

Darkness Visible: A review of the autobiography of William Styron

William Styron's autobiography "Darkness Visible" (1990) describes his battle with major depression. The author clearly did a great deal of research into depression, especially after he realized that he himself was suffering from the disorder. He felt repeatedly expresses the theme that it is difficult for those who have not suffered a depressive episode, including therapists, to understand those who have, in part because it is so difficult to explain the deep feelings of pain, isolation, and anguish that characterize depression. Styron describes his difficulty with explaining his suffering to others; he talks about the mental pain and the sensation of drowning or suffocating. He displays at least a layman's knowledge of the DSM and references it and several of the symptoms described in it that he suffered. He also explains that clinical depression is a combination of abnormal neurochemistry, behavior, and genetics (pg. 38). He describes some of his own symptoms: confusion, failure of mental focus and lapses of memory (pg. 14); a loss in his ability to speak clearly and articulate his thoughts (pg. 27); and generalized pain, which he perceived as the mind's defense against believing itself to be injured (pg. 44).

Styron complains that those who have not suffered from major depression do not understand the severity of the problems that those with the disorder face, and therefore often minimize it with such feeble phrases as, "We all have bad days" or "You'll pull out of it" (pg. 38). He talks about his feeling that depression is not a strong enough word for the disorder; he feels melancholia more accurately describes the acute pain and suffering of those affected. Although Styron did not suffer acute symptoms until the age of sixty, his early novels described people with depression; three of his main characters having taken their own life due to the disease. Styron thus speculates that although he did not have an acute, devastating episode of

major depression until later in life, he had probably been suffering from the disease for some time. He noticed the onset of his symptoms in Paris, France, where he had gone to receive an award for one of his books. He explains the paradox of his feelings: “My dank joylessness was therefore all the more ironic because I had flown on a rushed four-day trip to Paris in order to accept an award which should have sparkingly restored my ego” (pg. 5). After receiving the award, he flew back home to the United States to see a psychiatrist about his severe depression.

One of the most severe problems Styron reported was his suicidal ideations. He had a notebook that he described as not exactly a diary, but a book that he did not want others to read, that he intended to destroy before he grew old and feeble. One day, when he realized that the time was coming for him to end his own life, he destroyed the notebook. The next day he went to the lawyer to update his will, then sat at home writing his suicide note. He described this as the most difficult document that he ever had to write. That night, as his wife slept, he sat up watching TV and trying to decide which route he would take to end his life. As he sat there pondering, a song played on the television, bringing back childhood memories of his mother having sung the same song. The song evoked such tender memories of his family, his friends, and all the good people in his life that he would be leaving behind, and leaving devastated, that he realized that he could not go through with his suicidal plan. He woke up his wife and they began arrangements for his hospitalization. In the end, it took Styron at least three different medications and nearly seven weeks in the hospital before he began his recovery.

One of the main themes in the book was attempting to convey to the reader the sense that depression is a serious illness, not to be taken lightly; he wants us to picture depression as a serious disease, and suicide caused by depression as no more stigmatizing than death due to

cancer. The author deals at length with the philosophical issue of suicide, and when a person's sufferings exceed the good in their life; at that point, Styron asks, is suicide justified? He also contrasts depression to diabetes and other disorders, complaining that unlike other diseases, psychiatric illnesses do not have straightforward treatments. The first pill the patient is given often is not the one found to be most effective in treating the patient; and it can take weeks or months to find a medication that effectively reduces the symptoms. Styron points out that for an individual with severe depression with suicidal ideations, these few weeks can be a matter of life and death. He also tries to convey the notion that hospitalization should not be seen as a last resort. Although he resented many aspects of his hospitalization, such as group therapy and art therapy, he did feel that hospitalization helped him much more than being in his own home. Many aspects of psychiatric hospitalizations have not changed much in the 22 years since the book was published; however, I believe that psychiatric hospitalization has become slightly less stigmatizing. I think that several new medications for depression have also been added to the market during that time, although there is still a struggle to link the individual to a medication that will effectively treat their symptoms in a timely fashion.

The book describes the effect of depression on the micro and mezzo levels, and seeks to be a guide to the experience of depressed individuals on the macro level. As an autobiography the book primarily focused on how depression affected William Styron. It impacted his career: he nearly alienated both his publisher and the people who had given him an award for his writing. It impacted his social life: he became withdrawn from friends, unable to communicate, and ultimately isolated. It also impacted his family life. Although he describes his wife as very patient with him throughout his struggles, I am sure it must have had an impact on her. His

suicidal thoughts nearly brought an end to his life, which would almost certainly have left her with great feelings of guilt, pain, grief and loss. The book itself is an effort to reach into the macro level: it attempts to inform, educate, inspire, and transform people's views of mental illness (specifically depression and suicide).

I initially chose this book because it looked short, and I had no idea what the subject matter was. However, as I read it, I felt a keen empathy for Styron. As someone who has had several major depressive episodes with suicidal ideations over the past 16 years (although my diagnoses is bipolar I, not unipolar depression), I found this book both enlightening and hard to read. On the one hand, I could empathize with many of the experiences of the author all too well, and it was reassuring to hear another person voice the opinions that I have held about my disorder. On the other, I found that his descriptions of his illness evoked strong unpleasant memories of my many suicidal episodes: when he described having written wills and suicide notes, I thought back on times that I had done the same. He writes that he clearly remembers some lines of his suicide note; I also remember lines from my very first suicide note. I shared his feelings about hospitalization, and resentment for the patronizing we each received in psychiatric hospitals, although in the end the environment proved much safer and more beneficial for both of us. I read this book in one sitting; the author did a wonderful job of drawing the reader into his life, and helping them see his illness through his eyes. I would highly recommend this book to someone who is battling with depression and to their families. It helps provide a sense of the severity and complexity of severe depression, as well as providing invaluable insight into what could compel a person to take their own life. It provides hope; although in the short term, it may seem that there is no end in sight, and that medication is not providing any relief, in the long

term, through medication and therapy, people suffering from depression can recover, and even succeed in life. This book was riveting and influenced how I see depression.

I believe social workers should do more to help find therapies that actually speak to people in the hospital for major depression. Activities such as group therapy and art therapy are difficult for the depressed individual, because they wish to withdraw from society and have no interest in activities that they may otherwise enjoy. Being forced to attend these sessions, especially during the early days in the hospital, can cause resentment in the person with depression. There should be more research done on what treatments are effective during hospitalization, especially the early days or weeks of hospitalization. Social workers should be educated about the symptoms of depression and the sense of isolation individuals who are depressed may feel, even when they are with others; they should also be taught to be sensitive to the individual's potential inability or unwillingness to communicate with the therapist. Since William Styron was an at least middle class white American, this book did not deal with issues of race, class or culture. Although these issues are not discussed in the book, they most likely have an effect on the treatment availability, likelihood to seek treatment, and treatment outcomes for individuals with major depression. It did discuss spirituality briefly in the beginning of chapter 5, where he likens his situation to that of Madame Bouvary from the book bearing that name. He likens her trip to the priest in search of relief for her anguish with his own trips to the therapist, and describes both priest and therapist as patronizing and unhelpful.

In conclusion, I found this book extremely insightful. It challenged me, both by forcing me to recall similar events in my own life, and by forcing me to critically evaluate the services provided to individuals with major depression. The author presented major depression in an easy

to understand way, helping even the lay reader empathize with his condition. The book evokes understanding and compassion for those suffering from depression, especially in contrast with the response one may otherwise have of everyone having a bad day or depression being something the individual can choose to rise above. Styron provides the chance to see through the eyes of a person suffering from the throes of major depression, as well as providing a glimmer of hope to those suffering.

References

Styron, W. (1990). *Darkness visible: a memoir of madness*. New York: Random House.