experienced a sudden loss of libido, another complained of slight dyspareunia, and the third had migraine attacks that were provoked by sexual intercourse.

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NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Catalepsy

Catalepsy received considerable attention from Victorian authors. Sherlock Holmes also encountered the phenomenon, although exactly what the phenomenon is would be difficult to say from these extracts, apart from the descriptions of Poe and Eliot. Contemporary medical texts display a similar confusion. Some, like Grainger Stewart, seem to regard the phenomenon as being synonymous with catatonia. Stewart states that “prolonged rigidity of muscles characterises catalepsy.”¹ The description used by Wilks approaches that of Poe, though with the comment that “If a limb be placed in any position there it will remain.”² Gowers regarded the phenomenon, in most cases, as hysterical. He describes attacks lasting minutes or hours in which the temperature is lowered, respiration and the heart’s actions weakened, and the countenance expressionless. He adds, however, that after an initial phase of muscle rigidity, the limbs remain in any position in which they are placed.³ While recognising that the condition was probably not homogeneous, Gowers developed an elaborate hypothesis as to its pathophysiology. Kinnier Wilson defined catalepsy as a state of sustained motionlessness with or without clouding of the sensorium.⁴ His conclusion that such states were generally hysterical would be one that most modern neurologists, I suspect, would share.

Edgar Allan Poe, 1839, The fall of the House of Usher
The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth had left as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death.

Edgar Allan Poe, 1844, The premature burial
For several years I have been subject to attacks of the singular disorder which physicians have agreed to term catalepsy, in default of a more definitive title. Although both the immediate and the predisposing causes, and even the actual diagnosis of this disease are still mysterious, its obvious and apparent character is sufficiently well understood. Its variations seem to be chiefly of degree. Sometimes the patient lies for a day only, or even for a shorter period in a species of exaggerated lethargy. He is senseless and externally motionless; but the pulsation of the heart is still faintly perceptible; some traces of warmth remain; a slight colour lingers within the centre of the cheek; and, upon application of a mirror to the lips, we can detect

a torpid, unequal, and vacillating action of the lungs. Then again the duration of the trance is for weeks—even for months; while the closest scrutiny, and the most rigorous medical tests, fail to establish any material distinction between the state of the sufferer and what we conceive of absolute death.

Gustave Flaubert, 1857, Madame Bovary
He remembered hearing about catalepsy, and the wonders of magnetism. He told himself that if only he willed it strongly enough he might succeed in bringing her back to life.

Charles Dickens, 1859, A tale of two cities
As a promising way of setting them right, half of the half-dozen had become members of a fantastic sect of convulsionists, and were even then considering within themselves whether they should foam, rage, roar, and turn cataleptic on the spot. . .

George Eliot, 1861, Silas Marner
. . . He saw that Marner’s eyes were set like a dead man’s, and he spoke to him, and shook him, and his limbs were stiff, and his hands clutched the bag as if they’d been made of iron; . . . and a peculiar interest had been centred in him ever since he had fallen, at a prayer-meeting, into a mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness, which, lasting for an hour or more, had been mistaken for death.

Wilkie Collins, 1883, Heart and science
“You need be under no anxiety about that,” said Benjulia. “I have left orders that Mrs Gallilee is not to be admitted. There is a serious necessity for keeping her out. In these cases of partial catalepsy, there is no saying when the change may come.”

Arnold Bennett, 1918, The pretty lady
Leaving a small ring of gas alight in the gas stove, she sat down all dirty on a hard chair in front of it and fell into a luxurious catalepsy.

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