



# The Portrayal of Diseases in the Novels of Zoe Heller and Joanne Harris

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## Abstract

The article zeroes in on the vision that diseases, alienation and grotesqueness are inseparable. It suggests that mental and physical disorders contribute to realizing the scale of alienation and grotesqueness inside and outside the characters. The current research shows the way diseases determine human interaction. It elucidates the characters' paradigm shift in their understanding of themselves and the world after a disease has entered their lives. The presence of symptoms, syndromes and traumas in the novels presupposes that society is far from being balanced. The article also discloses the overlap of literary discourse with medical discourse.

**KEY WORDS:** brain; consciousness; disease; syndrome novel; alienation; grotesqueness





## Introduction

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The human condition in the 21st century is viewed as alienated since the main emotion of the epoch is alienation which is close to the atomization scale [1]. The level of alienation has been exceeding due to restrictions, in particular, lockdowns, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Admittedly, the level of stress among the population is increasing too. As a result, we observe that neurosomatic mechanisms lead to psychological and psychiatric problems, and vice versa, psychological problems may become the basis for the development of somatic diseases. Medicine and neuroscience have permeated much of everyday discourse. So, B. Kravitz states that neurological diseases reflect societies disease [2].

The tendency to embed diseases into novels becomes increasingly popular among writers because literature, as well as science contributes to an understanding of the relation between nature and society [2]. In fact, we globally speak about the intercrossing of the sciences and humanities. Contemporary British and American literature are currently preoccupied with neurological conditions and disorders. With regard to it this research paper considers three novels by British authoresses: Z. Heller's "What Was She Thinking?: Notes on a Scandal" (2003), "The Believers" (2008) and J. Harris's "Different Class" (2016). A writer, just as a doctor, physiologist, pathologist, has the right to reveal the most ugly and disgusting in a human being. The contemporary era is a whole bunch of pathologies: sociopathy, psychopathy, sexopathy. This might be connected with the fact that even in an age of rapidly progressing biomedicine human beings still remain vulnerable to diseases. In his day S. Kierkegaard wrote that "there is not one single living human being who is completely healthy" [3] and "not a single human being who does not despair at least a little, in whose innermost being there does not dwell an uneasiness, an unquiet, a discordance, an anxiety in the face of an unknown something" [4]. Another point related to the mentioned tendency, according to S. Timpanaro, is the acknowledgement that the physical and biological world, as an inevitable conditioning force, precedes the socio-economic base and the cultural superstructure [2]. With this regard, it brings us to the human brain because the powers of thought, logic, morality, imagination, empathy are associated with it.

Neurolinguist T. Chernigovskaja states that our brain is a neuron net, which is so powerful that is hardly controllable and thus it only partially obeys us. It uses new pathways, may act in a non-standard way [5]. The talk is about "the complexities of neurological systems and the ungraspable nature of consciousness;... evolution is not progressive, it is multiple; it is not about perfectibility, but about adaptation in



shifting and multiple contexts. Environment is a complex web of connections and feedback loops” [2].

Each character has an idiosyncratic personality. According to neuroscientific theory, characters’ own experiences take place within biological constraints: id est., the boundaries of their cerebral hardware. P. MacLean’s cerebral modules concept “Triune Brain” and its aphoristic interpretation by T. Robbins through the universalist theory contribute to understanding the human condition and interpreting diseases in the texts. This concept is based on the division of the human brain into three distinct regions: the reptilian, mammalian and modern human brains which attempt to coexist. This hierarchy is based on an evolutionary view of brain development. The reptilian or primal brain (basal ganglia) → reptile consciousness (aggressive, self-preserving, greedy consciousness) is related to the language of body sensation and impulses, instinctive responses; paleomammalian or emotional brain (limbic system) → mammal consciousness (love, warmth, generosity, joy, grief) deals with the language of emotions and feelings; neomammalian or rational brain / homo sapiens brain (neocortex) → floral consciousness (empathetic telepathy) is associated with intellectual verbal language, conscious thought, self-awareness [6, 7]. Despite the fact that P. MacLean’s model is criticized because of oversimplification, it is still helpful in the endeavours to explicate humans’ behaviors. According to modern advances in brain-imaging, the correlation of responding on the side of the brain during primal, emotional and rational experiences can vary, so these responses can be different for each person.

Quite similarly to the previous theories anthropologist H. Fisher produced “Three Loves Theory” for understanding relationships. Scientists like H. Fisher have studied the cognitive and neurobiological processes underlying attraction and love, and they have pointed to different emotions that occur at different stages of romantic relationships. This helped H. Fisher to map the neurobiological components of each love experience and then match them to real-world social realities. She came up with the three loves: lust, passion, commitment which occur independently from each other in different parts of the brain [8]. Lust is instantaneous and based on straightforward physical and behavioral components of attraction. It comes from the reptilian brain and is about instincts [9]. Passion is rooted in the mammalian brain. It shows a high degree of emotional connection [10]. Commitment is when love becomes unconditional. Commitment is when you emotionally accept and love the other person’s flaws as much as their strengths. Commitment arises with the idea that the relationship will persist indefinitely. Couples who reach that level of commitment, their senses of self actually merge with the other person [8]. The suggested theory aids in comprehending the characters’ relationships in the novels which may be viewed as deviation and seem to be unhealthy within social norms.



## Syndromes in life and fiction

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Terms “diseases, symptoms, syndromes and traumas” are commonly met in medicine and psychology. What is the role of the syndrome in contemporary culture and literature? To be able to cast some light on it we refer to P. MacLean’s statement that all human consciousness is schizophysiological syndrome consciousness [2]. Etymologically, “schizo-“ means division or split and “physiological” pertains to physiology, relating to the functions and properties of living bodies [11]. As is claimed, in the 1980s the Syndrome Age started [2]. It can be witnessed that it has not ended yet. So, it is quite likely that the name of the Age is a result of syndrome thinking which is connected with syndrome consciousness mentioned above. A syndrome is a set of medical signs and symptoms which are correlated with each other and often associated with a particular disease or disorder [12]. Biologization encourages abandonment of even a basic distinction between “organic” (somatic) and “functional” (mentally induced) disorders. Just as the self is somatized and molecularized, so more and more of everyday life is medicalized [2].

Literary critics are concerned with the linguistic symptoms of neurological disorders. The contemporary novel shows a continuing preoccupation with what it feels like to live in a biomedicalized, post-postmodern culture and with the relations between the economic and the neurobiological as they play out in the psychopathologies of contemporary everyday life. But the pathologies have changed. The manic addictions, obsessions and anxieties of the postmodern 1980s have been replaced by a sense of what the sociologist A. Ehrenberger calls “the weariness of the self” [2].

It can be said that fiction is engaged with neuroscience superficially, for example, specific titles, and substantially, when diseases and their symptoms are, in general, referred to more deeply. Owing to all these processes there appears the so-called “syndrome novel”. The syndrome novel is a convenient way to indicate contemporary fiction’s interest in neurological disorders and science. We distinguish 1) the first generation syndrome novel which is associated with a sense of the self as recursive and displaced, the product of confabulation; 2) the second-generation syndrome novel in which insights of neuroscience give way to something more mystical. Inadequacy, weariness and loss are faced in the syndrome novel. This fiction reflects a continuing preoccupation with the self. The contemporary syndrome novel attempts to retrieve the self by exploring what gave rise to its loss and in doing so moves beyond both a neuroscientific and a postmodern viewpoint [2]. In the phenomenological terms of Kierkegaard, however – and in those of syndrome fiction – the key experience is of an estrangement in which the body seems beyond the control of thinking, seems to have



interposed itself as an object between oneself and the world or to have been dissociated from the thinking self so thoroughly that “the self” experiences itself as disembodied, outside itself [2]. P. Waugh stresses that “a key feature shared by syndrome novels is the presentation of a complex cultural condition through attention to individual phenomenologies of perception and feeling refracted through a linguistically and formally self-reflexive frame”. The dominant mood in such novels is depressive.

Thus, in the novels under investigation there have been identified features of a syndrome novel; based on the number of diseases in two of them they can be considered syndrome novels.

## Alienation and grotesqueness & diseases → inseparable?!

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The notion of disease is most powerfully articulated by S. Sontag. Feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. The disease being so enriched with meanings is projected onto the world. The disease becomes adjectival. Something is said to be disease-like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly. The subjects of deepest dread like corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness, are identified with the disease [13]. Today, our conceptualization of neurological diseases must affect how we read these metaphors.

The characters in the novels under analysis deal with mental and physical disorders. It cannot but be admitted that different mental states are associated with different physical states and it is not quite clear which causes which [2]. It is important to stress that diseases cannot be reduced to constellations of symptoms. Symptoms are unique expressions of particular life experiences. Based on the humanistic approach to mental disorder a symptom is regarded as the symbolic expression of a repressed conflict. Based on the biomedical approach to mental disorder the symptom is regarded as a natural sign of materialness.

It can be stated that diseases are directly related to alienation and grotesqueness. Diseases affect human organisms and, as a consequence, they may undergo inner and outer changes which means ill people become other and quite frequently ugly in appearance which makes them feel both alienated from themselves and society. Visually changes are not always noticeable. Estrangement, insanity, otherness are linked to alienation and distortion, oddity, ugliness are associated to grotesqueness. Mental illnesses become or cause impediments that prevent people from having an active life



because they are literally excluded from many processes. Alienation can be the result of a mental or physical condition. Possible health-related causes of alienation include: anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), any conditions that may cause a person to feel singled out or disconnected [14]. With regard to grotesqueness, it shows deformity as the expression of the physical and mental decadence of the human body. Through diseases we see moments of personal collapse modifying the mind and the body because they cause a breach between muscle, bone, and skin. An emotional breakdown, witness to a division caused by external pressure, is a collapse of intangible weight, and yet so overwhelming that the body is modified and crushed. Deformity has its roots firmly planted in reality, in the memory and sensation of the tragic and ironic condition of human existence [15].

Thus, in the novel we deal with abulia, Capgras syndrome, Kandinsky-Clérambault syndrome, obesity and metabolic syndrome, Down's syndrome, Icarus complex, infertility, coma, post-traumatic stress disorder. Though, for instance, abulia, Capgras syndrome, Kandinsky-Clérambault syndrome, Icarus complex are not indicated directly in the analyzed texts. In Z. Heller's novel "What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal" the reader encounters one character who has a neurological disorder – Ben, Bathsheba Hart's son, he has Down's syndrome. In her other work "The Believers" we meet the paterfamilias Joel Litvinoff who is seriously ill after a stroke. His daughter Karla Litvinoff suffers from obesity and experiences problems with her reproductive system. We also get familiar with Karla and her husband Michael's neighbour who "is a host to chronic ailments..." [16] and Jameson Nicholas (Monster) who has been paraplegic since his childhood. We also get acquainted with Lenny, the Litvinoffs' adopted son, who is addicted to drugs and alcohol. In J. Harris's novel "Different Class" the reader comes across the main character David Spikely with His Condition as a result of the past sexual assault on the part of his teacher.

Now it makes sense to provide interpretation on medical and figurative dimensions of the syndromes and disorders mentioned above:

- Abulia is medically an illness as a result of an injury to the brain, characterized by a lack of will or initiative, it may be a sign of a neurologic or psychiatric disorder [17]. Figuratively, we speak about indecisiveness. It is observed in relation to Karla and Rosa from "The Believers", and Bathsheba Hart from "What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal". In case with Karla, she is not sure how to act in her unhappy marriage. She shares home with her husband but it is not love that unites them, it is something totally different. As to Rosa, while trying to explore her origin, she immerses herself into the Jewish rituals which seem absurd to her and she cannot decide whether she should proceed or refuse from participating in them because of not feeling comfortable. Bathsheba is in two minds as to her relations with the spouse and her lover;





- Capgras syndrome or Capgras delusion, medically speaking, is the irrational belief that a familiar person or place has been replaced with an exact duplicate [18]. In a figurative sense, R. Powers believes that “as a species, human beings have collective Capgras. We do not have the requisite response to other members of our species or to the other species with whom we share the world, and this leads to our alienation from the natural world” [2]. It is about our unwillingness to see things as they are. The talk is about Karla’s husband Michael in “The Believers”. Michael starts noticing vaguely that his wife is becoming not so obedient as she used to be, he is in his somewhat illusional world. In “What Was She Thinking?: Notes on a Scandal” Richard Hart, Sheba’s spouse, after finding out about his wife’s love affair, does not want to recognize her at all. Barbara Covett also refuses to see Bathsheba as she is because her image of the colleague and friend does not coincide with the real Bathsheba;
- Kandinsky-Clérambault syndrome in the medical dimension is the psychic automatism (a psychopathological syndrome / the estrangement syndrome / the influence syndrome), characterized by delusion of being controlled by an external force. It occurs on the level of thoughts, feelings, movements [19]. The metaphoric dimension describes it as conformism; escaping responsibilities; fear to recognize one’s misdoings. This can be exemplified by the characters from “Different Class”, e. g. David Spikely who accuses God of that what he is, Roy Straitley, a Latin teacher views St Oswald’s School as such that urges the pupils and teachers to commit the wrong. For Karla her husband seems to be the one who makes her behave the way she does not really feel like behaving probably because she is afraid of being left. For Bathsheba Hart her pupil and lover Steven Connolly becomes the outside influence she thinks she cannot resist;
- Obesity and metabolic syndrome are medically defined as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health [20]. Figuratively, this is seeking for protection; escaping feelings; denial of oneself; hidden anger. In “The Believers” Audrey’s mother is overweight which may be connected with her age, Karla’s obesity can sooner of all be the result of denying herself in many senses, trying to escape her feelings, feeling unprotected;
- Infertility is defined as not being able to get pregnant in the medical dimension. In the figurative dimension it presupposes unwillingness to gain parental experience, at least not with the wrong person; resistance to life processes. Karla is unlikely to get pregnant, quite supposedly because Michael is not the man she really needs;
- Down’s syndrome is medically described as a genetic disorder caused by the presence of all or a portion of a third chromosome 21. Patients typically



present with mild to moderate intellectual disability, growth retardation, and characteristic facial features [21]. In a figurative sense, it is linked to unwillingness to put up with the world, to manifest oneself into the world. This is what we observe in Ben's case, he is the son of Sheba and Richard who are teachers;

- Icarus complex, in psychoanalysis, describes an over-ambitious character with delusions of grandeur whose spiritual ambition exceeds its personality limits [22]. It is characterized by a desire to be immortal, narcissism and lofty but fragile ambition [23]. In the figurative dimension it is fear to get older, accept aging processes, to die. For instance, Michael does sports regularly reminding his wife of it and food quantity and Audrey can hardly accept the fact that her husband can die. Joel is always involved in some love affairs with other women as if wishing to convince himself that he is still young and his body potency is strong. Bathsheba got married to a man with the age difference between them, so she wanted to catch up with everything letting a young lover enter her life;
- Coma, in the medical dimension, is a prolonged state of deep unconsciousness caused by a stroke, as a result, a person is in a vegetative state (with no awareness) [24]. Coma is associated, in a figurative way, with fear of life and death, an in-between state because of indeterminacy, unwillingness to make a choice, escaping from somebody / something; no unity between energetic and physical bodies. Joel was in a coma and it was barely possible to say if he really was happy with Audrey and, generally, in his family;
- PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is medically viewed as a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/ combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury [25]. Exposed to traumas are those who have suppressed aggression, anger, experience a lack of confidence, the desire to earn the love and recognition of others, depend on the opinions and assessment of others, constant mental pain, old wounds, ban the expression of feelings and emotions, those who are characterized by vulnerability, impulsiveness, mental instability, risky behavior, upbringing. The figurative interpretation includes feelings of guilt and rage, commonly directed against oneself, a compromise within because of inner conflicts. Karla is always attempting to suppress her feelings. Being wounded by her mother or spouse she does not show it as she is diffident. Bathsheba Hart and Barbara mention about their upbringing which proves that they are traumatized. Bathsheba was never good enough for her parents and Barbara was taught by her mother how to postpone her life. David





Spikely in “Different Class” is deeply wounded by the traumatic experience he gained as a pupil while interacting with the male teacher, he is full of aggression and anger which are hidden from others but his traumas contribute to the way he acts committing horrible deeds. His pain comes from the fact that he was not believed.

While analyzing behaviors, states, actions of the characters it is close to impossible to realize their root cause, especially, if we keep in mind that our brain is not quite explainable in his responses to events in the light of the triune brain theory and the three love theory. We can only assume what Audrey and Bathsheba were guided by marrying men who were considerably older than they. It can also be wondered why Karla was staying with Michael when there were literally no relations at all, probably duties. Mental and physical reactions are intertwined, however, it is hard to identify the ones being initial as it is quite likely that they may vary.

## Diseases as a bifurcation point

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Any disease can be defined as a catalyst of many life processes. Disease is a change in the steady state of the system. J. Pruys speaks about the role of diseases in fiction in this way: “Sickness makes people weak, insecure, needy, angry, sad and depressed. It makes characters speak their minds, makes them honest and direct. These strong emotions exacerbate conflict, especially when the illness is grave. And conflict is the basis of all drama” [26]. The bitter truth about Joel and his marriage becomes known. His infidelities and an affair with Berenice, the black woman that ended with the birth of their son Jamil born out of wedlock destroys Audrey’s illusions about her spouse. Audrey Litvinoff, Joel’s wife showed her true face in relation with her family members, particularly, daughters Karla and Rosa. She also managed to demonstrate the way she interacted with unfamiliar people, for instance, the doctors who were involved in her husband’s treatment. Diseases in all the novels become an indicator of how we fear to ask for help within the family circle or beyond, trying not to show our weaknesses and pretending to be strong when we are not. It is also identified that the characters’ personal experience of pain may be considered subjective or unreal and, as a result, remains unnoticed until it is too late. Joel is a perfect example of a person who is considered “as right as rain” [16] by his family members whereas his secretary is in the know that he has taken about fifty Tylenol in the last twenty-four hours but in vain [16]. Bathsheba Hart being a mother of a child with Down’s syndrome experienc-



es difficulties as a woman who is restricted in her ability to manage her personal and professional life to the fullest due to this. David Spikely's attempts to seek aid with His Condition after being sexually assaulted by his male teacher fail, chiefly, because of his decision not to put the worst into words. He thinks that: "words give shapes to things, .... Words bring the monsters into the light" [27].

Diseases become helpful in: showing who we really are; confronting us with choices; revealing unhealthy inter-dependence; urging us to think about illnesses, how to conceptualize them, how to understand pain; realizing the prohibitions of expressing feelings and sufferings; making us aware of feeling uncomfortable while asking for help and thus unwilling to do it; making us recognize ourselves in other people, which can be cathartic and even painful (teach empathy / feel an ill person's pain).

## Conclusion

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Indeed, a disease can be an obstacle to stop the characters, a signal that the chosen path is wrong, a possibility to adapt to something new, a chance to change. It is a way to show that we are interconnected and dependent on one another whether we want it or not. It makes us start to appreciate life and be grateful. However, it is not only about this, diseases manifest the disease of being a human who is the vessel for meeting the divine and earthly. Since feelings, perceptions, and beliefs are involved in experiences of mental distress, the phenomenological and literary join forces in the contemporary syndrome novel to understand suffering in the biomedical age. These sufferings are partially caused by "enlightened false consciousness" which is the key contemporary syndrome identified in the novels. It can be overcome if we manage to acknowledge sincerely our biological restrictions and switch from syndrome to new sincerity, which lies in fusion of sincerity and authenticity where authenticity views truth as something inward, personal, and veiled, the product of self-examination (the self) but it is not enough and sincerity emphasizes intersubjective truth and communication with others.

The obtained findings confirm that cross-disciplinary work in the modern cross-disciplinary world is impossible if we oppose mind and brain, trauma and syndrome, psychoanalysis and neurology or the sciences and humanities.



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