

Satire against romanticised tragedy in Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and
Relaxation*

Liina Kaihilahti

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English

Languages and Literature

Faculty of Humanities

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the use of satire against the literary phenomenon of romanticising tragedy in Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). The historical background examines the causes of female characters being misinterpreted and misvalued in literature: a problem caused by the real-life oppression of women, where gendered norms have enforced inaccurate claims on women's ability to function as human. The lack of female jurisdiction outside domestic affairs has led to women's long-instilled exclusion from literary circles, which in turn has had a debilitating effect on why the tragedy of female characters is heavily romanticised; to both keep control over women, and find catharsis in the suffering of beautiful creatures. The methodological framework of the thesis consists of close reading and critical analysis of satire, implemented through the treacherous observations of the unreliable narrator. The narrator is an unnamed young woman plagued by her insatiable desire to sleep, finding the comatose state as the only escape from her anxieties, being prepared to continue the habit by any means necessary. The absurdity of the satire allows the reader to examine the narrator as a troubled person in a regrettably absurd situation, instead of an enviable entity. The thesis concludes that the novel successfully uses satire to create a complicated female character, where her suffering resists romanticisation through its graphic depictions of dysfunctional relationships, trauma, mental illness, and declining health.

Tiivistelmä

Tämä kandidaatintutkielma analysoi, kuinka satiirin käyttö Ottessa Moshfeghin romaanissa *Vuosi horroksessa* (2018) hylkää tragedian romantisoinnin. Historiallinen taustatutkimus tutkii syitä naishahmojen väärinymmärrykseen ja aliarvostukseen kirjallisuudessa: ongelman pohjana esiintyy tosielämän naissorto, jolloin sukupuolinormit ovat toteuttaneet vääräluuloja naisten kyvyistä toimia inhimillisesti. Naistoimivallan puute kotipiirin ulkopuolella on myös johtanut naisten pitkäaikaiseen poissulkemiseen kirjallisuuspiireissä, millä on ollut yleisvaikutus naishahmojen tragedian romantisoinnilla. Niin naisten yhteiskunnallinen hallitseminen, kuin myös katarsiksen etsiminen kauniiden olioiden kärsimyksen kautta, jatkaa ongelmallista ja liiallista naishahmojen romantisointia. Tutkielman metodologinen viitekehys koostuu satiirin lähiluvusta ja kriittisestä analyysistä. Satiiri puolestaan muodostuu epäluotettavan kertojan petollisten havaintojen kautta. Kertojana toimii nimetön nuori nainen, jota vaivaa kyltymätön halu nukkua. Kertoja on valmis varmistamaan tapansa jatkuvuuden hinnalla millä hyvänsä. Satiiri mahdollistaa lukijan todistavan kertojan levottomana ihmisenä surullisen absurdissa tilanteessa kadehdittavan kokonaisuuden sijaan. Opinnäytetyön johtopäätöksenä on, että romaani onnistuneesti toteuttaa satiirin vastakeinona tragedian romantisoinnille vastenmielisten ihmissuhde-, trauma-, mielenterveys- ja kehokuvausten myötä.

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1. Introduction

Women's reputations have long been garnished with fictional speculations. This phenomenon of despotism has been constructed by centuries of systematic social conventions interpreted and recorded by a predominantly male writing community. The absence of women's jurisdiction over their own descriptions in literature has led to female experiences and emotions being disproportionately misinterpreted, dramatized, and exploited when building the fictionalised character of a woman. Gender has been upheld as a defining binary order of life, and women's roles have stayed more or less constricted, their representation manipulated and work undervalued. As a consequence of society failing to recognize women as independent and active partakers in societal change and development of culture and discourse in both reality and fictional literature, the element of womanhood is effectually romanticised as a one-dimensional symbol of tragedy.

In this thesis, I argue that the trope of romanticised tragedy narrative remains a problematic generalization, expressly on literature containing complicated, suffering women. The novel examined in this thesis is Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). The text offers a twist of satire regarding its tragic events, where Moshfegh writes a script of dark humour to show the horrid possibilities of the extent of tragedy, abandoning romanticisation for ugly descriptions of unlikable pain. The novel can be found of using satire to ridicule the vanity and delusion of the unreliable narrator, as well as the narrator's attempt of restricting or denying the extent of tragedy. The context and choices of the narrator lead to analysing the research aim on how a tragic narrative can be written without romanticisation, refusing to simplify women's suffering as a fantasy to dwell on instead of a problem to solve and seek help for.

The research aim will be analysed through the research question:

How does satire portray tragedy in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*?

2. Historical background on the restriction of women

The problematic construction and distribution of tragic female characters finds its origins in the real-life treatment of women. The historical lack of women's perspectives in writing can be explicated by women's historical place in society always being "one stage behind the man" (Klein, 1946, p. 8). The sense of womanly expectations of real life then transcend to literature, creating and enforcing stereotypes that mock and restrict, reducing women to only serve as dutiful homemakers and objects of beauty.

Theoretical physiology has been used as a designation to 'explain' and 'prove' women's inferiority to men, with philosophers and physicians from ancient times to the 20th century insisting that the uterus was an organ resulting in unpredictable melancholy and poor decision-making (Farzand, 2023). Thus, the womb, along with the overall change in woman's bodies over time (from puberty, to motherhood, to menopause) and with women's position in society, represented a key element of tragedy women were thought to be born with, as discussed further in the next chapters. The discourse around the shame and resentment of the womanly body relates directly to the extent of authority women are allowed to gain and practice in society. Women's lack of jurisdiction to participate in the narrative regarding womanity has resulted in realistic portrayals of female struggle be replaced by a romanticised version more appealing to the literary masses.

2.1. The pursuit of the aesthetic ideal

A considerate factor in the containment and restriction of women's freedom was the rise of the "pursuit of the aesthetic ideal" (Bordo, 1990, p. 83). The Victorian era, along its technological advancements and newfound beauty standards, encouraged specifically women to restrict their food intake out of purely aesthetic reasons. As food became more accessible and processed, 'fat' had suddenly become the enemy, and slenderness was an ideal one was encouraged to prioritise over health. Officially, the extremities of the pursuit were (and still are) rejected: failed liposuctions, obsessive compulsive exercising, and illnesses like bulimia or anorexia nervosa are frowned upon (Bordo, 1990, p. 85). However, the pursuit of thinness and beauty is never truly with health in mind—the process involves the hope that at the end, through any means necessary, the body is accepted by society, and admired rather than judged. The measurement of success has been constructed to be laboriously associated with the weight, slenderness, and overall appeal of the individual.

Ongoing trends sold by social media, fashion cycles, and magazines determine the current aesthetic ideal, and along with it, women are expected to constantly monitor their weight and alter

their body structure through diets, rigorous exercise routines, cosmetic procedures, and even invasive surgeries (Saraceni et al., 2007). The process inevitably controls hundreds of hours of their lives – hours, that could be spent reading or debating or publishing. This in part explains why, even with the revolution of women’s rights from the 19th century, women are kept within a separate lane in society from their male counterparts in regard to social acceptance and pursuit of authority. Despite 21st century customs and laws forsaking the prohibition of women’s independence, women are still being taught to conform to societal norms through controlled aesthetics and conditioned behaviours. This predominantly means women endorsing expectations of pleasing the leading part-takers of society (men) with pleasant exteriors and restricted speaking-roles, fitting the standard of appealing to but never overruling men. These guidelines of control are the lasting effect from the quondam necessity of women finding providing husbands, effectively forcing women into sexuo-economic relations as a means of survival (Kraditor, 1981, pp. 99-100).

Women’s taught desire to expel any ‘fatness’ from one’s body can be seen as a “rebellion against maternal, domestic femininity” (Bordo, 1990, p. 104), built from the role of a wife and mother. Feminine bodies’ negative association with ‘flab’ is associated with the softness of a mother’s body as it stretches and changes in childbearing. The idea of a woman sacrificing her beauty and individuality for motherhood is romanticised as an instinctual feminine need rather than the laborious expectation it is. Later in life, as the child grows, the mother’s disdain for her own body is reflected onto her daughter’s, with a need to control her daughter’s weight, enforcing and upkeeping unhealthy tendencies in the attempt to remain socially acceptable. This cycle of control from mothers to daughters within the sanctity of home is a result of the lack of authority and position the mother has “outside the domestic arena” (Bordo, 1990, p. 104), as motherhood is a powerful device only until the child realises the lack of authority women, including their mother, has in the sexual hierarchy of labour division.

At its common worst, as obsessions over the aesthetics of feminine bodies is encouraged, the disapproval towards their own bodies prevents women from functioning properly, both physically and mentally (Bordo, p. 89). As women are engulfed with issues regarding weight and fatness, their body reflects a constant struggle of tragedy in every-day life. No solitary diet or exercise routine is capable of curing the cultural cycle of rapidly changing beauty standards, which in turn create toxic, competitive female relationships and enforce the repressive behaviour by men towards women.

2.2. Mental illness and hysteria

Along with causing women to obsess with the physical aspects of their bodies, another factor restricting women is the history of hysteria. Historically, hysteria was the typical diagnosis for numerous unexplainable ‘womanly’ ailments or infirmities. Until Freud’s explorations in the turn of the 20th century, where hysteria as a disease was modernized to be associated with the brain instead of the uterus, hysteria was an exclusively female phenomenon (Tasca et al., 2012). Women who expressed discomfort or dissatisfaction in life were seldom taken seriously; instead these women were considered to be unable to express themselves in a sensible, appropriate way for a societally acceptable woman, and were thus labelled hysterical. Other, more physical, symptoms like insomnia, epilepsy, melancholy, fainting fits, abnormal excess or lack of arousal and sexual tendencies, etc., were all considered common symptoms of hysteria (Tasca et al., 2012).

In reality, most of the hysteria symptoms exhibited by women were what are today known as rather common, highly prevalent mental disorders, like anxiety and depression (World Health Organization, 2017). Typical human behaviours accepted among men yet considered societally inappropriate when showcased by women, such as anger and frustration, were also wrongly diagnosed as threatening aggressiveness or rebellious disobedience, also as symptoms of hysteria. The continued cycle of misunderstanding and misinterpreting women’s health issues has upkept the misunderstanding that women are either perfect mothers, wives, and virgins with working, satisfied wombs that correspond directly to a sound mind, or instead, women having become fallen sinners; independent women, disobedient girls, and prostitutes with continuous problems and destroyed wombs, plagued by insanity, and thus, diagnosed with hysteria. The mistake of attempting to explain women’s problems with vague theories and unprovable tests has kept women tied to a status of inferiority, unable to be trusted with their emotions and easily succumbing to hysteria.

Aristotle claimed that this supposed ‘attraction’ towards hysteria and constant suffering was a source explanation for why women were and always would be inferior to men –physically, mentally, and theologically (Tasca et al., 2012). This Aristotelean concept of male superiority, basing that “the woman is a failed man”, has been both a conscious and subconscious basis in the mainstream view of women’s inferiority and weakness in withstanding troubles. The sense of inferiority towards women’s sexuality and attributes of femininity “is not constitutional, but acquired” (Klein, 1946, p. 80), having been drilled into the Western human mind by relentless cultural concepts. Freud, as another example of glorified misinformation, suggested the development of the feminine character would be one of bitterness and sorrow, as the young girl, realising her difference from men, would blame her mother for having borne a daughter instead of a son (Klein, 1946, pp. 72-73). This

psychoanalytic method of explaining women as creatures of envy to compensate their ‘organic inferiority’ evades scientific accuracy, as with most of Freud’s works, but it does offer insight into the historic attitude towards women and the unexplainable symptoms of hysteria, along with the lack of sensible studies into the female character and the reality of tragedy.

2.3. *Women in literature: characters and writers*

In 1974, a class in Indiana University was taught concerning literature only written by women –a rare feat as women’s studies lacked status then as being a real, established field. The authors of *Still Mad: American Women Writers and The Feminist Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, recount how their syllabus revolutionarily included only women writers, from “Jane Austen to the Brontës, from Emily Dickinson to Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath –authors whose works we read as girls and young women but whom we had never studied in college or graduate school” (Gilbert et al., 2021, p. 10). Literature by women is typically classified as ‘other’: whereas literature by men represents all of humanity, literature by women represents womanity. This cycle is still upheld by the referral of male writers as simply ‘writers’, whereas female writers often are branded with the additional tag of being a **woman** writer. There are many who oppose this tag; for example, Denise Levertov rejected the identification of a woman writer, instead preferring to be recognized as an American writer through her country of residence (Gilbert et al., 2021, p. 11).

Though the gender categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ are classifications created and upheld by social construct, the two are relentlessly under a harsh division of gender stereotypes. In actuality, there is nothing in the way of thinking of men and women that would fundamentally separate one from another (Sjoberg, 2016, p. 32), except for the conditioned social norms which cause the power imbalance to remain. However, despite misogynistic theories and superstitions, women are not just female, but human, and the sense of inferiority from men is a constructed, upheld system of oppression. Although the concept of womanhood is a pertinent topic in literature, both the writer and the reader should have a sensibility and skill to utilise critical reading skills to distinguish exaggerations and other artistic liberties in order to prevent gross misinterpretations and manifestations of womanhood and femininity.

Despite the gendered disparity between published works, there have always been women who have written, mostly with the complete absence of adulation (Morris, 1993, p. 76). The primary genres by published women writers were those of gothic tales and romantic stories, which were refused to be considered thought-provoking art by male critics, despite the success rate in sales (Morris, 1993,

p. 99), –perhaps even, as Morris (1993) suggests, the male audience’s despicability towards women’s works was specifically **because** of the success in sales and overall popularity amongst female readers. Despite the rarity of positive reviews confirming genius, female authors have always contributed to the evolution of literature. Austen, for example, revolutionized the extent of description when it came to male characters, with lengthy and repeated physical notes previously only being reserved for female characters (Spencer, as cited in Morris, 1993, p. 97). Women, through their gothic romances, explored themes of violence, irrationality, and passion; concepts predominantly inspired by the physical changes and pains of menstruation, motherhood, and pregnancies, as theorized to be a part of Mary Shelley’s writing process of *Frankenstein* (Moers, as cited in Morris, 1993, p. 98). Along and within romances and gothic tales, women wrote uniquely of domestic duties and the solidarity of female friendships that form whilst doing these woman-appointed ‘unskilled’, ‘unheroic’ daily practices (Morris, 1993, pp. 77-79). The texts study the human need for connection and communication, a humanitarian aspect which revolutionized portraying friendships and other intimate relationships in literature. The lack of research in the field of women as writers as well as credit to female writers still, however, affects the overall acknowledgement, praise and analysis female writers and characters receive.

Tough a rise in both female authors and characters can be seen in the 20th and 21st centuries, the effect of women’s exclusion from classics lingers; imperfect, multidimensional female characters are still rare in mainstream publication. Womanity is something that certainly should be studied – focusing on how structures and events affect women and their perceptions specifically, after decades of studies only focusing on men. However, the run-along tag effectively and even destructively separates women writers from the men, furthering exclusion, and allowing patronizing categorization.

3. Literary analysis in observing suffering

3.1. Introduction to the novel

My Year of Rest and Relaxation by American author and novelist Ottessa Moshfegh was published in 2018 by Penguin Random House UK. The story tells of a 26-year-old unnamed narrator, described to be “tall and thin and blond and pretty and young” (p. 27) and living in New York in the year 2000. Comfortably rich due to the inheritance left by her dead parents, our narrator tells that though the exterior of her life seems perfect and untouchable, she is riddled by anxiety that only sleep can treat and dull. The narrator’s perception towards herself is complicated, as her stoic personality is a shield behind which she cares, yet is afraid to show it. The narrator repeatedly recounts her daily privileges, mentioning her envied beauty and her thought-process dismissing other people’s opinions, leading the reader very quickly to the observation that the unnamed narrator is incredibly delusional and unreliable. The narrator claims that her destructive habits stem from her pure love of sleep, so much that she hatches a plan to hibernate for a full year straight in the hope of redeeming herself.

The unreliableness in the narrative allows the reader to pick up on the satire; the narrator is in complete denial of the reality: her observations regarding things of importance are anywhere between irrelevantly meaningless and crudely shocking, thus managing an unromantic, distressed approach to the narrator’s problems. The narrator refuses to admit her poor mental health, undiagnosed depression being the lurking cause behind her desire to live a restricted life of solitude and sleep. The unknowing bliss of comatose-like sleep is the narrator’s obsessively sought coping mechanism to her unadmitted mental problems. The satire is thus constructed through the unreliable narrator’s disillusioned conclusions and impulsive behaviour: through its depictions of disarray and humiliation, the satiric commentary takes a stance against harmful romanticisation of female suffering.

3.2. Theoretical method: satire through the unreliable narrator

My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018) is a satirical contemporary novel pushing against the romanticisation of tragedy, where the satire is implemented through the unreliable narrator. Satire is a genre that often employs irony to showcase and ridicule a certain event, phenomenon, or person. Its characteristic features involve being topical, claiming to be realistic all while being exaggerated or distorted, as well as funny in a typically grotesque or painful manner (Highet, 1972, p. 5). Satire is, however, protean, and is unfit to be attached to a singular strict definition (Declercq, 2018). With its multimodality, satire manages to serve a wide array of commentary through a lens that aims to be

both entertaining and informative; raising questions with an informal, unserious manner. Despite satire's typicality of being abrasive and obvious, critical close reading is required for the reader to be conscious if and when satire is present in a text, as well as its extent and purpose of commentary.

The satire of the novel relies on the uncertain and compromised narratological effect created by the unreliable narrator. In unreliable narration, the telling of events to the reader exchanges objectiveness to subjectiveness, either through misinterpreting or withholding information (Shen, 2011). This accounts to two different possibilities from the narrator: either the narration aims to tell the reader the truth, but the narrator misunderstands the testified situations and reports them somewhat falsely to the reader, or the narrator purposefully withholds information from the reader, manipulating meanings and concocting a story that suits the purpose of such narrative. The creativity of first-person narration profits from unreliability, as it forms a restricted understanding of the narrator from knowing and/or telling everything, having the narrating character's personal feelings and prejudices affect the text's overall sense of storytelling.

The satire in the novel is found through the dark humour and delusions presented by the first-person narration, constructed by absurdly confident statements and vulgar descriptions of rotting beauty, bodily functions, and sexual violence. Satire takes the ongoing tragedy of the novel, and showcases the narrator's exaggerated observations as practical horror, derogating the possibility of romanticisation to despair and ridicule from the reader's point of view.

3.3. Construction of romanticised tragedy

The definition of tragedy is "a very sad event or situation, especially one that involves death", with the primary example being so: "It's a **tragedy** that she died so young" (Oxford University Press' Learner's Dictionary, accessed 2024). Tragedy is a story fated to end poorly in sacrifice or betrayal, the opposite of comedy; a 'happy ending'. Tragedies remain interesting and important methods of storytelling as the themes of love, longing and inevitability of death are recurrent in describing a universal human experience and thus transcend the ever-changing cycles of culture (Farzand, 2023).

Despite their ability to induce melancholy and other emotions deemed negative, tragedies are useful in having readers relate to characters and thus reflect on their own values and ethical principles, acting as "moral and ethical mirrors to society" (Farzand, 2023). Numerous literary techniques can be found in tragedies, keeping readers engaged and aware of changes: common examples being foreshadowing, symbolism and dramatic irony. Farzand (2023) recounts Aristotle's concept of catharsis, eliciting powerful emotions and serving as a purge of the past. Tragedy allows humans to

rationalize their suffering and turn it into something memorable despite the inflicted pain. Readers relating to the suffering of tragic characters are then able to inspect their own experiences, the self-reflection possibly leading to a sense of relief and renewal via the cathartic release of emotions (Farzand, 2023).

A problem stemming from tragedy's pipeline of grief to relief, however, is the end-product of abundant romanticisation. The definition of romanticisation is "to represent or think of [something] as better than reality would warrant" (Merriam-Webster, accessed 2024), meaning a sense of idealization and sentimentality is added to the observation, causing unrealistic sanguine expectations. Easily turning desire into addiction, humans may tend to start looking for catharsis excessively; desperate to receive the satisfaction of catharsis by any means necessary. This can lead to a reader ignoring the tragedy of tragedy itself and focusing solely on the pleasurable beauty of it, regardless of the intention of the author.

The humanity of women has been manipulated by tragedy, as the female body has been pushed aside to be an object to be viewed, owned, and generally disrespected, unlike its male counterpart. Tragedy relies on the twist from high to low, from happy to sad: the more tragic the end, the more cathartic the release will be. The outcome of beautified, romanticised tragedy through relatable themes brings a sense of an artistic, purposeful community to the reader who has suffered similar instances, or **wishes** to experience to 'grow' insight. However, the phenomenon studied in this thesis revolves around the ideology that by experiencing tragedy, both a character and a real-life person (young women being the main target group due to the previously explored sexuo-economic-based reasons) believe that the misery enhances their beauty, thus enforcing their value and strengthening their position in the eyes of male validation. This problematic narrative relentlessly keeps flourishing in Western communities, strengthening the patriarchal views that see women as overly emotional and weak-minded, and objects to serve a purpose in a man's life rather than their own.

Despite tragedy being a topic of discourse from real-life influences, allowing people to oversee, observe and learn from the tragedies of history, its fictionalization opens the phenomenon to a wide array of decentralization. In fiction, the tragedy works primarily as a form of entertainment, as it is further detached and decentralized from critical thinking skills: viewing tragedy solely as a romantic idealization of beauty and misery rather than a reminder that relief can be found even from the worst outcomes.

4. Satire against romanticisation of tragedy in the novel

4.1. The price of pretty: trauma, loss, and lack of support

The themes of grief and loneliness appear as the narrator's life is haunted with her childhood and the complicated relationship she had with her now-deceased parents. Being an only child, the narrator recounts the distance and isolation that always seemed to cloud her understanding of who her parents truly were. Her father, the narrator remembers, was a distant figure she barely associated with: "My father was joyless, too, at home. When I was growing up, we'd pass each other in the hallway in the morning like strangers" (p. 137). Whereas the narrator's relationship with her father was one of absence, the mother and daughter had a serpentine, dramatic relationship. The narrator recounts her mother's negative comments filled with abstruse complaints and other wounding remarks:

Oh, my mother. At her most functional, she kept to a strict diet of black coffee and a few prunes for breakfast. For lunch she'd have Dolores fix her a sandwich. She'd eat just a few bites, and put the leftovers on a bone fine china plate on the counter—a lesson for me, I took it, in how not to overindulge. (p. 135)

The suggested pattern of disordered eating and disdain for any possibility of 'fatness' echo throughout the novel in the narrator's overconsumption of coffee and underconsumption of actual food. The mother, through her actions and words, valued beauty above all else, her health and daughter included. The generational effect of destructive behaviour follows the narrator's daily decisions and perceptions, worsened by her inability to properly process the grief from the loss of her parents, continuously using transactions as a distraction: "I was lucky to have my dead parents' money, I knew, but that was also depressing" (p. 37).

The narrator constantly denies her descent towards dysfunctionality, as she satisfactorily notes her appearance of blondness and thinness has remained. The importance of the narrator's beauty remaining enforces satire through perturbing prioritization: "Even at my worst, I knew I still looked good" (p. 27). Without a second glance, this may seem like traditional glorification of pain and romanticization of anguish; a construction where the value of a conventionally attractive individual in society grows through tragedy. The unreliability of the narration eventually reaches a definitive turning point in the dismissal of health, as the narrator glances in a mirror one day and fails to meet the typical conventionally attractive appearance she is used to, merging the themes of femininity and grief with her rotting state of being:

When I righted myself, someone appeared in the mirror as if through a porthole window, and it startled me. My own startled face startled me. Mascara had streaked down my cheeks like a masquerade mask. Remnants of bright pink lipstick stained the outer edges and corners of my lips. I brushed my teeth and tried my best to scrub the makeup off. I looked in the mirror again. Wrinkles in my forehead and lines around my mouth looked like they'd been drawn in pencil. My cheeks were slack. My skin was pale. Something flashed in the gloss of my eyeballs. I got close up to the mirror and looked very carefully. There I was, a tiny dark reflection of myself deep down in my right pupil. (pp. 186-187)

The passage portrays the extent of damage the narrator has succumbed to; a withered body reduced to portray the decaying state of her mind. Until this point, the narrator has denied the extent of damage from her mental issues, which could otherwise be attempted to be romanticised by the reader. There are earlier mentions of the narrator's withering condition, which are, however, fleeting and easily forgotten beside the narrator's supposed victory in sleeping longer periods and taking less care of herself. Such include the narrator's notion of not having menstruated in months (p. 134) and her difficulty to stay upright: "I wobbled against the bookshelf. It was difficult to stay upright –two months of sleep had made my muscles wither. And I could still feel the trazodone I'd taken that morning" (p. 74). The spiral of a worsening bodily state can be noted to emphasize the narrator's unsteady mind and reckless functions. The narrator's only focus is on the sought effect of blissful sleep, away from her anxieties. The downsides of her habits do not infiltrate the narrator's ego until it is too late; when all remaining beauty and health has fled, finally showcasing a sick, frail woman deeply in danger due to her own neglect. With this, the reader can note the satire pushing against the romanticised beautification of a body and mind in trouble, seeing the narrator's habits not as quirky whimsicality, but deeply sick and worrying cycles of sleep-addiction and depression.

The painful mark of her parents' memory is seen throughout the novel, as the narrator melancholically visits her past and ponders 'what could have been' every once in a while. Moshfegh portrays a painfully realistic problematic parent-child relationship, as the narrator has more trauma than joyful memories, but she can still be seen yearning for the love she lacked from her parents. The narrator's desire for sleep has strong roots in the memory that napping with her mother was the only time the two ever truly got along (pp. 46-49). By this, the narrator associates sleep with safety, and a solution to grief, escaping her real-world troubles: "Oh sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (p. 46). The narrator keeps sleep as a subconscious memory of the rare instances where she felt safe, loved, and cared for in her childhood, suppressing her trauma.

Observing the narrator's mental illness controlling her life, she is found to be an anguished woman trying to revive her favour for life. Due to the unreliability of the narration, it is important to avoid mistaking the narrator's own notions of despair and disdain towards her current state as the purposeful message of the whole book. Distinctly, in instances when the narrator is unsure of recent events due to her drug-infused coma-sessions, it remains unclear to the reader whether the narrator is purposefully aiming to deceive the reader. Mosfeigh has written a character not made to immediately please and cater, as the narrator can be selfish, naïve, and infuriatingly careless. These factors of imperfection, however, enforce her humanity.

The narrator finds the eccentric Dr Tuttle to supply her with the pills for her quest of year-long hibernation. Pleased with Dr Tuttle's poor memory and electrified suggestions, the narrator lies about insomnia to experiment with pills, despite the conflicting memories of her mother having struggled with alcoholism and undisclosed drug addiction. These instances are prime examples of the writing's satire presenting the twisted worldview of the narrator, showcasing her delusion of refusing to admit that though she truly needs help, she is unable to acknowledge considering a superior long-term solution. Instead, she is addicted to her safety net of sleep and isolation, and is willing to use extreme measures to ensure her comatose bliss, as the trauma from the narrator's conflicted relationship with her parents and their subsequent deaths linger on her present. Though the narrator tries to distance her memories, emotions, and further self-evaluation, she remains affected by her parent's treatment. In numerous instances, the narrator revisits her memories, the experiences triggered by something inconvenient that makes her think of her parent's reserved behaviour.

The desire to avoid processing such uncomfortable, troubling feelings are the basis inspiration for the narrator's quest for uninterrupted sleep away from her anxiety, as composed by the themes of mental illness and loneliness through her attempts of complete isolation. The narrator's suggestion, then, that after a year of sleeping, she is sure to be cured of her disdain towards the world and its prospects, is again a definitive sign of satire. It is a notion that the reader meets with pronounced ridicule; how impossible that a top university educated woman could come up with a plan of such extreme measure and truly make it work. However, Moshfeigh's narrator keeps the reader intrigued with constant surprises in her trauma-based decision-making.

4.2. Female friendship: envy, adulation, and ambition

At first read, the narrator seems to be passive to the events in her life, which enables and upkeeps the cycle of avoiding decision-making and facing realities, upkeeping the theme of loneliness. She is cold

and inattentive to the people in her life, influenced by her ideology of doing the bare minimum to stay alive; mistaking her illness for indifference. The narrator does however, experience guilt, sincerity, and desperation, though she tries to push difficult emotions away and focus on being an unfeeling entity parted from her humanity. As she is powerless to evolve from her difficulties resulting from mental illness, she seeks to gain control in other aspects of her life, hence indifference is introduced to mask desperation. The narrator states: “I did crave attention, but I refused to humiliate myself by asking for it” (p. 65), enforcing her state of mind being influenced by her anxiety to seem weak and needy, something her parents taught her to circumvent.

The only stable external appearance in the narrator’s life is her friend Reva, who approaches the narrator’s habitat often unannounced and uninvited. The narrator recounts how she “loved Reva, but [she] didn’t like her anymore” (p. 7). The relationship is a complicated mixture of a plethora of negativity, as well as occasional sincerity, showcased by the narrator towards Reva, and vice versa:

I don’t know what it was about Reva. She worshipped me, but she also hated me. She saw my struggle with misery as a cruel parody of her own misfortunes. I had chosen my solitude and purposelessness, and Reva had, despite her hard work, simply failed to get what she wanted—no husband, no children, no fabulous career. So when I started sleeping all the time, I think Reva took some satisfaction in watching me crumble into the ineffectual slob she hoped I was becoming. I wasn’t interested in competing with her, but I resented her on principle, and so we did argue. I imagine this is what having a sister is like, someone who loves you enough to point out all your flaws. (p. 14)

The frustration of the narrator can partly be explained as a symptom of restlessness, which she exhibits due to her irregular and lengthened sleeping patterns, as well as her disdain for the interruptions withholding her from said sleep. The rest of it can be credited to the personality of the narrator, as well as her disdain for Reva’s. In its entirety, the relationship of the narrator and Reva can be seen reflecting the toxic competition cycles of womanhood.

The narrator may seem vain, but as her narration continues and experiences unfold, the immaturity in lacking sympathy is established as a way to secure her isolation and disassociation. The narrator rarely gets angry; when something irritates or bothers her, she deems that she has no power to control it so ‘why bother’. The narrator’s passiveness in the decision-making of relationships and daily routines she experiences thus becomes an automatic lifestyle of limited phone calls, time alone in her vast apartment and defenceless answers to criticism she receives. Reva is a constant contributor to interjecting the narrator’s attempts of complete isolation, arriving with wine at the

narrator's house to delay attempts of early afternoon sleep and urging the narrator to eat and go outside, along with other comments partly well-intentioned, partly tools of competition.

The narrator's disdain for ambitiousness and Reva's quests of societal approval may at first seem like a rejection of human connections altogether, however, this is proved otherwise through the narrator's experiences in daily routines and long-term plans. The narrator cares, deeply, yet she is too tired and too defeated by her mental illness and unprocessed trauma to try harder. The narrator confuses truthfulness and simple disdain for effort with the fear of rejection halting her from doing things that would make her happy:

At least I'm making an effort to change and go after what I want, she said. "Besides sleeping, what do you want out of life?" I chose to ignore her sarcasm. "I wanted to be an artist, but I had no talent," I told her. "Do you really need talent?" That might have been the smartest thing Reva ever said to me. (p. 16)

The narrator realises her own incapability of ambition, seen in her lack of interest in a fulfilling career. Instead, the narrator works as an art gallery receptionist; a job she found after graduating, when she still found it relevant to 'fit in'. Eventually, the narrator is fired as her sleep interferes with her productivity and work ethic. However, the narrator sees the instance as an opportunity rather than a loss: she now has nothing to keep her from staying home and sleeping all day, all night. The absence of daily work hours allows the narrator to submit deeper into her mental illness and desire for drug-induced comatose sleep. In her quest to completely erase the hardships of active decision-making, the narrator manages to slip into a dangerous path of vulnerability and self-destruction. The decrepit decision-making can be noted as a constant motive in the novel: the choices kept to the minimum by the narrator to ease her lifestyle of endless sleeping slowly turn into unknown, self-medicated journeys, where the narrator finds herself going out, waking up without any memory of what she has done. Strange, disturbing clues shroud the narrator, yet the passiveness remains, resulting the narrator with an inability to find life-altering shame or regret for her actions.

The narrator finds no shame either in her treatment towards Reva, instead considering her reactions of ignorance justified. The friendship, and the theme of femininity in discourse between the narrator and Reva, is riddled with satirical ridicule on the dysfunctionality of the pair's connection and lack of understanding each other. Reva's defining characteristic is being loyal yet envious, to the point of annoyance. Reva will refuse to leave the narrator's side, no matter how rude or distant the narrator tries to be in return. Reva's character is extensively psychoanalysed by the narrator, and is summarized at the beginning of the book by so:

Since we'd met junior year, Reva could never soberly admit to any desire that was remotely uncouth. But she wasn't perfect. "She's no white lily," as my mother would have said. I'd known for years that Reva was bulimic. I knew she masturbated with an electric neck massager because she was too embarrassed to buy a proper vibrator from a sex shop. I knew she was deep in debt from college and years of maxed-out credit cards, and that she shoplifted testers from the beauty section of the health food store near her apartment on the Upper West Side. I'd seen the tester stickers on various items in the huge bag of makeup she carried around wherever she went. She was a slave to vanity and status, which was not unusual in a place like Manhattan, but I found her desperation especially irritating. It made it hard for me to respect her intelligence. She was so obsessed with brand names, conformity, "fitting in." She made regular trips down to Chinatown for the latest knockoff designer handbags. She'd given me a Dooney & Bourke wallet for Christmas once. She got us matching fake Coach key rings.

(p. 9)

Reva is a young woman, and an only child like the narrator. Reva, however, does not have an inheritance to survive on, is unsure of her looks, and is obsessive in the way she is perceived, and goes to extreme lengths flaunting an imaginary lifestyle to try and prove that she fits in the social circles she admires. Reva is a character constructed through superficial ambitions and desperate determination, willing to achieve her wants by deception through fake bags and other societal illusions of worth; something the narrator considers crude, thus damaging her the appreciation for Reva's positive qualities. Reva can be analysed as the juxtaposition to the narrator: a character constantly on the go, whereas the narrator sinks down and hides away. Whereas Reva is determined to find and showcase her worth in societal standards, the narrator claims she could not care less. Despite the pair's perennial frustrations towards one another, the women share a pursuit of proving the other wrong, although their methods to achieve it differ vastly.

Though the narrator's and Reva's intertwined relationship is complex and their communication dysfunctional, the pair share a strange sense of fierce sisterly connection. Whilst the narrator has managed to push away everyone else in her life (relatives, colleagues, other college friends and mentors), Reva has insistently stayed by her side. Despite Reva's intents of the relationship being primarily fuelled by a need to prove she's doing better than the narrator (as told, however, by the unreliable narrator), while the narrator seeks to avoid Reva, the pair's friendship endures. Though Reva's personality and ambitions irritate the narrator, the narrator employs a passive disassociation to many of Reva's issues and rarely has the energy to state her disclaimers out loud, instead letting Reva complain and having the complaints fall to unresisting ears:

She was competitive about beauty and "life wisdom." Her envy was very self-righteous. Compared to me, she was "underprivileged." And according to her terms, she was right: I looked like a model, had money I hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was "cultured." Reva, on the other hand, came from Long Island, was an 8 out of 10 but called herself "a New York three," and had majored in economics. "The Asian nerd major," she named it. (p. 13)

Both the narrator and Reva experience different kinds of self-hatred, which essentially uphold the women's relationship with one another, echoing the feminine construction of both connection and competition. Whereas Reva despises the outturns of her life, dictated by the lack of care-free opportunities and structure provided by material wealth, the narrator detests the structure of work-driven society, trudging forward with no desire to produce concrete plans or fulfilling goals. Despite the narrator having a broad selection of privileges and opportunities on account of her inheritance and family, her mental illness controls her life. What one lacks, the other has; Reva wants to live a life painted perfect, while the narrator needs Reva's ambition and perseverance. Reva clings on to the narrator for the opportunity to pretend to be better, and the narrator accepts Reva's overbearing entity to gather some sense of control in her life; depending on the occasion, by either pushing Reva away or accepting her.

The women's friendship is riddled with the complications of needing connection, yet detesting the other in envy for what they cannot have for themselves. The statements exchanged between Reva and the narrator enforce the text's satire: conversations cycle on the extremities of ridicule, as the two women refuse to let their friendship go, and instead accept the poor treatment from each other. In an almost maternal way, the two care for one another all while anticipatedly offering a plethora of criticism over the other's choices: a course of action found constantly within mothering, as concluded in the earlier chapter of women's roles in society. Despite the complexity of the women's relationship, the narrator does care for Reva, parting from her at the end of the novel with a sense of melancholic gratitude. Subsequently, Reva's (suspected) death during the events of 9/11 have the narrator reach a strange, unromanticised yet vulnerable view on the catharsis of life and the beauty of its fragility: how life might change at any moment, and one should be awake during it.

4.3. Shitty boyfriends: abuse, obsession, and disrespect

Another one of the narrator's defining relationships constructing the satire of the novel is with a man called Trevor, "a recurring ex-boyfriend, [the narrator's] first and only" (p. 29). Trevor is in his early

40's and works at New York's Wall Street. The older male love interest seemingly represents a multitude of aspects the narrator cannot reach in her life; respect and unconditional love from a mature authority figure, for example. The narrator is obsessed with maintaining the attentions of Trevor, although she is herself unable to understand her infatuation, and the man does not reciprocate the feeling in the desired extent. It becomes clear that Trevor only uses the narrator for sexual favours and sadistic power-play, even rape and assault: "His favourite thing was to fuck my mouth while I lay on my back pretending to be asleep, as if I wouldn't notice his penis slamming into the back of my throat" (p. 175). Trevor and his actions humiliate and hurt the narrator, leaving her grappling with the theme of loneliness and her declining mental health. The narrator, however, refuses or is unable to realise the full extent of the experienced abuse as her obsession overrules sanity.

Though occasionally the narrator pushes back on Trevor's dominations, she always eventually complies in the end, signalling that she is willing to go to extreme lengths to keep Trevor in her life. Unlike with many other people in her life, the narrator is determined to keep him close, despite this showcasing more of an obsession regarding the chase for his acceptance, rather than actual romantic infatuation:

He took me into his kitchen, turned his back, and said, "Get on your knees." I did as I was told and knelt down on the cold marble tile. "Keep your eyes closed," he said. "And open your mouth." I almost laughed, but I played along. Trevor took his blow jobs very seriously. "Have you seen Sex, Lies, and Videotape?" I asked him. "James Spader in that-" "Be quiet," he said. "Open up." He put an unpeeled banana in my mouth, warning me that if I took it out he'd know, and he'd punish me emotionally. "Okay, master," I mumbled sarcastically. "Keep it in there," he said, and walked out of the kitchen. I didn't think it was very funny, but I played along. Back then, I interpreted Trevor's sadism as a satire of actual sadism. His little games were so silly. So I just knelt there with the banana in my mouth, breathing through my nose. (p. 94)

The dynamic between the two never gains more respect. Trevor's narcissistic behaviour ends with the narrator always apologizing, as she renounces her dignity to keep him around: "I knew he was lying. But I still apologized" (p. 95). As the narrator's periods of sleep become longer, the more excruciating her moments of being awake are, as staying in touch with Trevor becomes a true compulsive obsession: there are repetitive phone calls of begging and threats of committing suicide. No clear reason for the narrator's obsession over Trevor is presented: "I still couldn't accept that Trevor was a loser and a moron. I didn't want to believe that I could have degraded myself for someone who didn't deserve it. I was still stuck on that bit of vanity. But I was determined to sleep it away" (p. 76). It could be, that along with numerous people in her life almost worshipping the

different parts of her privilege, the narrator finds a comfort in Trevor's cruelty, and engages in the man's games as an act of self-harm. Trevor himself sees the narrator as a clingy child with abandonment issues, and is well-aware of the extent the narrator is willing to bend in his will.

Trevor represents a caricature of a man that takes from women without giving in turn: using them and humiliating them shamelessly. He repudiates seeing the narrator as an equal, and rather keeps his view of women as objects to win over and possess. Of the narrator, he says: "Blondes are distracting. Think of your beauty as Achille's heel. You're too much on the surface. I don't say that offensively. But it's the truth. It's hard to look past what you look like" (p. 35), which enforces the lack of respect Trevor has for the narrator, focusing on offers of pleasing looks and sexual favours. Trevor has formulated an image of a 'respectable' woman he agrees to date and is comfortable to show around as a respectable prized possession, and the narrator's despair in failing to fit his standard implements the satire of the novel through its dysfunctional relationships, poor communication, and accepted disrespect.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The novel ends in September 2001, with the narrator considering herself restored by virtue of her ‘year of rest and relaxation’. The miraculous cure concludes the satirical possibility of someone sleeping away their troubles, as well as showcasing the pain experienced as something ‘necessary’ to go through: the narrator feels her restriction and detachment from the world has made her reborn and rested. Watching a VHS recording of the Twin Tower destruction, the narrator notes herself realizing the beauty and fragility of life and being alive: “Each time I see the woman leap off the Seventy-eight floor of the North Tower – [...] There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake” (p. 289). Amidst the satire of what could be interpreted as a tone-deaf moment of finding delight in a horrible circumstance on the expense of others, the narrator seems to have truly righted herself, and found a reason to stay awake, understanding the gravity of existing instead of wallowing in self-imposed destruction.

This thesis aimed to analyse how tragedy was portrayed through satire in the novel. Through the themes of femininity, mental illness, loneliness, and grief, Moshfegh’s narrator has been studied as a resistance towards the literary trope of beautiful, anguished women whose sufferings are seen through a romanticized lens, where the character’s sorrow in oppressive circumstances is regarded as a shallow plot device. The narrator’s rich life full of possibilities is plagued by trauma, a feeling of unsafety in childhood and an inability to hold meaningful connections. The narrator, through most of the novel, is unhappy despite all her privileges of being the picturesque model of desired femininity, effortlessly fitting the strict Western beauty standards. In addition, despite how the narrator **should** fit the desire of the male gaze, it is never enough to garner the full affections, or respect, from Trevor. The pair’s relationship showcases the toxicity of women’s servitude to men, and argues against women’s ‘destiny’ to find a way to receive satisfaction through association to a man.

The narrator’s underlying mental illness which fails to be properly diagnosed or treated echoes the damaging history of the hysteria diagnoses, thus effectuating the themes of mental illness and loneliness through her trauma and isolation. The harrowing tiredness and lack of interest in decision-making of the narrator –of this novel, or another presenting a complicated woman— should cease to be hastily classified as a bad personality or an unwise mind. The complexity of the narrator’s situation –her broken love life, her messy friendship with an envious best friend, her trauma from her dead parents and her hectic, restless New York city life under a drug haze— is still presented through a lens of pure tragedy instead of romanticised glamour. The satire manages to turn all possible aspects of romanticisation into a frenzy of horror and dread for the reader, with its vulgar depictions of sexual abuse, bodily functions, and unclear thinking of a sleeping pill addict.

In conclusion, to revisit the different aspects of tragedy in the novel, the narrator's unreliability does not manage to convince the reader of a life of pure, enviable catharsis by tragedy. Through the factors of dysfunctional relationships and harsh realities of untreated mental illness, the novel creates a product of satire through a horrid fall into self-destruction, eventually with the situation being (impossibly, by real-life standards) cured by succumbing fully to the year of sleep and detachment.

Limitations of this study include lack of previous research, as mentioned, regarding the complexity of women and female characters in literature, especially as components of implemented romanticised tragedy, whether in the text itself or in real-life discourse. Limitations of this thesis also include the lack of further background analysis into the historical societal aspects of queer and/or non-white women/non-binary people assigned female at birth, which would be a favourable addition in further research, as this thesis only examined one view of womanity which largely was based on whiteness and heterosexuality. Additionally, potential future research could observe behaviour on social media, where *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and other novels concerning feminine suffering are abundantly discussed. Especially the possible correlation between the youth's rising lack of critical reading skills and romanticisation of mental illness would be a personal topic of interest.

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