

Teaching Psychology and Literature: Melancholia as Motivation in the Novels of Dick Francis

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Abstract

Teaching literature from a psychological perspective provides a basis for the study and analysis of human motivation and behavior, as psychology and literature make mutual contributions to the study of both disciplines. Melancholia is a recurring theme in the novels of Dick Francis, and the first-person accounts of despair and depression are sensitive, perceptive insights into the thoughts and emotions of the protagonists. Francis effectively illustrates the melancholy hero who attempts to overcome self-doubt and fear, the loner, isolated and withdrawn from society, who can be motivated by depression to become passionately and intensely involved in his professional life. Freud wrote in *Civilization and its Discontents*, "No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a portion of reality, in the human community."

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Psychoanalytic interpretation of literature can provide a valuable basis for the study and analysis of human motivation and behavior, as literature and psychology make mutual contributions to the development of both disciplines. Bennet describes coordinating courses in which introductory psychology and freshman composition were taught to students enrolled in both courses. “Principles of behavior introduced in the psychology class were portrayed in action through the literature read and discussed in the English class” (Bennett 26).

Character analysis of the melancholy heroes in the novels of Dick Francis provide examples of human behavior. Melancholia is a recurring theme in the novels of Dick Francis, and the first-person accounts of despair and depression are sensitive, perceptive insights into the thoughts and emotions of protagonists and other melancholy characters. “To varying extents all Dick Francis protagonists have crosses to bear, which is a phrase frequently used by Francis himself” (Barnes, *Dick Francis* 145), and for many, that cross includes symptoms of depression. Marty Knepper states that reading *Blood Sport* is learning “what it feels like to be lonely, paranoid, and suicidal” (242).

In 1978 Dick Francis published *Trial Run*, his seventeenth of thirty-eight novels; the same year J. Madison Davis wrote:

Much of what makes Francis one of the best in his genre is his deliberate attempt to complicate the main hero. Like Chandler’s heroes, Francis’s are the modern equivalent of knights in an

unchivalric world, and they frequently [...] are forced into a decisive battle weakened by wounds. As is appropriate in the twentieth century, however, Francis recognizes the profound weaknesses induced by psychological trauma and the difficulty of overcoming it. (Davis 46)

The genre of psychoanalytic literary criticism became popular following the publication of the works of Freud, often with emphasis on Oedipal issues (Craighead 533). With the advent of hard-boiled detective fiction, “The melancholic private eye quickly became an enduring genre staple” (Greenberg 4). Critics began to concentrate on the depressive tendencies of protagonists, and in some cases, the authors. “The dysthymic dick and his genre debuted together. Many of his creators were no strangers to his despair” (Greenberg 6). Depression has been described and experienced by artists and authors throughout history. “In his essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ written in the 1930s, Sigmund Freud distinguished melancholia from mourning—the suffering engendered by the loss of a loved one. In melancholia, Freud argued, the sufferer is experiencing the perceived loss of (a part of) the self—a narcissistic injury that results in heightened self-criticism, self-reproach, and guilt, as well as withdrawal from the world, and an inability to find comfort or pleasure.” In the same essay Freud referred to Shakespeare’s Hamlet as the archetype of the melancholic sufferer” (Gianoulis & Rose 691-692).

The antecedents of the melancholy hero of modern fiction include Hamlet, the melancholy Dane, and the brave but lonely and isolated Beowulf. In “The Melancholy Hero—a Link in the Evolution of Medical Psychology,” M.K. Smith reviews the Old English poem “Beowulf” with “regard to mood disturbance. The poet anticipates many modern concepts concerning the aetiology of depression” (174). Smith states that a modern psychiatrist describing a potentially depressed person, would probably use terms similar to those used to describe Beowulf’s life (178).

“The central feature of melancholic depression is persistent and unremitting sadness. Persons suffering from this disorder are unable to enjoy normal pleasurable experiences, even brief ones, and they exhibit a greatly reduced sensitivity to pleasurable stimuli” (“Melancholia” 415). The melancholic detective has been described as a man (or woman) who experiences private agonies, emotional conflict, psychological stress, disturbances of sleep and appetite, loss of libido, and attempts to overcome self-doubt and fear, a loner, isolated and withdrawn from society. Many of the melancholy heroes in the novels of Dick Francis are motivated by their personal anxiety and depression to become passionately and intensely involved in their personal and professional life.

The fearful, melancholy characters are the most appealing, interesting, and complex of the Dick Francis protagonists. Their adversity creates empathy. Dick Francis is never more appealing than when he discusses the Devon Loch disaster, and his being comforted by the royal family. Francis rode the Queen Mother’s horse, Devon Loch, in the 1956 Grand National; thirty yards from the finish line, Devon Loch collapsed. The incident remains one of the unsolved mysteries in the sport of steeplechase racing (*Sport* 223).

Are the detective fiction protagonists men whose melancholia is a reaction to previous life events, loners who prefer life on the mean streets, or is their depression the result of the “constant exposure, that his work entailed, to the worst in human nature” (Greenberg 4)? Undoubtedly there are examples of both among the characters in the Francis novels. Tony Beach and Roland Britten suffer from reactive depression to previous events; Tony’s wife has been dead for six months. He continues to experience “the devastating, weary, ultimate loneliness. [...] Six months into unremitting ache I felt that my own immediate death would be no great disaster” (*Proof* 7). Roland Britten, an amateur jockey and an accountant, is kidnapped twice, held in isolation at sea and again in a van. After the first depressing

night, Roland wonders, “How long did it take for the human mind to disintegrate, left alone in uncertainty [...]” (*Risk* 37)? Norman West, a private investigator in *Hot Money*, has been exposed to the worst in human nature, and “looked infinitely weary, as if the sins of the world were simply too much to contemplate. He had seen, I supposed, as all investigators must, a life-time procession of sinners and victims [...]” (59).

A reference to depression occurs in the first paragraph of *Even Money* by Dick and Felix Francis: “I sank deeper into depression as the Royal Ascot crowd enthusiastically cheered home another short-priced winning favorite. To be fair, it wasn’t clinical depression—I knew all about that—but it was pretty demoralizing, just the same (1).

Ned Talbot of *Even Money* knows about clinical depression, as his wife Sophie suffered from bipolar disorder. In her cycles of despair, she threatens to commit suicide. Both Ned and Sophie want children, but her illness and medication had put that plan on hold (50-51). Sophie is later released from the hospital and appears to be stable. In the Epilogue Sophie announces that she is pregnant; however, the authors do not again address the important issue of medication for depression during pregnancy (350).

Other Francis characters exhibit symptoms of seasonal affective disorder, a type of depression which recurs as days grow shorter in fall and winter, probably caused by adverse reaction to decreasing amount of light. In *Second Wind*, TV meteorologist, Kris Ironside’s “early autumnal depression intensified day by day” (7). “As autumn approached, the Ironside manic-depressive gloom intensified downwards” (5). “In his depressive periods he talked familiarly about suicide as if discussing an unimportant life choice like what tie to wear for early breakfast broadcast” (9).

Charles Todd, of *In the Frame*, is another example of a character whose depressive symptoms recur in autumn, as expressed in the following passage:

I hated autumn. The time of melancholy, the time of death. My spirits fell each year with the soggy leaves and revived only with crisp winter frost. Psychiatric statistics proved that the highest rate of suicide occurred in the spring, the time for rebirth and growth and stretching in the sun. I could never understand it. If ever I jumped over a cliff, it would be in the depressing months of decay. (33)

Alesia Cenci, jockey and kidnap victim, is back at home, but feeling guilt, shame, and insecurity. Andrew Douglas, professional kidnap negotiator, becomes a victim of the same kidnapper. Although Andrew knows what to expect, he begins to experience feelings of unmanageable despair and desperation (*The Danger* 259).

“Yesterday I lost my license” (3), introduces the reader to Kelly Hughes of *Enquiry*. Kelly has been disqualified and lost his professional steeplechase license when witnesses testified that he intentionally lost races. He could no longer race or go to race courses.(3). Reactive depression is almost inevitable for Kelly as he has been framed and falsely accused. Dexter Cranfield, who loses his trainer’s license as a result of the same enquiry, is deeply depressed and suicidal. Kelly “persuades him to pull himself together and work for a future that to Cranfield seems impossible. [...] Kelly is made of sterner stuff, with a resilience and lack of self-pity [...]” (Barnes, *Dick Francis* 69). For Kelly Hughes the despair and agony that he has suffered provide motivation and enable him to control his life.

The theme of parental rejection is present in many of the novels of Dick Francis” (Wagner *Clues* 7). Henry Grey reflects on his relationship with his parents as “one of politeness and duty, but not of affection. They didn’t even seem to expect me to love them, and I didn’t. I didn’t love anyone. I hadn’t

had any practice” (*Flying Finish* 2). Henry has rejected his parents’ aristocratic social background and works with a bloodstock agency. He is also an amateur jockey and is taking flying lessons. These coping strategies and skills have enabled him to minimize the psychological consequences of rejection.

“Perhaps the most obvious example of parental rejection is that experienced by Philip Nore of *Reflex*, whose mother left him with a series of caretakers” (Wagner *Clues* 9). “I had never actually lived with my mother, except for a traumatic week or two now and then” (*Reflex* 17). Philip has developed interest and skills in both photography and racing as a result of his childhood experiences. These aspects of his life have permitted him to derive positive results from negative circumstances. One might expect a correlation between parental rejection and depression; however, many of the Francis protagonists are resilient enough to overcome the potentially damaging effects (Wagner *Clues* 7).

With varying degrees of success Sid Halley, Matt Shore, Daniel Roke, and Gene Hawkins illustrate their creator’s theory that, “[...] if a person is to be happy and fulfilled, he or she needs satisfying work, work that one does with intensity and one’s full energies.” (Knepper, “*Dick Francis*” 246).

Odds Against introduces Sid Halley, whose racing career has ended as the result of a racing accident which left his hand severely crippled. Sid Halley lost more than a hand and a career. When his dying mother apprenticed him to a Newmarket trainer, he experienced a bond between horse and rider, providing the motivation which led to a satisfying, successful racing career. “And so it had been until it all fell apart” (*Under Orders* 22).

Sid’s mentor, best friend, and former father-in-law, retired Admiral Charles Rowland, knows Sid well and believes that the strength and resilience demonstrated during his racing career will resurface. Sid, now employed at the Radnor detective agency, is shot during a routine investigation. “It was the

first step to liberation, that bullet, though I wouldn't have said so at the time. I stopped it because I was careless, Careless because bored" (1).

This proves to be the turning point for Sid Halley, the point at which he exemplifies Freud's statement that, "Professional activity is a source of special satisfaction if it a freely chosen one" (Freud 30, note 5). The professional activity was not originally freely chosen by Sid; however, during the investigation of the shooting, a policeman commented the Sid was professional, efficient, and good at detective work. On Sid's first day back at work, he tells Radnor that he wants to stay if he can do real investigative work. Radnor replies, "Good God. At last, [...] And it took a bullet to do it" (*Odds Against* 72). Sid Halley has found the motivation to become a professional investigator, passionately and intensely involved in the work of the detective agency.

Later in *Odds Against*, the Radnor Detective Agency is destroyed, and Radnor says that he is too old and too tired to start again. Sid convinces Radnor that the other employees are dependent on the agency. Sid Halley says to Charles Rowland, "I've just been doing to my boss what you did to me at Aynsford. [...] Kicking him out of depression into action" (267).

The professional activity not originally chosen by Sid Halley has chosen him. From the racing world and beyond, his investigative skills are in demand. He is at peace with his disability. "In truth, I had been much more comfortable with my left arm these last three weeks than I had been for ten years, [...] it was part of me as a whole" (*Under Orders* 307). His personal life now includes his wife, Marina, and a resolution of the lengthy feud with his ex-wife, Jenny. The healing process for Sid Halley seems to be complete.

Air taxi pilot, Matt Shore, of *Rat Race*, has experienced a divorce and career problems. He had “been depressed for so long that it had become a permanent state of mind” (13). Matt reflected that, “Maybe one day I would accept the unsatisfactory present not as a healing period but as all there was ever going to be. That would be a pity, I thought. A pity to let the void take over for always” (57).

When Matt Shore’s unoccupied plane is destroyed by a bomb, the void in his life is filled by his investigation of the mystery. Who planted the bomb, who was the intended victim, and what was the motive? The investigative activities are the result of a re-awakening instinct for self-preservation when he realizes that the Board of Trade investigators consider him a possible suspect. Matt manages to solve a complex crime while becoming involved in the lives of jockey Colin Ross and his sisters, Nancy and Midge. We leave Matt wounded but involved in life and in love with Nancy. He is also anticipating running his own air taxi service—the world thrust into his fingers (213). Matt Shore has discovered a therapy that works for him.

In *For Kicks* Daniel Roke has been supporting his sisters and brother since his parents drowned in a sailing accident when he was eighteen, and he experienced “a fierce aching desperation to be free” (13). “I continued at night to sink into head-holding miseries of depression, and kept these moods out of my days – and my balance sheets – only by working to the limit” (14). When Roke has an opportunity to become a British undercover agent, he accepts, “to fling responsibility to the wind and cut the self-imposed shackles off my wilting spirit” (14). The successful completion of his assignment provides a feeling of purpose in his life. Offered a job in counterespionage, Roke arranges for the supervision of his siblings and his business in Australia. Daniel Roke has a new and challenging vocation, a calling that he finds impossible to resist (Barnes *Dick Francis* 34).

Endogenous depression or melancholia doesn't always have an obvious cause. It is not necessarily brought on by a specific life event or circumstance. It is Gene Hawkins of *Blood Sport* who experiences the "groundless, deeply felt sadness (melancholia)" and "tormenting loss of emotional life" of endogenous depression (Eysenck 259). Hawkins suffers from a recurring melancholia with no apparent external cause other than the fact that his lover has left him. He faces an enforced three week vacation with apprehension and dread. The Luger under his pillow "was there to save my life. Not to take it. I had lived through a lot of temptations, and I lived with that too" (*Blood Sport 2*).

Hawkins is able to function professionally and at least superficially in social situations; however, he thinks of spending his vacation weeks beside the river feeding ducks. He could jump in when he couldn't stand any more of it (8).

Gene Hawkins agrees to go to America to investigate the disappearance of a world-class stallion, and goes to New York to meet with insurance agent, Walt Prensela. The night before their meeting "had been one long stupid struggle between a craving for oblivion and conviction that appeasing it wasn't so much morally wrong as a thorough going defeat. Obstinacy had given me what success I had had in my job, and it alone seemed to be keeping me alive" (55).

During the investigation and surveillance, Gene considers putting the barrel of the Luger against his head, and squeezing the trigger (267). He decides to die and then rejects that decision. He has "touched bottom and come back. [...] I felt that after this I really could climb right out, if I went on trying" (269). Only fourteen pages later the insurance agent, Walt Prensela, is killed saving Gene's life. Gene's reaction is, "It should have been me lying there, not Walt. I shook with sudden impotent fury that it wasn't me, that Walt had taken what I'd wanted, stolen my death It would have mattered so little if it had been me. It wouldn't have mattered at all" (283). It no longer appears that Gene feels hopeful that he really can climb right out and recover.

Throughout *Blood Sport* the use of first person narration provides the reader with a painful awareness of what is in Gene Hawkins's mind; on thirty-nine of the three hundred and nine pages in the novel there are thoughts of despair, depression, melancholy, or suicide. Gene Hawkins epitomizes the protagonist for whom depression provides motivation, and solving crimes becomes self-prescribed work therapy. Hawkins reflects that "only work brought my splintering self into any sort of whole, and I knew well enough that it was the work itself which had started the process" (11).

Gene Hawkins is probably the Dick Francis hero least likely to become happy and fulfilled. Perhaps it is a good sign that he recognizes the symptoms of depression in Eunice Teller, Dave's wife. Gene suggests that Eunice should use her interior decorating talents and start a business to fill the void in her life (178-179). We can conclude from this and other observations that Gene does recognize the therapeutic value of work, but the reader is left to wonder if Gene Hawkins will also consider psychotherapy.

Francis has chosen to create different heroes for his novels with the exception of Sid Halley, who appears in four and Kit Fielding in *Break In* and *Bolt*. All of the characters fall within the detective genre; however, each reacts and develops as he deals with the social, moral, and psychological issues within his own milieu. Different backgrounds, environments, and stressors allow each protagonist to change and mature as a real person in a real world, not just as a stereotype of the detective hero.

Davis says that *Bonecrack* "Ends as happily as possible" (60). That seems to be true of most of the Francis novels; even the most melancholy heroes exhibit some resilience and resolve; most retain the belief that good will triumph over evil. The victims of reactive depression recover or adapt. Seasonal affective disorder by definition will subside; it can be treated by phototherapy or relocation to the Caribbean (one of Francis's homes). Gene Hawkins, the most seriously depressed of the heroes, shows an occasional flash of optimism, but Melvyn Barnes indicates that "Francis leaves the reader with a

lingering doubt as to Gene's future" (*Dick Francis* 61). There is; however, no doubt about the author's contribution to the literature of detective and mystery fiction. In the later novels the focus shifts from exciting racing scenes to emphasis on character studies, resulting in his "becoming less a writer of thrillers and more a creator of literature-while remaining, as he has always been, splendidly readable" (Bauska 244).

Freud wrote in *Civilization and its Discontents*: "No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a portion of reality, in the human community" (Freud 30, note 5).

Dick Francis also felt that, "[...] if a person is to be happy and fulfilled, he or she needs satisfying work, work that one does with intensity and one's full energies" (*Knepper* 246). That a person needs satisfying work is an obvious conclusion; however, for the Dick Francis protagonist it is the passion and intensity devoted to that work which enables him to find purpose and direction in his life. Freud also states that, "Professional activity is a source of special satisfaction if it a freely chosen one—if, that is to say, by means of sublimation, it makes use of existing inclinations, of persisting or constitutionally reinforced instinctual impulses" (Freud 30, note 5). Although many of the Dick Francis heroes have not freely chosen to become involved in crime solving activities; once involved they have chosen to use their existing inclinations to resolve the task thrust upon them. With acceptance of this responsibility they have begun the process of renewed involvement in society with a strong motivation to avoid failure and achieve success.

Bennett indicates that coordinating courses in introductory psychology and freshman composition were chosen to enhance both courses, as the "focus of both is on a concern shared by the disciplines of psychology and English: understanding the human condition" (Bennett 26). A similar course is described by

Williams and Kolupke who selected literary works with “sufficient detail and elaboration of character to provide grounds for a full analysis of behavior and motivation” (Williams and Kolupke 60).

C.P. Snow writes that Dick Francis has, “a most unusual psychological skill, and one which is very rare anywhere, and certainly very rare among novelists” (Snow 1973). Snow’s article, “Over the Sticks,” appeared in the [London] *Financial Times* in 1973. Thirty-three years later a profile of the work of Richard Stanley Francis, in *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*, states that Francis “looks perceptively at human relationships” (Barnes, *St. James* 374) and indicates that psychological stress provides a motivating factor and gives “depth and feeling to his protagonists” (*St. James* 375). The melancholy heroes in the novels of Dick Francis provide examples for analysis of behavior and motivation.

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