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NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Epilepsy

Much has been written of epilepsy in literature, not 
least by Dostoyevsky. Early accounts, for example by 
Dickens, stressed the forces underlying the condition, 
a conclusion underpinned by medical writings of the 
period—for example, those of Romberg and Gowers. 
Dostoyevsky, Bennett, and Proust all refer to a parti- 
cular facial expression that declares the disease. 
Dostoyevsky describes the unearthy scream that may 
usher in a tonic-clonic seizure, together with the 
mystical, intensely pleasurable state that some patients 
with complex partial seizures experience. Descriptions 
of the tonic and clonic phases of an attack are com- 
mon as are accounts of focal symptoms after an event, 
indicative, as we now know, of a focal basis for the 
seizure. The twin sisters in _Titus Groan_ both appear to 
have suffered an infantile hemiplegia although they 
appear confused as to its lateralisation. _Déjà vu_ is an 
experience all of us share and there is nothing in 
David Copperfield’s history to suggest it had an 
epileptic basis. Wolf Solent’s olfactory and gustatory 
hallucinations must surely be epileptic, though that 
diagnosis is not considered in Poyw’s book.

**Charles Dickens, 1837–9, Oliver Twist** 
. . . and in whom all evil passions, vice, and profligacy, 
feasted, till they found a vent in a hideous disease which has made your face an index even to your mind.

**Charles Dickens, 1843–4, Martin Chuzzlewit** He spoke to them in something of his own voice too, but sharpened and made hollow, like a dead man’s face. What he would have said, God knows. He seemed to utter words, but they were such as man had never heard. And this was the most fearful circumstance of all, to see him standing there, gabbling in an unearthly tongue.

**Charles Dickens, 1849–50, David Copperfield** “We have all some experience of a feeling, that comes over us occasionally, of what we are saying and doing having been said and done before, in a remote time—
of our having been surrounded, dim ages ago, by the same faces, objects, and circumstances—of our knowing perfectly what will be said next, as if we suddenly remembered it!”

**Fedor Dostoyevsky, 1869, The idiot** Something of that strange expression which makes people realise at the first glance that they are dealing with an epileptic.

. . . the first sound of the dreadful scream, which burst from his chest of its own accord and which he could have done nothing to suppress.

**Fedor Dostoyevsky, 1871, The devils** There are seconds—they come five or six at a time—when you suddenly feel the presence of eternal harmony in all its fullness. It is nothing earthly. I don’t mean that it is heavenly, but a man in his earthly semblance can’t endure it. He has to undergo a physical change or die . . . in those five seconds I live through a lifetime, and I am ready to give my life for them, for it’s worth it . . .

**Arnold Bennett, 1911, Hilda Lessways** Idiotic greenish face . . . apelike eyes.

**Marcel Proust, 1920, 1921, 1922, Remembrance of things past, vol. 2.** . . . with the impassive expression of an epileptic.

**Thomas Mann, 1924, The magic mountain** . . . and one day, while the meal was in full swing, the man was seized with a violent epileptic fit, and with that oft-described demonic unearthy shriek fell to the floor, where he lay beside his chair, striking about him with dreadfully distorted arms and legs.

**John Cooper Powys, 1929, Wolf Solent** Once more the scent of pinks came quivering through his brain and he felt a shameless twirl of pleasure. This time, instead of the wrath of Christie Malakite it was the body of the hatter that associated itself with that remembered scent—not any repulsive odour of mortality emerging from those nailed-up boards, but rather some spiritual essence from the presence of Death itself. And as he breathed this air, the voices of his companions became a vague humming in his ears, and all manner of queer detached memories floated in upon him. He felt himself to be walking alone along some high white road bordered by waving grasses and patches of yellow rock-rose. There was a town far below him, at the bottom of a green valley—a mass of huddled grey roofs among meadows and streams—round which the twilight was darkening. Along with all this he was conscious of the taste of a peculiar kind of baker’s bread, such as used to be sold at a shop in Dorchester, where as a child, they would take him for tea during summer jaunts from Weymouth.

**Mervyn Peake, 1946, Titus Groan** You see, my poor child, I and my sister Cora are a great deal older than you and we both had convulsions when we were about your age. You may have noticed that our left arms are rather stiff and our left legs, too . . . “Not only our left arms”, Clarice broke in, “but all down our left-hand sides and our right-hand legs, too.”

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