

A Brief Commentary on *Health and Happiness*, a short story by Virginia de Forrest
from *Godey's Lady's Book*, November, 1855, pp. 399-401
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"Of all melancholy topics what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?" Death, was the obvious reply. 'And when,' I said, 'Is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length the answer here also is obvious- 'When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.'"

The Philosophy of Composition by Edgar Allan Poe, 1846.
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/poe/composition.html>

I have been unearthing and reading short stories written by women in the United States or in Territories that later became States since November 1972. I have been thinking about all these stories I have read and trying to think beyond my delight in them to understand what, as a body of literature, characterizes them – if anything. I did not undertake this quest with a notion of what I would find other than my belief that the stories existed and could be found. I believed that if I looked imaginatively enough I would find them. I believed (and feel that the belief is more than justified) that whatever there is to write about, women have written about. I did not presume to predict what themes and issues, which relationships and challenges I would discover to be dominant in U.S. women's short stories. I didn't presume that there *would* be dominant themes or issues or relationships or challenges. I knew I would find stories but I didn't know what I would find out about the stories.

However, over the years, without expecting or seeking it, I began to find out that there were and are dominant themes and issues, relationships and challenges. I have noticed clusters of stories that seemed to belong together, that seemed to constitute a thematic tradition, something that women have written about so frequently that it seems to be a "women's topic."¹ I have published collections of women's stories that extend across two centuries about women's friendships, about battering and resistance, about mothers and daughters, about women and fatness, about betrayals by male partners, about the lives of never-married women, and about Christmas. Illness, aging, and absence of scholarly support have slowed down my productivity but I have quite a number more of these collections in process than I have already published or even written about.

One of my not yet published anthologies is a collection of stories about women and disability and chronic illness. The earliest story in that collection is the 1855 story, *Health and Happiness* by Virginia de Forrest published in *Godey's Lady's Book*. De Forrest wrote it and Sarah Josepha Hale published it. De Forrest, about whom I've found almost too little to bother mentioning at this point in my research, wrote the story. Sarah Josepha Hale, about whom there is now, since the beginning of women's studies in literature in the 1960s, more research than one person would want to consume without some particularly driving interest, published the story. They collaborated in bringing

this story urging women to value their good health to what seems to have been the largest possible audience available to any writer in 1855, *Godey's Lady's' Book*.

It is the earliest story I have discovered that speaks to the issue of women's health. The story is revolutionary because it speaks in favor of women's health. The story models some of the ways women's health can be pursued. It asserts without reservations that a woman's health and well-being are essential to her and also essential to the happiness and well-being, the health, of her family. The story acknowledges and counters the then-current romanticization of women's frailty and illness. It is quite amazing. The conversations between the ill woman and the healthy woman are conducted with great gentleness. What the sick woman reveals to the healthy woman about sickness and health is done within a class-inflected culture that romanticized the languid woman, the fragile woman, the frail, dying woman that had long been embedded in the popular culture of the day. The sick woman, Emily, declares to Clara, the healthy woman: "Clara, there is no unalloyed happiness without health." Clara responds: "But, Emily, it must be pleasant to be sick now and then, just to find out how much people love you."

Clara expands on the uses of frailty – you can test the love for you of those around you. You can insure their devoted attention if they do love you. There are a number of kinds of manipulation at her disposal, Clara implies to Emily. The complexity, the mineable depths of that exchange could be spun out into a monograph! – if there were any use for it. Maybe someone will think there is a use for it. The exchange is an opening into an understanding of power relationships in married couples of a certain class at a certain time in history. And don't we all know that where there is not equal power between two people there will be manipulation? Of course. And yet Clara doesn't for a minute think she is speculating on ways to be manipulative of a husband she hasn't (perhaps) even met yet. She is thinking romantically. Hmmm. What does it mean to think romantically? Emily, with all the understanding and gentleness she can manage tried to apprise Cora of the reality of reality. I can suggest that the reason Emily is so gentle with her young sister-in-law is just that she is a gentle tempered woman. But the more important suggestion is that the young woman represents Hale's readers who have been conditioned by the popular cultures of their day to romanticize ill-health, and it isn't wise to diss your readers. If you want to change their mind about something, gentleness is the way to go. It's a form of saleswomanship.

This exchange about the uses of ill health, during which Emily avers "my cross is . . . ill-health" is the crucial exchange in the story. Emily counters the manipulations Clara suggests are the benefits and the rewards of ill health with what she thinks is even better – the benefits and the rewards of good health. Clara seems unable to imagine that ill-health about which she is speculating as a permanent condition, is a bodily condition and not a performance. She has said, "it must be pleasant to be sick now and then." She seems to think of ill health as something to enhance a woman's attractiveness, like the right color of wallpaper on the bedroom wall.

At the end of the story, after a year has passed, another dialogue takes place between the two women. After long separation during which Emily and her infant daughter Bertha have both undergone major life-style changes in the pursuit of good

health, Emily is now well, her infant daughter Bertha is vigorous, the picture of health, and she and Cora are on their way to a reunion of Emily's family. After all that Emily has said to Cora about the preferability of health to ill-health, Cora still says, "affecting an air of languor," "I don't think you and Bertha are half so interesting as you were a year ago; then you both had such white, clear complexions, and were so spiritual; now you are in such rude bloom, and Bertha is positively sunburned."

Whether Clara has learned anything, has had any attitude adjustment, is for the reader to decide. What did de Forrest mean to imply when she wrote "affecting an air of languor?" What do you think? What did de Forrest's readers think? What were they supposed to think? What did Hale think de Forrest meant for her readers to think? What did Hale think? After all, there is a sense in which this story is not only de Forrest's but also Hale's because although de Forrest wrote it, Hale published it.

Sarah Josepha Hale² wrote in 1829 that "Physical health and its attendant cheerfulness promote a happy tone of moral feeling, and they are quite indispensable to successful intellectual effort."³

If we had no more information about Hale than that statement, I think we would be safe to think that Hale would approve of the embrace of health and of the equation Emily makes of health and happiness. I think she would want her readers to embrace that equation. I think such an equation might lead to an enormous change in the lives of women in that time and of that class. They would stop using make-up that poisoned them and stop engaging in behaviors that on the one hand was designed to enhance a woman's attractiveness to a man or to men in general and on the other hand undermined their health and well-being. For instance, cosmetics with arsenic in them. The use of belladonna to create certain optical effects. The wearing of clothing that was so constraining that it led to respiratory problems.⁴

I think the story is absolutely wonderful because long after I read *Health and Happiness* and thousands of other stories, I have retained a sense of it. I've remembered my impatience, although I think I understand, with the incredible patience with which Emily addressed her healthy sister-in-law Clara. I just want to snap at that ninny, that romantic childish innocent who is insensitive to the tortured life of her brother and her new sister-in-law. Although their age in years is not very great, their difference in wisdom and understanding makes them centuries, or at least decades, apart. Clara is nineteen years old, Emily, a new mother, just three or four years older than Clara. How thick-headed does someone have to be not to know that life is better, happier, more fun when you are strong and healthy? That little rush of excitement the younger woman gives off because she is part of the great drama of the Dying Of Emily starring Emily and Frank and Clara!!! There is even, for the contemporary reader, a strong intimation of the connection between health and environmental issues! This first story about women and health is as much a story for our time as it was for the mid-nineteenth century.

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Stories of Fanny Hurst, [Women in Trees](#), and [The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe and Other Stories of Women and Fatness](#).

Endnotes

¹ I definitely do not mean “Woman’s Topic,” an essentialist construction. I mean a topic that women write about a lot, regardless of their race or class or ethnicity or embodiment or sexuality or health condition or climate or region.

² For forty years Hale was “editress” (as she preferred to be called) of *Godey's Lady's Book*, which was the most popular ladies’ book of the 19th century. Each issue contained poetry, beautiful engraving, fiction, fashion and manners advice, and articles by some of the most well known authors in America. Although she began editing this periodical in 1837, she edited another ladies’ book, *Ladies' Magazine* from 1828 until 1836. So, as an editor, she was in a position to influence the tastes of American women in fiction and fashion for fifty years.

³ Park, Roberta J. "Embodied Selves: The Rise and Development of Concern for Physical Education, Active Games and Recreation for American Women, 1776–1865", *Sport in America: From Wicked Amusement to National Obsession*, David Kenneth Wiggins, editor. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1995: 80.

⁴ I could have chosen any of dozens of evidenciary quotations to explain in greater detail what I refer to above as women’s self-destructive behavior in the name of sexual appeal. And we certainly needn’t go back to the middle of the 19th century for examples of this. There are still those who believe that Jacqueline Kennedy’s cancer was triggered by the coal tar in her hair dye and today we have self-induced starvation to satisfy an idea of what a woman should look like to be considered attractive.

In the late 18th to mid–19th century, the ultra–pale look persisted. A “lady” didn’t need to work in the sun, and therefore should be pale...translucent, even. Some historians even speculate that consumption (tuberculosis) was so common that it became fashionable to look as though you were suffering from TB. Indeed, the white skin, flushed cheek, and luminous eye of the illness was frequently imitated with white lead and rouge. To make the eyes bright, some women ate small amounts of arsenic or washed their eyes with orange and lemon juice—or, worse yet, rinsed them with belladonna, the juice of the poisonous nightshade. More information at <http://www.vintageconnection.net/ModesInMakeup.htm>