

Headache

A number of physicians and physiologists have given accounts of their migraine over the past 200 years, most particularly the aura, with or without headache: examples include Caleb Hillier Parry,¹ Emil Du Bois-Reymond,² Sigmund Freud,³ Karl Lashley,⁴ and, in our own time, Miller Fisher⁵ and Graeme Hankey.⁶ Another notable migraineur was the philosopher Immanuel Kant.⁷

Such is the prevalence of headache in general and migraine in particular that it might be anticipated that such phenomena might also stimulate accounts from non-medical authors, possibly influencing or occurring in their imaginative works, whether or not they themselves were sufferers. For example, it has been suggested that Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's experience of migraine may (or may not) have contributed to Lewis Carroll's depiction of Alice's strange experiences of expanding and contracting in size (macro- and microsomatognosia) in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), hence the 'Alice in Wonderland syndrome'.⁸ The only direct reference to headache in Carroll's Alice books of which I am aware is in chapter 4 of *Through the looking-glass and what Alice found there* (1872), wherein Tweedledum excuses his lack of bravery, and hence unwillingness to fight Tweedledee, by saying that he has a headache, and Alice agrees that he may look a little pale.

However, just as there is a paucity of neurologists willing to declare a special interest in headache, despite it being the most prevalent of 'neurological' conditions, so literary accounts of headache seem to me to be few compared, say, to illnesses with more dramatic potential, such as the inability to walk (paraplegia?) which miraculously improves: think of Mrs Clennam in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857); Clara Sessman in Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880); Colin in *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911); and *Pollyanna* (1913) by Eleanor H Porter. Nonetheless, some literary accounts of headache have come to my attention, and readers may be aware of others.

Arthur Ransome, famed for the *Swallows and Amazons* series of books, gives an account in *We didn't mean to go to sea* (1937) of what sounds (to this neurologist) like childhood migraine, apparently induced by seasickness or at least by the motion of the sea:

...Titty suddenly clutched the coaming of the cockpit and leant over it.

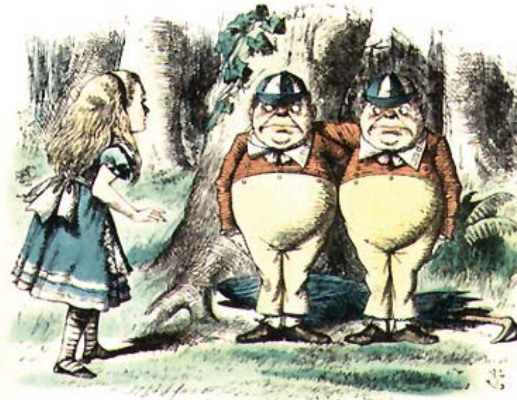
"She's being sick," said Roger ...

"Leave me alone," said Titty, "... It's only one of my heads. I'll be all right if I lie down for a bit."

... Down in the fore-cabin Titty scrambled into her bunk. Something was hammering in her head as if to burst it.⁹

In *Northern Lights* (1995), the first book in Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*, the young heroine, Lyra Belacqua, wakes with a "sick headache", ascribed to her proximity to the gas fumes of a boat engine near which she is in hiding.¹⁰

In L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), "warnings of a sick headache", presumably migraine, prevent Marilla Cuthbert from escorting Anne Shirley to church shortly after the latter first arrives at Green Gables, with the result that the young orphan indulges her wish to adorn her hat with wayside flowers, much to the astonishment of the other parishioners. The episodic nature of Marilla's headaches later becomes evident, necessitating Anne to attend to the housework whilst Marilla rests. She



Andrew Larner is the editor of our Book Review Section. He is a Consultant Neurologist at the Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Liverpool, with a particular interest in dementia and cognitive disorders. He is also an Honorary Apothecaries' Lecturer in the History of Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

Correspondence to:

AJ Larner,
Walton Centre for Neurology
and Neurosurgery,
Lower Lane,
Fazakerley,
Liverpool,
L9 7LJ, UK.
Email: a.larner@
thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk

has to lie down, and their effect is to leave her weak, "tuckered out", and "somewhat sarcastic". She feels they are becoming worse and worse and that she must see a doctor about them. Her local attendant, Dr Spencer, insists she see a specialist, who turns out to be an oculist, whose recommendation is that Marilla should give up reading, sewing, and any kind of work that strains the eyes. If she is careful not to cry, and wears the glasses he gives her, he thinks her eyes may not get any worse and the headaches will be cured; if not, she will be stone blind in six months.¹¹ Even today, consulting an optician about headaches in the belief they originate from 'eye strain' is common, and sometimes even suggested by general practitioners,¹² even though refractive errors rarely a cause of headache.

The social consequences of headache are also noted by the creator of *Just William*, and arch social critic, Richmal Crompton:

...Mrs Jones had a lively sense of her own importance... there was no doubt at all that people weren't making enough fuss of her, so she rose and said with an air of great dignity:

"Mrs Hawkins, I am suffering from a headache.

May I go into your drawing room and lie down?"

She had often found that that focused the attention of everyone upon her. It did in this instance. They all leapt to their feet solicitously, fussed about her, escorted her to the drawing room, drew down the blinds and left her well pleased with the stir she had made.¹³

Another archetypal boy hero, Harry Potter, uses the pretext of headache to escape from Professor Trelawney's divination class at Hogwarts after seeing an apparition of his arch-enemy Voldemort.¹⁴

Social realism is also to be expected from Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). As a doctor, he was certainly familiar with headache in his clinical practice,¹⁵ and a number of his characters profess, or are reported to be suffering from, headaches: Ivanov (in the play of the same name, 1887), Olga (in *Three Sisters*, 1901), and Shipoochin (specifically "a migraine"; *The Jubilee*). The character Lyebedeve suggests that Ivanov's headache is because he thinks too much; Olga supposes that she gets a continual headache (tension-type?) "because I have to go to school every day and go on teaching right into the evening".¹⁶

Jane Austen, another keen social observer, reports in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811, chapter 16) that Marianne

Dashwood, following the departure of her beau, Mr Willoughby, is;

... awake the whole night ... She got up with an head-ache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment.

Are these simply the consequences of young and unrequited love, or does she have a migraine (perhaps triggered by young and unrequited love)? In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813, chapter 7), Jane Bennet develops "sore throat and head-ache" which worsens as her feverish symptoms increase, having ridden (at her mother's suggestion) to Netherfield in the rain to see Mr Bingley; her illness requires the attendance of her sister, Elizabeth Bennet, which brings her into the social orbit of Mr Darcy. Later (chapter 33), Elizabeth has a headache, and hence is unable to go to tea at Rosings, at which time Mr Darcy calls unexpectedly to make his first (unsuccessful) proposal of marriage: obviously Elizabeth's indisposition will not help his case. Jane Austen is also alert to the potential dangers of new (fashionable?) headache treatments, as evinced in her novel *Sanditon*, left unfinished at her death in 1817:

"[Susan] has been suffering much from the headache and six leeches a day for ten days together relieved her so little that we thought it right to change our measures – and being convinced on examination that much of the evil lay in her gum, I persuad-

ed her to attack the disorder there. She has accordingly had three teeth drawn, and is decidedly better, but her nerves are a good deal deranged. She can only speak in a whisper – and fainted away twice this morning ..."^{cited in 17}

Before we indulge in the condescension of posterity after reading this passage, it may be worth considering which current headache treatments might be held up to ridicule in a century or two (acupuncture? botulinum toxin injections?).

Perhaps it is purely a chance observation or selection bias, but readers may note that all the physicians and physiologists who wrote about their migraine and are referred to in this article were men,¹⁻⁶ which might be considered unusual since migraine is more prevalent in women, whereas all the literary accounts of migraine or presumed migraine, with the exception of Chekhov's Shipoochin,¹⁶ relate to women.^{9-11,13,17} Could it be that literary discourses may sometimes reflect the human condition more accurately than professional medical discourses?

References

1. Larner AJ. *Neurological contributions of Caleb Hillier Parry*. *Advances in Clinical Neuroscience & Rehabilitation* 2004;4(3):38-9.
2. Pearce JMS. *Historical aspects of migraine*. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatr* 1986;49:1097-103.
3. Pearce JMS. *Freud's migraine, and contributions to neurology*. In: *Fragments of neurological history*. London: Imperial College Press, 2003:615-21.

4. Lashley KS. *Patterns of cerebral integration indicated by the scotomas of migraine*. *Arch Neurol Psychiatry* 1941;46:331-9.
5. Fisher CM. *Late-life (migrainous) scintillating zig-zags without headache: one person's 27-year experience*. *Headache* 1999;39:391-7.
6. Hankey GJ. *Recurrent migraine aura triggered by coronary angiography*. *Practical Neurology* 2004;4:308-9.
7. Podoll K, Hoff P, Sass H. *The migraine of Immanuel Kant*. *Fortschr Neurol Psychiatr* 2000;68:332-7.
8. Larner AJ. *The neurology of "Alice"*. *Advances in Clinical Neuroscience & Rehabilitation* 2005;4(6):35-6.
9. Ransome A. *We didn't mean to go to sea*. Harmondsworth: Puffin 1969 [1937], p 135.
10. Pullman P. *Northern lights*. London: Scholastic, 1995, p 150.
11. Montgomery LM. *Anne of Green Gables*. Godalming: Colour Library, 1994 [1908], p 125,256-7,345-6,469,473-4.
12. Larner AJ. *What role do optometrists currently play in the management of headache? A hospital-based perspective*. *Optometry in Practice* 2005;6:173-4.
13. Crompton R. *William – the good*. In: *The Just William Collection*. London: WH Smith, 1991, p 193-4.
14. Rowling JK. *Harry Potter and the goblet of fire*. London: Bloomsbury, 2000, p 501.
15. Coope J. *Doctor Chekhov: a study in literature and medicine*. Chale: Cross Publishing, 1997, p 109.
16. Fen E (transl). *Chekhov: Plays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959, p 86,250,449.
17. Larner AJ. *Acupuncture use for the treatment of headache prior to neurological referral*. *J Headache Pain* 2005;6:97-9.