

ROMANTICIZING TUBERCULOSIS:
POETRY, PROSE, OPERA, AND SOCIETY OF THE ROMANTIC ERA

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POETRY, PROSE, OPERA, AND SOCIETY OF THE ROMANTIC ERA

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Abstract

The Romantic Era peaked from 1800 through 1850. This era saw an increased emphasis on individualism and the self, and a growing sense of nationalism. The works of the period relied on sensory description, using romance to cloud otherwise bleak situations. For society, consumption was linked to poetic and aesthetic qualities, to the extent that the consumptive's pale and slender features were viewed as highly desirable characteristics. This reverence allowed for portrayals and perceptions of consumption to be clouded by romantic images, until scientists were able to identify the tuberculosis causing bacteria and its severity became better understood.

Introduction

The Romantic Era began at the end of the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth century; in most places romanticism was at its peak from 1800 through 1850. This era saw an increased emphasis on individualism and the self. With the rise of individualism, there was also a growing focus on nationalism. This growing sense of nationalism resulted from the people rising up against rulers to fight for freedoms. Many new works portrayed nature as being inherently good, while humanity was the evil which tainted the natural world.

Tuberculosis was one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented diseases of the time. Tuberculosis, often called Consumption, the White Plague, and the White Death, was believed to be linked to poetic and aesthetic qualities. This belief was reflected in both the literature and the medical field of the time, this interconnectedness allowed “literature [to affect] consumption’s reality, just as consumption shaped literature to a hitherto unrecognized extent” (Lawlor, 190). As science progressed, the literature adjusted to accommodate this change, and through these changes tuberculosis went from being characterized as romantic and mysterious, to being an infectious bacterial disease.



Figure 1: An image from *Ladies Monthly Museum* in September, 1825. It depicts the ideal slender, pale figure with rosy cheeks.

Prior to the advancements in medicine, the pale, slender figure, and rosy cheeks that were caused by tuberculosis were highly desirable features. This can be seen in Figure 1, which shows that ladies' magazines perpetuated this ideal. The reverence of the outward manifestations, and the disease's association with the poetic and aesthetic meant that tuberculosis was revered rather than feared. During the nineteenth century, tuberculosis was associated with "a markedly romantic sensibility, which was spreading about, especially among intellectuals and artists" (Pôrto, 1). This perpetuated the

association of the poetic and aesthetic with tuberculosis and resulted in its association with the Romantic poets, particularly John Keats who is sometimes thought of as Consumption's Poster Child. In part this was due to Keats' own illness and his resulting deterioration in physique, but it also stemmed from the belief that tuberculosis was a disease that afflicted intellectual and poetic persons.

While measures were taken to ensure the comfort of the consumptives, there was nothing that described the horror of suffering from tuberculosis and what it actually looked and felt like. It was not the dainty cough with the drop of blood that was so often painted, rather it was a wracking cough and a disease that destroyed the lungs to the point that the consumptive could no longer breathe. The romantic portrayals that simultaneously condemned humanity for tainting the beauty and purity of nature can be seen in the imagery of the consumptive, who strives for perfection while still being tainted as they stained cloths with blood from their coughs.

Tuberculosis: Characteristics and History

In 1689, Dr. Richard Morton established that pulmonary tuberculosis was a pathology. However, due to the variety of symptoms associated with tuberculosis, it was not identified as a single disease until the 1820s. In 1838, J.L. Schönlein named the disease, and then in 1882, Robert Koch identified and described *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, the bacillus that causes tuberculosis.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, tuberculosis caused widespread public concern due to it being endemic amongst the urban poor. There was a belief that consumption could be cured by a change in the air quality. Following this belief, in 1854, Hermann Brehmer opened the first tuberculosis sanatorium in Poland. An attempt was

made to estimate the benefits of sanatorium treatments by examining patients from the King Edward VII Sanatorium in Sussex from 1907-1914. These patients were all middle-class and thus had a better standard of living, which gave them a better chance of recovery. Despite these favorable conditions, it was reported that “751 of the 1707 admitted (44%) were dead by 1916” (McCarthy).

Prior to the development of the antibiotic streptomycin in 1946, the only treatment options were sanatoriums and surgical intervention, which involved collapsing the infected lung and allowing the tuberculosis lesions to heal.

Society

During the eighteenth century very little was known about disease and disease processes: it was not until 1820 that tuberculosis was identified as a disease that resulted from one infectious origin. During the eighteenth century, medical practices still relied heavily on bleeding and climate changes to cure disease. Due to the idea that climate had an effect on a person's health, consumptives were often advised to relocate to warm and humid climates.

Through the mid-nineteenth century, consumptives were thought to have "an aura of exceptionality that put them in a position of certain refinement in the eyes of their" peers (Pôrto, 1). This elevated status perpetuated the societal construct that deemed being slender and pale as beautiful allowed those physical characteristics to be celebrated, and thus society did not ostracize the consumptive nor was the disease itself villainized. It was thought that contracting, and ultimately dying of consumption were signs that the afflicted individual was a person of high aesthetic merit. This idea likely stemmed from the large number of Romantic poets, writers, and artists who likely suffered and died early deaths because of tuberculosis.

In addition, prior to the Industrial Revolution tuberculosis was often associated with vampires. When one family member died of tuberculosis, the health of the other infected household members would slowly decline. This caused people to believe that the first person to die was slowly draining the life from their other household members.

However, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the movement into Realism resulted in a shift in how people perceived and thought about the world. Thus, opinions shifted toward tuberculosis being recognized as a disease of the weak and oppressed.

Poetry

The Romantic poets focused on nature, emotions, the goodliness of the natural world and the evil of humanity, and dualism. For many of the Romantic poets, emotions and how humans conceptualized their emotions figured heavily into their works. During the Romantic Movement, poets actively worked to reform poetry and move into poetry that focused on intuition and emotion.

In addition to the change in themes, the Romantics also attempted to add spontaneity to their poems. While spontaneity was a theme of Romantic poetry, the poems still had restriction in their composition and the emotions they illustrated. The Romantic Movement saw renewed interests in the poetry of the past. However, this interest also spurred a movement away from the strict forms of poetry and into styles such as free verse. This movement created poems that became increasingly similar to prose, partially due to an increase in the usage of colloquial language.

John Keats (England)

The romantic imagery of consumption that was popular during the Romantic Era is closely associated with the poets of that time, particularly the life and works of John Keats. When John Keats was 14, his mother died of consumption. During her illness, Keats helped to care for her. Years later, Keats' youngest brother, Thomas, contracted consumption. Starting in 1817, John Keats and his brother George joined forces to care for their younger brother. In 1818, John Keats took a walking tour of Scotland, Ireland,

and the Lake District of England. While he was at the Isle of Mull in Scotland, he developed a bad cold and fever. Due to this illness, John Keats had to return to Hampstead, where he continued to nurse Thomas until Thomas' death in December of 1818. While caring for Thomas, John Keats likely contracted consumption during his time spent caring for Thomas.



Figure 2: Sketch done by Joseph Severn of a dying Keats. The inscription reads "28 Janry 3 o'clock mng. Drawn to keep me awake-a deadly sweat was on him all this night." ("The Final Months: Keats on his deathbed")

John Keats relocated to Rome, Italy during his illness, along with his friend Joseph Severn who took care of Keats during his illness. He died of tuberculosis on February, 23 1821 in a room overlooking the Spanish Steps. Figure 2 is a sketch done by Joseph Severn as he watched over a dying Keats. On February, 27 1821, Severn wrote a letter to Charles Brown, another friend of Keats, informing him of Keats' death. In this

letter Severn wrote that Keats “died with the most perfect ease—he seemed to go to sleep.” (“The Final Moments: Keats on his deathbed”). However, counter to this romantic and peaceful death, Severn also wrote that “the phlegm seemed boiling in his throat” and that when the doctors did the autopsy they found that Keats’ “lungs were completely gone” and they “could not conceive by what means he had lived these two months.” (The Final Moments: Keats on his deathbed). These dueling descriptions show that the manner in which Keats died was violent until he slipped into a coma-like state and died. The autopsy revealed that the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* had damaged his lungs so severely that he would have been barely able to breathe and would have been coughing up large amounts of blood.

John Keats initially studied medicine, which would have resulted in financial security for his family. However, during his time as a medical student he became increasingly ambivalent towards medicine and instead began to devote much of his time to writing. His medical knowledge would come back to him as he died from consumption. Due to his studies in medicine he would have been more aware of the pain and exhaustion that come with dying of consumption. His medical training and his experience in caring for, and watching as his mother and brother died of consumption, did not prevent him from repeatedly mentioning death and romanticizing consumption in three of his odes.

Overall, Keats’ poetry is characterized by its sensual imagery, which draws the reader in the multidimensionality and depth of the subject matter. This use of sensual imagery is especially present in his odes. Four of his poems stand out for their motifs of death and their references to consumption: “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode to a

Nightingale”, “Ode on Melancholy”, and “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”. “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode to a Nightingale”, and “Ode on Melancholy” were all written in 1819, shortly after Thomas Keats died of consumption. “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” was written in 1817, at this time John Keats would have been caring for Thomas.

The first stanza of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” begins with the speaker addressing an ancient Grecian urn, completely focused on how the images on the urn are frozen in time. For the speaker, the urn acts as a historian that can tell a story from the past. Though the urn acts as a historian, the speaker is still left curious as to what the figures are depicting, the time they were from, and what their story is. The second stanza focuses on a second image on the urn; that of a young man and his lover lying beneath the trees; in the third stanza the speaker examines how the trees are permanently new, a state which echoes the lovers’ never ending love. In these stanzas, Keats emphasizes the paradox of life and lifelessness by describing how the lover and the fair lady “cannot fade” (“Ode on a Grecian Urn” 19), their looks and actions unchanging as they exist in an eternally still and “silent form” (44). In the fourth stanza, the speaker examines the image of a group of villagers leading a heifer to be sacrificed. In this stanza, the speaker wonders where they are going to and coming from, and imagines what these places might be like now that they are forever abandoned. The speaker, in the final stanza, speaks to the urn about its permanence and knowledge.

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, Keats focuses on the dichotomy between the earth and the ethereal, and between mortality and permanence. The themes of this poem reflect on Keats’ ideas that his poetry would not be remembered. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” was written after Thomas had died, the themes of the poem reflect on the impermanence of the human body and the escape of the soul after death. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, Keats writes “when old age shall this generation waste”; however, this statement seems

optimistic considering the number of people who died of diseases such as consumption, war, and famine (46). Keats uses the urn as a symbol for the ways in which the arts can offer consolation during times of suffering.

“Ode to a Nightingale” centers on the speaker’s heartache, and how the nightingale’s song makes him happy and gives him a feeling of euphoria and numbness. Through this poem, the speaker discusses how he wants to forget his troubles and desires, and follow the nightingale’s immortal song even to the speaker’s death.

The main theme of “Ode to a Nightingale” is Keats’ desire to die, if he can die in an easy and pain free manner. There are two other main thoughts in “Ode to a Nightingale”: Keats’ evaluation of life and the power imagination holds. In “Ode to a Nightingale”, Keats is able to use the nightingale’s song as a manifestation of creative expression. The speaker in the poem places his faith in the nightingale’s song, which “fades[s] far away, [and] dissolve[s]” into the night (21). “Ode to a Nightingale” draws from Keats’ pain after the death of his brother Thomas. In 1819, when “Ode to a Nightingale” was written, it is likely that Keats was already experiencing the painful manifestation of tuberculosis. During his illness Keats would have become increasingly aware of his own mortality, and would likely have wanted to find a way to end his suffering. In this poem, Keats uses emotions to emphasize the suffering felt from heartache and the reality of human mortality.

“Ode on Melancholy” addresses how to cope with sadness. The first stanza focuses on what the sufferer should not do, and end with reminding the sufferer not to forget their grief. The second stanza picks up with what the sufferer should do to help

with the grief. In the third, and last, stanza, the speaker explains how these rules are linked, and that joy can only be found through sadness.

In “Ode on Melancholy”, Melancholy acts as the consolation during suffering. Her anthropomorphized character embodies the dichotomy of pleasure and pain. Keats shows the pain and suffering that those still living feel upon the death of a loved one. However, he emphasizes that those still living must not forget their sadness, but rather should remember the beauty of the deceased. Rather than dulling one’s senses, or committing suicide, the living must take comfort in the pleasure of memories. Keats was likely drawing on his own experience of grief after the sickness and death of his brother in order to portray pain and pleasure, like life and death, as coexistent entities that rely on each other in order to exist.

In “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”, Keats uses the images of beauty and art as a way of examining human mortality. The main theme of this poem draws on human mortality, and the heaviness that humans feel when this mortality is made more obvious. This poem was written in 1817: at this time, Keats was caring for his dying brother. He would have become increasingly aware of human mortality, particularly his own and his brother’s. As his brother’s suffering increased and his death became more imminent, Keats would have felt helpless to ease his brother’s suffering and pain. These feelings of helplessness and awareness of human mortality come through in “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”. The overwhelming presence of these likely came across due to occurrences in Keats’ life at the time and his inability to ignore the fact that his brother was dying.

John Keats is a prime example of the metaphors associated with tuberculosis. His life is reflected in his poems through the pictures of the beauty in early deaths, and the

necessity of dichotomies such as melancholy and delight, and pleasure and pain. Through his poems a clear vision of the positive metaphors used by the Romantics is seen. Keats repeatedly holds on to the image of the beauty that can be found in death. This image holds with many of the English Romantics, who used the disease to shape the literature and poetry of the time.

Prose

The Romantic Movement largely focused on imagination, individualism, and the natural world. During this movement, the writers focused on emotions, the commoners, and the mysterious. Much of the prose from the time is heavily sentimental and looks to the past with regret. While individualism was an important characteristic of the Romantic Movement, the sense of nationalism was also on the rise. With this rise in nationalism, people joined together in fighting the injustices that restricted their freedoms. These fights influenced the writers of the time to use rebellions and revolutions as back drops to their stories.

The ideas behind the Romantic Movement led writers worldwide to begin rejecting more restrictive writing styles. Writers began to let their imaginations control the plots and characters of their stories, rather than focusing on the realistic. By not restraining the influence of their imaginations, Romantic writers created stories that reached beyond reality and were often focused on emotions.

Historical and sentimental novels were popular due to the rise in nationalism and the sympathetic views of the past. Interest increased in gothic romances, which paired the horrific with the romantic to horrify and entrance the reader.

Edgar Allan Poe (United States of America)

Edgar Allan Poe is a recognized poet and prose story-teller of the Romantic Movement that developed in North America in the early nineteenth century. The Romantic Movement in North America, like that of Europe, was characterized by an emphasis on individualism, the self, and the view of the natural world as inherently good, while human society was inherently corrupt. Much of the literature of the time was characterized by the gothic. Edgar Allan Poe took this gothic emphasis and created poetry and prose full of mystery and the macabre.

When Edgar Allan Poe was about two, his mother died of consumption. In 1847, Edgar Allan Poe's wife and first cousin, Virginia Clemm, died of consumption. Her struggles through her illness and her eventual death had a profound effect on Poe's poetry and prose, as can be clearly seen in the change of his descriptions of consumption.

In 1832, Edgar Allan Poe first published "Metzengerstein". In this story, Poe romanticizes a consumptive death by having the narrator state that "I would wish all I love to perish of that gentle disease" ("Metzengerstein" 94). Poe describes the death as being peaceful and painless. Poe's romanticism of the consumptive appears in this story as a way of comforting the son of the deceased. By choosing to describe the death as painless and peaceful, Poe is bringing comfort to the living narrator. The consumption that is portrayed in "Metzengerstein" is the romantic consumption, the description of which was the cultural norm during the 1800s.

Ten years later, in 1842, Poe published "The Masque of the Red Death". At this same time, Virginia Clemm was suffering from tuberculosis. In "The Masque of the Red Death", the character of Prince Prospero tries to ignore the fatality of the Red Death. This

coincides with the manner in which many individuals ignored the true fatality of consumption, preferring to romanticize the symptoms and ignore that it ultimately causes the sufferer to die. Poe portrays the red death, not as the romantic consumption, but rather on a fatal illness that must be avoided at all cost. Prince Prospero attempts to escape the Red Death by hiding himself away, though he is ultimately unsuccessful and ends up dying. Prince Prospero's death reflects on the hopelessness that many felt as they contracted diseases such as tuberculosis.

This sharp change in Poe's descriptions of tuberculosis reflects the changes that occurred in Poe's own life. As Poe watched his wife suffer through tuberculosis, he was no longer able to ignore the pain associated with tuberculosis. Poe continued to try to ignore the fatality of consumption, while experiencing his wife dying of the disease. Poe's change in his portrayal of illness reflects upon the changes in his life, as his adopted mother died and then he watched his wife suffer and die. "The Masque of the Red Death" was published before his wife died. There is a clear difference between the portrayals of tuberculosis in "Metzengerstein" and "The Masque of the Red Death". This difference coincided with his wife contracting tuberculosis. "Metzengerstein" and "The Masque of the Red Death" represent the two extremes that Poe used when describing tuberculosis. In "Metzengerstein" he focused on the romantic image by glorifying the consumptive death. On the flip side, in "The Masque of the Red Death", Poe focused on the horrors and unrelenting manner in which tuberculosis infects and kills. Despite the fact that many of his stories focus on the horror and the gothic, Poe continued to romanticize tuberculosis in many of his works. This romantic portrayal by Poe reflects

the attitudes towards tuberculosis held by writers and the public during the Romantic Movement.

Victor Marie Hugo (France)

The Romantic Movement in French literature occurred later than in other countries; however the change in literature corresponded to the societal changes during the 1700s and 1800s. The precursor to the Romantic Era in France was the cult of sensibility, which was associated with Ancien Régime. With the revolutions came a series of social and political upheavals. The actions of the revolutions were described both by those outside of France, and later by French writers themselves. One of the most well-known writers was Victor Hugo, most known for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables*.

Hugo's *Les Misérables* spans the time from 1815 to the June Rebellion in 1832. The first volume of the novel is focused on Fantine. Due to the harsh circumstances that she experiences, she is exposed to and contracts tuberculosis. More so than other authors of the time, Hugo accurately portrayed the pain and delirium that tuberculosis could cause. While Hugo gave a more accurate description of what suffering from tuberculosis could be like, he still hints at the romanticism of the disease. In *Les Misérables*, Fantine goes through a number of hardships which cause her to reach an ultimate low point. Her death is actually a reprieve from the hardships of her life, as well as a reflection upon all of the negative things that happened to her. Fantine's death can only be seen as romantic in that it gives her an escape from her negative life.

Henri Murger (France)

Like Hugo, Murger used a consumptive death to free one of his Bohemians from her negative life. In *The Latin Quarter (Scènes de la vie de Bohème)*, Mimi contracts and dies from tuberculosis. This novel is the inspiration for Puccini's *La Bohème*, which will be discussed later in this paper. Unlike Hugo's presentation, Murger's descriptions of Mimi's illness in the novel are more in line with the romantic view of consumption. Her death is ultimately peaceful and while her illness spans throughout the novel, there are few details about her suffering. Rather, the focus is on how her death frees her from the negative life she had led.

Like Fantine, in *Les Misérables*, Mimi suffers through a number of set-backs that emphasize the desperation of her character. Mimi's illness only furthers the image of her downtrodden life. The love she finds gives her life a positive edge; however, her death casts sadness over the love and the life that they could have achieved.

Alexandre Dumas, fils (France)

In *Camille*, Dumas describes the romantic consumption. His descriptions are where we get the images of the drop of blood on a white handkerchief. Throughout the novel there are repeated mentions of the weakness, the health concerns, and the measures taken to improve the consumptive's health; one such measure was to relocate to the countryside. It was a common practice during the 1800s to leave the cities with their dirty air and retreat to the clean air of the country.

Marguerite, the consumptive around whom the novel centers, continues to be a socialite despite her illness, allowing Dumas to create an image of a woman in the full of life who continues to live for the moment. The direct dichotomy is that she is aware that

her health is failing her and that she is dying. Through this dichotomy, Dumas creates contradictory emotions that must both occur and be felt.

While Marguerite and those around her are concerned for her health, no one is terribly alarmed by the blood she coughs up. This is telling of the society of the time, and of the romantic image that Dumas wants to portray. In fact, the first time her coughing up blood is mentioned, concern is shown primarily because she had to remove herself from the social occasion.

As with Mimi in *The Latin Quarter*, Marguerite enters into a romantic relationship. Throughout the book there are numerous mentions of the affection shown between Marguerite and her lover. To the reader of today these affections bring only thoughts of the spread of tuberculosis. However, considering the time, the romance allows Marguerite to transcend beyond being a mistress and to become the object of a man's affection. She is forced to end the relationship as her health declines; this parallel shows the connections between the decline in health, spirit, heart, and body. Marguerite's death is heavily romanticized. She passes peacefully, painlessly, and with a beauty that can only come with the Romantics.

During her illness, Marguerite chose to live peacefully and happily, rather than concentrating on her illness. Despite her efforts to ignore her illness, she was often forced to acknowledge the changes that had occurred due to her consumption. In addition to coughing up blood, she also tired easily. As her illness progressed, she took on the characteristic pale and weak image that was a common societal perception.

This book portrayed the image of consumption that society held, while also encouraging the image. It also influenced additional works of art to portray consumption

in this romantic manner. Later, Giuseppe Verdi would recreate this book into the opera *La Traviata*, which will be discussed in the next section. In 2001, Baz Luhrmann would bring the story to the big screen with *Moulin Rouge!* which would bring back to life the romantic image of the consumptive and the sudden and peaceful death that overcomes them.

Opera

Giacomo Puccini (Italy)

Giacomo Puccini composed *La Bohème* as a four act opera, with a libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. *La Bohème* is based on Henri Murger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de bohème (The Latin Quarter)*. The opera premiered in 1896 at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy.

In *La Bohème*, consumption is treated in two ways. It is taken seriously and seen as an illness that needs to be treated. However, there is also a certain amount of love and romance that centers around the consumptive Mimì and the poet Rodolfo. Mimì and Rodolfo embark on a romance that Rodolfo ends because he knows that he does not have the financial means to help Mimì get the medical aid she needs. The friendship that Mimì and the bohemians form holds a certain amount of care that allows all of them to form deeper bonds of friendship.

In Puccini's *La Bohème*, it is not until act three that the audience has any evidence that Mimì is ill. This awareness comes when Mimì enters the stage and is seen to be coughing violently. She approaches Marcello, a friend of Rodolfo, at the inn (for which he paints signs) and tells him about Rodolfo ending their romance. Marcello is concerned about Mimì's cough, and informs her that Rodolfo is asleep. When Rodolfo awakes, he finds Marcello and tells him that he left Mimì because he is afraid that she has contracted an illness that will ultimately be fatal, and because of his own poverty he is unable to help her. By breaking it off, Rodolfo hoped that Mimì would find a wealthier suitor who could

care for her. Mimì hears the confession from her hiding spot and her coughing and crying reveals her to Rodolfo. Rodolfo and Mimì agree that they love each other too much to part, and agree that they will stay together until the springtime.



Figure 3: A depiction of Mimì's death in Puccini's *La Bohème*, surrounded by the Bohemians.

In act four, the springtime has passed and Mimì has left the patron she took up with after leaving Rodolfo. While she is wandering the street, weakened because of her illness, Musetta comes across her and Mimì begs him to take her to see Rodolfo. Though she is weak and haggard from the tuberculosis consuming her, upon being reunited with Rodolfo she has a brief moment where she feels as if she is recovering. However, this brief moment is over when Mimì begins to cough once more. The opera ends with Rodolfo holding a dead Mimì, crying with anguish over the loss of his beloved; her peaceful death in which she is surrounded by the love and friendship of the Bohemians can be seen in Figure 3, where she is lying peacefully down as though she were simply sleeping.

While Mimì's death is sad, there is a romantic edge to her death. In the end, her death acts as her reprieve from the desolate life she led during her time before she met the Bohemians. Though she was already dying when she met the Bohemians, through that meeting she was able to find and have love and friendship until she died. Those who shared their lives with her were with her as she died, they mourned and remembered her. Mimì's suffering occurred when she was separated from Rodolfo; however, when they were reunited she recovered for a moment before giving in to the illness and allowing herself to die.

Giuseppe Verdi (Italy)

Giuseppe Verdi composed the three act opera, *La Traviata*. The libretto was composed by Francesco Maria Piave. *La Traviata* was based on the play *La dame aux Camélias* (1852), which was originally adapted from Alexandre Dumas, fils novel *The Lady of the Camillias*. *La Traviata* premiered in 1853 at the La Fenice opera house in Venice. Originally, Piave and Verdi wanted to set the opera in contemporary times; however the authorities at La Fenice forced them to set it in 1700s France. In 1880, Piave and Verdi's wish was granted and the time frame of *La Traviata* was changed to the eighteenth century.

La Traviata closely follows the events that occur in Dumas novel. As with Dumas novel, *La Traviata* focuses on the romance between Violetta, a courtesan suffering from tuberculosis, and Alfredo, a young bourgeois from a provincial family. In *La Traviata*, Violetta continues to interact with society, until finally she retreats to the countryside. Violetta's illness directly influences her relationship with Alfredo; from their first meeting after she fainted to their tearful reunion on her deathbed, their romance revolves

around her illness and their love strengthens through her illness, being the strongest when she is physically the weakest.

The first act begins after Violetta has been ill, and opens with a party to celebrate her recovery. This party is the occasion of the first meeting of Violetta and Alfredo, where it is revealed that during Violetta's illness Alfredo came to her residence every day. During her party, Violetta begins to feel dizzy, and while she rests the party continues, guests dancing while she examines her pale physique. While those familiar with the opera know that Violetta is suffering from consumption, her pale face is the first indicator that she is still ill, despite her belief that she has recovered. As Violetta rests in the salon, Alfredo enters and expresses his concern for her still fragile health



Figure 4: A depiction of Violetta's death in Verdi's *La Traviata*.

In the third act, Violetta's doctor tell her maid that Violetta's tuberculosis has gotten worse and that she is going to die soon. Alfredo and Violetta are reunited, but this comes too late, as she is near death. Violetta revives for a short time during Alfredo's visit, and exclaims that her pain and discomfort are gone. She soon dies while in

Alfredo's arms; this can be seen in Figure 4, which shows her peaceful death in which she is surrounded by love.

La Traviata, like Dumas' novel, focuses on the romanticism of tuberculosis. In *La Traviata*, Violetta continues to socialize and put up a front of recovered health. However, this front only lasts for a short time as she is quick to tire and must rest frequently. Violetta is not shown in pain; her coughing is dainty and elegant, the polar opposite of a consumptive cough. This romantic portrayal of tuberculosis is drawn from Dumas' novel, in which the courtesan, Marguerite, keeps her station in society and attempts to assure the public of her health.

Conclusion

During the Romantic Era, consumption was believed to be linked to poetic and aesthetic qualities, a belief that was reflected in the literature and medical field of the time. Consumption's association with the slender, pale figure with rosy cheeks allowed it to be viewed in a positive light. In later years that image continued to be considered the ideal body, however, its association with consumption diminished which further enhanced society's negative view of tuberculosis.

As disease processes and *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* were discovered, the literature adjusted to accommodate this change, and through these changes societal perception of tuberculosis changed from being poetic and aesthetic to being an infectious bacterial disease. The perception of tuberculosis being associated with the poetic and aesthetic changed during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, especially as tuberculosis became endemic amongst the urban poor. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, consumptives were advised to relocate to warm, humid climates. This idea that changing the air would aid in recovering from consumption continued to be used into the twentieth century with the development of sanatoriums.

It is likely that even during the Romantic Era the positive view of tuberculosis was predominately seen in the affluent due to its association with the aesthetic and poetic. In addition, the urban poor would have been unable to support themselves as they contracted tuberculosis and any medical aid would have been financially out of their reach. The affect that tuberculosis had on the urban poor can be seen in its escalation to

an endemic disease, which caused widespread public concern in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The advancements in medicine that allowed for tuberculosis to be seen for its true devastation led to an overwhelming change in its portrayal in literature. These forces combined and helped change the societal perceptions of tuberculosis. No longer was it seen as the romantic, poetic, aesthetically pleasing consumption of the Romantic Era, instead it evolved into a feared disease that could not truly be treated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even now, we have problems with combating the various forms of tuberculosis, due to the increasing number of drug resistant strains.

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