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Psychological Distress due to Overwork in Deir el-Medina

Emotions are the gateway to the mind. The ability to have and express emotions is powerful. Humans are lucky to have been able to articulate this ability since they have started forming communities and interacting with other human beings. One such early civilization that displayed a complex slew of emotions was ancient Egypt. Poems written by the villagers of Deir el-Medina offer insight into how ancient Egyptians felt about their daily lives. Examination of these poems reveals that love was a synonym for obsession. The interpersonal connections and inner thoughts reflected in the poetry formed by the villagers reveal the inner turmoil they faced when living in Deir el-Medina.

The working lifestyle of the village may have contributed to the emotional deterioration of the village males. Deir el-Medina is an ancient Egyptian community home to the artisans who worked on tombs in the Valley of the Kings during the New Kingdom period. The workers' week entailed eight working days and only two days off. The workers did not have much time to socialize, let alone woo and court someone. The male speaker in *The House of My Beloved* perfectly represents how socially inept the workers were due to their limited social experiences. He wishes he "could be appointed as door keeper [so he] could make her [his lover] irate at [him] and hear her voice when she is riled," but the speaker's logic displays their relationship as unhealthy. He loves her, but she does not notice him. He thinks if she notices him when she is mad, it is a better option than not being noticed at all. This thinking reveals the psychological

distress the male speaker has concerning his 'love.' He is so tired of being ignored that he will do anything to gain her attention. The male speaker in *I Wish I Were Her Laundryman* is no different. He is a man who will follow his lover around like an obsessed stalker. He tries to make her notice him, but in the end he gives up and tells the reader he is happy "if [he] could just be the washerman." This aspiration of the speaker presents his psychological state as damaged. A sane man would pursue a woman so that he could be her husband or boyfriend, but these speakers are content with being only the male next door and watching from afar. These works of Egyptian literature identify men as overworked with little time to woo their lovers and expose their psychological distress when asserting their 'love.'

Although the female speakers were not completely immersed in the working environment they revealed a similar psychological distress concerning their 'love.' Whereas, the men were limited to social interactions within the tombs, the women are limited with societal expectations. Their societal expectations embodied the workers' lifestyle. In this lifestyle, there was not enough time to fall in love when there was work to be accomplished. Tombs take a long time to build, and with a deadline as short as death, time is of the essence. The female speaker in *My Heart Flutters Hastily* gives the reader insight into the power of societal criticism when stating "let not the people say of me: 'A woman fallen through love!'" She fears that society may gossip about her and ruin her reputation. People are overworking and risking their social abilities while the female speaker is thinking about love. She complains that her "love of [him] lets [her] not act sensibly," and she faces an inner dilemma regarding how she should act. This inner turmoil is so detrimental that it causes her to not dress properly. The concept of time is also a problem in *My Brother Torments My Heart*. The female speaker's mother urges her lover to stop seeing her. The speaker states that "he knows not my wish to embrace him," highlighting the mother's concern

that her daughter is wasting her precious time on a not worthwhile love. At the end of the poem, the female speaker's psychological distress is revealed through her promise to wait for her lover by stating that her "people will hail [him] all together" if he confesses his love to her. She compares her lover to a god that everyone should praise, revealing that she views him not as lover but as an idol. Any person with a sane mindset would not say his or her lover is his or her idol. In retrospect, the speaker's mother was right to disapprove the relationship for the sake of the speaker's mental stability. The emotion of love represented in these poems discloses the mental distress females had when contending with their love interests.

Seclusion due to their work as tomb artisans also affected male and female speakers' inner thoughts negatively when talking about love. The workers' jobs included keeping secrets from the common folk, so interacting with the outside world was forbidden. This isolation did not help the villagers' mental distress. Because they had not seen much of the world, other people in the village became the center of their world as a way to cope with the depression that was formed by their isolation. For example, the male speaker in *The Sister Without Peer* describes his lover as being "like that the sun." Ancient Egyptians knew the fact that the sun is the center of the universe, and in the poem, the speaker is comparing his lover to the sun implying she is the center of his world. The sun also symbolizes life, hinting that the speaker's source of life is his love. Additionally, the male speaker in *Her Love Gives Me Strength* implies that same when he presents his inner distress by contemplating about suicide. He proclaims how his "love is on the far side," implying that his lover is dead. The reader realizes this after he affirms there is a "river between our bodies." The ancient Egyptians lived on the east bank of the Nile because the rising of the sun in the east signifies life, whereas the tombs were built on the west bank of the Nile because the setting of the sun in the west signifies death. In the end of the

poem, the speaker chooses to commit suicide because he has no motivation to live anymore. Perhaps if he had access to the outside world he could have found another motivation for living. Unfortunately, due to the nature of their work, the people of Deir el-Medina had to suffer depression and its psychological effects alone.

These secular works of Egyptian literature written by the residents of Deir el-Medina acknowledge their psychological distress through the use of metaphors representing their personal connections and their thinking processes. The utilization of emotions and the effects of work lifestyle aid in revealing the inner turmoil of the civilization. Poems are just one way of expressing bottled up emotions; with the increased ability to articulate emotions as humans in communities, the possibilities of being heard are endless. Future generations might use present day literature as a way to understand the lifestyle of the present through the emotions the present generation puts in its poems.