

Brian Tomasik

Psych 1 – Attachment 2

5 April 2006

Response to Question 2

Every chronic illness is at once very similar to and very distinct from every other. Arthur Kleinman illustrates this point well in The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition. By relating a number of diverse personal stories of chronic illness, Kleinman demonstrates that each disease is uniquely molded by an individual's personal, social, and cultural surroundings. Yet at the same time, the narratives connect to one another and evince patterns that are characteristic of most, if not all, experiences with chronic illness.

This is demonstrated well by the parallels that may be drawn between Kleinman's stories and the second given illness narrative about a student's mother, Melissa. There are many elements of Melissa's story upon which Kleinman touches: headaches, guilt, and depression (chapter 6), the notion that illness represents God's punishment (chapter 7), and the search for alternative treatments outside of the medical establishment (chapter 16). However, the parallels are especially striking for one of Kleinman's narratives in particular—that of Antigone Paget (chapter 6).

The most obvious similarities between Melissa and Antigone are probably their circumstances and the symptoms from which they suffer. Both of them appear, at least from the information given, to be middle-class American women in their fifties. Moreover, both of them endure similar afflictions. Melissa's condition is characterized by a general sense of "exhaustion, debilitating headaches, feelings of guilt, extreme depression, [and] overwhelming pessimism." Melissa and her doctors have not definitively identified any specific physical cause of the

suffering. Antigone's pain, in contrast, does have a direct source: stiffness of the neck resulting from a car accident. But her illness, too, has expanded to encompass a wide range of other emotions:

[Antigone] feels troubled, frightened about the future, blocked in getting things done, and blue; she has lost a sense of 'pleasure or interest in things.' The pain also [...] contributes to a constant sense of tension. And it leaves Mrs. Paget weak, exhausted by the end of the day. (89)

Even though the physical causes of these two illnesses probably differ (if Melissa's illness even has a physical cause), the overall psychological consequences for the two women are very much the same.

Moreover, the illnesses may not be due entirely to physical factors. In each case, uncomfortable family situations may trigger and exacerbate the pain. Melissa, for example, is troubled by her divorce and "her failure to keep the family together." In addition, when she begins furnishing her house with religious items, her children have "a negative response to this suffocating environment," and are thus reluctant to visit home. As a result, Melissa feels like a "failure as a mother" and becomes more depressed than before. Antigone's illness also includes a troubling family situation. She feels oppressed by an overbearing husband who "expect[s] his wife to defer to him" (94). Antigone realizes that "she had not individuated, had not developed a strong enough self-identity when she married" (93). Thus, when her accident occurs, Antigone's "physical pain [...] carry[s] another significance—of inner pain" that results from her dysfunctional marriage (94). She decides to leave her husband, but upon doing so, her children become upset and request that she return him. Thus, Antigone is torn between divorce and reunification; in Kleinman's interpretation, this is "a decision literally too painful to make."

Antigone's neck pain is something that allows her to put off "making this ultimate decision about marriage" (95). While the exact details of family interaction differ in these two cases, the general trend is the same: in each story, a difficult family situation makes the illness sufferer feel guilty and trapped, which exacerbates the tensions and uncertainties that she was already experiencing from the disease itself.

In addition to symptoms and family contribution to illness, there is a third similarity between Melissa and Antigone: both women incorporate religion into their perceptions of the illness, although they do so in different ways. Melissa "sees her illness as punishment from God," and consequently she adorns her home with "crosses, statuettes, prayer books, shrines, and nonsensical religious babble." She also consults her priest for help, and he includes her in prayer every Sunday. Antigone, too, is devoutly religious, but she does not respond with such pronounced efforts toward God. For her, religion takes on a more symbolic role in giving meaning to her illness. Describing her history of religious belief, Antigone relates that "I was trained to believe in the reality of sin, in the need for self-control and penitence and God's grace. [...] I remember how college changed all that. Now those ideas became metaphors" (93). Kleinman includes one of these metaphors in his narrative, when Antigone uses the image from "the great Renaissance and medieval paintings of Christ hanging there limp on the cross" to describe the position in which her neck pain is most severe (91). Thus, Antigone incorporates religion into her understanding of her illness, though in a very different way from Melissa.

Religion takes on another significance in Melissa's story. The student author feels that "Religion has become the center of Melissa's life" to such an extent that Melissa doesn't trust anything other than "superstitious hocus-pocus" to help her. "I personally think that the treatments fail," the student notes, "because Melissa expects them to fail." The student goes on to

argue that Kleinman's approach would be misguided in his mother's case, since it would only reinforce her perception that she can't get better through medical efforts. However, this argument is predicated on a misinterpretation of what Kleinman actually advocates. The student correctly notes that Kleinman wants physicians to "address[...] illness in the context of the meaning it carries for the sufferer and his or her family." But there's a big difference between addressing an illness in context and unequivocally accepting the belief system of the ill person.

Looking at the context of an illness means taking the time to understand how the sick person and her family understand the disease, and how it affects their everyday lives. The doctor is not compelled to approve of that interpretation, however. In the case of Mrs. Flowers (chapter 7), for instance, Kleinman certainly would not have urged that Dr. Richards support her consumption of pickle juice, even though it was part of her understanding of the illness. Rather, Kleinman would have urged that Dr. Richards take the time to understand what Mrs. Flowers was telling him and then to explain what the confusion was. In this case, looking at the illness in context is actually the opposite of giving endorsement to the patient's view: only by understanding more fully Mrs. Flowers's situation could Dr. Richards have helped her to realize why taking pickle juice was a bad idea. The same is true in Melissa's case. Only if her doctors took the time to become aware of her religious beliefs about the illness would they be able to act on that knowledge. This is not to suggest, of course, that they ought to respond in the same way that Dr. Richard's responded—that is, by ordering Melissa to abandon her religious belief system. However, they might have been able to modify the way they interacted with Melissa to take into account the fact that she didn't trust biomedicine. A deeper understanding on the part of the doctors can only help the situation, not make it worse.

Melissa's story shares many similarities with that of Antigone Paget. Both women come from similar life circumstances and suffer similar symptoms. Their illnesses are both exacerbated by hard family situations, and religion plays a significant role in the interpretations that both women create. Yet there are also differences. For Antigone, chronic neck pain takes on an additional meaning as something that prevents her from making a painful choice between divorcing her husband or returning to him; for Melissa, the pain is part of a feeling of "failure" at marriage and motherhood. In addition, while Antigone uses religion for metaphorical interpretation of her illness, Melissa takes religion literally and correspondingly appeals to God for help. Thus, although the women's experiences parallel each other in many ways, they are still distinct. This fact illustrates Kleinman's observation that chronic illnesses never quite "fit the mold"; because it encompasses the sufferer's personal, familial, and cultural understandings, the illness experience is always slightly unique for each individual.