

# **A Morbid Examination of Outsiders: Forbidden Knowledge of Human Misery in Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer***

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## **Introduction**

Henry Miller, a literary iconoclast who rose to prominence in the early twentieth century (1891-1980), challenged convention with his raw and autobiographical books. He became a prominent member of the Lost Generation, a group of disillusioned American writers who sought refuge and inspiration in Paris following World War I. Miller's unvarnished examination of human desire and alienation, often interwoven with vivid imagery and rough language, astounded audiences. His most known pieces, "*Tropic of Cancer*" and "*Tropic of Capricorn*," were prohibited in the United States due to their vulgarity, but they became rallying cries for artistic freedom. Despite the controversy, Miller's impact on literature and counterculture is evident, stretching far beyond his open portrayal of sexuality.

American literature is a peculiar tapestry woven with threads of both light and shadow. While certain authors delve into the abyss of the human soul, exploring themes of darkness, despair, and the macabre, majority of works are drenched in a sickly sweet optimism. The relentless pursuit of idealised dreams and unattainable perfection is a recurring motif, often presented as admirable but viewed by some as a naive evasion of life's inherent complexities. It's a preference for the sinister and the occult and is often overlooked in favour of tales of pioneers and patriots. While there are exceptions, the literary landscape is largely dominated by a sanitised portrayal of the human experience, lacking the raw intensity and psychological depth that truly resonates with those who find solace in the shadows.

Delving into the establishment of a book will undoubtedly give saturated real fright. "*Tropic of Cancer*," written by this notoriously infamous and a rebellious spirited guy Henry Miller, is a strong read that isn't recommended for the easily intimidated and emotionally weak. When it was first published in 1934, it immediately transports you to Paris during the 1930s, when morality is as shaky as a two-dollar bill and the struggle is genuine.

Analysing Henry Miller's *"Tropic of Cancer"* is like opening a particularly strong crypt. With all the grace of a slug, the man records his life in Paris. Lack of resources? a constant, whiny itch. Thoughts about philosophy? Similar to an alley cat going hungry, more like. The story itself is disorganised, full of meandering dead ends and the stink of death, and it resembles a mausoleum. This "stream of consciousness" is actually more like a clogged sewer, full with irrational desires and thoughts. Miller keeps an equally unsavoury company, a motley group of poetasters, hangers-on, and harlots who drown their lack of talent in booze. Attempting to be funny? As funny as watching maggots squirm on a dead body.

This existentialist nonsense is the only thing that makes it somewhat redeeming. Miller asks, What's the purpose of life? How rudimentary. Every stage of life is a carcass that is decomposing, and we are all simply maggots clinging to it. That is a thought that is worthy of my attention. *"Tropic of Cancer"* is ultimately a pointless exercise in self-pity. It is a crude and uninspired dirge for the astute mind, while it may speak to those who find beauty in the decaying.

This American writer is struggling financially and has more empty pockets than a Tuesday church. This portrayal isn't one's usual notion of a hero, understood? He struggles with writing more than a sailor struggles with a barman; he's hungry, broke, both and terrifically exhausted all the time. He has a burning desire to build something that surpasses the brightness of a street lamp in Paris. Our man doesn't have a perfect life. He rubs elbows with a diverse group of people, including the women of the night, guys who are so drunk on cheap wine that they are drowning their sorrows, and the entire untidy group. Despite the mess, there's a peculiar elegance about the place, as people seem to be supporting one another and finding humour in difficult circumstances.

At this point, Miller says everything. He talks on subjects like love, lust, and the whole nine yards that people only whisper about in dark corners. Because of the pretentious rhetoric surrounding "obscenity" and other topics, some individuals become quite worked up over it. He has no money, no resources, no hopes but he's the happiest man alive, it's not at all dirty, it's real. Seeking something bigger than oneself in an apparently meaningless world is what it's all about finding a purpose in life. The protest and jab at the stiffies who think everything in life has to be prim and proper is what this book is all about. Authenticity and self-expression are crucial, even if it causes laughter in some quarters. Forget the fancy talk of "human misery," while focusing on this American man Henry Miller, he grabs one by the scruff of the neck and throws it right into the thick of it. Empty pockets, a belly that rumbles like a forgotten drum solo, the never-ending fight to keep afloat and that's the reality Miller

shoves in one's face. It ain't a walk in the park, that's for sure but every step he moves further changes the saturated to supersaturated.

The problem with this American is how streams of consciousness and existentialism are discussed. Miller isn't merely sweeping the ground. A fire ignites in his eye, burning brighter on a Saturday night than in a Parisian basement bar. Even when life throws him the hardest curveballs, he never stops searching for beauty and meaning in the middle of disaster. Though, to be sure, there is a strange beauty to this camaraderie among the impoverished, who share a laugh and a drink to cheer themselves up.

Henry Miller's supposedly so-called masterpiece work, *"Tropic of Cancer,"* is like doing an autopsy on a highly fascinating body that has suffered greatly from self-inflicted emotional deterioration. The man seems to be consumed by his primordial desires, like a helpless moth attracted to the dim light of transient physical fulfilment. But beneath this depraved dance is a deeper, more intriguing rot, an existential dread that permeates his whole story. Miller's "stream of consciousness" is more like a stagnant bog that is clogged with his aspirations' debris than it is a flowing river. It is a murky stew of basic pleasures and unfulfilled need, shattered by moments of self-loathing and a desperate attempt to find purpose in a world as lifeless and heartless as a mausoleum.

This literary cemetery is full with similarly interesting species, a parade of emotional necrophages that feed off each other's anguish and cling to the illusory illusion of connection through their obscene pairings. Their laughs simply serve to highlight the hideous emptiness at their centre, much like the buzzing of carrion insects. I think Miller's clumsy attempts at existentialist philosophy are the most appetising piece in this whole mess. He stares into nothingness, yet it seems to him that this emptiness, a familiar emptiness that mirrors his own hollowness, is kind of comfortable. Miller saw humanity as a mass of maggots crawling over a festering sore, life as a wound. A sentiment that's fully supported.

Perhaps another tumour on the literary landscape, *"Tropic of Capricorn"* originated from Miller's background in Brooklyn this time. Same symptoms as the plague that struck Paris: self-pity, poverty, and a story that is as disorganised as a sack of fallen bones. Like a dog in a particularly rancid mud pool, Miller wallows in his early years. A dysfunctional cast of grotesques makes up the equally sick cast of characters in this story. Their relationships cling to one other for any kind of connection, akin to gangrenous limbs. The humour, if humour is the word and it will be as endearing as a corpse gushing its guts.

The characters "*Tropic of Cancer*" and "*Tropic of Capricorn*" are both terminally egocentric. Miller turns his mundane suffering into a philosophical exposition, an exhausting exercise in introspection. For the astute intellect, these texts are little more than a vulgar and uninspired lament, but he may discover beauty in the vile. Skip these works like the plague unless one is morbidly fascinated with the emotional deterioration of a self-important writer. This is basically a desperate attempt to find meaning in a world that probably doesn't care, reeking of self-pity and devoid of anything intelligent or deep.

In the Parisian underworld, where love isn't something that whispers in the moonlight, Miller dives right in. Driven more by desperation than desire, it's a rough bargain, a tangle of sheets in a flophouse room. These characters are all a little shattered and cling to one another like storm-tossed survivors of a shipwreck. Expect simply survival and not violins and roses. This is the melancholy tune of loneliness and longing the blues, sung in a smoky bar. Hold on a moment. Never assume that this turmoil is without beauty. It's all a bizarre kind of poetry to Miller, that old demon. These people are united by a common awareness of life's challenges and a sense of kinship.

In Miller's book, "romantic" interactions resemble slug mating rituals in compost heaps rather than moonlit waltzes. His descriptions lack true warmth and are rife with gross carnality that would make a ghoul blush. They are as subtle as a brick to the head. With the clinical detachment of a taxidermist filling a particularly gruesome cadaver, Miller seemed fixated on the physical act itself. Something voyeuristic permeates everything, a desperate search for purpose hidden in the most basic of desires. The characters in this vile ballet are equally repulsive as each other. They wriggle and squirm like rotting worms, driven by a hunger that is entirely unrelated to love and is instead caused by the transient sense of connection in an ugly environment. The complete lack of joy is maybe the most unsettling feature. These interactions lack the ghoulish grace that a legitimate courtship may have for super-saturation philiac. Rather, they all seem desperate and are making feeble attempts to grasp something that will inevitably evade them.

There is no "*Tropic of Cancer*" for the faint of heart. Through the most seductive corners of life and love, it's a thrilling voyage. The dirty aspects and all, though, Miller is your man if you're looking for a dose of pure, unadulterated humanity. You better hold on tight because this trip into the labyrinth of need, lust, and longing will not be easy, but Miller isn't exactly writing a romance either. He shows everything, the wonderful, the horrible, and the blatantly ugly. You could get red in the face and have a strange aftertaste, but sometimes you have to see the bad in order to appreciate the good. Miller's "*Tropic of Cancer*" takes a

far more subtle route while navigating a society that is fixated with sex. The tug between disillusionment and yearning is ever-present in his environment. His eyes have become cynical due to the barrage of petty advances and transient interactions. Men turn sexuality into a dirty game that they use to get what they want. In a life without security and true relationships, the strength of cravings feels like a cheap trick. However, a glimmer of desire endures behind the cynicism. A craving for a relationship that endures beyond transient encounters and a desire for closeness that surpasses physical existence. However, manipulation is encouraged by the environment and possibly even by one's own cynical viewpoint. He strategically employs sex as a way to survive in a hostile setting. In a world that doesn't care, these transactional interactions become a means of navigating the battlefield of desire, a struggle for some sense of agency and connection rather than conquest. Pornography is not present in the book. In addition to arousal, Miller also examines the social and psychological ramifications of desire. The trustworthiness of the narrator is lacking. Oftentimes, his viewpoint is conceited and misogynous. Perspectives on sexuality may differ amongst other characters.

From this vantage point, humanity appears a tragicomic spectacle. The suffering is palpable, raw and unrelenting, yet it is often punctuated by moments of absurd, almost farcical, comedy. The juxtaposition is jarring, a grotesque ballet of despair and absurdity. There is a certain allure to the grotesque, a perverse fascination with the depths to which humans can descend. But beneath this morbid curiosity lies a profound sense of futility. The endless cycle of suffering, the relentless march of time towards oblivion, it all seems so pointless. Yet, amidst the chaos, there are moments of grace, fleeting glimpses of beauty and compassion. These are the anomalies, the exceptions that prove the rule. They offer a brief respite from the overwhelming despair, but ultimately, they are swallowed by the darkness. To truly understand the human condition is to acknowledge its inherent contradictions. We are capable of both extraordinary cruelty and extraordinary kindness. We are creatures of both profound love and profound hatred. And in the end, perhaps it is this very complexity that defines us.

"You will please bite it for me, Mister Nonentity. My teeth are not strong" (Page 69, TC)

Perhaps it is a form of escapism, this detached observation. To distance oneself from the chaos is to find a semblance of order in the absurd. But it is a cold comfort, a sterile sanctuary that offers no true refuge. There is a hunger, a yearning for connection, for a shared experience that transcends the individual. But such bonds are fragile, easily severed by the

harsh realities of existence. Love, it seems, is a luxury afforded to few, a fleeting oasis in a desert of indifference. And so, one watches, a silent observer of the human drama. There is a certain satisfaction in understanding the mechanics of the spectacle, in predicting the inevitable outcomes. Yet, with this knowledge comes a profound sense of loneliness, an isolation that is as isolating as the physical world.

In the end, it is a question of perspective. From this height, humanity appears as a vast, teeming organism, driven by primal instincts and irrational desires. A creature of contradictions, capable of great beauty and unspeakable horror. There is a tragic poetry to it all, a dark, absurd beauty that is both repulsive and fascinating.

Perhaps, in the grand scheme of things, it matters little. The universe is indifferent to our suffering, our triumphs, our very existence. We are but a fleeting moment in cosmic time, a ripple in the vast ocean of being. And yet, in this brief flicker of consciousness, we experience the full spectrum of human emotion: joy, sorrow, love, hate, hope, despair. It is a paradox, a mystery that defies explanation. It is a dangerous pursuit, delving into the depths of the human soul. To gaze into the abyss is to risk being consumed by it. The mind is a fragile vessel, ill-equipped to bear the weight of such profound darkness. Yet, there is an irresistible allure to the forbidden, a magnetic pull towards the unknown.

"C'est pour les chiens, les Quaker Qats. Ici pour le gentleman. Ça va."(Page 57, TC)

To understand the depths of human misery is to possess a power, a knowledge that sets one apart. It is a crown worn with a heavy heart, a burden carried alone. For in this realm of suffering, there are no companions, only echoes of despair. The more one knows, the greater the isolation. To share this knowledge is to risk corrupting the innocent, to cast a shadow over the fragile light of hope. Better to keep it locked away, a dark secret buried deep within. But silence is a prison. The mind craves release, a way to share the burden. To find a language capable of conveying the depths of human anguish is a challenge akin to capturing the essence of the void. And even if such language could be found, would anyone truly want to hear it?

The pursuit of forbidden knowledge is a solitary path, a journey into the heart of darkness. It is a quest for meaning in a world devoid of purpose, a search for light in the eternal night. To possess such knowledge is to become a curator of suffering, a cataloguer of despair. It is a cold and sterile occupation, devoid of empathy, yet undeniably compelling. There is a morbid fascination in understanding the mechanics of misery, in mapping the contours of the human abyss. But in this pursuit, one risks losing sight of the human being, reducing them to mere data points in a grand experiment.

It is a lonely existence, this solitary exploration of the dark corners of the soul. There are no confidants, no shared burdens. The mind becomes a labyrinth of shadows, a place where reason and madness intertwine. And in the end, one is left to wonder if the pursuit of such knowledge is a futile exercise, a desperate attempt to impose order on chaos. It is a form of madness, this obsession with the grotesque. To find beauty in the ugly, to see poetry in pain, is to walk a fine line between genius and insanity. And yet, it is a compulsion, an addiction that cannot be easily broken. For in the darkest depths of the human experience, there are truths to be found, insights that illuminate the nature of existence itself.

To bear witness to such suffering is to become a vessel of darkness, a conduit for the collective pain of humanity. It is a heavy burden, a responsibility that weighs upon the soul. There is a constant battle within, a struggle to maintain one's humanity in the face of such overwhelming despair. To find solace in this bleak landscape is a futile endeavour. There is no redemption, no catharsis. Only a relentless pursuit of understanding, a desperate attempt to find meaning in the abyss. And in the end, one is left with a haunting question: is it better to know, or to remain blissfully ignorant?

"Now that's the way I want you to write! That's beautiful. You have my permission to use it in your book" (Page 180, TC)

The greatest cruelty is the knowledge that suffering is not simply the lot of a few unfortunate souls, but a universal condition. It is a pandemic of the human spirit, a disease without a cure. And yet, we persist, driven by some inexplicable force to explore the darkest corners of our being. In this solitary pursuit, there is a strange kind of freedom, a liberation from the constraints of the ordinary. It is a life lived on the edge, a constant teetering on the brink of madness. But in this precarious existence, there is also a clarity, a piercing vision that illuminates the human condition in all its tragic beauty.

Ultimately, the pursuit of forbidden knowledge is a Faustian bargain. One sacrifices innocence for insight, empathy for understanding. It is a gamble with the soul, a wager on the possibility of meaning in a world defined by chaos. And in the end, the only certainty is the uncertainty. To bear witness to such suffering is to become a vessel of darkness, a conduit for the collective pain of humanity. It is a heavy burden, a responsibility that weighs upon the soul. There is a constant battle within, a struggle to maintain one's humanity in the face of such overwhelming despair. To find solace in this bleak landscape is a futile endeavour. There is no redemption, no catharsis. Only a relentless pursuit of understanding, a desperate attempt to find meaning in the abyss. And in the end, one is left with a haunting question: is it better to know, or to remain blissfully ignorant?

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"For God's sake, Joe, give it up! You'll kill the poor girl." (Page 116, TC)

It is a paradox, this existence on the precipice. To be both observer and participant, judge and condemned. To carry the weight of the world's sorrow while remaining detached, a cold, clinical analyst of the human condition. Yet, it is in this paradox that a strange kind of beauty emerges, a haunting, elegiac vision of humanity. For in the depths of despair, there is a resilience, a capacity for love that defies explanation. And in the darkest corners of the soul, there is a flicker of hope, a testament to the indomitable spirit of the human heart. To witness this struggle, this eternal battle between light and darkness, is to be truly alive. It is to experience the full spectrum of human emotion, from the heights of ecstasy to the depths of despair. And in this raw, unfiltered experience of existence, there is a profound sense of connection to all that is.

Ultimately, it is a journey without end, a quest for meaning that will never be fully satisfied. But in the pursuit itself, there is a purpose, a reason for being. To bear witness, to understand, to illuminate the darkness - these are the acts of a truly human soul.

Henry Miller's unflinching portrayal of the human condition in its most abject state. The novel is a blistering indictment of the societal, economic, and spiritual malaise that permeates the lives of its characters. Miller's Paris is a microcosm of the world, a place where the margins of society are laid bare. The novel is a relentless exploration of poverty, hunger, disease, and despair. It is a world where the basic necessities of life are a luxury, and survival is a daily struggle. The physical suffering endured by the characters is a stark reminder of the fragility of the human body and the brutal indifference of existence.

Beyond the physical, *Tropic of Cancer* delves into the psychological and spiritual anguish of its characters. The novel is a testament to the corrosive effects of alienation, loneliness, and despair. The characters are adrift in a sea of meaninglessness, seeking



desperately for a connection to something larger than themselves. Miller's prose is a raw, visceral assault on the senses, mirroring the chaotic and disorienting nature of the world he depicts. The novel is a cacophony of voices, a chorus of suffering and longing. Through the eyes of its protagonist, we witness the degradation of the human spirit, the erosion of hope, and the ultimate triumph of despair. This work is brutal and uncompromising that refuses to offer easy answers or false consolations. It is a book that demands to be read, but not without a deep sense of unease. It is a novel that forces us to confront the darkness within ourselves and the world around us.

"Bring another princess along - or a countess, at least. We change the sheets every Saturday." (Page 182, TC)

A central theme in *Tropic of Cancer* is the plight of the artist within a society that seems indifferent, if not hostile, to creative expression. The novel presents the artist as a solitary figure, struggling to find meaning and purpose in a world dominated by materialism and conformity. Miller's protagonist is a quintessential example of the alienated artist, a man out of step with the rhythms of contemporary life. His struggle to create in the face of poverty and rejection is a recurring motif, highlighting the precarious nature of an artistic existence. The novel suggests that the creative spirit is often at odds with the demands of survival, forcing artists to make difficult choices and compromises. This portrayal of the artist as an outcast is a powerful indictment of a society that values material success over spiritual fulfillment. It is a world where the imagination is stifled and the human spirit is reduced to a commodity. Through the character of the artist, Miller exposes the deep-seated malaise of a culture that has lost touch with its soul.

## Conclusion

Miller's *"Tropic of Cancer"* would not pique his interest. Continuous, explicit sex would most likely numb her yearning need for emotional connection. She would become even more sceptical of men's goals as a result of women's objectification, which would lead her to question his own ambitions in a culture that appears to emphasise material possessions.

Characters become angry and lonely as a result of their insatiable yearning, which turns into a burden. Miller's *"Tropic of Cancer"* would not pique his interest. Continuous, explicit sex would most likely numb her yearning need for emotional connection. She would become even more sceptical of men's goals as a result of women's objectification, which would lead her to question his own ambitions in a culture that appears to emphasise material possessions. In *"Tropic of Cancer,"* Henry Miller envisions a society in which people are

miserable because women are objectified and sexual appetites are endlessly pursued. Men, including the narrator, treat women as objects of desire, resulting in fleeting meetings that lack genuine connection.

The story is told exclusively from the perspective of a man, leaving the women's wishes and reasons unknown. Sex becomes a one-sided transaction, with males exerting power and women subject to exploitation. This repeated objectification most certainly leads to the female characters' loneliness and disenchantment with sex itself.

Because they are outsiders, Miller's protagonists develop an acute awareness of the pain that surrounds them. Because of their alienation, they are forced to adopt a detached observer's position, much like her own, which enables them to clinically study the depths of human suffering. Although providing a deep comprehension of the outsider's experience, runs the risk of simplifying the complexity of people to a mere spectacle. The risk is losing empathy due to being overcome by a pathological obsession with misery. Despite their gloomy undertones, Miller's writings nevertheless honour the resiliency and joyousness of the human spirit. A fair reading would recognize that human nature is marked by both resistance and hopelessness.

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