem to echo your own experience?

Kansas

Dorothy's Kansas in The Wizard of Oz seems an expression of the depressive's experience of the world.

When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side.¹ Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached to the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it.² Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else.³

When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now. When Dorothy, who was an orphan, first came to her, Aunt Em had been so startled by the child's laughter that she would scream and press her hand upon her heart whenever Dorothy's merry voice reached her ears; and she still looked at the little girl with wonder that she could find anything to laugh at.

Uncle Henry never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was. He was gray also, from his long beard to his rough boots, and he looked stern and solemn, and rarely spoke.

— L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, 1900.

Exercises:

1. Have you ever visited or lived in a very flat place? Did it have an effect on your mood? What was it like?

Is there something about it that feels like your experience of depression? Discuss, if in group.

2. Contemplate the photographs of the “dust bowl” featured on our web page to get a sense of Dorothy's world. Consider printing them out and “colourizing” them as a way to improve your own mood. Or do so in Photoshop.

3. Have you ever climbed a mountain? Did it elevate your mood?

¹The flat terrain may represent a sense of valuelessness. The image of a mountaintop or a steeple or the term “heaven” associates height or altitude with greater value.

²Water seems generally to represent emotion or desire or energy. The lack of water here therefore suggests an emotional numbness, which is often characteristic of depression.

³The lack of any colours perhaps suggests, specifically, a lack of beauty in Dorothy's life.

4. If there is a significant hill nearby, consider hiking or climbing it if you are depressed. This could make a good group expedition.

5. The passage seems also to associate a depressed mood with dryness.

If you are feeling depressed, consider listening to the sounds of running water as an antidote. If there is a stream nearby, consider a visit.

Our web pages also feature YouTube videos with sounds of running water. See if this improves your mood.

6. A sense of greyness, lack of colour, seems to be another expression of depression. Vincent van Gogh, who suffered deep depression, seems to have fought it by painting images without shadows and emphasizing bright blues and yellows. Viewing a collection of his paintings might help a dark mood.

Brightly colouring shadowless images, like those of stained glass, icons, or comic book art, may therefore elevate the mood. Our web pages offer many examples. Try this to improve your mood.

7. Look up and contemplate Andrew Wyeth's painting "Christina's World" online. Although Wyeth says it illustrates a neighbour's physical disability, it seems to convey Dorothy's experience of living in a barren world, and of feeling excluded from life: the typical experience of an abused child. Perhaps it reflects Wyeth's own experience.

Due to copyright and permissions, it is not reproduced here. But it is easy to find online. View it, for example, at the New York Museum of Modern Art's web page:

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78455>

Does it speak to you of your own experience?

8. Compare the images by Canadian artist William Kurelek, who suffered from severe depression, also linked on our web page. Do they seem more hopeful? Why?

9. Dorothy is introduced as an orphan, being raised by her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. What do you imagine happened to her parents? Why are they never described? What was her former life?

What is her "backstory"?

How might it have shaped her character, as observed in the book or movie?

10. Imagine a backstory in which the Wizard of Oz is actually her father. Doesn't this fit?

Reflect now on the story of Dorothy and Oz as the tale of an abandoned child trying to understand the father who abandoned her and her mother.

Does all this resemble anything in your own life history?

11. Edvard Munch is another artist who struggled with depression and anxiety attacks. Contemplate his famous image, "The Scream," shown on our web pages. Does it remind you of your own experiences?

12. Consider as well his images titled "Melancholia." They too are available on our web pages.

The Demonic Mirror

Here we find another clear literary description of depression, from Hans Christian Andersen's The Snow Queen. Andersen himself suffered from depression, and attributed it to abuse in childhood.

Now we are about to begin, and you must listen; and when we get to the end of the story, you will know more than you do now about a very wicked hobgoblin. He was one of the worst kind; a real demon. In fact, he was the Devil himself.⁴ One day he was in a state of delight because he had invented a mirror⁵ with this peculiarity, that every good and pretty thing reflected in it shrank away to almost nothing.⁶ On the other hand, every bad and good-for-nothing thing stood out and looked its worst. The most beautiful landscapes reflected in it looked like boiled spinach, and the best people became hideous, or else they were upside down and had no stomachs. Their faces were distorted beyond recognition, and if they had even one freckle it appeared to spread all over the nose and mouth. The demon thought this extremely amusing. If a good thought passed through anyone's mind, it turned to a carnal grin in the mirror, and this caused real delight to the demon.

All the scholars in the demon's school, for he kept a school,⁷ reported that a miracle had taken place; now for the first time it had become possible to see what the world and mankind were really like. They ran about all over with the mirror, till at last there was not a country or a person which had not been seen in this distorting glass.

⁴ Depression, in other words is ultimately oppression by the Devil. It is not clear whether Andersen means this figuratively or literally.

⁵ A mirror naturally represents the mind or consciousness, which "reflects" on the sensed world. This identity is obvious enough to appear East and West. The *Platform Sutra*, for example, includes the brief poem:

*The body is the bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.*

A good description of mindfulness.

A mirror can also represent more specifically the imagination, which "mirrors" sense perceptions as mental images.

Andersen then seems to diagnose depression as a distorted imagination. A distorted imagination breeds monsters.

This suggests that attention needs to be paid to the imagination in order to re-orient it. Distorted destructive thoughts must be confronted.

⁶ The distorting mirror of depression is represented here as presenting the opposite of the three great transcendental values that justify existence: it shrinks the good and the beautiful away to nothing, makes everything appear as ugly as possible, and in doing so falsifies everything.

If this is a correct diagnosis, it explains why conquering the dragon of depression, in the typical hero legend, reveals some transcendental object which represents the Good, True, and Beautiful. This is what the dragon, the depression, has concealed.

⁷ Andersen attributed his own tendency to depression to abuse in the school he had attended in childhood.

They even wanted to fly up to heaven with it to mock the angels; but the higher they flew, the more it grinned, so much that they could hardly hold it. At last it slipped out of their hands, fell to the earth, and shattered into hundreds and millions and billions of bits.

Then it did more harm than ever. Some of these bits were not as big as a grain of sand, and these flew all over the world, getting into people's eyes. Once in, they stuck there, and distorted everything they looked at, or made them see everything that was amiss. Each tiny grain of glass kept the same power as the whole mirror. Some people even got a bit of the glass into their hearts, and that was terrible, for the heart became like a lump of ice.⁸ Some of the fragments were so big that they were used for window panes, but it was not wise to look at one's friends through these panes. Other bits were made into spectacles, and it was a bad business when people put on these spectacles meaning to be just. The evil demon laughed until he split his sides; it tickled him to see the mischief he had done. But some of these fragments were still left floating about the world.

—Hans Christian Andersen, *The Snow Queen*, 1845. Dugald Walker, trans., modernized.

Exercises

1. Does Andersen's distorted mirror sound like your own experience? Does your imagination tend to minimize the good and maximize the bad in everything? Reflect and, if in group, discuss.
2. If in a group, does any member have a cell phone with a camera and a photo enhancement program that includes a distorting mirror effect? If so, take shots of members of the group, trying different effects, and see how crazy people can be made to look. Share with one another for amusement. Award some informal prize to whoever can come up with the most absurd distortion.

If you are on your own, upload a photo of yourself and experiment at for example, http://funny.pho.to/distorting_mirrors/ or <https://www.imgonline.com.ua/eng/picture-distortion.php>

3. Andersen says the demon laughs when he sees how ugly the mirror makes people look. We laugh at ugliness too, don't we? If we tried the previous exercise, didn't we find it funny?

Why is it that we find ugliness funny? Is this wrong of us? Should we instead feel pity?

Is all ugliness funny, only a certain kind of ugliness, or ugliness in certain situations? If the latter, what makes the difference?

Are there different kinds of ugliness?

4. How sure can you be right now, depressed or not depressed, that you are seeing things as they really are? What if the Devil, or, to use Descartes's phrase, some "evil genius," is distorting all your thoughts? Is there any way to know? Meditate or discuss.

5. Elon Musk argues that we are probably all living in a simulation created by some alien programmer.

"If you assume any rate of improvement at all, then games will be indistinguishable from reality, or civilization will end. One of those two things will occur. Therefore, we are most likely in a simulation, because we exist." (from an interview on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, September 7, 2018).

⁸ As in the tale of Cupid and Psyche, this associates the transcendental values, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, with love. Perhaps love (agape) describes the proper reaction to the perception of any universal value. We love, or should love, truth, beauty, and goodness.

Does this seem plausible to you? How can we tell? Does it matter? Meditate or, if in group, discuss.

6. Can you recount a time when your mood seemed to distort your perception of things?

7. Consider this advice: “Never make an important life decision when you are in a depressed state.”

Is it good advice? Does this passage suggest why?

8. Andersen says that when we are depressed, we see good people as “upside down and without stomachs.” What does this suggest to you?

Meditate on the image. Do good people sometimes have “no stomach”? Discuss if in group.

9. “If a good thought passed through anyone’s mind, it turned to a carnal grin in the mirror.” This suggests the difference between “good” as understood by a narcissist and “good” as understood by a moral person.

Discuss the difference between the pleasure given by a moral act and the pleasure given by a sexual act. What is the difference? Are they “good” in the same way? Which is more “good” to you? Why?

If in group, discuss.

10. Andersen says the Devil keeps a school.

Andersen blamed his own tendency to depression on being abused in school. Have you had such experiences? What was your experience of school growing up? Was it the source of any of your problems?

Do you think it taught you things that were wrong? If in group, share examples.

On the whole, do you think that school as we know it is good or bad, helpful or unhelpful? If in group, discuss. Try to think clearly of what exactly is wrong, and what exactly could be done to make it better. Doing so may clarify some of your own traumas.

11. The demons declare that the mirror is a great advancement, because it shows the world as it really is.

What if they are right?

Some studies show that depressives have more accurate judgement than people who are not depressed. And there is the old saying, “ignorance is bliss.”

Is it the average person who is delusional? Is being depressed being more realistic?

12. If reality is depressing, is it better not to know? Is education and the quest for knowledge therefore a bad thing? Andersen seems to suggest that here; a literal reading of the story of Amor’s shining light on Cupid, or opening the box of Pandora’s beauty, seems to say the same. So does the Greek story of Pandora. Or the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis: evil enters the world because they eat “the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

If you could get rid of your depression by undergoing some form of therapy that reduced your understanding of the world as it is, making you more stupid, would you do it?

If not, why not?

13. Do you suppose you are depressed because you know more than most people? Because you see, realize, or have experienced things they have not?

If so, is depression best seen as only a side effect?

14. "Some people even got a bit of the glass into their hearts, and that was terrible, for the heart became like a lump of ice"

Resolved: depression is not so much a sad feeling as an inability to feel anything. Consider this idea; discuss. Does it feel as though your heart is frozen?

15. Images of the demonic mirror are featured on our web pages. They may help you visualize this metaphor for depression.