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Center for the Study of Ethics in Society

Papers published by the Center
Vol. XX No. 1
November, 2014



**Anorexia/Bulimia, Transcendence, and the
Potential Impact
Of Romanticized/Sexualized Death Imagery**

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Founded 1985

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**Anorexia/Bulimia, Transcendence, and
the Potential Impact
Of Romanticized/Sexualized Death
Imagery**

Presented November 10, 2014

Heather D. Schild

Papers presented for the
Center for the Study of Ethics in Society
Western Michigan University

Vol. XX No. 2
November, 2014

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Anorexia/Bulimia, Transcendence, and the Potential Impact of Romanticized/Sexualized Death Imagery

Heather D. Schild

Introduction

Anorexia and bulimia are eating disorders that predominantly affect women, and are often about getting or maintaining control over one's life. The medicalization of these disorders and their treatment removes this sense of control for eating disorder sufferers, causing women to seek out treatment only when they become very ill and near death. Recent trends in marketing to young girls and teens have begun to "romanticize" death and "sexualize" the idea of the living dead in a way that may cause young women suffering from eating disorders to view death as a more viable option than seeking out medical treatment.

The intent of this paper is to provoke consideration and encourage further dialogue about current popular culture and media trends that may be potentially damaging to young women in the United States repetitiously exposed to its content. This paper will open with a discussion of where ideas of thinness came from in the United States and why women feel they are socially required

to meet these ideals. Then, a focus on anorexia and bulimia will illustrate current trends and theories of why eating disorders exist, why they become addictive, and how they are perpetuated. An illustrated discussion of the recent trends that romanticize and sexualize anorexic thinness, death imagery, and themes of the living dead directed toward children and teens will ensue, and be followed by an examination of ideas of transcendence that exist in Western culture.

As a researcher, I feel that this issue is both socially relevant and timely. A vast number of research articles and books have been published on topics surrounding the damaging effects of media and eating disorders on women over the past several decades, yet the number of women, particularly young women, suffering from eating disorders continues to grow. In 1995, 34% of girls in high school thought that they were overweight; today 90% of them do (Martin, 2007). Further, when polled, 50% of women between the ages of 18 and 25 said that they would rather be “hit by a truck” than be “fat” (Martin, 2007). A full 2/3 of these women who were polled also reported that they would rather be considered “mean” or “stupid” than to be considered “fat” (Martin, 2007). These data are shocking, but they illuminate just how body obsessed today’s young women have become; a reality both frightening and worthy of research attention.

Thinness and Perfection Obsession

Berger (Jones, 2005) asserts that in American culture, women are defined by their appearance and gestures because they are continually the subject of the “masculine gaze” which objectifies them. American women are taught that they will be treated according to how men evaluate them, which for many women is directly reflected in the number they see on the scale.

Recently, I came across a blog about whether men preferred “thick” or “thin” women. The men resoundingly answered that they liked thick women better, but then they began exchanging photos of women they considered to be “thick”, including the photo posted below. “Thick” women were defined as having “a small 24 inch waist,” but with so-called “thick” characteristics, such as the exceedingly thin woman’s muscular thighs shown in the photo image, or women with large backsides for the size of their frame, which by these men’s standards were not anywhere near “large” at all.

Foucault’s (1977) theory of panopticism, discusses the function body surveillance serves in society. Body surveillance acts as a corrective measure that encourages subordinate individuals (in this case, women) to strive for model appearance and behavior. Surveillance is therefore enacted in a hierarchical fashion, meaning the individuals who maintain the most power in society are the only ones capable of exacting conformity from

others (Foucault, 1977). Each individual who is surveilled is reinforced to play out their role in society, and those who deviate from performing their given function are separated out from the “normal” and labeled “abnormal” (Foucault, 1999 p. 199). This label is stigmatizing to the individual who will strive, whenever possible, to attain the “normal” social status label.

Today, women attempt to emulate the body mores set up by Hollywood that demand a woman never gain weight from her teen years on (Maine, 2005, p. 16). Women are expected to stay young looking through cosmetic surgery and beauty treatments such as coloring their hair to cover the gray to wearing false nails and lashes (Maine, 2005). Women who can’t afford plastic surgery are at the mercy of spandex body shapers and push up bras to help them maintain their youthful body shapes. Countless ads on television and radio, on billboards, and in magazines encourage women to join weight loss programs and to buy weight-loss and nutrition supplements and exercise equipment. Many of the women featured in these commercials appear to be normal sized young women in their “before” pictures, and shrink to near anorexic proportions in their “after” photos. With standards such as a 24 inch waist to live up to (only to be considered “thick!”) it is no wonder women are preoccupied day and night with their weight and appearance.

Obsession with body appearance became a trend when movies became popular in the 1920s. Prior to this, women in the Victorian era wanted to appear thin and frail because this was considered to be a romantic look, and tuberculosis was considered a romantic disease that made its sufferers more attractive and better lovers. Anorexia would not become a commonly used term until the 1960s (Martin, 2007). The 1960s brought about the fad of ultra thin models, of whom one of the most famous was Twiggy (pictured below), nicknamed after her twig-like appearance.

In the 1960s the “Twiggy” look was achieved by eating very little. My own mother recounts eating nothing for an entire year of high school other than a small one-serving size bag of potato chips and a bottle of soda each day to maintain an ultra-slim figure. The 1980s; however, brought about a new fad of toned slimness brought about through excessive amounts of aerobic exercise and the low-fat diet craze (Martin, 2007). Today women are expected to be extremely slim yet muscular and toned, have large breasts (though large breasts are not natural on slim, low-fat body types), and exist on carbohydrate-free diets. The demands for female perfection have become much more difficult to achieve, so it is no wonder young girls are caving under the pressure and creating their own versions of perfection through starvation.

“Ana” and “Mia”: Anthropomorphized as Friend and Lover

According to Medline Plus.com (NLM, NIH), anorexia nervosa is a condition where an individual loses “more weight than is considered healthy for their age and height.” This disorder may also include tendencies to exercise in extreme quantities and “intense fear of weight gain” (Medline Plus). Bulimia is defined by Medline Plus (NLM, NIH) as “an illness in which a person binges on food or has regular episodes of overeating and feels a loss of control.” Both of these types of eating disorders are described as occurring most commonly in young women, though men suffer from these illnesses as well. Eating disorders also most often affect women who are very driven, goal-oriented, and have perfectionist tendencies (Medline Plus).

There are two main theoretical camps that seek to define the cause of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. The first camp is critical of U.S. media as the cause and driving force behind these trends for young women who are attempting to lose weight in order to emulate their favorite actresses, singers, fashion models, etc. Weight-loss campaigns further increase women’s anxiety levels about their weight and appearance, keeping them pre-occupied with their body image and comparing their body shape to other women around them. Naturally, over time these ideas of body perfection, and pursuit of weight-loss through strict dietary control and exercise--often equated with control over one’s

life--become extreme and cross over into "illness." The second camp sees the initial step into disordered eating behavior patterns as voluntary, but over time, control over the ability to stop or judge when enough weight has been lost is diminished and the eating disorder sufferer develops "illness." Popular culture and media are not considered to be the source of eating disorders in this camp, but they work to normalize the disordered eating behaviors and perpetuate them.

Whitehead (2010) looks to the patriarchal structure of U.S. culture to explain some of the phenomena that may be observed in pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites. Membership in these online support groups is solidified through friendships that normalize eating disordered behaviors by developing collective pro-eating disorder identity (Whitehead, 2010). Women on these websites tend to engage in caretaking behaviors through reminding each other to "stay strong" and "be safe"; meaning they should take vitamins and drink plenty of water, etc. while fasting (Whitehead, 2010). These women also provide support to each other by posting "thinspo", or thinspiration, for other forum members to see. Thinspo consists of images of thin women, often emaciated models, that anorexics desire to look like, as well as images of women pushing away their plates or with tape across their mouths when faced with "forbidden foods" such as sweets or bread. Women also post recipe suggestions for each other that are

extremely low-calorie, usually 50 calories or under, and advise each other to savor and enjoy their minimal amounts of food to the fullest (Whitehead, 2010). These women often encourage each other to “clean” in order to keep their minds off food. Whitehead (2010) posits that this idea of “cleaning” places women squarely into the subordinate female role and domestic realm of society perpetuating patriarchal norms.

Pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites allow women to anthropomorphize anorexia and bulimia by giving them the nicknames “Ana” and “Mia,” whom women often refer to as their friend, lover, or even goddess (Whitehead, 2010). Members of these websites must prove their devotion to Ana and Mia through posting thinspo or inspirational poems, sayings, or letters to Ana and Mia (Whitehead, 2010). There is a large amount of media available for women on these sites to consume. For example, there are bands that specifically write songs that support pro-Ana and pro-Mia behaviors. A song entitled “Me and Mia” contains the following lyrics:

Fighting for the smallest goal: to gain a little self-control,
Won't anybody here just let you disappear?
Not doctors, nor your mom and dad, but me and Mia, Ann
and Ana,
Know how hard you try. Don't you see it in my eyes?

Sick to death of my dependence, fighting food to find
transcendence,
Fighting to survive, more dead but more alive.
Cigarettes and speed for livin', and sleeping pills to feel
forgiven,
All that you contrive, and all that you're deprived . . . (Ted
Leo & the Pharmacists)

This song builds on the idea of support and friendship that women with eating disorders are supposed to feel emanating from the anthropomorphized embodiment of their eating disorders as the female figures “Ana” and “Mia.”

Members of pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites are also encouraged to participate in exhibitionism by posting pictures of themselves as they become emaciated and show off their bones as they become visible and protrude through the skin (Whitehead, 2010). Such exhibitionism (as shown in the images below) gives these women authority, because as they achieve extreme levels of thinness, other members begin to look to them as sources of valuable advice on how they can achieve similar results (Whitehead, 2010). Appearance is directly related to the value of advice, as well as self-worth for women on these websites.

Wangsgaard-Thompson (1992) conducted research with minority women, namely African American and Latina women,

and found that for most, eating disorders emerged as a form of “self-care” that began in response to traumatic events. Eating disorders for these women generally began around age eleven in response to sexual abuse, racism, poverty, sexism, etc.

(Wangsgaard-Thompson, 1992). In these instances, food was able to take the place of drugs or alcohol and numb the pain these women felt. Food was the drug of choice because these women were able to binge or binge and purge in the evenings, yet were still able to get up and function the next day (Wangsgaard-Thompson, 1992).

In studies with teens, Gailey (2009) posits that young girls become members of these pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites for much the same reason as teens experiment with drugs, dress in Goth style clothing and make-up, or dye their hair multiple colors; they are choosing to engage in a deviant subculture. A deviant subculture consists of shared symbols and meanings, images, and language (Gailey, 2009). Participating in these types of deviant subcultures via the internet allows members to participate anonymously, protecting their identities, giving them the control to choose who they reveal their participation to, and protecting their secret relationship with Ana or Mia (Gailey, 2009). Gailey (2009) further asserts that women engaging in these websites are participating in “edgework.” The concept of edgework was coined by Lyng in 1990, and is defined as a choice where one fulfills unmet needs,

and this creates a pseudo-sense of control over one's life (Gailey, 2009). Participating in edgework includes participating in activities that may cause potential harm, either mentally or physically (Gailey, 2009). Edgework allows anorexic and bulimic women to test their limits, and long periods of starvation produce dizziness and euphoric states that may be comparable to adrenaline rushes encountered when engaging in thrill-seeking (Gailey, 2009). The difference between thrill-seeking and edgework, however, is that the latter begins as a choice but later becomes uncontrollable. One must build a skill-set over time in order to continue pushing limits and achieving the desired euphoric state (Gailey, 2009). The choice to participate in these pro-eating disorder websites is initially voluntary, but after a time of building skills, constant planning and monitoring of food intake, and enduring the isolation that comes from hiding the secret of an eating disorder, involvement becomes uncontrollable (Gailey, 2009).

Most teens who join pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites list a sense of self-hatred for their bodies and the desire to achieve perfection as their main reasons for engaging in these websites (Gailey, 2009). Maintaining control over food intake and their bodies are the reasons they engage in skill-building; their biggest fear is of losing control and gaining weight (Gailey, 2009). Going through this process of starvation requires that these women learn to embrace the pain of starvation, which in turn proves their

strength and validates their membership in the pro-eating disorder community (Gailey, 2009). In order to succeed in this endeavor, Gailey (2009) posits that a woman must alienate herself from her body and transcend its physical needs, which may create an emotional disconnect between the mind/spirit and body.

The most common treatment of eating disorders involves a woman suffering from an eating disorder either being committed by her family and forced to get help, or a woman who is very ill and fears she will die from her eating disorder committing herself to the hospital for treatment. In order to starve herself, a woman has spent a long period of time building skills necessary to transcend, or disconnect herself from her bodily needs, in order to see what she believes to be a perfect, magic number on the scale. When a woman is committed, or commits herself, to the hospital for treatment, the extreme amount of control she has exercised over her daily food intake and habits is taken away from her, and the doctors and medical staff take control (Gailey, 2009). Once a patient, women are force fed back up to a perfect, magic number on the scale where they are considered to be at a safe weight and may be released (Gailey, 2009). Such medicalized treatments for eating disorders are likely to cause a great deal of trauma for women who strive to maintain control, and then have it stripped from them. This forced reversal of the starvation process and stripping of control, is likely to further exacerbate these women's

sense of alienation from their bodies. Without extensive counseling, very little true healing is likely to occur for these women. Today, Martin (2007) points out that better understanding of what eating disorders entail has given rise to the use of group homes to counsel and treat anorexic and bulimic patients. These patients are only force fed until they are out of immediate danger, then the rest of their recovery is up to them (Martin, 2007).

Unfortunately, a sense of competition and communal support for disordered eating behaviors is still present in these settings.

Patients who succeed have to decide that they want to succeed and beat their eating disorders (Martin, 2007).

Social Obsession: Romanticism and Sexualization of Anorexia, Death Imagery, and the Living Dead

Today's youth are exposed to a barrage of romanticized and sexualized images of anorexic thinness, death, and the living dead. One of this year's best selling dolls made by the Mattel toy company are "Monster High" dolls. These dolls are supposed to be teenage monsters. A visit to Mattel's website shows these "monster" characters engaged in partying, shopping for high fashion and sports. The "Monster High" dolls feature bodies that are anorexicly thin and wiry, and being monsters, many of them feature blue and green skin, and even stitches across their faces. Some of these dolls represent the living dead: Draculaura is a

vampire, Frankie Stein is made of stitched together body parts that have been re-animated from the dead, Spectra Vondergeist is indeed a ghost, and Ghoulia Yelps is a zombie. Each character has a bio page on Mattel's host website, and most of the female characters are 16 years old and focus on fashion, dating, and gossip. For example, Clawdeen Wolf's bio lists her favorite activity is "shopping and flirting with boys," and Frankie Stein says in the "Killer Style" section of her bio, "My friends say I have the perfect figure for fashion...they've taken me shopping for some scary cute clothes that are absolutely to die for!". The closest images to the body figures of these dolls are pictures of individuals suffering from the severest forms of anorexia. In the image below featuring some of the "Monster High" dolls (copyright Mattel) it is easy to see that these dolls feature skeletally thin legs and arms, their thighs are far from touching (a sign of achievement in anorexia), and their shoulders are barely as wide as their heads. Male activist, Brian Bixler, who suffered from acute anorexia for over two decades and now advocates that men seek treatment for eating disorders, had a body shape similar to that of the male doll pictured below at his lowest weight, which was 84 pounds at 5'9", and had a barely detectable heart beat (Dr. Oz Show). So literally, in the case of these dolls, such pursuits for fashion would be something young girls (and boys) would be "dying for".

Unfortunately, at such low body weights, glowing eyes, shiny hair, and energy to date and party don't exist.

Meanwhile, the living dead as romantic leads in popular books, television series, and movies geared toward teens have dominated popular culture over the past decade. The website Goodreads.com features a listing of the "Best Teen Vampire Fiction" which is made up of over 200 books! Of course, the popular *Twilight* series is near the top of this list. In this series the star, Bella, falls in love with living dead vampire, Edward, marries him, becomes pregnant with his child, and then must be killed and turned into a vampire herself in order to survive giving birth to the baby. Tween and teen girls idolize the male co-stars, Edward (vampire) and Jacob (werewolf) who fight to win Bella's love. This led to the formation of opposing teams, "Team Edward" and "Team Jacob," the team a girl belonged to indicated which man she would date if she were the character Bella in the *Twilight* story line. These team memberships became so popular that an entire line of "Team Edward" and "Team Jacob" merchandise was developed and marketed for young girls. These products could be found at specialty stores that cater to tween and teen fashion such as Hot Topic, and also at large chain stores that cater to the general public such as Walmart. Though this particular phenomena is not news, and its popularity has died down, it does illustrate how

mainstream the romanticizing of vampires and the “living dead” has become.

There are a host of other vampire series available for teens such as the *Vampire Academy* series, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Bloodlines*. The majority of vampire book covers feature young women in sexy attire and make-up, or with their necks turned up and bared in vulnerable positioning awaiting the (generally male) vampire’s bite. Most story lines report that the girls’ life changed dramatically when she crossed over and became the living dead. The girls became more popular and gained the attention of multiple boys and sometimes even gained special powers. For example, the book *Vamped* by Lucienne Diver, states that the main character (female donning red lip gloss on the book cover) became a vampire and gained “eternal youth, beauty, free designer clothes...a new boyfriend...” as the result of becoming a vampire--the highly romanticized idea of being dead, yet still alive.

In addition to romanticizing the idea of death, main stream culture is beginning to adopt a view of sexualized death. Sullen brand graphic tee shirts are a great example of this. Sullen graphic designs are modeled after a group of women called the “Sullen Angels.” These women are featured in photographs of them in sexual poses, wearing lingerie and angel wings on the Sullen website. The website also includes the body measurements of each Sullen Angel on the top line of her bio page. The tee shirt designs

that bear the images of the Sullen Angels are sexualized versions of “dead” women. Two of these designs may be seen in the images below (copyright Sullen Graphic designs). One features a thin woman in lingerie with eyes missing, filled in with white, and blood streaming from her eye sockets down her face. She is not wearing panties, and her pubic hair is evident, insinuating she is dead but still a sexual object. The other image features a woman with a bracelet of thorns around her bicep, her face half eaten down to the skull, and a wreath of roses around her forehead--a popular grave dressing in the Victorian era. These graphic designs are for men, but there is also a line of tee shirts with similar designs available for women on this site. Sullen tees have become popular and are available in various stores and catalogs, for example King Size catalog, one of the most popular clothing catalogs for big and tall men.

In 2008, Triumph Films, Stage 6, and Sony Pictures produced a film called “Zombie Strippers” that featured several women who have also starred in pornographic films. The plot line of this film is that the government created a virus that causes zombification, and an infected soldier visits a strip club and bites a stripper while she is dancing there. Once she turns into a zombie, she begins to dance for the men who are both horrified and turned-on by her bluish-green, peeling skin, yellowing teeth, and rotting face. Soon, the zombie stripper is the only woman the men at the

club will pay to see dance, all other women are booed off the stage. One by one, the strippers at the club decide they want to die and become zombies too so they can have the admiration of the men at the club. This film has inspired “zombie stripper” events across the United States. In these events women dress as bloody, dead zombies and strip for a paying audience. The photo below features Roxy Saint as a zombie and Robert Englund (copyright Sony Pictures). Underground trends, such as this one, work to sexualize death imagery in a grotesque way, but the fact that these ideas are picked up and perpetuated illustrates their acceptance in society.

On the social forefront, one of the biggest names in music today is Lady Gaga. She was rated by Forbes as the #4 most powerful and influential celebrity in the world (2010), and was chosen to be the September, 2010 cover person on *Vanity Fair* magazine. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Lady Gaga shared her struggle with bulimia, and advocated her fans seek treatment for eating disorders. On the heels of this heartfelt plea, Lady Gaga launched into a phase of skeletal costuming in 2011. In her appearance at the 2012 Grammy Nominations on CBS, Lady Gaga opened the show with her face painted like a skeleton and wearing only a black thong panty and a bra beneath her jacket. In the photograph below (copyright CBS), skeletal men, further illustrating the sexualization of the skeletal (dead) image, are groping Lady Gaga.

The aforementioned are just a few examples of the romanticism and sexualization of the skeletal, anorexic body type, death imagery, and the living dead. With an increase in the number of women suffering from eating disorders today, popular culture themes such as these could have potentially dangerous impact on the lives of these women. For women struggling to maintain a sense of control over their lives and their futures, treatment for their eating disorders often only occurs when they become very ill or begin to fear they will die as a result of their eating disorder. These themes may work to erase fears of death and make death appear to be a sexy and glamorous thing. Just as anorexics and bulimics seek to transcend the need for food, images such as these may encourage them to seek to transcend life itself rather than give up control and receive medical treatment for their eating disorders.

Philosophical, Psychological, and Religious Ideas of “Transcendence”

Descartes initiated a discussion of mind/body dualism with his statement, “I think, therefore I am”. This statement, insinuated that there are two distinct realms that humans possess, the mind and the body (Kim, 2006). This Cartesian logic is extended further to assert that these two realms represent the mental, or what’s inside the mind, and the material, which is everything outside of the mind (Kim, 2006). In this logic; however, the mind and body are viewed as causally connected; if the mind determines it wants something done, it can instruct the body to perform that function (Kim, 2006). Cartesian logic; however, does not leave room for various levels of the mind, such as the subconscious. Burwood (2008) posits that sometimes people do experience a feeling of separateness from their corporeal bodies, and when one has had such an experience, ideas of mind/body dualism become easier to discuss. Feeling separated from the physical body is called “dissociation” (Burwood, 2008). Sartre wrote that dissociation is what makes us aware that an outside body exists, but that the more one attempts to completely dissociate from the physical body, the more they realize that they are trapped inside it (Sartre in Burwood, 2008). Leder wrote that in cases of disfigurement, disability, or illness it is possible to experience a sense of otherness

from the body and view the body as completely alien because it has become unfavorable or foreign (Leder in Burwood, 2008).

Burwood's (2008) theory of the process of dissociation occurs in three distinct steps. First, there is occasional resurfacing of the body; it is never completely there or completely absent. Second, a dislike for the body is developed because it no longer allows for enjoyment. Third, is complete dissociation from the body that becomes considered separate and alien (Burwood, 2008, p. 266). Burwood's (2008) model of dissociation allows for flexibility; an individual may experience a combination of the first two steps and never reach the third. For example, if a person who has been ill for an extended period of time and has begun to dissociate, begins to feel well again, they will discontinue the trajectory toward complete dissociation (Burwood, 2008).

Burwood (2008) includes that his model of dissociation applies to individuals who are suffering from extended illness, disability, or disfigurement, but also to those who have been objectified, for example, in the case of racism. Burwood's (2008) model of dissociation may be applied to women suffering from eating disorders. Women suffering from eating disorders often report feeling objectified by society and judged as imperfect, which leads them to pursue extreme diets that develop into anorexia and bulimia. These women experience extended illness, and extreme physical pain from starvation as the result of eating disorders,

which cause them to dissociate from their physical bodies. In this way transcendence of food is possible because hunger pains and the drive to eat essentially become non-existent when the body becomes completely alienated from the mind.

Themes of transcendence are also prevalent in religion. For example, in Christianity, Christ transcended death on the cross by rising from the grave after three days. Supernatural stories, such as this, abound in religious beliefs and teachings. Boyer (2001) found that individuals were only able to accept ideas of the supernatural when the characteristics of the supernatural were aligned with religious teachings they held to be true, or when they fit well with personal beliefs the individual held. For example, in an experimental series individuals were asked if they believed that God could be in more than one place, performing more than one miracle at the same time. Upon agreement, a story was shared with participants where God performed two miracles at the same time, then the individuals were asked to recount the story to another person. Nearly always the story was changed to God performing first one miracle and then later performing the other (Boyer, 2001). The story was theoretically altered because it had to fit into the individual's conceptions of how such events could and would occur (Boyer, 2001).

Because of this tendency of people to shape events based upon their own concepts, Boyer (2001) warned that all concepts

that crop up in popular culture and folklore should be taken seriously because it is difficult to know which themes will take on supernatural relevance with a group of individuals based on their associations with religion, life, death, and supernatural powers assigned to the concept (Boyer, 2001, p. 91). Basically, any supernatural idea that would align well with personal conceptions could potentially develop great social relevance within a group. Boyer (2001) also points out that children are more susceptible to adopting and adapting new ideas into their concepts of the supernatural, as is illustrated by the existence of imaginary friends for many young children (p. 150).

The fact that ideas of the supernatural may be adopted by groups to which they hold the most social relevance raises a red flag for young women who are suffering from eating disorders and encounter romanticized ideas of death and the living dead in popular culture and media venues. Sexualized imagery of death and the living dead promote even greater concerns because they place “desire” in the mix which may imply that men sexually desire dead women, or women that appear frail enough to be near death. Further, young children appear to be the most open to adopting supernatural ideas, and promoting dolls that feature anorexicly thin bodies with heavy focus on fashion, flirting, and dating should give rise to concerns.

Conclusions and Invitation to Further Discussion

Today young women are being exposed to popular culture and media images that encourage them to seek body perfection. If they have cellulite, there is a cream for it; if they have flabby arms or lack six-pack abs, there is a special piece of exercise equipment to address the issue; if they feel they need to lose 10 pounds, or even 100 pounds, there is a dietary supplement or weight-loss program guaranteed to do the trick. These pressures make it difficult for young women to develop healthy attitudes about their bodies. Because of this, more young girls than ever before are suffering from eating disorders. Most of these women only seek medical treatment for their eating disorders when they have become very ill or become afraid they may die as a result of their eating disorders.

Unfortunately, new trends in popular culture and media geared toward tweens and teens have begun to focus on romanticized and sexualized images of anorexic thinness, death, and the living dead. Meanwhile, current treatments for eating disorders take control away from sufferers and treat the physical effects of starvation, but may not address the emotional and mental disturbances that set the eating disorder into motion. Because of this, it is my concern that such prevalent, romantic and sexual images of death and the living dead may influence young women to elect not to seek treatment for eating disorders, even when they

know their lives are in danger, because they feel they will be able to transcend their embodied state through the romanticized death experience.

Martin (2007) relates how she was encouraged to study a different topic in graduate school. She was repeatedly advised to avoid the topic of eating disorders because it was an over studied subject, and because she was too young and inexperienced to contribute substantially to the field of knowledge about the subject (Martin, 2007). However, Martin (2007) fought for her topic choice because she knew what she faced everyday of her own life, and she looked around her and realized that not one of her friends had “normal” eating patterns either. So, in the spirit of Maine (2007), I too appeal to other social scientists willing to share their thoughts today. Our children are dying; as a parent I see how these themes and cultural narratives of thinness have affected my two teenage children (a girl and a boy), who routinely skip lunch with their peers. I worry about their fragile body images because I know that they are getting older and will soon be off to college themselves where I will not be able to make sure they eat healthy meals or stay away from pro-Ana and pro-Mia websites. This is a dialogue that we need to have! I welcome comments, criticism, and contributions to this subject matter.

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