MALADIES OF LIFE, MALADIES IN FICTION. A READING OF JEFFREY EUGENIDES' "COMPLAINERS"

Ana-Blanca CIOCOI-POP
"Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Email: anablanca.ciocoipop@ulbsibiu.ro

Abstract:
The present paper deals with the intricate interplay of malady, medicine and humanity in Jeffrey Eugenides' story "Complainers", the opening story in his volume of short prose Fresh Complaint, published in 2017. The story traces the destinies of two women (one of whom is diagnosed with dementia) who manage to save each other from life's maladies by means of their friendship. Written in the typical half melancholic, half tongue-in-cheek manner characteristic of all of Eugenides' texts, the story hints at the possibility that the real-life maladies of our world are not physical but emotional and societal. The emotionally and medically sterile environment we have created to cradle us in the illusion of safety and rationality is contrasted to the rich inner world of the two women and human beings in general. Eugenides thus poses a series of interesting questions: Is it preferable for the "human machine" to slowly shut down by decaying or disappear swiftly and suddenly? What is more painful, disease and decay or annihilation? How much of our humanity does disease take away?
Keywords: malady; disease; decay; medicine; society; humanity; Jeffrey Eugenides.

Introduction

"Complainers" is the opening text in Eugenides' latest collection of short prose, suggestively entitled *Fresh Complaint*, published in 2017, six years after his last published novel, *The Marriage Plot*. Most probably attempting to make up for the lack of success of *The Marriage Plot*, as well as to experiment in a more complex way with short prose forms, *Fresh Complaint* navigates the shifting waters of postmodernity with much skill and with the characteristic wit and sometimes biting irony which Eugenides aficionados have grown accustomed to. It covers topics such as death and old age, East versus West,

sexual harassment, tax evasion, in vitro fertilization, and many other complain-worthy aspects of (our) everyday life. "Complainers" opens, as previously stated, this volume of short prose, partially lending its title to the entire collection and setting the tone for the texts to follow. While the opening story in the volume is generically entitled "Complainers", somewhat hinting at a century-old habit of humans as a group, the closing story bears the volume's title, "Fresh Complaint", and is a story about a false sexual harassment accusation. Therefore, we can state that the volume traces the history of complaints, old and new, from the boomer generation to the "texting" one, fictionalizing a series of real-life shortcomings of the human body and mind.

"Complainers" tells the half melancholic, half empowering story of two elderly women and their friendship. When the story opens, Cathy visits her friend Della in the retirement home she is committed to, "Wyndham Falls. Gracious Retirement Living." From the very onset, the narrative element of malady, and its medical implications, are present in the text, sharply contrasting with the retirement home's romanticized name, creating a tension between reality and its fictionalization. The story's omniscient narrator thus draws attention to the fact that disease has most often been romanticized in Western culture, with this practice echoing into the present times. As also noted by Gian Paolo Biasin,

> "The ancient literary theme of disease, which was treated by the Romantics mainly in a vague, indefinite, melancholic way, having often little to do with a precise bodily sickness, took on particularly notable importance in the second half of the last century in France. The death of Madame Bovary, described by Flaubert with relentless attention to painful and cruel medical details, dramatically marked the end of the Romantic hero" (Biasin, 1967: 79).

Cathy describes the home upon first seeing it as "big and glassy, with white benches outside and an air of medical orderliness." (Eugenides, 2017: 3). The adjective "medical" serves a double purpose here: firstly, it creates a reassuring atmosphere of safety and security (while the medicine is close

at hand, death can be fended off)[1], secondly, it symbolizes the sanitized nature of our world, where things like feelings, religion, or moral concepts have been wiped out, "purging" society of any element that is not objectively and scientifically quantifiable. The world thus narrates disease as much as it narrates itself, generally speaking. In the old days, Della would have been cared for by her family – in the postmodern nightmare, however, her family cleansed (sanitized?) their hands of responsibility, committing her to a clean, white, orderly home. The harsh reality is, however, undoubtedly hinted at right in the next line, where Cathy remarks: "But the garden apartments set back on the property are small and shabby. Tiny porches, like animal pens. The sense, outside the curtained windows and weather-beaten doors, of lonely lives within." (Eugenides, 2017: 3). The initial perception of immaculate "medical orderliness" (fiction) is thus quickly shattered, baring the truth in its entirety: decay, abandonment, solitude, dehumanization ("animal pens" - reality) and as we shall see malady shortly.

1. (Real) maladies past and present

Rushing in to see Della, Cathy remembers the present she brought her: a book neatly wrapped in brown, organic paper. She admits that the present is not really original, as this is what she always gifts her friend on their encounters. She adds, however: "It's more than that this time. A kind of medicine" (Eugenides, 2017: 4). Before we are filled in on the details of the nature of this medicine, the narration takes a leap

[1] See also Price Herndl: "We live with a perverse relation to illness. With the medical technological advances of the twentieth century, we latched onto the hope that disease was being conquered. With the development of antibiotics to combat infections, public hygiene to prevent fevers, and vaccines to prevent epidemics, we came to believe we were living in an almost post-disease era. We were sure the cures for cancer and the common cold were on their way. Since the early 1980s, though, we have seen the resurgence of disease; AIDS, dengue fever, and other "new" viruses have made virology the new frontier in medicine, while the reappearance of old diseases we thought were gone – malaria and tuberculosis, for example – have led us to question our sense of safety from infection [...] Still, most of us live as though we still have that faith in medicine and seem surprised when illness finds us, as it always does (771).

back in time to the moment of Della's dementia diagnosis. Cathy recalls, with much carefully concealed emotional pain, the moment she started to realize and experience her friend's mental decay. The two friends are sitting on the porch of Della's house, speaking of doctors, tests, screenings and therapists. The objective medical vocabulary stands in stark contrast to the obvious emotional bond between the two women, pointing to the human tragedies hidden behind any scientific terminology used to describe disease and death. Thus, here too, we can notice the gap between the harsh reality of disease and the human attempt at fictionalizing and constantly subduing it. Della herself obstinately refuses to speak about her disease, so the responsibility is passed on to Bennet, her son, who delivers the medical details "in a dry, matter-of-fact tone." (Eugenides, 2017: 5). Shocked by Bennet's apparent detachment from his mother's situation, Cathy tries to excuse his behaviour by seeing it through the lens of his profession: "Bennet works for an insurance company, in Hartford, calculating the probabilities of illness and death on a daily basis, and this was maybe the reason." (Eugenides, 2017: 5-6). We encounter here, again, the opposition between the world of science and the one of the spirit (or between reality and fiction): of course, many things can be scientifically dissected and explained, sparing one the burden of emotional involvement - but behind this arid, soulless dissection, the human tragedy is lurking, blazing its teeth, as white as the medical orderliness we use to keep our existential anxieties in check. For Bennet, his mother's diagnosis is rendered and made comprehensible in terms of a series of interdictions: "The doctor says my mom can't drive anymore. Or use the stove. She's going to put her on some medicine, supposed to stabilize her. For a while. But, basically, the upshot is she can't live on her own." (Eugenides, 2017: 6). What Bennet, like many of us, fails to realize is that imposing such dramatic interdictions on a person, on top of that person has already received a devastating diagnosis, does nothing but shatter the little feeling of being human still left in them. Bennet dehumanizes his mother even more than the diagnosis, and the doctor already did when he adds in the end: "Yeah, well. Anxiety's part of the whole deal." (Eugenides, 2017: 6). His mother and her disease are nothing more than a deal to him,

one of the many transactions in a world where everything can be bought and sold. Deals can be good or bad, and it is obvious that Bennet is intent on making the best of this bad deal he finds himself in. He consequently decides to commit his mother to a care home permanently. The reality of her disease seems, at this point, inescapable.

2. Malady as a human tragedy

From this point on, the narration takes yet another leap back in time to the moment Cathy and Della meet. Two women as different as can be, one a thirty-year-old divorcee, forced to work her way out of poverty, sexually promiscuous, the other a wealthy fifty-year-old, with a traditional mindset, living in a lush suburban home by the lake with her husband. The two start meeting for dinner and other activities more and more often, forging a strong friendship based on the things they have in common: crafts and reading.

In a sudden flash, the narration takes us back into the present, with Della opening Cathy's present. From the cheer-filled stories of the two women having margaritas, going to Weight Watchers together, or sharing a joint, we are abruptly taken back to the cold, metallic reality of Della's merciless illness and to the nightmarish halls of the home she is held captive in:

> "In addition to the many elderly tenants who negotiate the corridors behind aluminium walkers, there are younger war veterans, with beards, vests, and caps, scooting around in electric wheelchairs. There's no nursing staff. It's cheaper than assisted living and the benefits are minimal: prepared meals in the dining room, linen service once a week. That's it." (Eugenides, 2017: 9).

Della herself is using a walker and avoiding naming her diagnosis. She refers to it as "my malady" or "this thing I've got," yet another attempt at fictionalizing the disease and thus mastering it (Eugenides, 2017: 10). This unconscious coping mechanism hints at the loss of human dignity disease carries. The disease is never simply a diagnosis, a cold enumerating medical terminology, symptoms and possible treatments. It is, as previously mentioned, a human tragedy of epic proportions

placed in the prosaic environment of everyday life. The young veterans in wheelchairs, the inhabitants using walkers, Della herself – they are all miniature images of a human tragedy as old as time: one of the unstoppable and irreversible decays of the mind and body. Refusing to name one's disease (naming things being a Biblical ritual of bringing them into existence) equals Della erasing and annihilating it, at least for a while. Cathy fully understands her friend and prophetically notes: "Doctors love to hand out diagnoses and pills without paying attention to the human person right in front of them." (Eugenides, 2017: 10). What Cathy hints at here is that most maladies are not of the body, but of the soul. The shock of a ruthless diagnosis is also not of the body but of the mind and spirit. Most maladies are thus not of the body, as modern medicine would have us believe (the white picket fence of orderliness has to be kept up), but of life itself, of our very essence, of the soul. Cathy concludes the same when she states:

> "These displays of humor confirm what Cathy has felt all along, that a lot of Della's mental confusion is emotional in origin. [...] Cathy isn't surprised that Della represses the terminology. *Dementia* isn't a nice word. It sounds violent, invasive, like having a demon scooping out pieces of your brain, which, in fact, is just what it is." (Eugenides, 2017: 10).

3. Gendered maladies

After hearing Della's heart-wrenching confession, which proves how aware she is, despite her mental confusion, that her sons could have afforded her a better care facility but simply did not want to, Cathy decides to take her out on a shopping spree to redecorate her grim, depressing room at home. In the meantime, Della's mind yanks her back into the past, and she remembers her childhood spent in a cold, dark basement that looked like a crypt. The irony is that both the beginning and the end of Della's life are spent being buried alive in crypts of some sort: first, the basement she is confined to, then the care facility. In between, there is the thing called life, cut short by the brutality of her disease – and not only hers.

In yet another flashback, we find another disease, the one of Della's husband, Dick. One night, Della recalls, Dick just

gets up in the middle of the night and drives away. He returns after a couple of hours, and Della finds him on the living room floor, surrounded by road maps. The next day he announces to her that he has been scouting for investment opportunities in Florida and forces her to move there. The reader assumes that Dick had been a victim of the same disease as Della. The suspicion of a medical condition is almost unavoidable, as no "sane" person would just leave in the middle of the night and decide to move somewhere else. The horizon of expectation is slowly building up as the reader waits for the revealment of Dick's diagnosis. This, however, fails to happen. Dick is never diagnosed with mental illness; instead, he keeps forcing his wife to move from one investment venture into another, eventually leaving her to deal with bankruptcy after his death. The bitter irony of the situation haunts Della: "Her tone was full of wonder and outrage at the ideas men latched on to, especially as they got older. They were like fits of insanity, except that the husbands experienced these derangements as bolts of insight." (Eugenides, 2017: 15). What is a disease in women is insight in men; this is the bitter conclusion Della and the omniscient narrator in "Complainers" ultimately reach – what is taken to be a reality in one instance is fictionalized and turned into a narrative of insightfulness in the other. Even disease is determined by such things as gender, prompting society to see maladies where there is emotional imbalance and insight where there is madness. The only conclusion the reader can reach here is that society itself is a malady, infecting everything in its way and thwarting life itself. It is also interesting to note that Dick refuses to "retire"; he is caught up in a hamster's wheel type of existence, feeling that he needs to constantly do something in order to justify his "right" to be alive. Another real-life disease hinted at here is capitalism itself, as also noted by Kravitz, who claims that "Put simply, the bottom line [...] is that capitalism can make one sick in an unpleasant variety of ways, even, and perhaps especially, at the workplace." (Kravitz, 2010).

The idea of the disease being viewed differently according to the gender it affects comes back to haunt Della and the narrator in the section of the story detailing the book Cathy brought with her as a present. This is also the moment in the story when the contrast between reality and fiction becomes

most apparent, but at the same time, fiction is presented as a possible instrument that can help one overcome reality and survive it. The book is the story of two old Athabascan women who are left behind to die by their tribe during a famine. The two ultimately manage to bond and survive, but what is most interesting in this section is the caption found underneath one of the book's illustrations, which also bears symbolism related to disease and decay: "*Our tribes have gone in search of food, in the land of our grandfathers told us about, far over the mountains. But we have been judged unfit to follow them, because we walk with sticks, and are slow.*" (Eugenides, 2017 : 19) The parallelism between the fictional women in the story and the modern-day care home is painfully obvious. The same type of society that left its weak members behind to starve is now confining them to retirement homes, out of sight, like useless baggage. Nothing has changed in the grand scheme of things, except appearances. Bodily decay, disease, frailness, weakness, old age – all are still seen as obstacles, as things which have to be swept under the immaculate carpet of societal appearances, underneath that thin layer of "medical orderliness" mentioned in the story's opening paragraph.

The disease symbolism even extends to the planet itself. One another one of Cathy's visits to the retirement home, we are told that "Sometimes, thinking about climate change, the world ending in cataclysms, Cathy says to herself, "Oh, just get it over with. We deserve it. Wipe the slate clean and start over." (Eugenides, 2017 : 21). When the disease becomes all-pervasive, death is the only welcome outcome. The story thus throws a highly interesting ethical question out there: Is it preferable for the "human machine" to slowly shut down by decaying, or to disappear swiftly and suddenly? What is more painful, disease and decay or annihilation? How much of our humanity does disease take away? A semblance of an answer is provided during the shopping spree Cathy takes Della on in order to redecorate her room. While they are in the store, Della lets go of her walker, trying to have a look at something, and falls into a shelf of glasses, seriously hurting herself and having to be taken to the hospital. Again, the situation is presented from a double perspective; on the one hand, the cold, objective, medical one: "perform an MRI to check for bleeding in the brain, X-ray her hip, apply a damp

chamois bandage over her abraded arm," (Eugenides, 2017 : 23) on the other hand from the human, emotional one, of Cathy choosing to stay with her friend and sleep on the couch in her hospital room. The same dichotomy is that is it not their selfishness that bothers Cathy the most. It's how they stand before her now, infused – bloated – with rationality. They want to get this problem solved quickly and decisively, with minimum effort. By taking emotion out of the equation they've convinced themselves that they're acting prudently, "even though their wish to settle the situation arises from nothing *but* emotions – fear, mainly, but also guilt, and irritation." (Eugenides, 2017: 26). The real illness pervading "Complainers" is an illness of the soul, the disease of emotional incapacity, the handicap of being out of touch with our basic humanity.

4. And malady shall be no more

At the end of the story, Cathy decides to escape with Della to Della's old house in Contoocook and to care for her there, thus emulating the behaviour of the fictional heroines she and her friend look up to and identify with, hinting at Oscar Wilde's famous statement made in the essay *The Decay of Lying*, according to which life imitates art far more often than art imitates life (Wilde, 1889). On their way to the house, it begins snowing, an allusion to the white shade of the retirement home noticed by Cathy at the beginning of the story. But while the white of the retirement home is medicinal and artificial, the one of the snow is natural and comforting. During the drive, Della dares to mention her disease for the first time: "I don't know if dementia is the kind of thing you *can* sort out" (Wilde, 1889). Just like that: the malady was named and identified. Cathy looks at Della to see if she's aware of this change, but her expression is merely resigned." (Wilde, 1889: 28). The women manage to survive in the house alone and with help from neighbours for a month. From this point on, the story's timeline is condensed at lightspeed. We find out that Della's sons occasionally come to take care of her, Cathy has returned to her own home, and two years have passed. It is winter again, and it is snowing heavily. In the closing section of the story, Della is possessed by a sudden urge to go out into the all-enveloping whiteness, to disappear in it. The ending is open, as we never find out

whether Della does this or not, placing the narration definitely out of the realm of reality and into the fictional one: "Everything white. Just walk on out. Keep going. Maybe she'd meet someone out there, maybe she wouldn't. A friend." (Wilde, 1889: 33). All mention of disease disappears at this point, with death restoring humanity and dignity where they were previously wiped out by malady.

The open ending, reminiscent of the ending of *Middlesex*, where we see Cal standing in the open doorway, halfway between male and female, past and present, suggests our eternal status as travellers through space and time. Disease merely represents a hiatus on this journey, not a final destination. Even though it degrades people, reducing them to the status of weak beings dependent on others' help, it is not a permanent state. Death, the one thing we spend our lives running away from, comes to be seen as a form of deliverance, restoring that which was thwarted by illness: basic human dignity. It is also highly symbolic that Cathy is not there to accompany Della on what seems to be her final journey, echoing the century-old wisdom according to which we all come into the world alone and leave it in the same manner. The ending can also be interpreted symbolically, not literally, as the descent of Della's mind into the darkness of dementia. We cannot know if the snow she sees is real or just a product of her imagination – much like anything else in life, where the lines dividing reality from fiction are at best shadowy and vague, to paraphrase E.A. Poe. Paradoxically, the darkness of the disease eating away at her brain is represented, if we were to take this interpretative path, by the luminosity of the masses of snow. While most of her life is shrouded in darkness (from the basement of her childhood to her marriage to Dick, to her confinement in the retirement home), in losing her sanity, Della finally discovers light. The friend she hopes to find outside in the snow-covered landscape is, in fact, her real self, free from the manifold deformities cast upon it by societal expectations, gender roles, and finally, illness.

While in the book Cathy gifts her, the two women are finally found by their tribe and rejoin it; in "Complainers", the female characters take the eternal path of solitude. Not even Cathy is by Della's side during her final days. She, too, has

chosen solitude over human togetherness. Ironically, so much of this story is about human connection and the painful absence of it from our modern lives, which results in a general malaise recognizable at every level of human existence and interaction. Why, then, did Eugenides choose to end the story with an image evoking solitude? Several interpretations are possible here. Firstly, we can take the final scene as an image of apartness in body but togetherness in spirit. Even though Cathy is not physically by her friend's side, she will always be in her heart. Secondly, we can interpret the story's ending as a confirmation of the societal malaise it describes: Cathy has to leave back to her home in order to pay her rent and care for her husband. Modern life is not designed in such a way as to allow togetherness. Thirdly, we can read the final scene as a coming together of Della's body and soul, as she searches for herself, for her real self, in the snow. The solitude of not having known who she really was, or of not having been able or allowed to be who she truly was, is dissipated by the acknowledgement, and acceptance, of who she is. In their essay entitled "The disease-subject as a subject of literature", Kottow & Kottow argue that

> "Based on the distinction between living body and lived body, we describe the disease-subject as representing the impact of disease on the existential life-project of the subject. Traditionally, an individual's subjectivity experiences disorders of the body and describes ensuing pain, discomfort and unpleasantness. The idea of a disease-subject goes further, representing the lived body suffering existential disruption and the possible limitations that disease most probably will impose. In this limit situation, the disease-subject will have to elaborate a new life-story, a new character or way-of-being-in-the-world, it will become a different subject". (Kottow & Kottow, 2007).

In "Complainers", Della's self is thwarted by the experience of the disease. She loses touch with herself as her brain slowly descends into total darkness and oblivion. We can state that the disease causes her to shift into an entirely new persona. This is also the reason why she cannot call the disease by its name because she does not recognize it, and neither does

she recognize herself. She has been stripped and robbed of her identity. In the end, however, she manages to come back to her true self and reconnect with the inner, real "friend" she had lost.

Conclusions

"Complainers" is one of the most thought-provoking stories in Eugenides' 2017 collection *Fresh Complaint*. It masterfully thematizes topics which, especially during the past two years, have (re)appeared at the forefront of our collective preoccupations: disease, old age, death and the human perception of reality. As is Eugenides' custom, the story involves quite a bit of biting social critique, hinting at the underlying malady of Western societies, where old age and disease are perceived as shameful, taboo topics, and are heavily fictionalized and romanticized in order to make them more palatable. The story of Della and her tumultuous journey through the meanders of a merciless dementia diagnosis, as well as her empowering friendship with Cathy, are analyzed permanently from a social, as well as general human point of view, both of which stand in stark contrast to the cold, medical apprehension of disease and the trauma connected to it. Thus, "Complainers" challenges our "sanitized", safe, scientific (fictionalized) world, holding up the mirror of our own lack of humanity, which is shown to be the real malady.

References:

Biasin, G.P. (1967). Literary diseases: from pathology to ontology. In *MLN*, vol. 82. No. 1. 79-102.

Eugenides, J. (2017). *Fresh Complaint*. London: 4th Estate.

Kottow, A. & Kottow, M. (2007). The disease-subject as a subject of literature. In *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*. Volume 2. Available at: https://peh-med.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1747-5341-2-10 [Accessed on: 22.01.2023]

Kravitz, B. (2010). *Representations of Illness in Literature and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Available at: https://www.cambridgescholars.com/resources/pdfs/978-1-4438-2083-7-sample.pdf. [Accessed on: 23.01.2023]

Price Herndl, D. (1998). Critical condition: Writing about illness, bodies, culture. In *American Literary History*. Vol. 10, no. 4.

771-785
Wilde, O. (1889). *The Decay of Lying*. In UCLA. Available at: https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/steen/cogweb/Abstracts/Wilde_1889.html, [Accessed on: 07.02.2023]

≈≈

Ana-Blanca CIOCOI-POP has been a member of the Department of Anglo-American and German Studies at the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu since 2008, teaching courses and seminars in early, Victorian and contemporary British literature, American literature, British and American culture and civilization, as well as English as a foreign language for courses for students outside the field of the Humanities, and an associate lecturer with the "Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy of Sibiu since 2022. She was awarded a PhD in Letters in 2008 for a thesis focusing on the constructive skepticism evincible in the works of Franz Kafka, William Golding and Jeffrey Eugenides. She has published extensively in the field of literary, postcolonial, and feminist studies. Among her most recent research interest are geocriticism and translation studies, as well as strategies for teaching English to members of the military.

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by a grant from the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, CNCS/CCCDI - UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P3-3.6-H2020-2020-0160, contract no. 55/2021.