ISSN: 2634-9221
European Journal of Applied Sciences; Vol. 14 No. 03 (2026) (150-154)
https://doi.org/10.14738/ejas.1403.10812

Suicide as an Ultimate Act of Defiance: Illustrated by Stephan Zweig

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Desperation, a multifaceted feeling, may reveal various faces depending on the underlying circumstances, age and cognitive containment. Whereas most people are aware to putative fluctuations in feelings and state of mind and accept failures besides successes on a daily basis, individuals with reduced coping capacity hardly conform to intricate alterations in their routine, which may affect their mood, self-esteem, social involvement, familial relationships and even health. Since the brain controls our thinking, feelings and behavior, a widespread known phenomenon is an exceptional worry of failure that precedes almost any competitive need ('I will probably fail again') leading to disappointment, unhappiness or even to an *a priori* 'loser' personality entailed by 'self' under-estimation and built-in despair. Such problematic personality is not just theoretical, as we all are familiar with the need to constantly compete and improve our confidence and public appeal as well as our social interactions. In the multitude faces of despair, one that often typifies problematic teenagers is their low expectations for a better future and feelings of disappointment and inconsideration by either the family or surrounding society. Such negative feelings may trigger extreme responses like running away, addiction to drugs, eating disorders (bulimia, anorexia), steep decline in school and even embellished aggression. In many instances, such responses conceal a strong desire of defiance and a way to 'punish' the 'alleged inconsiderate', yet actually non-guilty, surrounding while in a few extreme occurrences may even lead to suicidal acts. Notably, these extreme incidents usually involve psychological difficulties and disturbances that differ considerably from suicidal motivations like those of Muslim shahids persuaded to murder on a religious or radical nationalistic basis. Moreover, the suicidal acts of Shahids cannot be compared to those of the disturbed teens as the intent and underlying circumstances are different and usually associated with either materialistic objectives like financial rewards to their poor families, or ideation of fanaticism by brain washing of individuals with low intelligence that experienced some mental breakdown and thus were easy to convince. Totally different, however, is the severe defiance by elder people, who protest either against a major destructive issue in their family or social affairs, or object various national or international policies. These people may enter the third phase of life skeptic about the probability of resolving their difficulties or meeting their aspirations, and so their protest or even suicidal attempt expresses disappointment and increasing despair, that would disappear (so they think) by ending their life. An example of such a trend was demonstrated by the suicidal act of Stephan Zweig.

Born in 1881 to an affluent Jewish family in Vienna, heart of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a European center of cultural life, Stephan Zweig emerged already at age 20 with an exceptional talent as revealed in a published collection of poetry. After completion of a PhD in philosophy he initiated a fruitful career as a novelist, biographer and dramatist

(scriptwriter)*. Using his talent and professional background he became a writer of fiction stories about psychological dilemmas of diverse characters involved in either social meetings, vacations, or various bothering circumstances, and so acquired a reputation of being a master in scrutinizing the human soul. His exceptional creativity was reflected on a broad spectrum of subjects and 46 published books mostly dealing with emotional conflicts related to love, betrayal, guilt, remorse, mental breakdown or acceptance, all provided in a very elegant yet daring style that attracted the readership of the years between the two world wars. His story-characters were derived from various social levels like the young woman of a lower working class in 'The Post-office Girl' compared to the high-class vacationists in 'Letter from an Unknown Woman' or 'Twenty-four Hours in the Life of a Woman'. Most of Zweig's stories occur in a peaceful background of a vacation site forming a unique atmosphere. Zweig was expert in describing complicated situations and building up the tension, which attracted the reader and raised his curiosity about how the complex situation would be solved. Approaching 1930, Zweig was at the top of his prestige and his novels were among the most translated German-language, and so he became the bestselling author in the years 1930 till WWII. His meteoric rise ceased as soon as the Nazis came to power. They considered him a dangerous ideological enemy and invested great efforts to abandon his writing and books, concomitantly to confiscating his property and belongings. They included him in a blacklist of intellectuals to be arrested when caught. Clearly, his way of life and scholastic relationships ended and he felt like a refugee or a Jewish peddler. Zweig then succeeded to escape from a putative nasty future by moving with his wife in 1938 to England, where he divorced and married a young English woman. Then he moved for a short time to New York and finally settled in Brazil (1940). However, shortly after, he was unable to accept his new life apart from his beloved home and traditional intellectual routine, which increased his disappointment and actually shocked him when observing the swift deterioration in humanitarian values and moral in Europe, particularly in the countries that prior to the rise of Nazism were considered top leading civilizations with the highest cultural and intellectual achievements (e.g., Germany). Consequently, Zweig realized that his admiration of European values, way of life and civilized manners actually was too naïve. His exaggerated appreciation of the European society suddenly declined and his pacifistic view, as was demonstrated in his writing, almost gone. His despair was so overwhelming that he decided not to continue sharing his life with such an abominable society and committed suicide. This was a clear act of defiance against the new European values and loss of humanism that were his 'bread and butter' till the Nazi rise (see his farewell letter**). Besides his personal intellectual despair, the large difference of age between him (age 60) and his second wife (age 30) as well as her chronic Asthma could have also increased his depression and suicidal thoughts.

In contrast to other writers like the Germans Heinrich Bell, a Nobel laureate, who criticized the German social, religious and educational systems emphasizing the total, blind obedience under the new dehumanized regime, or Günther Grass (named the 'conscience of Germany'), who primarily directed his after-war criticism toward political and social issues, Stephan Zweig was unable to adopt to his new life neither accept the evil metamorphic change in Europe, and as an act of weakness (or maybe courageousness) decided to end his life together with his desperate wife. No doubt, in his suicidal act, the world lost a literary giant with abilities exemplifying the top of the human spirit. Although Zweig's star diminished greatly after WWII, his genuine capabilities have resurrected in the past decade with the release of new translations of many of his books.

***SELECTED STORIES**

Forgotten Dreams (1900): An elegant lady relaxing on the terrace of her magnificent mansion in the Riviera is called upon by a man she had known in her younger days. About to leave for America, he has come to ask her for an explanation of why she had decided to marry into money rather than take her chances with him back then.

Springtime in the Prater (1900): A young woman in an elegant building in the best region of Vienna is frustrated because the new gown that she has ordered for the Derby Day did not arrive on time, obliging her to miss the fancy event. Finally, she decides to put on her oldest dress and just go out for a walk on that lovely spring day, when she is admired by a young student who finally works up the courage to ask if he might accompany her. She accepts out of a spirit of adventure, and they have a most enjoyable outing in Vienna's great Prater park. The simplicity of it all quite enchants her and one thing leads to another and so on.

In the snow (1901): A Jewish community celebrating Hanukah in a small town in medieval Germany hears that a large group of religious blood-thirsty fanatics are on their way.

The Cross (1906): A French officer is cut off behind enemy lines after an ambush during the Napoleonic War in Spain and desperately tries to survive amid the immeasurable.

***The wedding in* Lyon** (1901): A group of condemned prisoners is awaiting execution in a prison in Lyon during the French Revolution when a new group of prisoners is brought in, and a young couple is miraculously reunited.

The love of Erika Ewald (1904): Lonely and innocent Erika Ewald falls increasingly under the charm of a very gifted violinist whom she accompanies on the piano, and finally things come to a brink during a Sunday outing to the outskirts of Vienna where the owner of an establishment where they stop for refreshments politely addresses her as the violinist's bride, that they both realize that she almost is. The story raises intense and very convincing exploration of the profound emotional, psychological and sensual impulses of the young woman.

Scarlet Fever (1908): A young medical student arrives to Vienna and has enormous difficulties adjusting to life in the big city, not only because he is still under-developed, immature and shy, but also because he is quite overwhelmed by the force of the extroverted and quite domineering older student in the next room in his dwelling. But all changes when one day the landlady comes to him in tears pleading for his help as a medical student to save her young daughter who has come down with a fatal scarlet fever.

Twilight Story (1908): A fifteen-year-old English boy on holiday in the grand Scottish castle of his relatives wanders into the grounds late at night, fascinated by its somewhat eerie atmosphere, where he is abruptly accosted in the dark by a passionate young woman who vigorously embraces him before fleeing. Unable to identify her he waits under the same tree again the next night and has another encounter with the ghostly girl, trying desperately to identify her and deepen their relations.

Burning Secret (1911): In an Austrian mountain resort an experienced Baron sees an attractive woman, who has come there with her sickly twelve-year-old son for a cure, and

cleverly first strikes up a friendship with the boy as a way to his mother's heart. His strategy is brilliantly successful, but the Baron makes the mistake of ignoring the boy from then on.

Fear (1922): A well-to-do married woman who has faulted with a seductive young pianist is aggressively blackmailed by a mysterious young woman who threatens to denounce her to her husband. The blackmail is increasingly successful, the lady is overcome with fear and anguish and finally she sees only one fatal way out of her dilemma.

Letter from an Unknown Woman (1922): A well-known novelist returns home after a holiday in the mountains to find a long letter from a woman he had once known, but quite forgotten. She, on the other hand, has never forgotten him, for a good reason explained in the letter.

The Fantastic Night (1922): A well-off and rather idle reserve officer in Vienna in June 1913 finds himself quite by hazard at the races in the Prater, the great Viennese public park, and watches the excited behavior of the crowd during the races with a detached eye. His day and his whole existence are thrown head over heels when he starts paying attention to an alluring person next to him and he rapidly goes through a major life-changing experience.

Beware of Pity (1939): An Austro-Hungarian officer stationed far from home, is invited to a lavish party at the mansion of a rich Hungarian landowner, where he meets his daughter and spontaneously asks her for a dance. When he realizes that she is crippled, he feels a deep compassion for her, while she falls in love with him. Soon the officer is drawn into a massy situation and emotions quite unforeseen, as pity and guilt inexorably implicate him in a well-meaning intention that tragically goes wrong.

The Royal Game (1942, published in Argentina only in 1944): Zweig explores the psychological battle between an arrogant chess champion and a mysterious challenger on board a ship. The tale delves into themes of obsession and the human psyche as both men confront their inner demons through the intellectual intensity of the game.

Twenty-four Hours in the Life of a Woman (1927): A psychological novel detailing a distinguished English widow's intense 24-hour journey of passion, reckless gambling, and profound regret. After observing a desperate young man at a Monte Carlo casino, she is drawn into his chaotic life, testing her morals and altering her perspective on love and despair.

The **Post-Office** ***Girl*** (1930, published only in 1982): A posthumously novel detailing Christine, a poor Austrian postal worker, who is invited by a wealthy aunt to a luxurious Swiss resort after WWI. Following her experience at an elite life, she is abruptly abandoned, returning to poverty and teaming up with a bitter war veteran to plan a desperate, chaotic escape.

Amok (1922): A psychological novel that explores extreme obsession and mental breakdown, heavily influenced by psychoanalytic themes. The story is told as a confession from a doctor to a narrator on a ship travelling from India to Europe

The World of Yesterday (1940)**:** A memoir of how European cultural, moral and spiritual achievements deteriorated between the two world wars, the rise of Nazism, and during WWII.

Decisive *Moments in History* (1927) It started off with only five miniatures in its first edition and grew to a collection of 14 miniatures with later editions. Its first English translation was published in 1940 as *The Tide of Fortune: Twelve Historical Miniatures*. The miniatures describe historical events that changed the world.

Selected biographies, historical portraits, plays: Stephan Zweig wrote in 1920 historical studies of famous literary figures like Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoevsky in a collection named “Three Masters”; Then in 1927 he wrote “Decisive Historical Events”. In addition he wrote in 1929 the biography of Duke Joseph Fouché, minister of various French regimes during Napoleon’s ruling; in 1932 the biography of Marie Antoinette, the French Queen; and in 1935 the biography of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland. In 1917, while he served in the army, Zweig wrote “Jeremias” a drama of nine scenes, in which he expressed his pacifist sentiments and Jewish religious background, and ended it with the line "A person can be put in chains, but his spirit, never”.

Selected films based on Zweig’s work: Twenty hours in the life of a woman (1931, 1932, 1968, 2002); Amok (1934, 1944); Angst (1928); Beware of Pity (1946 Britain); Fear (1954); The House by the Sea (1924); The Invisible Collection (2012, Brazil); Letter from an Unknown Woman (1942, 1962, 2002); Marie Antoinette (1938); Mary, Queen of Scotland (2013).

****ZWEIG’S FAREWELL LETTER (TRANSLATED FROM GERMAN)**

Declaration

Before I depart from this life, of my own free will and with a clear mind, I want urgently to fulfil one last duty: I want to give heartfelt thanks to this wonderful country of Brazil which has granted me and my work such kind and hospitable repose. Every day I have learned to love this country better, and nowhere would I more gladly have rebuilt my life all over again, now that the world of my native tongue has perished for me and my spiritual home, Europe, is destroying itself.

But one would need special powers to begin completely afresh when one has passed one’s sixtieth year. And mine have been exhausted by long years of homeless wandering. It seems to me therefore better to put an end, in good time and without humiliation, to a life in which intellectual work has always been an unmixed joy and personal freedom earth’s most precious possession.

I greet all my friends! May they live to see the dawn after the long night is over. I, all too impatient, am going on alone!

Petropolis 22. II 1942

Stefan Zweig