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Cultural Perceptions of Suicide in Western Cultures from Antiquity to the Present

A Senior Honors Thesis

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for Graduation in the Honors College

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The subject of suicide has been one often removed from or ignored in the historical record. In the rare moment when scholars and popular culture have focused on suicide, it is more due to its promise of death and bloodshed rather than any actual concern to the act and its purposes. As a result, the topic and its cultural connotations have remained largely absent from cultural historiography. However, what little attention that has been paid to the subject of suicide highlights more the perceptions of suicide than the actual act. As with any subject, the manner in which something is perceived by the general population is dependent upon its depictions in cultural documents and vice versa. Specifically, the manner in which cultural documents of a society, such as examples of media, literature, and so on, are reflective of the prevailing attitudes of the period and place. Because of this, the most explicit purpose of this project is to provide a more comprehensive history of perceptions of suicide. Prevailing attitudes regarding suicide have undergone a marked shift between antiquity and now, reflecting fundamental changes in societal perceptions of the act and the relative ethics behind it. Fundamentally, perceptions of suicide have historically fluctuated between complete opposition, wherein the act is regarded as a moral blight, and relative acceptance, where the ethics of the act are pushed aside in favor of sympathy or understanding toward the causes of the act.

There is a necessary discussion to be had culturally regarding specific attitudes pertaining to suicide based upon the evidence provided by cultural artifacts that chronicle the manner in which attitudes and perceptions changed or remained unvaried over time. Attitudes present in Western examples of literature, media, and law reflect fundamental shifts in the understanding and perceptions of suicide, based upon the differing cultural and temporal influences of a specific place. In particular, in Western societies, the act of suicide went from an unusual, accepted act to a more shameful or even damning action. In order to do this, this essay will

engage in an analysis of newspapers, literary works, and religious and legal documents, as well as supplementation from academic works, to engage in a fruitful and useful analysis of perceptions and representations of suicide. The scope is focused within Western societies, specifically scope on Western Europe, England, Germany, and the United States in particular, in order to develop a comprehensive history of suicide in this region. Western societies are the main focus due to the varying perceptions of suicide in the last few hundred years, which have allowed for the act to reflect evolving attitudes on the subject, as well as the relative abundance of representations present in various cultural objects, literary works and periodicals in particular. Various reflections of suicide found in these cultural documents, from literary and mass media treatments to philosophical and sociological analyses, present an act that has undergone an incredible perceptual shift over centuries that has been thus far ignored in the historical record.

There is a lack of any real synthesis in regards to the history of suicide in the social sciences and critical analyses of cultural documents. Multiple scholarly assessments have been written about specific periods or topics within the field, but none have attempted a comprehensive analysis of the subject and its history. Though there has always been a morbid interest in the subject of suicide, any attempts to historicize it have been done largely in the mind of describing scandals and myths rather than with an interest in documenting its actual history and position in society. The majority of scholarship on the subject focuses on particular periods and regions in regards to cultural reflection on the act. For example, the monograph *History of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World*, edited by John Weaver and David Wright, contains several essays that address historical perspectives on suicide in different regions and time periods. The intention behind the collection was to rectify the lack of scholarship on the history of suicide, which was, and remains, at the “periphery of humanistic

scholarship.”¹ The collection represents one of the more comprehensive histories on the subject, particularly with its reflection on the intersection between medical and public reactions to suicide. Several other works have attempted to pay similar attention, most often in book form, though most just focus on one particular place and period.

In most instances, this scholarship does not attract much interest or debate. Perhaps the most apparent debate occurred in the nineteen eighties regarding the influence of the rise of print media, particularly newspapers, in the eighteenth century. Historian Michael McDonald published two articles, “The Secularization of Suicide in England 1600-1800” and “Suicide and the Rise of the Popular Press in England,” both of which argue that the relationship between print newspapers and suicide is mutually impactful. Newspapers were enabled to make better profits and sell more papers when they focused on the scandalous, such as suicide, while the act of suicide itself began to take on a more secular and sympathetic tone. Fellow historian Donna Andrews took issue with McDonald’s conclusions, specifically that there were multiple socio-economic factors during the period that prompted both print press and suicide without the two necessarily having strong ties. Aside from a few articles in scholarly journals spanning a few months, there had been little more, or any, further debate within historical factions of suicidology. This dearth of information and attention may largely be attributed to the lack of psychological and social research on suicide its context. The most groundbreaking research on suicide was Emile Durkheim’s *Le suicide, or The Suicide*, a book on research published in 1897. Durkheim has been credited with founding the field of sociology, largely because few, if any, had ventured to focus on the psychology of the many previous to his research. Prior to

¹ David Wright and John Weaver, introduction to *History of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World*, ed, David Wright and John Weaver (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009): 3.

Durkheim's assessment, academic scholarship on suicide was near non-existent, with the scant few focusing on individuals or romanticized deaths more than the topic itself. As such, the field may be split into two periods, "before and after that book ... *Le Suicide*," highlighting how "little systemic research" existed before Durkheim published his monogram. This severe lack of information and attention emphasizes how necessary more detailed and comprehensive histories on the topic are.

Emile Durkheim's 1897 *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* was the first such attempt to address suicide and its societal origins and consequences. Previously, there had never been any serious inspection of suicide in any capacity, scientific or otherwise. In many ways, this study is a part of a growing interest in scientifically analyzing society and the world that developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to this interest, Durkheim's research and analysis have become incredibly influential in suicidology, and are invaluable in analyzing suicide in any context, including historically and literarily. As such, it is necessary to use Durkheim's findings and assertions as a basis for an inspection on suicide. Durkheim operates under a definition of suicide as "death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result," ruling out any deaths by misadventure or with some doubt cast upon them.² Utilizing this definition, Durkheim's bases his study on the central assertion that suicide is a result of societal factors bearing down on the victim and influencing the act. These "social types of suicide" are then influenced and determined by "the causes which produce them:, as opposed to the predispositions, such as race, gender, mental state, and climate, that suicides had been solely

² Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 44.

attributed to in the past.³ Though Durkheim does not completely dismiss these factors and influential in suicides, he does argue that there are more ingrained societal elements, such as religion, economic crisis, or other attributions of “the weight of society” that bear heavier on the victim when suicide is attempted.⁴ Essentially, Durkheim develops a more neutral representation of suicide than was ever seen before him, with a focus on causation and the misunderstandings regarding suicide rather than the sensationalization of the act. His arguments on the causation of suicide are essential knowledge for any examination of the subject, and will be used to analyze the manner that suicides are depicted in cultural objects in Western societies. As such, Durkheim’s work and its influence will be utilized as a basis for the organization and analysis of the various cultural elements studied in this work and how they reflect prevailing perceptions of suicide.

I. Literature

References to and representations of suicide have been present in literature for over two thousand years. Many authors have chosen to depict suicide largely for its potential as dramatic fodder. However, despite less than savory purposes, literary depictions of suicide are an incredibly important source for an analysis of cultural understandings of suicide. This is because of the extreme proximity between a literary work and the general populace. A literary work is directly marketed to general population, and, as such, has an interest in reflecting societal perceptions of certain elements, such as suicide, in order to appeal to a mass audience. An analysis of literary pieces is then a necessary component of cultural understandings of suicide. Additionally, when placed in close proximity to analyses of other literary works depicting

³ Durkheim, *Suicide*, 147.

⁴ Durkheim, *Suicide*, 219.

suicide, the individual representations come together to highlight important trends in suicide representation over time. An analysis of the manner in which an author depicts suicide will also illustrate the mechanism behind this depiction, reflecting popular perceptions of the causes of suicide and the role it plays in everyday life.

Some of the first of these representations were in Greek tragedies, which presented suicide as a curious but understandable action taken by those desperate enough to take their own lives. For example, Sophocles play *Antigone*, one of the Theban plays focusing on the family of Oedipus. The play, most likely written sometime around 441 B.C.E. contains several suicides, each of which is represented as understandable, or even necessary. The most prominent of these suicides are those of the titular Antigone and her fiancé, Haemon, the king's son. Antigone kills herself in a "fine linen noose" while imprisoned for burying her rebellious bother, while Haemon leaned "his full weight on the blade...halfway to the hilt" upon finding her body.⁵ Though both deaths are, by modern standards, avoidable and unnecessary, the play depicts them as the logical, if tragic, conclusions of each character's story; as a beloved sister, Antigone had to give her brother an honorable burial and, once this expectation has been fulfilled, she had no reason to live in captivity after returning honor to her brother. Haemon's death is given more focus and consideration, as his death is described in great detail, but it ultimately distills down to his grief and "raging mad with his father for the death" of Antigone.⁶ However, the most interesting aspect of this representation of double suicide is that "the living are guilty of their death."⁷ Rather than demonizing the suicides, as would be done in later representations, Antigone and Haemon's suicides are blamed on the society that pressed them to do it. This is reflective of a

⁵ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 122.

⁶ Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 120.

⁷ Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 120.

more sympathetic and even accepting cultural understanding of suicide, and implies that, though the act is tragic, suicide deaths are not necessarily less logical or natural than any other mode of death.

Written around 1600, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* contains several monologues within the main plot that contend with the issue of suicide and its ethics, specifically religiously. The titular protagonist is haunted by his father's death and his yearning for revenge, which causes him to feel deeply depressed and suicidal. In his first introduction, Hamlet recited a soliloquy wherein he wishes for his body to "melt, thaw and resolve" into nothingness, making the audience privy to his suicidal urges. He then goes on to admonish canon law, complaining that God had "fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" damning his own desires for death.⁸ Hamlet's complaints highlight the importance of religious doctrine in European society, and how religious doctrine affects those contemplating suicide. Though written in Protestant England, by a Protestant, *Hamlet* is a very Catholic play; for example, Hamlet's father must toil in purgatory before he can ascend, a strictly Catholic belief, and Hamlet refrains from killing his uncle while he is praying in order to prevent Claudius from traveling directly to heaven with his freshly forgiven soul. Due to the play's latent Catholicism, it reflects both Elizabethan English beliefs on suicide as well as contemporary Catholic beliefs on the subject. As with other Christian sects, Catholics believe that to commit suicide is a sin; this belief is derived from the Ten Commandments, which label murder, even of oneself, as a sin.

Catholic beliefs are standardized by the Church, while Protestant beliefs are more varied, making their admonishment of suicide particularly virulent. As such, Shakespeare's choice to

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 20.

write a particularly Catholic depiction of suicide ideation is interesting. Elizabethan society was strictly Protestant, and any remaining Catholics, referred to as recusants, were officially persecuted well into the nineteenth century. In emphasizing the Catholic nature of the play, Shakespeare is enabled to represent the more intense condemnation of suicide espoused by the Catholic Church and Catholic doctrine, as well as presenting contemporary Protestant views of the period. Beyond religion, Hamlet's speeches also question the ethics of suicide. The famous "to be, or not to be" soliloquy contemplates the merits of suicide, and whether one is to "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or to take one's life and avoid the dangers living can bring.⁹ Hamlet's debate, which centers on questions of ethics and duty, reflects similar arguments that were made at the time, and which have continued into the twenty-first century. It also reflects an inexact view of suicide, as he is enabled to provide support for either argument within his questioning. This shows that rejection or understanding of suicide during this period was not set in stone, at that there were debates surrounding how society and individuals should consider the act.

One of the most famous depictions of suicide in literature is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1794). One of the earliest examples of modern international bestsellers, the novel has become a stepping stone in cultural depictions and understandings of suicide. At the time of its publication, the novel became a sensation, spawning the so-called "Werther Effect" in reference to international recreations of the title character's suicide. As a product of German Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, the novel presents a stylized and sentimentalized depiction of suicide ideation, as well as the act itself. The titular Werther is driven to "drink the cup of bitterness" and attempt to take his own life after a woman

⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 97.

he loves marries another man.¹⁰ His descent into this state is recorded in an epistolary style, in a series of letters to Werther's friend Wilhelm, save for the last section, which is presumably written by Wilhelm himself. It is in these last few correspondences that one may best see how contemporaries understood Werther's motivations. He describes himself as "possessed by an evil demon" and believes that almost any act he can undertake, whether pleasurable or painful, "threatens to tear [his] heart asunder." In this letter, dated the twelfth of December, Werther states "I could not put an end to my torment!-My time has not come," marking some form of hesitancy in his actions, despite his assertions that "I should have surrendered my human existence."¹¹ His last dated letter, the twentieth of December, reads like a suicide note, one of several in the later portion of the novel, in which he inquires that his friends and family forgive and pray for him, and culminates in a series of "farewells" and exclamatory goodbyes. The narration then goes on to say that Werther killed himself several days later, after having made a scene at Lotte's home.

The nature of the novel, as a highly romanticized, melodramatic piece, and its subject matter, specifically a suicide brought on by spurned love, has captured readers' imaginations since its publication. Tobin Siebers argues that the novel was the "first psychological murder" due to these elements, which have placed Werther as the archetypal "artist-suicide in the Romantic age" and beyond.¹² In the case of this novel, it is not so much its depiction as society's reaction to this depiction that highlights the period's perception of the act. Almost immediately after its publication, the novel incited copycat suicides, leading to the development of the "Werther Effect." This denotes a "tendency of people to commit suicide under the compulsion of

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (London: Penguin Classics, 1989), 99.

¹¹ Goethe, *Werther*, 111-112.

¹² Tobin Siebers, "The Werther Effect: The Esthetics of Suicide," *Mosaic* 26:1 (1993): 16.

imitation rather than for individual motivations;” essentially, these suicides are attributed to cultural documents and events, such as the novel, with society acting as the primary motivator in the act.¹³ Contemporaries came to blame the novel and other sentimental novels of the period for inciting “sentimental responses” that result in reader’s deaths.¹⁴ Subsequently, the phrase has come to denote any rash of suicides that result from coverage of a single event; another example would be the development of an anti-suicide campaign in Vienna, Austria in the nineteen eighties following the completion of its subway system. This “relation between media reports and imitative suicidal behavior” has come to be understood as a leading cultural motive in large rushes of suicides, and has led to some of the first initiatives to actively prevent suicidal behaviors in individuals.¹⁵ These changes in public reaction to “Werther” suicides marks fundamental cultural shifts in understandings and interpretations of these acts. Initially, the suicides attributed to the novel were largely blamed on its sentimentalized and romantic nature, essentially blaming individuals and their susceptible nature to cultural influences for their deaths. Contemporaries would then use these deaths as examples to demonize novels and their influence on young people; though a reasonable argument, they refused to take into account any other cultural influences, and did not take these deaths very seriously beyond their “romantic nature.” However, modern approaches to the “Werther Effect” analyze the suicidal influences conveyed by Durkheim and others and actively attempt to address them, highlighting a perceptual shift in sympathy and blame in cultural reactions to suicide.

Oloudah Equiano’s 1789 memoir *The Interesting Narrative of Oloudah Equiano* provides interesting insight into a different sort of interpretation of suicide. Much of Equiano’s book

¹³ Siebers, “The Werther Effect,” 15.

¹⁴ Siebers, “The Werther Effect,” 23.

¹⁵ Elmar Etzerdorfer and Gernot Sonneck. “Preventing Suicide by Influencing Mass Media Reporting. The Viennese Experience 1980-1996.” *Archives of Suicide Research* 1:4 (1998): 69.

details his experiences as a slave in the eighteenth century, and the ill treatment he and other bondpeople were subjected to in particular. In one of the most memorable scenes of the memoir, Equiano describes attempted and completed suicides on his journey across the Middle Passage. This was enough of a problem on slave ships that “the crew used to watch those...who were not chained down” for fear that they would jump over the side of the ship and purposefully drown themselves.¹⁶ Those who attempted suicide were punished severely, typically with flogging, for nearly diminishing the slavers’ profits. In one instance, “preferring death to such a life of misery,” three bondmen jumped ship and drowned purposefully, an action that Equiano states “more would very soon had done” if they had been prevented by the ship’s crew.¹⁷ Equiano’s descriptions of suicide, and his own desire for it, are at odds with typical conceptions of it during the late eighteenth century. As stated previously, religion was an important obstacle in many suicidal attempts; Equiano mentions that the European crewmen could not comprehend why the bondmen would wish to kill themselves so far away from their homes and without proper burials. However, during this same period, many West African people, such as Equiano and his contemporaries were, followed kinship and animist religions, rather than Christianity or other religions with similar conceptions of the afterlife. In these religions, “when men have run their course in this world they return to their master,” regardless of how they have died, and, unless they have committed some grievous sin, they are reunited with their ancestors.¹⁸ This societal difference accounts for Equiano’s easy acceptance of suicide, especially in the conditions that he and others endured on slave ships. Without the barrier of European religious taboos, West

¹⁶ Oloudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 56.

¹⁷ Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 59.

¹⁸ G.T. Basden, “An Old Woman’s Pre-Arranged Funeral,” in *The Ethics of Suicide: Historical Sources*, ed. Margaret Pabst Battin. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 613.

Africans being enslaved found a certain solace in suicide, as they would be enabled to participate in the afterlife of their ancestors without the taint of sin.

As with these earlier examples, Anton Chekhov's 1896 play *The Seagull* uses a suicide to elucidate the dramatic nature of the plot. The central narrative of the play follows a group of artists through their personal and professional highs and lows. This dichotomy is best exemplified by Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov, a playwright whose romantic relationship with the actress Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya is paralleled by his professional failings. He spends the majority of the play wishing he could recreate the artistic mode of plays, largely in some hope of achieving recognition beyond his mother's acting career. However, he repeatedly fails at this endeavor, and toward the end of the play states he is "drifting in chaos of daydreams and images" without any idea as to "what [his] calling is" or what he could be successful in.¹⁹ Several conversations before this follow in the same manner, with Treplyov necessitating support and understanding from his peers. Eventually, Treplyov walks into his study after having destroyed his manuscripts and cut the last of his romantic ties with Nina and kills himself with a gunshot. His death is given a great deal of sensitivity compared to earlier examples, and especially for the dramatic structure of the play as a whole. Upon hearing the gunshots, the doctor Dorn goes to investigate and returns calmly and somberly; he requests that Trigorin remove Treplyov's mother "somewhere away from here" without raising any especially melodramatic alarms.²⁰ Earlier depictions of the aftermath of suicide have been bled for dramatic efficacy; Sophocles multiple violent deaths in *Antigone* and the especially deadly results of Hamlet's suicidal leanings provide perfect examples of these melodramatic suicides. However,

¹⁹ Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*, trans. Laurence Senelick (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 160.

²⁰ Chekhov, *Seagull*, 163.

The Seagull takes a more measured approach, neutralizing the climax so as not to over-emphasize its effect. This reflects a more serious approach to issues of death and self-harm, perhaps as a result of the decline of czarist Russia during this period.²¹ The earlier Western European examples reflect an interest in the melodramatic and the obscenely attractive; this example, however, is reflective of a more serious and somber thread often found in Russian literature of the period. Other Russian works of the period, such as the majority of Dostoevsky's output, focused on suicide as a specifically Russian social issue; Dostoevsky even once described it as a Russian institution, with the land having lost "the capacity to hold people on it" and prevent suicides.²² This highlights the ubiquitous nature of suicide in Russian culture, and also explains the manner in which Chekhov depicts it. Treplyov's suicide is directly influenced by his professional failings and inability to successfully engage in the outside world. These influences, as the direct consequences of Russian cultural understandings of suicide, highlight the more serious and sympathetic manner that Russian, and other Eastern European cultures, viewed suicides and those who commit suicide.

Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* provides interesting commentary on twentieth century British perceptions of suicide. A good portion of the novel follows shell-shocked World War I veteran Septimus Warren Smith, who ultimately kills himself after suffering a nervous breakdown. He is haunted by the death of a fellow soldier and repeatedly re-experiences the event; his death is treated as a direct result of the war and its psychological damage on participants. Woolf largely writes Septimus in a sympathetic manner, making his death understandable and tragic to the reader. However, it is understood very differently within

²¹ Tanya Jukkala, Ilkka Henrik Mäkinen & Andrew Stickley, "The Historical Development of Suicide Mortality in Russia, 1870–2007," *Archives of Suicide Research* 19:1 (2015), 120.

²² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary: Volume One 1873-1876*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 496.

the novel, particularly among the upper class characters. When Septimus commits suicide by leaping out of a window, his death is witnessed by the titular Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, causing her to question if “she did not pity him” or if “she felt glad that he had done it.” Clarissa likens herself to him, and feels a sense of pride that he was enabled to have “thrown it all away,” an action she could not comprehend for herself.²³ Like Septimus, Clarissa is haunted by the past, and allows it to dictate her present; however, unlike Septimus, she does not allow herself to take the more drastic actions to combat this status quo, perceiving such extremism to be beyond her status and understanding. This belief, which is presented as the norm among the aristocracy and upper middle class, is highly prejudiced toward those who attempt or commit suicide, likely due to its implicit association with working class people. In the example of Clarissa and Septimus’ near interaction, she describes herself as admiring him for his “attempt to communicate” through death, but then falls back into societal perceptions of suicide and those who commit it.²⁴ These perceptions become even more evident in the dinner party scene, where the aristocratic guests discuss Septimus’ death with disregard and flippancy. His death is brought up as an anecdote, between descriptions of children and professions, and it is treated as a sort of illustrious dinner party story, one that brings a level of danger to the conversation. Clarissa, at the very least, acknowledges the inappropriate nature of the topic, but more for its impediment to the success of her dinner party, as “in the middle of [her] party, here’s death,” rather than for any real concern for Septimus or his family.²⁵ Septimus’ status as a soldier is also commented on in this interaction, but only as another salacious detail; at no point do any of the attendees think to associate the war, or empathy, with Septimus’ suicide. This treatment reflects British disinterest

²³ Virginia Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 181-182.

²⁴ Woolf, *Dalloway*, 180.

²⁵ Woolf, *Dalloway*, 179.

in mental health issues and dealing with the psychological repercussions of the First World War; it also reflects the aristocracy's indifference in people of the lower classes and their well-being beyond acting as cannon fodder.

As the twentieth century progresses, and psychology became more standardized and understood, portrayals of the mentally ill, including those who attempt or commit suicide, became more sympathetic in representation. This is best highlighted in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963. The book is autobiographical, and follows a young woman named Esther Greenwood as she works for a New York City fashion magazine and has a nervous breakdown. The novel is notable due to its sympathetic and understanding approach to suicide and suicide ideation. First and foremost is the novel's point of view; as a first-person novel, the reader is placed in Esther's position, nearly forcing them to empathize with her and her emotional state. The majority of the earlier works are in the third-person, save for *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. However, where the two novels differ is the manner in which they use this first-person approach. Goethe uses Werther's melodramatic fears and fancies to create a romanticized mental breakdown, wherein his speech has art and emphatic inflection; this stylistic choice highlights the novel's focus on expression and aesthetic rather than realism. In addition, the novel's epistolary nature, even though in the first-person, allows for a degree of distance to be built between Werther and the audience. Plath, on the other hand, firmly places the audience in Esther's mind, refusing to allow for any distance between the two. As such, her mental health comes to the forefront to the reader, and the novel more effectively expresses the perspective of a suicidal individual.

Beyond the novel's point of view, the detailed and specific manner in which Plath conveys Esther's anxiety and depression brings the reader in deeper and creates a sense of

sympathetic association with her mental state. Though Esther does not commit suicide, she does attempt it several times, with the last acting as the most serious. In this final attempt, she swallows the pills that have been prescribed for her insomnia and hides herself out so she will be difficult to save. Before she is found, she details the experience of nearly dying, which she describes as “completely dark” and impenetrable, a description not too far off from her depictions of depression.²⁶ It is these reflections on her depressive state that are most effective in portraying suicidal depression to the audience. To Esther, her depression is a bell jar that reduces its inhabitant to “a dead baby” whose whole world is nothing but “a bad dream” that one cannot wake up from.²⁷ By going into such detail, Plath invites the reader to sympathize with and understand Esther’s emotions, and, potentially, understand the cause of her suicide attempts more empathetically. This puts it in sharp contrast to many of the earlier depictions of suicide, which treated it with alternating disdain and disinterest, depending on the investment of the characters in the action.

Literary depictions of suicide are often the most immediate reflection of a particular cultural understanding of the act. This is because of the relative proximity between a novel or play and the general population. Few other cultural elements are as much of a societal reflection as a literary work; as such, an analysis of literary representations is a necessary component to any serious treatment of the act’s cultural significance. Additionally, many authors employ depictions of suicide in their works in order to provide a source of drama or symbolize some higher theme in the work; this allows for a plethora of depictions to be sifted through to analyzed in order to observe changes and continuities in suicidal depictions in Western literature. The

²⁶ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 199.

²⁷ Plath, *Bell*, 276.

works studied above are some of the most famous and interesting pieces of possible analytical works. Additionally, when placed together, these works highlight important cultural shifts in perception regarding suicide. The earliest work, Sophocles *Antigone*, portrays suicide as a necessary evil when an individual is subjected to certain circumstances, such as the threat of death. This provides a certain amount of ethical leeway regarding the act; Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* and Chekhov's *The Seagull* reflect similar understandings, reflecting an important continuity in literary suicide depictions. It is relatively well known that suicide has been historically denigrated culturally, as evidenced by Hamlet's ethical debate over suicide in *Hamlet* and the wealthy's belittlement of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*. However, a more sympathetic vein holds in more recent literary works, namely Plath's *The Bell Jar*. The novel goes into the actual psychology of a suicidal individual, and places important emphasis on the role of mental health and outward influences in suicide ideation and enactment. This places Plath's treatment in sharp contrast to many earlier works, even those that treat suicide sympathetically. This contrast illustrates a trend in later literature toward more sympathetic portrayals of suicide and suicidal characters, largely due to the emphasis on the cause of their acts and the intricacies of mental health.

II. Print Media

Print media beyond literary examples, such as magazines and newspapers, are often the first sources that the masses have to a suicide or other violent event. As such, the manner in which these sources relay this information to their audience colors the manner in which that audience takes the information. In many ways, representations of suicide in informational media is just as influential to how suicide is culturally regarded and perceived as it is reflective of that very same society. The ways that these media outlets bring this information to their audience

may then be traced through dominant perceptions of suicide. Newspapers came to prominence in the eighteenth century, and became the most immediate and accessible manner for the masses to access information and news, specifically in regards to things that may not be in their immediate vicinity. This acted to conflate both geography and culture, allowing for the dissemination of information and attitudes across a vast array of social positions and contexts. As mentioned above, this mass access allowed for the spreading and settling of certain cultural beliefs, leading to a sort of standardization of perceptions. As such, newspaper and magazine representations of suicide act as a way of analyzing both societal perceptions as well as the influences behind these understandings. In regards to suicide, one can analyze four different veins of thought that can be traced through different media sources from the late eighteenth century into the twentieth century. These perceptions are sentimental, exploitive, socially aware, and flippant. By tracing each of these schools of representation, one can analyze the different perceptions of suicide that came to prominence in this period.

The first of these categories are the sentimental, which are characterized by the melodramatic and romanticized nature in which they are presented to the public. The most applicable comparison would be to *The Sorrows of Young Werther* meaning, stylistically, these newspaper articles are reminiscent of the tone and aesthetic of Goethe's novel. This comparison is most obvious in the literary selections within these newspapers, a common practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, a book review in 1828 records the poetic works of a suicidal writer, described as a "determined misanthrope of the Byron school," explicitly evoking the works of Romantic writers.²⁸ In these examples, there is a focus on the invocation of strong sympathetic emotions, though not necessarily compassionate or empathetic ones toward

²⁸ "A Lady's Album." *The Delaware Register* (Wilmington, DE), 8 Nov. 1828.

the suicide enactor. In the aforementioned example, the reviewer praises the “obstinate determination” and “sullen brevity” in the author’s work, but does not necessarily hold any real concern toward the author; the section ends with a quick mention that the poet “was still living,” but is given no more attention or care.²⁹ This romanticized style is particularly common in articles written in the early nineteenth century, the hey-day of the Romantic period. As with Romantic writings, these articles are particularly concerned with suicides resulting from unsuccessful romantic relationships, and particularly the actions taken by young women who have been spurned by their lovers. For example, an article published in 1803 focuses on the attempted suicide of a “fine girl” who shot herself after her father informed her that her lover was married. The writer goes into particularly lurid detail regarding the “unfortunate girl weltering in blood,” and emphasizes “the pistol in one hand, and a prayer-book in the other.”³⁰ These details act to sensationalize the subject, and invite the reader to not only sympathize with the girl, but to revel in the poetic details of her actions as well. A similar thread is taken in a later article, published in 1805, which focuses on “a young female, elegantly dressed” who attempted to drown herself in reservoir. The article uses particularly provocative language to describe the girl’s situation, referring to her lover as “the profligate author of her misery” who had seduced her and made her “a disgrace to her family.”³¹ As with the last example, the language here is pointed and, though less graphic, is just as effective at provoking the reader’s sympathy.

Along this vein, sentimental approaches enjoy investing in the story of the suicide attempt, using it as a sort of build up to the action itself. For example, one account focuses on one young woman who “was urged to destroy herself” by the “excessive grief” brought on by the

²⁹ “A Lady’s Album.”

³⁰ “Attempt at Suicide.” *The Observer* (London, UK), 15 May, 1803.

³¹ “Attempted Suicide.” *The Observer* (London, UK), 17 Feb. 1805.

death of her fiancé. As with the earlier examples, the language in this article is purposefully provocative, and invests a great deal in the build up to her action in order to amplify this effect. In this specific example, half of the article focuses on the account relayed by workers who witnessed her attempt.³² This focus on their point of view invites the reader to partake in the lurid details as these workers had, acting to amplify their emotional response. Essentially, the sentimentalized are highly invested in the emotional and aesthetic response in their readers. This appeal may be largely influenced by the Romantic period and works such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which peaked society's interest and changed tastes toward the sensation. As a result, suicides and suicide attempts became events for pity and lurid voyeurism in newspapers, inviting the reader into a relatively safe form of suicidal ideation and observation.

Exploitative newspaper treatments of suicide are similar to sentimental approaches in that they each are centered on evoking an emotional response; however, where the exploitative differs is in the emotions it is attempting to evoke. Rather than sympathy or pity, these articles are more interested in provoking feelings of perverse enjoyment, or the concept of *schadenfreude*, the enjoyment of others pain. These articles are not necessarily evil or cruel toward suicide enactors, but they do lack a degree of respect toward these individuals, and focus more on finding entertainment in the event than an empathic response. For example, one article refers to an "extraordinary double suicide" that provided "an exciting scene" for witnesses.³³ This article explicitly focuses on the entertainment value of a suicide, and the language seems to be marketing the experience of witnessing a suicide. A similar entertaining focus is evident in an earlier article, which focuses on a young woman who was spurned by a lover. The subtitle of the

³² "Suicide Prevented." *The Observer* (London, UK), 30 Mar. 1806.

³³ "Extraordinary Double Suicide." *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester, UK), 6 Oct. 1888.

article is “love makes fools or madmen of us all,” a quote borrowed from various plays and novels.³⁴ As with the last example, there is a focus on entertainment, and this one implicitly associates this real-life suicide with fictionalized portrayals meant to entertain an audience. This vein of exploitation comes to a head in the example of Prince Rudolf of Austria-Hungary and his mistress, Baroness Mary Vetsera. In this famous incident, the prince, the heir to the throne, killed his mistress and then himself, which opened a can of worms in European media. The incident played out like a modern reality show, and newspapers recorded the social tumult that followed the event. Specifically, the prince’s funeral, and the melodramatic circumstances surrounding it, garnered a great deal of attention, and it became “imperative” to many to attend the funeral; in fact, the attendance was so great that important officials were asked not to attend in order to prevent the event from reaching capacity, and troops were called to control the crowds, wherein many women “got caught in the great crush.”³⁵ This highlights the value of entertainment in these exploitative newspaper accounts regarding suicide.

Along with the entertainment value of exploiting suicides, exploitative articles also focus on exploited individuals who commit suicide. For example, one newspaper in 1844 contained two back to back accounts of suicides in prison. The first, titled “Lachner, the German, and that Trunk,” bridges the gap between the two exploitative modes, as the title is intended to attract for entertainment value, and the subject matter focuses on the mysterious prison death of a man not well known in the area.³⁶ The second of the newspaper’s suicides was of a young woman imprisoned for “assault with intent to kill;” the paper capitalizes on the attention-grabbing crime she has committed and goes into extreme detail on the manner in which she killed herself.³⁷ Like

³⁴ “Suicide: ‘Love makes fools or madmen of us all.’” *The Observer* (London, UK), 21 July, 1793.

³⁵ “They Died Together.” *The Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), 5 Feb. 1889.

³⁶ “Lachner, the German, and that Trunk.” *The New York Herald* (New York City, NY), 16 Jan. 1844.

³⁷ “Attempted Suicide at City Prison.” *The New York Herald* (New York City, NY), 16 Jan. 1844.

the other examples, there is no respect paid to the enactor, and the situation is essentially bled for cinematic or literary value, as if intended for a theatric audience. In fact, the article is followed by an advertisement for a musical theater production. Exploitative articles on suicides focused on the spectacle that they produce, and act to milk the act as entertainment for their readership.

The third approach to suicide representation in newspapers is for articles to be written in an actively socially aware and concerned manner. This style of article tends to focus more on statistics and data over suicides in general rather than specific events, and are reflective of social movements concerning mental health and wellbeing. For example, one article from the *Waterbury Evening Democrat* in Connecticut records a lecture given by a Doctor Hamilton in 1888, wherein the doctor goes over statistics and presents the prevailing beliefs on suicide from the period. Interestingly, Hamilton argues that “temperament and the national characteristics and peculiarities of people have a good deal more to do with suicide than religion or the weather,” an argument that directly refutes Durkheim’s later research on the subject. The article also provides a table recording the number of suicides in the most populated cities of the world, and the message as a whole reflects growing scientific interest and concern regarding suicide.³⁸ These concerns would be even more prominent in media in the decades following Durkheim’s research, especially after psychological analysis became more structured and regimented in the nineteen sixties. The public began to be more interested in mental health issues and treatments, especially as suicide came to be seen as “a grave social problem” that needed to be addressed immediately. As such, legislation regarding suicide and mental health became material for newspaper analysis, such as Noman St. John-Stevas’ 1960 sixty article focusing on proposed legislation to decriminalize suicide and instead introduce more accessible medical aid for suicidal

³⁸ “History of Suicide.” *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), 5 Sep. 1888.

individuals.³⁹ Additionally, during the twentieth century, suicide rates in Western nations rose steadily, sparking concern among researchers and the general populace regarding the cause. Many came to regard this change as a sign of “the times,” especially in the turbulent political and economic years of the Cold War.⁴⁰ Socially aware articles are also more interventional, and draw attention to genuine social concerns regarding high rates of suicide among certain populations.

This vein is most prominent in articles analyzing suicide rates in Vienna, Austria. By the end of the nineteenth century, Vienna had earned the title of “City of Suicides” for its remarkable high suicide rates. For example, in 1926 2,391 Viennese people killed themselves in a population of just under two-million;⁴¹ for comparison, in the same year, New York City had a population of about seven million with only eight hundred and forty suicides. Due to this predominance, Viennese suicide became the first example mass interest and concern in unremarkable, or non-fantastical, suicides. What was also remarkable about the Viennese example is the distribution of ages of suicide enactors; some of the youngest recorded were thirteen, while among the oldest was an eighty-four year woman; additionally, unlike what the sensational articles of the last two categories would suggest, the majority of Viennese suicides were men, reflecting more accurate trends in suicide enactment even into the present day.⁴² Over the course of over a century, well into the nineteen eighties, newspapers around the world focused on the Viennese example and its unusually high rates of suicide; what is remarkable about this attention is the more factual and respectful manner that newspapers addressed it. Rather than focusing on romanticism or any entertainment value, articles dealing with Viennese suicide, or mental health concerns in general,

³⁹ Norman St. John-Stevan, “Scope for Reform in Suicide Law.” *The Observer* (London, UK), 23 Oct. 1960.

⁴⁰ T. Patrick Harris, “Suicide Attempts Up, Reflecting the Times.” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), 21 Dec. 1980.

⁴¹ “City of Suicides: Vienna’s Unenviable Reputation.” *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester, UK), 17 Jan. 1927.

⁴² “Statistics of Suicides in Vienna.” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), 7 Feb. 1885.

start to take a more socially aware course beginning in the late nineteenth century and going into the twentieth. This shift reflects changes in societal attitudes toward suicide, which came to be viewed more as an addressable social problem than isolated or even entertaining acts undertaken by madmen and fools.

The final model of suicide representation is one that runs through the whole period addresses; in this model, writers take a more flippant and noncommittal view toward suicide, paying it enough attention to publish, but no more than that. For example, one bulletin recording of a “melancholy suicide” in 1797 gives the barest amount of detail on the event; the section itself is only four lines of a page long index of law issues and crimes.⁴³ In this example, the suicide is treated as wholly unremarkable, and the language employed expresses a complete disinterest in the event. As with examples in the other three trends, flippant articles are characterized by the tone their language sets; in these cases, there are no attempts to employ language that may attract excess attention, and the authors of these articles are not explicitly interested in making any social arguments regarding suicide. In one example, seventeen individuals attempted suicide on Christmas Day in 1929. Though the sheer number of attempts is noteworthy in of itself, the author makes no attempt to sensationalize or moralize the event. The attempts are attributed to “general misery,” and the article is more concerned with the statistics of the event than the causes or consequences. To highlight this lack of concern, the article does not even focus on the event, despite the title’s emphasis on it; the article ends with a description of an avalanche that killed several people, which also employs flippant and disinterested language.⁴⁴

⁴³ “Law Intelligence.” *The Observer* (London, UK), 26 Feb. 1797.

⁴⁴ “17 Tried to Commit Suicide in Vienna on Christmas Day.” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), 29 Dec. 1929.

Essentially, these articles are written in a strictly straightforward manner. In an article describing the attempted suicide of a father and son, the details of the attempts are written in a factual and distancing manner, despite the inherent salacious factors in the case, such as the double suicide and the use of laudanum to kill oneself. The article ends with a simple sentence stating “the elder Radcliffe served through the war,” emphasizing its focus on the factual, and perhaps giving a half-hearted attempt at attributing a cause to the suicide.⁴⁵ Even the aforementioned Viennese example was not immune to this vein of treatment. One article, titled “Vienna has Suicide Epidemic,” exemplifies this style. Despite the more emphatic nature of the word “epidemic,” the article itself is written rather tamely and straight-forward.⁴⁶ Several factors may play into the employment of this more flippant style; for example, it could reflect an attempt to refrain from sensationalizing such events, or the articles could merely be taken from time periods where bigger or more controversial events were taking place. Additionally, they may be reflecting reporters’ attempts to veer away from the sensational and exploitative while not necessarily acting didactically toward their audience. The four main veins of newspaper treatments of suicide are reflective of different yet concurrent trends in societal reactions to suicide. As such, they are invaluable in both analyzing contemporary reactions to suicide as well as analyzing the ways in which the populace came to know of and digest these events.

The four trends identified and illustrated in this section have become the prevailing medial representations of suicide in the last two centuries. The existence of such definitive trends in suicidal reporting highlights the indefinite nature of suicidal perceptions and representations during this period. Suicidal representations are highly cyclical, as the literary section highlighted,

⁴⁵ “Suicide by a Father and Attempted Suicide by a Son.” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), 10 Apr. 1874.

⁴⁶ “Vienna has Suicide Epidemic.” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), 10 Feb. 1924.

with prevailing attitudes switching between more sympathetic and completely oppositional views depending on specific regional values and interpretations of the causes of the suicide. As these newspaper articles illustrate, the last two centuries are in a sort of limbo state, as the previous dichotomy seems to be breaking down in favor of a more disjointed public perception. That is not to say that there is not a prevailing perception suicide, merely that the trends of previous centuries have yet to cement themselves in a singular position in the public consciousness. As such, the lack of a dichotomist understanding of medial representations reflects a fractured cultural understanding of suicide in the last two centuries.

III. Philosophy

By nature, philosophy is not necessarily accessible to a greater mass audience; one rarely has a favorite philosopher, despite their cultural influences. However, despite their lack of mass appeal, philosophical treatises on any subject are an interesting and necessary source in disseminating cultural understandings of a subject. Additionally, philosophers' focuses on a subject are reflective, if more in-depth and systematized, of the prevailing beliefs of the society that produced these treatises. In regards to suicide, as an inherently controversial and thought-provoking subject, philosophical treatments have been varied and often contradictory to one another. Almost anyone who has been labelled, or labelled themselves, as a "philosopher" has documented beliefs on the subject, its causes and consequences, and the ethics of the act itself. As such, it is necessary to narrow the pool of philosophical thought to specifically influential takes on the subject. First there is the classical interpretation, centered on the works of Aristotle and Plato, which will then be followed by John Donne's seminal *Bianthanatos*, in which he controversially espoused the ethics of suicide through Biblical examples. Each of the following philosophical tracts are, in one way or another, a response to Donne's work. By analyzing each

individually, in the context of those that came before them, a line of perceptual treatment may be drawn over the centuries regarding suicide in Western philosophy and how its ethical position has come into question.

The works of Aristotle and Plato reflect differing opinions, though with some continuities, on the ethics of suicide and its role in society during antiquity. In Aristotle's estimation, suicide is a punishable act because it is not necessarily an injustice toward oneself, but upon the state. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that the act of suicide is not an act of injustice upon the self because "he suffers voluntarily," negating the act as an injustice, which "nobody suffers injustice" by their own free will. Furthermore, the act of suicide, as it is "not expressly sanction[ed]" by the law, is inherently an injustice, particularly in its act as an injury upon someone's person, even if they enacted it upon themselves. As such, suicide in Aristotle's estimation is an injustice, or an injury, upon the state itself, as it does not comply with the law of the land. There is evidence to suggest this was a common understanding during Aristotle's period; he states that "the state exacts a penalty" on suicides, consisting of "marks of dishonor" upon the individual and their family.⁴⁷ Plato reflects similar sentiments regarding suicide and the law. In *Laws*, Plato states that those who commit suicide outside of judicial acceptance are to be shamed in death, largely through the deprivation of typical funerary rites.⁴⁸ These are likely the dishonors that Aristotle alludes to. However, he also describes differing ethical estimations of suicide in his other work. In *Phaedo*, Plato presents a fictionalized Socrates defending suicide as an act if "it is better to die than to live" for the enactor.⁴⁹ He also suggests that suicide, despite its controversial and illegal nature, if a suicidal individual is under undue state duress, such as

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 319.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Laws*, trans. R.G. Bury (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1961), 265-267.

⁴⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. R.G. Bury (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1966), 215.

already being sentenced to death, then they may kill themselves as a means of preservation, as their soul is “freed from the body as from fetters,” or a prison cell.⁵⁰ This acts as an obvious defense of suicidal acts, especially coming from the fictional mouth of Socrates, who committed suicide himself. These philosophical analyses of suicide reflect the differing opinions regarding suicide during antiquity. Specifically, despite laws and prevailing ethic denunciations of suicide, there were certain factions that believed suicide could be a justified and acceptable act, should it fall under a certain set of circumstances.

In the intervening years between the philosophical works of the Greeks and John Donne’s *Bianthanatos*, which was published in 1608, the predominate view on suicide was negative. Particularly in Christianity, the dominating religion of Western cultures, suicide was seen as a mortal and unforgivable sin, as it was an act of murder upon the self. However, Donne’s analysis of suicide makes a different argument; he argues that suicide is not necessarily an unforgivable sin, which he supports through his use of Biblical representations of suicide. He begins by arguing that suicide has come to garner its negative association because it always comes from desperation and the avoidance of God’s wrath, there is no way to repent and return to God from this sin, or that as a sin the act is unpardonable because it is a sin. However, using the example of martyrs, Donne argues that suicide is a justifiable act if done in self-preservation, which is “of natural law;” in the martyr example, they are wholly aware that they will die for their cause, and their death will act as a means of preservation for society and their beliefs.⁵¹ In this way, according to Donne, suicide may be excused if done for an honorable or holy reason. Donne also addresses laws against suicide; in England, as in antiquity, suicide is regarded as “a felony”

⁵⁰ Plato, *Phaedo*, 233.

⁵¹ John Donne, *Bianthanatos* (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1983), 15.

against the self and the state, and was punishable by an unholy burial.⁵² However, Donne counters this assertion by arguing that suicide is “excusable in conscious” if only an act done upon the self and not the state; he states that suicide, therefore, should only be seen as an injustice upon the state if “the person is of necessary use to the state,” and even then only as much as if a general took holy orders.⁵³ Therefore, the state has no jurisdiction over one’s manner of death should they choose to kill themselves. In arguing this, Donne places himself in direct opposition to prevailing attitudes on suicide, ones that have been passed down for centuries. The radicalism of this argument has led to centuries of debate among Western thinkers, who question whether Donne’s assertions hold any merit.

David Hume’s “Of Suicide,” published in 1757, Hume directly responds to Donne’s assertions. Hume agrees with Donne’s assertions, arguing that “a man, who retires from life, does no harm to society,” emphasizing the personal nature of suicide.⁵⁴ Like Donne, Hume asserts that suicide is not a transgression upon God or the law; instead, if it is an injustice at all, it is one done upon the self, based upon “our duty to ourselves” and no other.⁵⁵ In supporting Donne’s claims, Hume also harkens back to Socrates and Plato’s belief that certain extremities, such as “age, sickness, or misfortune” may act as justifications for death, removing the transgressive nature of the act.⁵⁶ Similarly, Thomas de Quincey’s “On Suicide” is a response to Donne; however, de Quincey reached different conclusions on the merits of the argument. Published in 1823, de Quincey wrote it less than a century after Hume, but, unlike Hume, focuses instead on the ecclesiastical implications of the act. De Quincey argues that “simply to

⁵² Donne, *Bianthanatos*, 37.

⁵³ Donne, *Bianthanatos*, 47.

⁵⁴ David Hume, “Of Suicide,” in *The Ethics of Suicide: Historical Sources*, ed. Margaret Pabst Battin. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 410.

⁵⁵ Hume, “Of Suicide,” 406.

⁵⁶ Hume, “Of Suicide,” 410.

kill a man is not murder” and that the act of suicide may be “distinct from self-murder” in this regard.⁵⁷ To illustrate this distinction, de Quincey focused on the concept of “spontaneous martyrdom,” which he argues to be an act of self-homicide sans self-murder. This concept is analyzed strictly in the retrospective, though it may be applicable to contemporary examples. De Quincey focuses his argument specifically in cases where there is “a woman that chose to die rather than to be dishonored” or a man is facing corporal punishment, similarly to Hulme and Plato. In these examples, according to de Quincey, suicide is a rational and expected act to be undertaken because, as Donne argues, it is an act of self-preservation by a martyr. Donne’s arguments on the ethics of suicide, and when it may be considered logical or acceptable to a degree, is proven to be extremely influential in later philosophical treatises on suicide. This may be largely attributed to the argumentative rational that Donne employed, specifically his use of ecclesiastical and civil law to argue against their typical opposition to self-homicide. In doing so, Donne changed centuries of established religious and legal embargoes on the topic, and opened a debate on suicide and its causes that has prevailed into the twenty-first century.

Despite this post-Donne trend of defending the ethics of suicide, other philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, returned to earlier assertions on suicide and duty. Like Aristotle, Kant argued against the morality of suicide based upon an individual’s social and civic duty. In *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, originally published in 1785, Kant states that “it is a duty to maintain one’s life,” and to kill oneself is to forsake this duty.⁵⁸ Additionally, Kant questions whether suicide is “consistent with the idea of humanity” and argues that suicide is the unlawful use of an individual, specifically the self, “to maintain a tolerable condition” for oneself at the

⁵⁷ Thomas de Quincey, Thomas. “On Suicide.” *Writings of De Quincey Vol. 8 Speculative and Theological Essays*, ed. David Masson (New York City: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), 399.

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1949), 16.

end of life. Under Kant's definition of humanity, "a man is not a thing," or an object to be used for one's own satisfaction. As such, "to mutilate [an individual], to damage or kill him" is the ultimate unlawful use of man.⁵⁹ Under Kant's philosophical treatise, suicide is a fundamentally objectionable action, both morally and ethically, due to its opposition to the inherent duties of the self. The arguments that Kant makes to support this assertion follow many of the same arguments that Aristotle and other ancient philosophers made in opposition to suicide. Following this alignment, Kant completely disavows any possible justifications for suicide, such as Plato's defense of Socrates. Kant states that if "adversity and hopeless sorrow" have encompassed all aspects of one's life yet the individual "preserves his life without loving it," then that individual is the maxim of "moral worth." This moral superiority is derived from the suicidal individual's sense of duty, which stands above all else in Kant's esteem.⁶⁰ Again, this is highly similar to Aristotle's assertions on suicide and duty, illustrating an important continuity in philosophical treatments of suicide. Donne's defense of suicide was highly influential in philosophy, but important later philosophers, such as Kant, continued to refute any justifications for suicide and instead highlighted the importance of one's duty to survive above all other inclinations.

Another important philosophical refutation of suicide is the doctrine of the existentialist, best illustrated by Albert Camus' 1942 essay "The Myth of Sisyphus." Camus argued that the "only truly philosophical problem" is suicide, and he sought to firmly address it within the essay.⁶¹ An important tenet of existentialism is its analysis of the absurd, which Camus defined as the human desire to find meaning in a meaningless world; he described this as the encounter

⁵⁹ Kant, *Fundamental*, 56.

⁶⁰ Kant, *Fundamental*, 16.

⁶¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 3.

between “the irrational, [and] the human nostalgia.”⁶² Camus believed that life itself was essentially absurd, devoid of meaning and purpose. However, despite this rather bleak perception, Camus argued that “it is essential to die unreconciled and not of one’s own free will” because “suicide is a repudiation” of the absurd that cannot be allowed in human life. Instead, man should “drain everything to the bitter end”⁶³ and accept the absurdity of the world, which is “not reasonable” and solely characterized by the “irrational and the wild longing for clarity.”⁶⁴ Camus believed that a central element of life was to embrace the absurd and continue to live despite the misgivings of an existentialist viewpoint. Furthermore, Camus held rather negative and oppositional views of the act itself; Camus characterized suicide as a confession “that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it” rarely committed “through reflection” or any actual inward introspection.⁶⁵ According to these beliefs, the individual is “forever... a stranger to [themselves]” and forever absurd in their interactions with themselves and the world;⁶⁶ because “the absurd ends with death” in all instances, there is no justifiable reason for the individual to kill themselves and repudiate the absurd that defines everyday life.⁶⁷ Similarly to earlier philosophers like Aristotle and Kant, Camus presents a philosophical refutation of suicide and any ethical justification for its enactment; this refutation highlights the further continuity of anti-suicide philosophical treatments following Donne’s defense. However, unlike Aristotle and Kant, Camus makes no mention of duty, and he does not seem to have any interest in it at all. Instead, Camus, and other existentialist thinkers, oppose suicide based on specific philosophical issues with the act. This illustrates a fundamental shift in cultural understandings of suicide and

⁶² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

⁶³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 55.

⁶⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 21.

⁶⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5.

⁶⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19.

⁶⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31.

its ethics; instead of focusing on civic duty and religious doctrine, prevailing schools of philosophy in the early twentieth century were opposed to the act of suicide based upon its relative opposition to perceived fundamental tenets of life, namely the absurd and the human search for individual meaning to life and the world.

Within Western culture, there have been two prevailing threads of philosophical treatment of suicide. These dominant perceptions are the opposition of suicide based upon duty and civic virtue, and a justification of suicide based upon the individual's inability to withstand the circumstances they have been subjected to. The first mode, the repudiation of suicide, is highly dependent upon Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and his assertion that it is one's duty to survive for the greater good of society. Under Aristotle's interpretation, to kill oneself is to deprive society of one's work and potential, thus committing a grievance act of murder. This argument has continued through the centuries, with Kant making similar arguments in the eighteenth century. The opposing philosophical belief is almost wholly derived from John Donne's *Bianthanatos*, in which he argues that suicide is justifiable under certain conditions, such as in the case of martyrdom or when the individual is under extreme duress. Aristotle's contemporary, Plato, made similar arguments in antiquity, but Donne's use of prevailing Christian doctrine to refute popular reflections on suicide provided the necessary cultural subversion for such a belief to take hold. Later philosophers, including David Hume and Thomas De Quincey, upheld Donne's assertions through similar means. Donne's influence reflects a shift in cultural perceptions of suicide, making it morally and socially justifiable if done for particular reasons, placing particular focus on the intention of the individual beyond the act of killing oneself. Durkheim's later work, and his focus on the social and individual causes of suicide, reflect this shift. However, there are important continuities into the twentieth century that must

be addressed. Existentialism came to the forefront of philosophical theories in the early part of the century, and important philosophers in the school, particularly Albert Camus, regarded suicide as an unethical act. This places this newer assertion in line with ancient perceptions on the subject; however, the existentialist refutation is based upon fundamentally different standards than duty. Rather than focusing on issues of duty and civic virtue, recent refutations of suicide focus instead on the relative failure of the act to make a difference in the absurd nature of life, wherein the individual should live and confront the absurd instead of repudiating it.

IV. Sociology and Psychology

As previously described, Emile Durkheim's *Le Suicide* is a seminal work in sociological and psychological understandings of suicide and its cause. In fact, the work was so influential that it acted as the impetus for the development of suicidology, the scholarly study of suicide in relation to other academic fields. In the intervening years, the field of suicidology has taken on differing opinions and factions regarding sociological and psychological studies on the act, its cause and consequences, and how it may be prevented most effectively in a medical setting. In many regards, these later works are responses to *Le Suicide* and its approach to various societal factors in suicides. However, each work takes its own approach in its analysis of suicide and the various factions of the greater topic that they address. Additionally, each makes their own singular arguments regarding suicide and its ethical implications, providing necessary insights into how psychological and sociological minds are addressing the issue in the years following the Durkheim's study.

In the years following Durkheim's publication of *Le Suicide*, psychologists and sociologists became increasingly interested in building upon his work and analyzing suicide in differing ways to his. Jack D. Douglas' *The Social Meanings of Suicide*, published in 1967,

follows in this vein. In the introduction to the work, Douglas acknowledges the dominant nature of Durkheim's work, and describes it as "the cornerstone of the whole approach to suicide" taken by the entirety of sociology toward suicide.⁶⁸ In fact, Douglas dedicates a quarter of the book to analyzing Durkheim's approach and conclusions. However, in an endeavor to break from strict Durkheimian arguments, Douglas branches away and argues that suicidal actions are socially meaningful actions, allowing for him to approach the causes of suicide in a different manner to Durkheim and to analyze the meaning in society that the act takes on as well. Douglas goes into detail regarding the "ambiguity in the language of 'suicidal' phenomena" and how these ambiguities in language, such as the usage of "despair, unhappiness," and other terms borrowed from "other areas of experience" complicate the meanings behind suicides and suicidal phenomena.⁶⁹ After discussing the standardization of such terms, Douglas shifts to case studies that emphasize the apparent meaning behind suicidal actions; he concludes that the "meaning" behind these acts are "fundamental about the actor himself," as it reflects both the societal causes behind the individual's act, following Durkheim's approach, but also the complex and individualistic psychological causes and meanings behind the act.⁷⁰ Douglas concludes by arguing that a fundamental problem in sociology is its dependence on Durkheim's approach and assertions when analyzing suicide. He posits instead that it would be more beneficial to accumulate various approaches to suicide and analyze such approaches as just as fundamental as Durkheim. For example, Douglas describes how he is the first to explicitly state that suicidal actions have meaning, and that those meanings need to be analyzed. Douglas' concerns highlight the importance of Durkheim within the field of suicidology, and his focus on a different

⁶⁸ Jack D. Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), xiii.

⁶⁹ Douglas, *Social Meanings*, 247-248.

⁷⁰ Douglas, *Social Meanings*, 279.

approach draws attention to a new trend that followed, wherein different factors and explanations were analyzed and applied to suicide studies.

In the same vein as Douglas' earlier work, Michael Dorais and Simon Lajeunesse approach suicide through a different context, namely sexual orientation of young men in contemporary society. This work, and others of the twenty-first century, reflects a more socially aware branch of sociological study that focuses its concerns on marginalized groups and explicitly "modern" phenomena in suicidology. In *Dead Boys Can't Dance*, Dorais and Lajeunesse focus on the preponderancy of suicides among young gay and bisexual men and boys, which they argue has been "increasingly recognized" but still largely ignored; therefore, they have endeavored to focus on the vulnerability of young gay and bisexual men and how different society pressures exploit this vulnerability and lead to suicidal acts.⁷¹ Like Douglas before them, Dorais and Lajeunesse acknowledge Durkheim's approach and influence, and, to a degree, apply it to their own subject matter. As they are focusing on the vulnerability of gay suicide enactors, they must take into account the specified social contexts that influence their suicidal actions; for example, "they are isolated" and subjected to the "compulsory" nature of heterosexuality in popular culture, which is largely regarded as the "normal outcome" of sexual interests.⁷² They then shift and focus on specific cases regarding young gay and bisexual men in Canada and the individual causes and vulnerabilities that played into their personal acts of suicide. The author's also take the interesting approach of analyzing the various influences in the attempted suicides of young men who did not complete the act; this information, they argue, is vital in analyzing prevailing attitudes and influences among the focused upon societal group. The

⁷¹ Michael Dorais and Simon Louis Lajeunesse, *Dead Boys Can't Dance: Sexual Orientation, Masculinity, and Suicide*, trans. Pierre Tremblay (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 14,

⁷² Dorais and Lajeunesse, *Dead Boys*, 22.

approach and subject matter that Dorais and Lajeunesse employ reflects emerging interests in marginalized groups and their experiences in the social sciences. This trend arose in the late twentieth-century as popular culture became more splintered and typically “alternative” societies and groups came to the national consciousness. As such, the social sciences took notice and, in the case of the LGBTQ community, trends within that community, such as the higher-than-average suicide rates, became subjects of interest for researchers. Essentially, Western sociology and psychology became more specialized and interested in marginalized groups and experiences.

Franco de Masi’s *The Enigma of the Suicide Bomber*, published in 2011, is interested in specifically contemporary attitudes and issues that have come to the attention of sociologists and psychologists in the twenty-first century. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11, media of all sorts became instantly interested in radicalized factions in the Middle East and their unique form of terrorism, namely suicide bombings. The predominant narrative in such works often colors the individuals who undergo these acts as intrinsically evil and dangerous, as well as any Muslim or Islamic sympathizer. As a result, the scholarship of this subject is largely prejudiced and incomplete. To counteract this, de Masi focuses on terrorism as “fuelled by the hate that arises out of the desperate conditions,” such as political and social instability in a region, which develops a “mental state that compels certain individuals to perform monstrous, inhuman acts.” De Masi does not attribute all terroristic violence to trauma, but also to “a political entity that encourages and organizes” terrorist acts.⁷³ In analyzing a rare subject in a rare sympathetic manner, de Masi recreates the context that the audience expects, and allows for a more nuanced approach to the subject matter beyond typical cultural depictions. In order to

⁷³ Franco de Masi, *The Enigma of the Suicide Bomber: A Psychoanalytic Essay*, trans. Philip Slotkin (London: Routledge, 2011), xxxii.

essentially “flip the script,” de Masi focuses on a definition of terrorism that includes the addendum that terrorism is most often implemented “by political minorities wishing to undermine a hated authoritarian regime;” in this example, Middle Eastern factions view the US and the West as an empirical, authoritarian force in their region.⁷⁴ De Masi then goes on to build a context in which the violence undertaken by suicide bombers may take on a “logical” trajectory, in spite of its inherent deploracy. De Masi also takes into account the international causes and implications of such suicides, and emphasizes the prominence they have come to in the international consciousness in the last two decades. As with Dorais and Lajeunesse, de Masi has chosen to disseminate a subject and group that has become more visible in the twenty-first century. Additionally, unlike the earlier examples, de Masi makes no mention of Durkheim or his influence, reflecting an emerging shift away from his findings in suicide scholarship.

The previous examples of post-Durkheim scholarship are marked by a single thread that connects them all together; regardless of their central arguments, they each address suicide and suicidal enactors in a respectful and sympathetic manner. This treatment may be largely attributed to Durkheim’s approach; he refrained from blaming victims or presenting them as subversive in some way. This then came to color the majority of sociological and psychological treatments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, there are still some studies that take on more antiquated approaches; namely, one’s that focus on the ethical implications of suicide and place their own feelings on the act above their research. This school of thought may be exemplified by Thomas Szasz’s *Suicide Prohibitions*, published in 2011, the same year as de Masi’s work and well into the sympathetic era. Like de Masi, Szasz does not address any of Durkheim’s work in his monolith, and he largely ignores the influences that go into suicidal

⁷⁴ De Masi, *Enigma*, 4.

actions. Instead, Szasz focuses on the perceived ethics of suicide and treating suicidal individuals. He comes to the conclusion that helping and treating suicidal individuals may be a noble endeavor, but that the dubious ethics of suicide may not merit the aid that an enactor would need in order to re-enter society after an attempt. Szasz argues that suicide ideation, as well as suicidal attempts, “are psychiatric transgressions, violations of mental health laws” that necessitates “punishments” that he refers to as “‘hospitalization’ and ‘treatment.’”⁷⁵ This sort of language categorizes suicide as a crime, harkening back to the days of Aristotle and Catholic hegemony in Europe, and explicitly insinuates that to aid a suicidal individual is to punish and imprison them. Furthermore, Szasz creates a strange dichotomy regarding different approaches to suicidal treatment; on one end is the noncoercive, which is labelled as a “noble end,” while the coercive model is “ignoble and unworthy of modern people.”⁷⁶ Essentially, one may only help a suicidal individual if they explicitly state they want help, which they are highly unlikely to request if they are suicidal. Much of Szasz’s argument and evidence is, therefore, more traditional in its analysis and approach. As such, one can see that, despite the dominance of Durkheim’s more measured and empathetic analysis, older depictions and analyses of suicide have survived into the twenty-first century.

Despite Szasz’s treatment, the prevailing view of suicide in psychology and sociology is remarkably sympathetic and sensitive. As stated previously, previously to Durkheim, there was really no scientific interest in suicide, and any attempts to study it at all were highly unconcerned with the tone they set. Typically, these treatments were sensationalized and generalizing, with little regard for enactors, their families, or those potentially debating suicide who may be

⁷⁵ Thomas Szasz, *Suicide Prohibition: The Shame of Medicine* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 12.

⁷⁶ Szasz, *Prohibition*, 15.

effected by such a treatment. However, Durkheim's more analytical and scientific approach transformed dominating treatments of the topic, and allowed for the development of an entire field focused on suicide, aptly named suicidology. In the wake of this shift, sociologists and psychologists began to base their research on Durkheim's method and findings, often at varying levels. Even those who attempted to distance themselves more from Durkheim's influence, such as Douglas, felt the need to discuss Durkheim and his influence. More recent works, such as those by Dorais and De Masi, are not as open as earlier works in addressing Durkheim's research, though this influence is quite evident and their works are indebted to Durkheim's opening of the field. Additionally, both of these works highlight an even more recent shift in scientific analyses in suicidology; these works analyze specific groups more susceptible to suicide ideation and action and address them in their particular contexts and consequences, shedding more light on contemporary issues and allowing for even further research within these sub-fields. However, despite these prevailing shifts in the social sciences, it is important to note such works as Szasz's, which address the topic in a more traditional manner. These works illustrate a more conservative vein still present in the field, as well as the level of continuity in perceptions of suicide in every cultural aspect, an element that must be paid attention to in spite of sweeping changing in cultural interpretations.

The lack of a historical analysis of suicide and its perceptions has resulted in a dearth of information regarding an incredibly important socio-cultural issue. Cultural documentation of suicide provides a host of sources that enable an analyst to produce a historiographical account of suicidal perceptions in Western cultures since the age of antiquity. The manner in which cultural and legal documents of a society, such as examples of media, literature, and so on, are reflective of the prevailing attitudes of the period and place. Attitudes present in Western

examples of literature, media, and law reflect fundamental shifts in the understanding and perceptions of suicide, based upon the differing cultural and temporal influences of a specific place. The earliest representations of suicide, in Greek literature and philosophy, laid the groundwork for the prevailing representations of suicide that would dominate for thousands of years. Refutations of suicide are often based upon the relative duty of the individual to live, whether for their own moral standing or as a form of religious duty. This refutation has taken several forms, from Aristotle's ethical laws, Shakespeare's religious debates over the act, and Camus' emphasis on the necessity of the individual to confront the absurd, whether it makes life miserable or not. In the opposing mode, suicide is regarded as an understandable and justifiable act if done under a high degree of duress upon the individual. Plato's defense of Socrates laid the groundwork for this perception, and it has persisted throughout the centuries, especially after the publication of Donne's defense of suicide, *Bianthantos*, in the seventeenth century. The culmination of this mode came in Durkheim's *Le Suicide*, which represents the first attempt by anyone to scientifically analyze suicide and study its causes and effects. Durkheim's research is invaluable in regards to the field of suicidology, a small field based upon relatively few foundational works that provide sympathetic, in-depth analyses of suicide. These two modes have battled for perceptual control since their inceptions on antiquity, and more compassionate representations seem to have won out in contemporary media. This shift came to the cultural forefront in the nineteenth century, with newspapers focusing on sentimental and variously exploitative representations in the vein of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Works like Plath's *The Bell Jar* emphasize this shift, especially in regards to its focus on mental health and individual experiences of depression and suicide ideation. However, despite this widespread and important shift, there is still a cultural stigma around suicide, as highlighted by its relative

historiographical absence. This continuity illustrates the need for further changes in cultural perceptions of suicide, especially in regards to interest in causes of suicide, such as mental illness, and addressing these causes before a suicide occurs.

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