



One of the many lives claimed by tuberculosis was that of Emily Shore, a Victorian woman who began keeping a journal as a girl. In 1891, Shore's sisters published excerpts of the journal under the title, *The Journal of Emily Shore*.¹ I have previously discussed how Shore's journal informs our understanding of the kinds of medical literature that families like the Shores read, and the kinds of advice they took from that literature, in pursuit of better health. There are other ways in which Shore's diary can lend to our understanding of managing TB in the Victorian era, especially how victims of TB and their families characterized and coped with the disease.

The excerpts the Shore sisters have included in the published *Journal* reflect a popular romantic narrative of consumptive women, one commonly found in fiction as much as in biographical accounts. According to Clark Lawlor, fiction about consumptives "provided a sentimental discourse within which [the consumptive woman] was able to insert her personal tragedy, and make of it both public art and private consolation of a sort."² Perhaps internalizing the stereotypes Emily Shore saw and read about in books and other media, she wrote the following in her journal after becoming ill:

*"I have written much that I would show only to a very few, and much that I would on no account submit to any human eye. Still, even now, I cannot entirely divest myself of an uncomfortable notion that the whole may some future day, when I am in my grave, be read by some individual."*¹

Here is the portrait of a young woman seeking comfort as she grapples with a fatal illness, a portrait that reflects a deliberate desire to be understood as a modest and humble person. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag observes that, “TB is the disease that makes manifest intense desire, that discloses, in spite of the reluctance of the individual, what the individual does not want revealed.”³ It was popular for Victorians to publish personal diaries; therefore, it is not unusual that Emily is careful in characterizing her identity in case her words are read by strangers one day. What is perhaps most intriguing, though, is that *how* she characterizes herself fits a stereotype that Sontag has identified. For Katherine Byrne, these characterizations are attributable to literary descriptions of consumption in novels, descriptions that the victims then internalized.⁴ By the time the Shore sisters published Emily’s journal, such descriptions would have been in circulation for decades, although they were only gaining traction when Emily wrote her journal.

The tropes deployed by Shore’s sister-editors also reflect stereotypes and inform our understanding of the metaphorical language writers and editors frequently and deliberately used to frame the consumptive’s identity. In the published *Journal*, the title page opens with stanzas from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, a eulogy that draws on symbols of nature: “The leaf has perished in the green.” At the end of the *Journal*, Shore writes of posing for a final portrait. A lengthy editors’ note accompanies the entry, which describes Shore’s “sweet” and “child-like face” with “geranium-coloured” cheeks.¹

Susan Sontag tells us that, “For more than a century and a half, tuberculosis provided a metaphoric equivalent for delicacy, sensitivity, sadness, [and] powerlessness,”³ qualities associated with children and flowers. The Shore sisters’ use of floral imagery at the introduction and conclusion of the *Journal* reify this stereotype and establish the tone through which they hope to characterize Emily, as an innocent girl with great moral fortitude yet flower-like fragility. As Francis Smith notes, theories about the moral state of consumptives appeared in medical literature in the 1860s, decades before the discovery of the tuberculosis bacteria.⁵



Geranium (representing gentility).

From *The Language of flowers: an alphabet of floral emblems*, London, Edinburgh, New York, 1857.

“The loss of health and strength has altogether deprived me of the active amusements, the rambles and observations of nature, in which I so much delighted, and has continually checked me in my studies, in which I delighted as much...And there are other causes, mental ones, which prevent my enjoying things as I once did; but they are partly my own fault, and partly

what I share in common with others. Oh, how many happy hours, which seem to me but as yesterday, start up in contrast with the present!...I live it all over again, and I cannot avoid weeping. There is no language to describe the sharp pain of past and regretted happiness. I was much happier as a child than I am now, or ever shall be.”¹

That Shore’s life and personality mirror those of the fictional consumptive—in her pining, self-reflection, self-reproach, and spirituality (examples of which abound in the journal, although the above passage is a good one)—makes one wonder: Did Emily and her sisters turn to fiction and poetry for cues on how to manage, cope with, and discuss her disease? As Lawlor explains in his study of consumption in eighteenth century literature, “narratives of consumption in novels, poetry and drama...provided ways in which people could deal with consumption in real life, or at least describe that consumption.”² In an era before formal support groups, TB sufferers not only looked to each other, especially while living abroad as expatriates within communities of TB victims, but they also looked to literature for comfort and understanding.



A sickly young woman sits covered up on a balcony; death (a ghostly skeleton clutching a scythe and an hourglass) is standing next to her; representing tuberculosis. Watercolour by R. Cooper, ca. 1912. Retrieved from the Wellcome Collection.

Emily Shore’s residence amidst a community of TB sufferers in Madeira, Portugal, also helped her in understanding and forming her identity. In a description of the church garden in Madeira she writes in her diary “we are not in England.”¹ This and other expressions of loss for her home country speak to the sense of nostalgia in the Romantic consumptive character. Nostalgia plays an important role in romantic depictions of illnesses and death. Popular Romantic poems like *So We’ll Go No More A-Roving* by Lord Byron frequently associate nature with loss and convey an idea that also haunted Emily, the idea that the world continues to turn, the seasons to change, despite one’s illness and death: “So, we’ll go no more a-roving / So late into the night, / Though the heart be still as loving, / And the moon be still as bright.”

There is no single trajectory for the demise of the consumptive patient. We know from both medical literature and personal accounts that consumption can cause great pain to its sufferer or it can kill insidiously. Yet Shore’s experience and identity resemble that of most literary characters, suggesting that the strategy with which she approached coping with her illness may have been borrowed from literary accounts she read. That she relied on literature does not diminish her pain or authenticity. It simply shows that, when reality was too difficult to bear, Shore found solace in stories, novels, poems, and dramatic works, testing fiction’s ability to palliate illness.

References

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