

# Suicidal Ideation and Completed Suicide in The Decameron



Saxby PRIDMORE<sup>1</sup>, Garry WALTER<sup>2</sup>

---

## SUMMARY

**Objective:** To extend our understanding of suicidal ideation and completed suicide via examination of a medieval Italian text—in particular, examination of the role of social and environmental triggers in such events. Previous studies have successfully examined the texts of ancient Greco-Roman, Old Norse, and Finnish civilizations to better understand the circumstances associated with suicidal ideation and completed suicide. Those texts included depictions of suicide by people without any apparent mental disorder in response to painful social/environmental circumstances.

**Materials and Methods:** The Decameron, a collection of 100 short stories written by Giovanni Boccaccio in 1349-51, was examined in detail. The setting of The Decameron is during the Black Death and concerns a group of 10 people that leave plague-ridden Florence for a holiday in the countryside. On each of the 10 days of their trip, each individual tells a story, which in total form the 100 stories of Boccaccio's work. For the present study, all mentions of suicidal ideation and completed suicide were listed and arranged with appropriate headings.

**Results:** In total, 9 accounts of suicidal ideation and 4 accounts of completed suicide were identified, all of which were in response to social stressors, particularly romantic problems.

**Conclusion:** Suicidal ideation and completed suicide in response to social stressors was a feature of The Decameron and it is feasible that this may have been a feature of medieval Italian culture. This would be in agreement with the findings of other studies that suggest that although commonly occurring in response to mental disorder, suicide can occur independently of such disorder as a result of a predicament in which an individual finds him/herself.

**Keywords:** Culture, history, suicide, The Decameron

---

## INTRODUCTION

It has been reported that suicide is always (Dorpat and Ripley 1960) or almost always (Bertolote et al 2004) the result of mental disorder. While accepting that suicide is more common among those with a mental disorder than those without mental disorder, we believe that suicide can be the result of a predicament in which an individual finds him/herself. One such predicament is an untreated or unresponsive painful mental disorder, and another is a painful social or environmental trigger (Pridmore 2009). With the aim of arriving at a better understanding of suicide, we previously examined the ancient texts of the Greco-Roman (Pridmore and Majeed 2011), and Old Norse and Finnish (Pridmore et al. 2011)

civilizations. Of those texts, the most recent is *The Kalevala*, an epic Finnish poem concerning events that occurred up to about the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Each of those texts included depictions of completed suicide in response to painful social/environmental circumstances by people without any apparent mental disorder (although this latter point cannot be known with absolute certainty).

The aim of the present study was to further improve our understanding of suicide via examination of *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio. The advantages of an examination of this text are single authorship (although the stories have diverse origins) and good quality information concerning the author's biography and life in Italy during the time the book was written.

Received: 18.02.2013 - Accepted: 12.03.2013

<sup>1</sup>MD/Prof., University of Tasmania, School of Medicine, Hobart., <sup>2</sup>MD/Prof., University of Sydney, School of Psychiatry, Sydney., Australia.

E-mail: gwalter@mail.usyd.edu.au

Boccaccio was the illegitimate son of a wealthy merchant (Kreis 2009) and was born in 1313 in Certaldo or Florence. At age 19 years he went to Paris and began writing poetry. He returned to Florence, where in 1348 (age 35 years) the Black Death caused the death of his father, step-mother, and many of his friends. In 1349-51 he wrote *The Decameron*. Boccaccio served as an ambassador to various regions, including Florence and Lombardy, and wrote prolifically. He died in Certaldo in 1375 at age 62 years.

*The Decameron* is a collection of 100 short stories (Riva 2010). The title is derived from Greek, meaning 10-day event. The setting of the work is during the Black Death and concerns a group of 10 young people that leave plague-ridden Florence for a holiday in the countryside. On each of the 10 days each individual tells a story, and these form the 100 stories of the work. A different member of the group takes on the role of master of ceremonies each day; thus, the stories are loosely knitted together. Scholars have shown that the stories are drawn from French, Italian, Latin, Indian, Persian and Spanish sources; however, they are re-set in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, and reflect the culture of that time and place.

*The Decameron* is a comedic work that draws attention to the friction between the newly wealthy commercial class and the nobility, and mocks the supposed lust and greed of the clergy (Riva 2010). Wit and intelligence are applauded. The church and the clergy receive satirical treatment, probably because they were held in low regard due to their impotence against the Black Death. Sex and humor are central to most of the book's stories. The subjugation of females is described and was probably exaggerated by Boccaccio, thus expressing his dissatisfaction with this aspect of society.

## MATERIALS and METHODS

We chose the Penguin Classics version of *The Decameron*, as it is inexpensive and readily available (Boccaccio 1995). All mentions of suicidal ideation and completed suicide were collected and are presented under these two headings.

## RESULTS

In the 100 stories problematic romantic relationships trigger suicidal ideation in at least 9 individuals, of which 4 completed suicide. Thus, in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, romantic disruption may have been a credible trigger for suicide.

### Predicaments triggering suicidal ideation

1. The second story on day 3 is set in Pavia, in Lombardy. A man of low status fell in love with Queen Theodelinda. Their social positions were so different that a relationship was impossible. The man found it increasingly difficult

to keep his secret yearnings under control, and as he was unable control his passion he kept telling himself that he would have to die (p. 201). While this passage does not specifically mention death by suicide, this can be interpreted as suicidal ideation.

2. The second story on day 5 occurs on the Islet of Lipari off the coast of Sicily. Gotanza was the daughter of a noble family and Martuccio was a craftsman. They fell in love. As Martuccio was relatively poor, Gotanza's father would not give them permission to marry. Martuccio set off to make his fortune with the intention of returning to marry Gotanza. Hearing that Martuccio had been killed, Gotanza. "...wept incessantly and resolved to put an end to her life. Lacking the courage to do herself violently to death, she hit upon a novel, but by no means less certain way of killing herself" (p. 380). She rowed out to sea in a small boat, then hoisted the sail and threw the oars and rudder overboard. She calculated that one of two things would happen: either the boat would, "capsize in the wind or it would be driven aground and smashed to pieces. In either case she was certain to drown..." (p. 380).
3. The seventh story on day 5 takes place in Sicily. Violante was the daughter of a noble family and Pietro was a slave. They became lovers and Violante became pregnant. Afraid of the consequences, Pietro told Violante of his plans to run away. She replied, "If you go away, I shall kill myself without fail" (p. 414).
4. The eighth story on day 5 is set in Ravenna. There are two events of interest: one is suicidal ideation and the other is a completed suicide. Nastagio, who had inherited a large fortune, fell in love with a young lady; however, she repeatedly rejected his advances. Accordingly, "Nastagio...was frequently sized after much weeping and gnashing of teeth, with the longing to kill himself out of sheer despair" (p. 420).
5. The fourth story on day 7 is set in Arezzo. Tofano, a modestly wealthy man, suspected his wife Monna was having an affair. He locked her out of the house and refused her access. She called out to him, "Rather than face the dishonor, which in spite of my innocence you threaten me with, I shall hurl myself into this well, and when they find me dead inside it, they will all think that it was you who threw me into it when you were drunk" (p. 503).
6. The ninth story on day 7 is set in Argos (Greece). Lydia, the King's wife, loved Pyrrhus. She told her maidservant, "Unless I can forgather with him very soon, I firmly believe that I will die" (p. 534). She sent Pyrrhus a message expressing her needs, which he rejected. "On hearing the result of her mission, she simply wanted to lay down and die" (p. 535). The maidservant then scolded Pyrrhus, "..."

not only will you bring about the certain death of your mistress, but you will reproach yourself so often for it that you too will want to die” (p. 556).

7. The seventh story on day 8 is set in Florence. Elena was a widow that was loved and pursued by Rinieri, a young nobleman. For her amusement, Elena caused Rinieri great physical hardship, which almost cost him his life. In revenge, Rinieri tricked Elena into being trapped naked on top of an isolated tower. She almost froze that night and the next day she was severely burnt by the sun and stung by insects. In distress, she was “almost to the point of hurling herself from the tower to the ground” (p. 597). She said to Rinieri, who remained nearby to enjoy his revenge, “I beg you in God’s name to come up here, and, since I do not have the courage to take my own life, to kill me yourself, for death is the one thing I desire above all else...” (p. 606).
8. The 10<sup>th</sup> story on day 8 is set in Palermo. After announcing that her brother’s fortune had been lost, a character stated, “I wish I’d been struck dead before this dreadful news had reached my ears” (p. 639). This is not suicidal ideation in the usual sense, but does indicate that death was conceptualized as a means of avoiding a predicament.
9. The seventh story on day is set in Palermo. King Peter of Aragon had made himself master of Sicily. Lisa was the daughter of an apothecary. Lisa saw the King at a jousting contest and “fell passionately in love with him” (p. 738). She was aware “of her lowly condition” and kept her love secret. “As her love continued to increase, so also did her melancholy, till eventually, being unable to endure it any longer, the beautiful Lisa fell ill and began to waste visibly away from one day to the next, like snow in the rays of the sun” (p. 738). She also stated, “I have chosen to die as the lesser evil (compared to life without a loving relationship with the King), and die I shall” (p. 739). While there is no mention of a self-destructive act, there is the expressed intention to die as a solution to a predicament.

### **Predicaments triggering completed suicide**

1. The first story on day 4 is set in Salerno. Tancredi, Prince of Salerno, was an old man whose daughter, Ghismonda, lived with him. Ghismonda took Guiscardo, a valet of humble birth, for her lover. Tancredi discovered the relationship and had Guiscardo captured. Thinking that Guiscardo was already dead (he soon would be), Ghismonda “resolved to live no longer”. She stated, “I shall continue to love him until I die, which I expect to do very soon” (p. 296). Tancredi had Guiscardo killed, then he put his heart in a chalice and had it delivered to his daughter (Ghismondo). She took poison and died.

2. The ninth story on day 4 is set in Provence, where two noble knights (de Cabestanh and de Roussillon) enjoyed a friendly relationship and lived in their own castles. De Cabestanh and the wife of de Roussillon had an affair. De Roussillon discovered the affair and secretly murdered de Cabestanh and cut out his heart. He told his cook it was a boar’s heart and to prepare it for his wife’s consumption. When she had finished this meal, de Roussillon informed his wife she had eaten her lover’s heart. Shortly after, “she allowed herself to fall” through a high window and died (p. 352).
3. The eighth story on day 4 begins in Florence and involves 2 deaths, 1 by suicide and the other from grief. Girolamo was the son of a rich merchant, who fell in love with Salvestra, the daughter of a tailor. His family was unhappy with the match and forced him to go to Paris, ostensibly to learn about their French assets. When he returned 2 years later, Salvestra was married and would not respond to him. He “resolved not to go on living...he clenched his fists and held his breath until finally he expired” (p. 346). While this is an unlikely or indeed medically “impossible” means of suicide, the intention is clear and Boccaccio describes it as being successful.
4. The eighth story on day 5 involves the report of a suicide. Nastagio encountered the ghost of Guido degli Anastagi, who told him that he had been repeatedly rejected by a woman and ultimately, “her pride and cruelty led me to such a pass that, one day, I killed myself in sheer despair with this rapier that you see in my hand” (p. 422).

## **DISCUSSION**

*The Decameron* is a satirical work that attacks the clergy, the class system, and gender discrimination. It was written for publication and thus the need for sales would have influenced the subject matter and style. It was published immediately after the Black Death; the impotence of the Church and the clergy in combatting the plague was one of the factors that hurt the reputation of the institution at that time. *The Decameron* is presented as the output of 10 people that escaped from a plague-devastated city “to make merry”. The stories are humorous and bawdy.

The question arises, how is such a work indicative of the behavior and thinking of the time? Literature both reflects and shapes the culture from which it arises. Some *Decameron* stories come from earlier times and places other than Italy, but were modified to fit Boccaccio’s contemporary world. It was written, like many other literary products, to entertain and instruct, and, accordingly, exaggeration and allegory were employed (Fajordo-Acosta 2013). One must therefore not over interpret the events described in the work in seeking to

understand suicidal behavior; the limitations of drawing on the arts, let alone a single literary work, to foster insight into real-world suicide in the medieval era are acknowledged by the present authors. Nevertheless, the 10 accounts of suicidal ideation and 4 accounts of completed suicide in response to various, but predominantly romantic, problems, suggest that suicide in response to predicaments occurred in medieval Italy. Further, although literary accounts of suicide in medieval times are relatively rare, it is evident from judicial and religious records that suicide and attempted suicide were not uncommon in that era, and that these were sometimes triggered (Seabourne and Seabourne 2001; Murray 1998). For example, there is an account (Murray 1998) of Giacomuccio Fatteboni, a 55-year-old peasant, who suddenly hanged himself in 1320. There was speculation that marital incompatibility may have been contributory.

In *The Decameron*, deaths related to romantic problems also include sudden death, such as when a woman saw the corpse of her lover and immediately died “from a surfeit of grief” (p. 348) and delayed deaths, for example when a woman’s lover was murdered and “eventually she cried herself to death” (p. 330). In another story, a man who thought that his wife had left him, “so deep was the despair into which he was cast that he lost the desire to eat, took to his bed and resolved to die” (p. 776). Such examples may suggest pathological conditions.

The seventh story on day 10, which begins in Athens, is of particular interest. Titus and Gisippus were friends that studied philosophy together; they had a complicated relationship with Sophronia, a young woman of the nobility. Titus and Sophronia married and went to live in Rome. Gisippus was banished from Athens (for perhaps unjustified reasons); destitute, he traveled to Rome. He saw Titus on the street, but Titus did not recognize him, and he believed he had been rejected. Wandering one night, Gisippus saw one thief murder another. “Intent upon dying, felt he now discovered a way of achieving his goal without resorting to suicide” (p. 760). He remained at the crime scene, was apprehended, confessed to the murder, and was sentenced to death by crucifixion, but was later exonerated. Gisippus’ motivation was triggered

primarily by a range of other social factors. The case is of particular interest because it appears to be the first reference of an attempted “suicide by cop”.

It is agreed that cultural factors play an important role in national suicide rates (Durkheim 1951). The conclusion that romantic problems may have served as a trigger for suicide in medieval Italy is consistent with recent clinical findings that romantic relationship problems are not uncommon triggers for suicidal ideation and behavior (Foster 2011; Cupina 2009).

---

## REFERENCES

- Bertolote J et al (2004) Psychiatric diagnoses and suicide: revising the evidence. *Crisis* 25: 147-55.
- Boccaccio G (1995) *The Decameron* (translated by G. McWilliam). 2nd ed. Penguin Books (originally published 1351).
- Cupina D (2009) Life events, gender and suicidal behaviours in the acute community setting. *Australasian Psychiatry* 17: 233-6.
- Dorpat T, Ripley H (1960) A study of suicide in the Seattle area. *Compr Psychiat* 1: 349-59.
- Durkheim E (1951) *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. New York: Free Press (originally published in 1897).
- Fajardo-Acosta, F (2013) *The Decameron* (1353). Retrieved January 23 2013, from <http://fajardo-acosta.com/worldlit/boccaccio/decameron.htm>.
- Foster T (2011) Adverse life events proximal to adult suicide: a synthesis of findings from psychological autopsy studies. *Arch Suicide Res* 15: 1-15.
- Kreis, S (2009) Giovanni Boccaccio, 1313-1375. The history guide: lessons on ancient and medieval European history. Retrieved January 22 2013, from <http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/boccaccio.html>.
- Murray A (1998) *Suicide in the Middle Ages (Volume 1): The Violent Against Themselves*. Oxford University Press.
- Pridmore S (2009) Predicament suicide: concept and evidence. *Australas Psychiatry* 17: 112-6.
- Pridmore S et al (2011) Suicide in Old Norse and Finnish folk stories. *Australas Psychiatry* 19: 321-4.
- Pridmore S, Majeed Z (2011) The suicides of the Metamorphoses. *Australas Psychiatry* 19: 22-4.
- Riva, M (2010) *The Decameron* Web. Retrieved January 22 2013, from [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/index.php](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/index.php).
- Seabourne A, SeaboUrne G (2001) Suicide or accident - self-killing in medieval England: a series of 198 cases from the Eyre records. *Brit J Psychiat* 178: 42-7.