MELANCHOLY AND THE IMPOSION
OF THE FAMILY IN EARLY- AND POST-MODERN TRAGEDY

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MELANCHOLY AND THE IMPLSION
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Thesis

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“A Coat of White Primer” (2005), the initial episode of the fifth and final season of HBO’s *Six Feet Under*, opens with footage shot by a shaky home video camera, as nineteen-year-old Claire Fisher captures the frantic last-minute commotion preceding her brother Nate’s wedding. Family and friends scurry about the church, attempting to locate the couple’s misplaced wedding rings, as Nate struggles to pin his boutonnière to his jacket, enlisting the help of his younger sibling David, while Claire records the pair’s clumsy fumbling and gently teases her older brothers. It is a sweetly affecting scene that no-doubt resonates with familiarity to most living in twenty-first century America. Especially since the rise of the home video recorder in the late 1980s, the wedding video has become a genre unto itself – valued not only as a treasured familial document, but increasingly as a form of mass entertainment, as reality television and the internet transmit what used to be personal domestic remembrances to general audiences for mass consumption. In short, the scene is very much of its time; it accurately captures the decade’s culture of hyper-mediation, highlighting the crumbling boundaries between public and private spheres that have come to characterize the early twenty-first century.

While *SFU* employs the home video to great effect, firmly and effectively situating the narrative within its turn-of-the-century context, the fact that much of the
episode’s narrative hinges so directly upon the events of a wedding harkens back to an earlier dramatic tradition. While comedy is certainly the genre most readily associated with the marital milieu, so too has the wedding always been an integral part of tragedy. Significantly, while weddings often function to resolve the dramatic conflict within comedy, they often do just the opposite within tragedy, disrupting rather than reconciling familial and social structures. Bennett Simon, in his 1988 analysis of the role of family in western dramatic tragedy, makes this very point, noting that discord surrounding the wedding is typical for the genre, describing its “terrifying and destructive” view of marriage (18).

Numerous classical works of tragedy, including major plays by Sophocles and Euripides, revolve around scenes of marital union. The tragic blueprint inherited from these earliest dramatists has cast a remarkably long shadow over western literature, and as such, many of the surviving tragedies of the English early modern period, much like their Greek forbearers, involve the explicit portrayal of the events and circumstances of a marriage. As an illustration, note that three of Shakespeare’s most revered and influential tragedies all hinge directly upon the events and implications of a marital union. Othello’s marriage to Desdemona, although it occurs shortly before the play begins, is, at the very least, a major catalyst for several of the play’s deaths. So too does the wedding of Gertrude to Claudius incite the tragic conclusion of Hamlet. And Romeo and Juliet’s demise is nothing if not a result of the couple’s ill-fated union.

Writing in the decades directly following Shakespeare, the Caroline dramatist John Ford used marriage as the mechanism for familial upheaval in several of his tragedies. The plot of The Broken Heart (1633) centers around the events of two
proposed engagements, though, suitably enough for tragedy, both wedding plans are thwarted by the play’s conclusion. Ford’s most enduringly popular play, ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore (1633), the play upon which I will focus, also involves a dizzying array of engagements, betrayals, and soap-operatic plot twists all centering directly upon issues of marriage. Yet while the marriage of Annabella to Soranzo in ‘Tis Pity is a far more modest affair than the relatively lavish, seaside ceremony of Nate Fisher to his girlfriend, Brenda Chenoweth, the two weddings come about as a result of a common impetus on the part of the brides. Both Anabella and Brenda seek a sort of moral redemption through romantic union, as if the act of marriage will somehow function as a penance, allowing both women to atone for youthful breaches of their respective societies’ sexual norms. Given that both ‘Tis Pity and SFU draw so heavily on tragic conventions, both women’s rather desperate attempts to curtail societal and self reprobation through marriage end, of course, in utter disaster.

Brenda, a recovering sex addict at this point in the show’s narrative, views marriage as a chance to transcend her promiscuous past – a way to attain a so-called normal life and salve her guilty conscience, which, so far, prevents her from having the meaningful romantic relationship she craves. Likewise, for Annabella, marriage seems to present the only way out of her incestuous and culturally abhorrent sexual relationship with her brother, while also providing a necessary civic cloak, giving her pregnancy the illusion of social legitimacy. As such, both women spend much of the time leading up to the ceremony in intense emotional pain, clearly suffering on their wedding days. The

Because this analysis is largely concerned with ‘Tis Pity and SFU in their position as dramatic works, rather than their later existence in print, dates given throughout are those of the works’ initial stage performances or airdates, respectively.
very scene in which Annabella is married begins with a fit of desperate emotion, as the stage directions that precede 3.6 locate her kneeling, whispering to the Friar as she “weeps and wrings her hands.” Indeed, the anguish of both women is symptomatic of a general atmosphere of depression that is pervasive throughout SFU and ‘Tis Pity.

While Ford’s plays are tragedies in the most literal sense, conforming neatly to traditional early modern English stage conventions, SFU often works to exemplify a uniquely twenty-first century version of the genre. While sharing the same discrete psychosexual concerns that crop up so often within the plays of Ford, SFU frequently expands upon this tragic framework, building a postmodern structure upon an early modern foundation. At its best, SFU confronts viewers with enduring tragic themes and motifs while remaining self-consciously timely and hip. For as the show, true to its postmodern nature, delights in crossing traditional borders of genre – most notably into the realm of soap opera and magical realism – its essence, as we shall see, is largely rooted in tragedy.² To be sure, the degree to which ‘Tis Pity and SFU are steeped in the cultures in which they were produced cannot be underestimated. Still, the extent to which they tackle analogous themes, anxieties, and tensions can be startling, as the works plunge eagerly into the darkest aspects of the human psyche. By expanding upon well-trodden, classical tragic themes with a special attention to the behavior of the human mind when it is subjected to extreme emotional duress, both Ford and SFU explore the very nature of suffering and sadness. They confront issues of mental illness by depicting a generalized climate of melancholia and depression, encapsulating their respective

² See Lavery for a complete discussion of SFU as magical realism and Poole for an analysis of SFU’s neo-soap operatic characteristics.
cultures’ ideas about the brain and its response to intense and disproportionate sorrow. Significantly, the seat of depression lies wholly within the familial sphere in both works. So profound is the emotional sadness the runs throughout the central families in ‘Tis Pity and SFU that the dramas can be seen to effectively employ what might be termed a poetics of familial melancholy. That is, the tragedy unfolds within a depressive climate which works throughout both narratives to gradually disrupt the foundations of the family structure.

Depression and Melancholia: The Resonance of Chronic Grief in Western Cultures

What follows stems from the deceptively straightforward proposition that the main engines of both SFU and the ‘Tis Pity is depression: out and out, all consuming, pathological grief. While the characters that inhabit both worlds can be seen to have earned their right to mourn as they are confronted with one misfortune after another, there is also something deeper at work within both. A climate of desperation and despondency is pervasive, not merely among individual characters, but also throughout the very worlds they inhabit. The twenty-first century Los Angeles portrayed in SFU and early modern Parma of ‘Tis Pity are depicted as centers of familial suffering. While the actions of individual characters can and do aggravate what is already a climate of despondency, it is often life itself that is seen to conspire against the families at the heart of these dramas. Thus as the narratives unfold, it becomes clear that the characters are trapped – locked into a downward spiral of sadness that, as the tragic audience already
suspects, will inevitably end in death. As such, both dramas exemplify their society’s attempts to deal with melancholia and familial grief through narrative. Employing the popular psychological insights and homespun wisdom prevalent within the cultures from which they arose, ‘Tis Pity and SFU allow us to glimpse into popular opinions regarding what is now commonly termed depression.

Admittedly, it is difficult to write about depression with any degree of precision.\(^3\) This problem is compounded when one attempts to discuss depression as it existed throughout a fairly large span of western history.\(^4\) While it is presently viewed by the medical and psychological community as a distinct illness – a mental disorder with specific, discrete characteristics and symptoms – its nature remains hard, if not impossible, to essentialize. This is due in large part to the fact that the symptoms of depression are manifest primarily within the psyche of those afflicted. As a result, the

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\(^3\) I wish to acknowledge the interrelated yet distinct senses in which the term “depression” must serve for the purposes of this analysis. While it is employed throughout the essay largely in reference to what has in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries alternately been called “clinical depression,” “major-depressive disorder,” and “unipolar depression,” I also wish to acknowledge the term’s equally important colloquial sense. According to the \textit{OED}, depression has been in use as a clinical, psychological term since the mid-nineteen hundreds, while its use as a generalized term, connoting extreme sadness, has been employed within popular discourse since as early as 1665. Because of the evolution and variance of medical and psychological vernacular since the English Renaissance, I must, by necessity, use depression as both a diagnostic referent and as a broad reference to pervasive sadness, for there is little utility in arguing the psychological “realities” of fictional characters. Whether such characters were deliberately conceived as clinically depressed is immaterial to my examination. Their behaviors which can be seen and described as depressed, however, are.

\(^4\) The emphasis on depression as a western phenomenon within this analysis is in no way intended to suggest that the condition is exclusive to the west. Indeed, this is far from the case. Nevertheless, the scope of this examination demands that I limit my discussion to depression and melancholia within the western medical tradition. It is important to acknowledge, however, the existence of depression as a condition that is not tied to any geographical locus.
search to uncover the existence of a precise chemistry of depression persists to no avail in the early years of the twenty-first century. By necessity, most of our knowledge on the subject comes from clinical observation and the experiential insight of those who have suffered from the condition.

Yet while the history of depression runs parallel to that of western medicine itself, the use of depression as a clinical term emerged only in the twentieth century. The ancient Greeks were the first western culture known to have identified and studied what we in the twenty-first century would call depressive characteristics. Greek humoral theory held that that an over-saturation of black bile within the brain was a major cause of melancholia. In the writings that have been attributed to Hippocrates and his followers, there is evidence that melancholia was, even as early as the fourth century B.C.E., seen as a discrete illness with both mental and physiological symptoms. The Hippocratic Aphorisms, for example, assert that prolonged periods of increased fear and despondency are symptomatic of melancholia (21).

The Alexandrian physician Galen (129-301? C.E.), relying on the humoral theories of Hippocrates and Aristotle, was among the earliest known to write about melancholia in significant detail, keenly observing that “Although each melancholic patient acts quite differently than the others, all of them exhibit fear and despondency” (93). While prescient in his acknowledgement of the varied, yet individually distinct, manners in which the condition can manifest itself, Galen also identifies the two major symptoms of modern depression as we still know them: persistent anxiety and inordinate sadness. This classical Greek notion of melancholia as a state of mental depression coupled with anxiety, causally attributed to an imbalance of bodily humors would persist
within western medicine for centuries, informing western medical texts through the middle ages, into the English Renaissance, and beyond.

Indeed, following Galen, an impressive array of physicians, philosophers, theologians, and scientists have studied depression. The first known attempt at a sustained, book length analysis of what was then termed melancholia came in the form of Robert Burton’s expansive *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). A sprawling treatise by any standards, Burton engages in an unremitting exploration of the mental and physical effects of an imbalance of the “cold & dry” humor (162). Using Latin verse, copious classical precedent (particularly that of Galen), and his own experiential observation, Burton attacks melancholia from every imaginable angle. Yet despite the sheer volume of Burton’s insights, his conception of melancholia resonates even today. “*Feare and Sorrow* are the true Characters, and inseparable companions of most *Melancholy,*” notes Burton, bringing to mind the twenty-first century medical consensus regarding concurrence of anxiety and sadness within individuals diagnosed as clinically depressed (163).

To be sure, while the humoral view of melancholia is not strictly synonymous with what we know as clinical depression, it does serve as the closest historical analogue to our twenty first-century conception of the term. As Jeremy Schmidt notes of seventeenth-century medical theory, “The concept of melancholy comprehended a wide range of characteristics in seventeenth-century European culture, from brooding introspection of the genius and the scholar to a condition of delirious and delusory madness” (583). If anything, then, the term melancholia casts a wider net than depression. While modern depressives would likely have been said to be suffering from
melancholia, so too would individuals afflicted with what we today would diagnose as schizophrenia, delusional disorders, or even common stomach ailments. Despite this difference, historical melancholia and modern depression are inexorably bound together. Schmidt continues, noting that melancholia’s “central and most immediately identifiable characteristic . . . was the excessive and unreasonable nature of its symptomologically defining emotions of fear and sorrow” (583). Such assertions as Schmidt’s hearken directly to modern psychology’s recognition of the link between depressed states and severe anxiety. As such, both seventeenth-century melancholia and modern depression are seen by many to share the same essential and definitive characteristics. As popular writer Andrew Solomon observes in his 2001 compendium of all things depressed, The Noonday Demon, “Disruptions long called melancholia are now signified by the strangely casual word depression” (285).

Yet even in the twenty-first century, depression remains hard to pin down. In the face of such vagaries surrounding the understanding and diagnosis of clinical depression, contemporary medicine still endeavors to distinguish and codify its major symptoms. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fourth edition (DSM-IV), provides a suitable, though imperfect, place to begin. According to the DSM, Major Depressive Disorder is characterized by “at least 2 weeks of depressed mood or loss of interest accompanied by at least 4 additional symptoms of depression” (317). Thus depression is revealed immediately as a self-referential conundrum; in essence, one is diagnosed as depressed if he or she exhibits persistent depression. Fortunately, the DSM goes on to offer a slightly more useful breakdown of depression’s secondary symptoms; reduced appetite, insomnia,
loss of interest or pleasure, fatigue, guilt, physical agitation, difficulty concentrating, and suicidal thoughts are all seen as symptomatic of depression (317).

While the use of the term depression has all but eclipsed that of melancholia in twenty-first century psychological parlance, it is interesting to note that its use has not been entirely eliminated by the medical establishment. In a subsection regarding the diagnosis of particularly ambiguous and categorically stubborn mood disorders – known as mood disorders not otherwise specified (MDNS) – the DSM describes a particular type of mood episode characterized as melancholia. Under the heading “melancholic features specifier,” the DSM notes a mood episode distinguished by a “loss of interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities or a lack of reactivity to usually pleasurable stimuli” (385). It continues, noting that during such an episode, “the individual’s depressed mood does not improve, even temporarily, when something good happens” (385). Such episodes are also often distinguished by “a distinct quality of . . . depressed mood . . . , significant anorexia or weight loss, or excessive or inappropriate guilt” (383). While not strictly analogous terms then, modern psychology seems to recognize a link between depression and melancholia.5

Yet while the DSM’s system of classification is a helpful starting point when discussing depression and melancholia, it is important to note that the analysis that follows is largely unconcerned with making sweeping psychological diagnoses. Instead, I would like to offer what might be termed a literary diagnosis, in which the works

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5 See Radden for a compelling argument against the strict equation of seventeenth-century melancholia and twenty-first century depression within the field of psychiatry. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this literary analysis, such comparisons need be made. While in full-recognition of the inexact parallels between the conditions, melancholia remains the closest early modern relative to clinical depression.
themselves can be seen as depressed, the narratives themselves rooted in aesthetics of melancholy. While cases can certainly be made regarding the individual depressions of particular characters, I am more concerned with the climate of depression within the family that is pervasive throughout both SFU and ‘Tis Pity. It is my hope that by examining the pieces with attention to how familial depression is performed within the dramatic tragedy, we can better understand how such mental disorders reverberate throughout their respective cultures. By sifting through the works and contextualizing the manners in which they attempt to deal with depression, with specific consideration of their single-minded attention to the human mind pushed to its limits by grief, we can learn a great deal regarding popular early- and post modern attitudes about what is now termed depression. Further, while there is undoubtedly a significant relationship between clinical depression and the portrayal of melancholy in drama, I seek to look at depression not from a chiefly medical or psychological perspective, but rather as a matter of aesthetics and culture. By exploring the poetics of familial depression common to both ‘Tis Pity and SFU, a great deal can be gleaned regarding dramatic strategies and cultural responses to what are now seen as depressive mood disorders. It allows us to consider simultaneously the literary, performative, and social implications of a debilitating mental condition that has fascinated audiences since the birth of drama itself.
Since Burton’s extensive investigation into the nature of prolonged and undirected sadness, popular psychological literature has continued in its examination of melancholia. Yet depression has long cast its ominous shadow over the history of western creativity as well. From the paintings of Cranach, Lucas the Elder (An Allegory of Melancholy, 1528) to the stark abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko in the 1950’s, the melancholic muse has commonly inspired visual artists. So too has melancholia often fired the imaginations of literary figures. Indeed, depression among writers has, in the twenty-first century, become a cultural cliché. This belief was no doubt perpetuated by the suicides of famed writers like Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway and Sylvia Plath, all of whom have become associated, both in terms of their lives and their writings, with depression. While evidence of a connection between creativity and depression is anecdotal at best, there is little doubt that the subject has informed, in some sense, many of the English language’s most enduring and admired literary works.

The connections between English literature and depression are particularly apparent within the sphere of the domestic tragedy. Hamlet, arguably one of the most widely influential plays in English, has been posited by many critics as an intense exploration of the Danish prince’s decent into a melancholic episode. In fact, Hamlet is so inexorably tied to the psychology of depression that it becomes difficult to discern

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6 See Ashton, chapter 11 for a more in-depth analysis of Rothko’s depression. Citing friends of the artist who have asserted that Rothko was “subject to serious depression, Ashton describes his later canvases as “tragic” and evocative of “tranquil melancholy” (187).
whether the play itself is an exploration of the depressed mind, or if, conversely, the concept of depression was born, in part, by an attempt to understand the play. Theodore Lidz alludes to this idea, noting that, “In his classic paper on the etiology of depressions, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ Freud was thinking of Hamlet’s transformation when he explained how mourning turns into pathological depression” (49). Thus it is evidenced that the founder of psychoanalysis, in a germinal paper regarding mental depression, uses Shakespeare’s fictional character as a model for an individual’s descent into a severe depressive episode.

Since the form’s popular resurgence on the early modern English stage, the dramatic tragedy has allowed writers, actors, audience members, and readers to explore, through the fictional portrayals of excessive and chronic sadness, the realities of clinical depression. Admittedly, connecting such seemingly disparate works as ‘Tis Pity and SFU within a single analysis might seem a bit incommensurate at first glance. Yet although the texts in question were created nearly 400 years apart and were written on two different continents, I believe that certain fundamental similarities running throughout both SFU and ‘Tis Pity make for an especially rewarding and productive comparison. Notably, tragedies of the English Renaissance and the television drama were created as popular entertainments in a dominant medium of their times. The contemporaneous popularity of the early modern English theatre, with its audience comprised of kings, queens, nobles, and commoners alike, hints at the diverse appeal of tragedy in Caroline times. Indeed, the theatre, during Ford’s time, would have commonly attracted an audience of varied financial means. Like television in the twenty-first century, the theatre could be enjoyed
by all but the poorest of citizens of London, and it is firmly-established that most plays included elements designed to appeal to both high- and low- brow tastes.

It is worth noting, however, that SFU, in its initial run, was shown on HBO, a premium cable channel. Unlike broadcast television, in which content is provided to audiences free of charge, cable relies on paying customers as a main source of income. While basic cable offers audiences packages of programming, in which customers, for a monthly fee, purchase home access to commercial stations that are unavailable over public airwaves, premium channels like HBO cost significantly more than basic cable and tend to rely much less on advertising dollars for revenue. Consequently, HBO’s series tend to have higher production values than their broadcast and basic cable counterparts. Additionally, because HBO is not strictly beholden to the whims of advertisers and the constraints of the Federal Communications Commission, HBO is able to present uncensored content. Similarly, while the price for groundlings to attend the early modern English theatre would have been relatively affordable for most people, there was a definite cost associated with theatre attendance.

To extend this analogy, we can readily see how the early modern English outdoor amphitheatres, or “citizen” playhouses played a role similar to that of basic cable in the twenty-first century, offering popular entertainment for a relatively small cost. When we consider that ’Tis Pity was first performed at the indoor Cockpit, a relatively small, fashionable hall, rather than in a larger citizen amphitheatre, it becomes further tempting to equate such high-brow theatre with HBO and other premium cable channels of turn-of-the-century America. Andrew Gurr notes that while “the single penny . . . was still the base price at the Fortune, the Red Bull and the Globe in 1642 . . ., the hall playhouses
expanded their price range with more costly seats” (12). A major implication of this price increase, continues Gurr, was that it “must have excluded most apprentices [from attendance]” (12). Not only did this have the effect of limiting popular access to many of these plays, particularly in their initial runs, but it also offered the opportunity to those within court circles to increase their social visibility. “As it became acceptable for fashionable ladies to occupy boxes alongside the stage,” remarks Gurr, “the social advantage of parading oneself at . . . the Cockpit came second only to an appearance at the Court itself” (12).

HBO’s mid-1990s business plan acts as an interesting twentieth-century echo to the more trendy and expensive playhouses of seventeenth-century England. Christopher Anderson’s chapter on HBO and drama, fittingly titled “Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” focuses on the network’s quest to “establish a unique cultural value among television networks” (30). One of HBO’s most successful strategies for this was to consciously create “a consistent and identifiable HBO brand, a luxury brand in a populist medium” (30). Because the network keeps information regarding its core audience closely guarded, data regarding the demographic makeup of its subscribers is sketchy at best. Nevertheless, Anderson argues that HBO’s viewership is likely comprised of the “educated upper-middle class” (34). In garnering such an audience, HBO overtly brands itself as “an exclusive cultural domain, appealing to a restricted taste culture and to viewers of privileged economic circumstances” (34). The implications of this cannot be overstated, and it is important to note that both SFU and early modern drama in general were essentially profit-driven enterprises whose success or failure would be largely contingent upon audience approval. As both texts
were conceived for the dominate mediums of their time, television and the stage respectively, they were essentially created in forms more closely associated with popular mass entertainments rather than celebrated cultural and artistic achievements. Still, because of the specific space in which the works were shown, HBO and the Cockpit, it becomes obvious that SFU and ‘Tis Pity sought to appeal to the upper echelon of their particular cultures. All of this begs the question of whether melancholia and depression themselves are, in some ways, disorders of the privileged classes. The contemporaneous audiences for both works seem to suggest that, at the very least, the dramatic portrayal of the depressed family may tend to be of particular interest to the economically advantaged. Perhaps this is indicative of the certain existential concern particular to the upper classes.

Bridging the Gap: An Evolution of Tragedy

Yet the discussion of tragedy itself brings us to a second nomenclatural impasse, for like depression, the idea of tragedy also remains shrouded in vagaries. Admittedly, attempts at genre codification are inherently problematic, and there is obviously little use in attempting to demarcate or patrol too rigidly the borders of literary forms. Further, I do not mean to suggest that the creators of SFU had early modern tragedy in mind when writing the show. Still, I seek to explore the ways in which the program, particularly in its final season, draws upon the same classical tragic traditions seen in the Caroline tragedies of John Ford. As such, perhaps a short discussion of tragedy itself would be useful.
While it is, of course, impossible to essentialize the nature of such a persistent literary tradition it is clear that tragedy has often been largely a family affair. Again, if we hearken back to the tragedies of Shakespeare, we will find that intra-familial tension is a fairly standard early modern narrative device. Yet, beyond pronounced concerns with kinship and romance, the fundamental characteristics of tragedy remain difficult to pin down although many have tried. Indeed, definitions of tragedy have ranged from the specific, rule-governed system of genre classification proffered by Aristotle in the Poetics, to more contemporary, popular notions positing tragedy as a nebulously defined breed of drama generally culminating in an unhappy ending. The main entry for tragedy in the OED positions the form as “a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion.”

Despite the divergence regarding definitions of tragedy, it is generally established that the form is firmly rooted in the exploration of sadness. Terry Eagleton, in the initial chapter of his extensive overview of the form, Sweet Violence, makes the same point, arguing that “no definition of tragedy more elaborate than very sad has ever worked” (3). Indeed, such sadness is apparent on multiple levels throughout tragedy. There are, most obviously, explicit scenes of sadness and pathos performed by the actors on the stage. More subtle, but equally important, is the puzzling concatenation of sorrow and exhilaration felt by the audience of a successful tragedy. Aristotle himself recognized this, arguing that the fundamental mandate of tragedy was to inspire “pity and fear” among its viewers (69). Still, given that tragedy is essentially a form of mass entertainment, there is the implicit assumption that the audience derives some type of pleasure from such feelings. As such, tragedy often works by eliciting two seemingly
contradictory emotions among its viewers. In this way, much like western music, tragedy is predicated on tension and release and the violent climax of the most affecting tragedies often functions as a sort of compositional crescendo. The tragic audience is invited to identify with the heroine only to be confronted by her inevitable suffering throughout the drama. As the well-established semiotics of tragedy foreshadow her inevitable demise, audience members are captivated – ensured of the inevitable horror that will follow, yet unable to look away. It is only after the play’s climax that the audience is eventually set free, taking with them the complex amalgam of fear and exhilaration – a sense of release as if they themselves have cheated death.

Writing on the subject of tragedy in 1961, Oscar Mandel takes exception to Aristotle’s use of emotional criteria to define the form. “Tragedy is an idea,” writes Mandel. “Like any other idea, it is certain to arouse emotions in mankind. But as with any other idea, these emotions will vary. We shall take it as an axiom that no idea inherently arouses a specific emotion. It follows that the idea of tragedy cannot be charged with one” (62). In this way, Mandel shows that concerns as to the hazards of relying on the emotional response of an audience as a means of genre identification are warranted. Still, Mandel is perhaps too sweeping in his outright dismissal. In sifting through the myriad attempts to come to terms with the form, it becomes apparent that there is little consensus regarding the fundamental characteristics of tragedy. As such, the emotional vagaries offered by Eagleton’s characterization of “very sad” for a summation of tragedies emotive response, while frustratingly imprecise, is perhaps as accurate and fitting a definition as we are likely to get.
The difficulties inherent to defining tragedy likely arise as a result of its persistence as a genre. From its earliest known beginnings in the sixth century BCE, tragedy, as a dramatic genre, has evolved appreciatively from its somewhat crude pagan precursors. The roots of the genre are commonly held to lie in ancient religious ceremonies involving the ritual sacrifice of a goat in honor of Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility and wine. What began as simple choral performances of pagan hymns would slowly develop into more complex narrative songs composed in celebration of famous heroes or gods. Thespis of Icaria, in an account that is probably apocryphal, is often cited as the first to introduce actors onto the stage to augment the narrative exposition supplied by the chorus. What resulted where not only the first western dramatic tragedies, but the beginnings of drama itself.\(^7\)

As we have seen then, while there has been considerable scholarly ink spilled attempting to define tragedy, such projects have generally met with limited success. As already noted, excepting the dubious legends of Thespis, authentic details regarding the particular origins of dramatic tragedy remain hazy at best. Still, it is generally held that the form evolved out of the earlier Homeric epic tradition. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, is the first known to have drawn this connection, claiming that the two forms differ in two rather superficial, structural respects: verse-form and the overall length of the work (129). He argues that the use of the heroic verse form throughout the epic tradition came about naturally, given that heroic verse “is the most stately and weightiest” of all existent poetic forms. Additionally, Aristotle held that the epic was generally longer than the dramatic

\(^7\) See Simon 13-26 for a more complete discussion of the origins and evolution of tragedy.
tragedy. He saw this primarily as a product of the inherent limitations of the stage. While the epic poet was free to explore multiple, concurrent narrative threads throughout his or her tale, in tragedy, Aristotle argued, “it is not [possible] to represent several parts of the action as happening at the same time, but only the part [that is occurring] on the stage and [being acted by the actors]” (131).

Of particular use to the following analysis is the work of Simon, who comes to a somewhat unexpected conclusion regarding a primary thematic difference separating tragedy from its epic antecedents. For Simon, although both epic and tragedy are interrelated – sharing common themes, traditions, symbols, and motifs – a primary difference between the forms lies in the scope and breadth of their respective narratives. The epic is commonly spurred and driven by the engine of war; its principal concerns often lie with matters of bravery in battle, glory, heroics, and the pursuit of immortal renown on the part of the epic hero. Dramatic tragedy, on the other hand, is generally narrower in its scope. While frequently as violent and harrowing as its epic forbears, tragedy generally centers not on state or sectarian discord or the exaggerated depiction of the glory of war, but rather on the internal emotional conflicts between members of a single family. As Simon succinctly argues, “war against the outside world in epic becomes war within the family in tragedy” (21). Thus the concerns of tragedy are often of a distinctly personal, domestic nature when compared to those of the epic.

Interestingly, early modern critic Sir Philip Sidney, in “The Defence of Poesy” (1595), argues just the opposite. Building rhetorically upon the classical model set forth by Aristotle, Sidney argues that the very scope of tragedy, as practiced in early modern English theatres, is one of the form’s most prominent shortcomings. “How then shall we
set forth a story which containeth both many places and times?” asks Sidney. While poetry, like human creativity in general, is seen by the critic as noble in its purpose to teach and delight, early modern drama is viewed, with some exception, as a rather vulgar and dishonest form. He continues, inquiring whether the playwrights of his age “know that a tragedy is tied to the laws of poesy, and not of history; not bound to follow the story, but having liberty either to feign a quite new matter or to frame the history to the most tragical conveniency” (244). Since most of the era’s plays reject the unities of time and place, Drama is indicted, and charged by Sidney with the enactment of “gross absurdities” upon the stage (244). Ever concerned with artistic purity, he objects not only to the tendency to mix both tragic and comedic elements within a single work, but also to the “mingling of kings and clowns” on the stage. While poetry uplifted the English language and people, the dramatic stage, as seen by Sidney, presented a carnivalesque hodge-podge of anarchic narrative development, lacking the order, restraint, and unity of more refined literary forms.

On one hand, Sidney is absolutely correct. The scope of early modern tragedy can be seen as immense, both spatially and temporally, as the action depicted within a single play can often span continents and generations. So too are characters of multiple ethnicities and of various social and economic stations represented together on the English stage. Nevertheless, unlike its epic forbearers, the heart of a great deal of early modern tragedy lies within the exploration of the disrupted family structure. In contrast to the verse epic, which often explores large scale martial conflict between multiple states or factions, the concerns of tragedy are often much more humble. ‘Tis Pity, at its core, revolves primarily around the thwarted romances of the respective plays’ young lovers.
Such concerns are of an intensely personal nature when contrasted with those of the typical epic. Rather than fighting the Trojan War, for example, Ford’s characters merely search for romance and familial contentment.

The same holds true for the Fisher family in SFU. Their problems are largely personal in nature, as characters search intently for some modicum of existential peace in an anxiety-ridden version of post-9/11 America. While the show does not let viewers forget the existence of a larger world in which important events play out on an international stage, it always remains firmly centered around the plight of the Fishers. The presidency of George W. Bush, the war in Iraq, and tensions regarding the global oil market are directly referenced as the show progresses. Yet while the Fishers clearly inhabit the same world as those of its contemporaneous audiences, the show’s primary concerns are those of interpersonal affairs. SFU, like ‘Tis Pity, often employs a distinct semiotics of tragedy as a means to explore the realities of depression and its effects on domestic bonds. While both works are very much a product of their times, so too do they tap into dramatic traditions that have persisted since the form’s classical origins. All of which brings us back to the weddings that play such prominent rolls in both ‘Tis Pity and “A Coat of White Primer.” While marital depictions abound within both early- and post-modern popular drama, frequently as mechanisms to enable tidy narrative resolutions, the nuptials presented in these works share a remarkably different dramatic purpose. As we shall see, within these works of melancholic familial tragedy, the wedding is often a harbinger of doom – a last ditch effort to regain the (illusory) innocence of an earlier time – rather than any occasion for celebration.
As we have seen, both ‘Tis Pity and SFU share similar generic and structural characteristics. So too, can both works can be seen to fill the primary tragic functions, as outlined by Aristotle, of evoking the fear and pity of audience members. Significantly, these emotional criteria seem to mirror, in some ways, the very symptoms of modern depression: anxiety and sadness. As such, we can see the utter suitability of using tragedy to explore depression and melancholia, for the emotional responses to both are fairly analogous. That is, tragedy, when successful by Aristotelian standards, seems to replicate the very emotional symptoms of depression. All of this seems to raise questions about the popularity and persistence of the form. After all, because depression is acknowledged to be a terrible disease with the potential to ruin the lives of those who suffer from its symptoms, why would audience members voluntarily subject themselves to such negative emotions, particularly in search of entertainment? Soloman’s observation of his own depression provides us with a possible answer to such questions. He writes, “I hated being depressed, but it was also in depression that I learned my own acreage, the full extent of my soul. When I am happy, I feel slightly distracted by happiness, as though it fails to use some part of mind that the brain wants to exercise” (24). Perhaps then, the tragic form allows for the relatively harmless exercise of that part of the psyche – the aspect of the human mind that derives some complex form of visceral gratification from such feelings. Solomon invokes Schopenhauer who explores this psychological paradox thusly: “We find pleasure much less pleasurable, pain much more painful than we had anticipated . . . We require at all times a certain quantity of care or sorrow or want, as a ship requires ballast, to keep on a straight course” (qtd. in Solomon 24). Perhaps, then,
tragedy can offer its audience members a relatively safe vehicle for the exercise for their darkest thoughts and emotions.
CHAPTER II

“THIS IS THE WORST THING THAT HAS EVER HAPPENED TO ANYONE AND I JUST WANT IT TO END”: SFU, ‘TIS PITY AND THE INTERNALIZATION OF FAMILIAL RUIN

When Six Feet Under premiered on HBO in June of 2001, many viewers were puzzled about what to make of an hourly soap-operatic family drama set in a funeral home. At turns disturbingly violent, bitingly satirical, absurdly comedic, and gut-wrenchingly earnest, SFU defied easy categorization. Yet, like the early modern ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, one of the show’s most notable traits was its extensively psychological bent. It was clear that the show was just as concerned with what was going on inside the heads of its protagonists as it was with their external actions. The program’s penchant for confounding audience expectations was established within the first five minutes of its pilot episode, as audience members are introduced to Ruth and Nathaniel Fisher, owners and proprietors of the Fisher and Sons funeral home. Nathaniel, fiftyish and balding, looks the part of an archetypal father figure, as he drives his black hearse down a sunny Los Angeles boulevard that has been decorated garishly with tinsel and garland for Christmas. After playfully bickering over the telephone with his wife, Ruth, about his smoking habit, promising her that he’ll quit, Nathaniel hangs up, smiles tenderly at his
wife’s well-meaning affection, lights a cigarette, and is unceremoniously struck by a bus and killed. While the sudden death of the Fisher patriarch was likely surprising to audience members, stranger still was Nathaniel’s presence throughout the season, as his ghost continued to converse with, advise, and, at times, torment his wife and three children, Nate, David, and Claire. Regular viewers would soon learn that in the world of SFU, such conversations with the dead are commonplace.

These interactions from beyond the grave are just one element that evidences the show’s morbid predilections. Obviously, because the Fishers operate and live above a funeral home, death is an everyday part of their lives. Their emersion in the realities of human mortality allows for moments of incredible detachment in the face of horror.

David and Nate, who inherit Fisher and Sons after Nathaniel’s death, and their gifted restorative artist (and later partner), Federico Diaz, are often seen blithely discussing trivial matters as they casually reconstruct a corpse – all of which is presented to viewers in a gorily realistic manner. In “A Coat of White Primer,” the two brothers and Rico can be seen calmly debating the pros and cons of breaking up with a partner over an instant message, all while reconstructing the body of a woman, bloodied and with a gaping hole where her eye once was. The naked and battered body of Andrea Kuhn lies on the table and is remarked upon merely as a curiosity. Rico, looks curiously at the woman’s bloody eye-socket. “Jeez, what did he do, stab her in the eye?” he asks David, who (half-) jokingly replies “That’s what happens to couples who never learn to fight.”

The irony of David’s lighthearted response is that he is utterly correct in his estimation. This brings us to another of SFU’s most distinctive narrative features. While the show is centered primarily on the plight of the Fishers, each episode begins with the
death of an unrelated character. This death usually informs the tone of the episode, while not generally affecting its central plot. Such deaths run the gamut from the absurdly humorous to the insensibly awful, cumulatively embodying the multifariousness of human mortality and the variety of fatalistic possibilities at hand.

The death of Andrea Kuhn in “A Coat of White Primer,” for example, comes about as a result of an argument with her boyfriend Lenard. Viewers are introduced to Ms. Kuhn as she discusses her lack of assertiveness with her friends and family. We are then shown a montage as, scene-by-scene, she makes peace with her sister, friends, and father, at long last exhibiting a sense of assertiveness. She begins to gain confidence in her new sense of self-possession as her relations respond generally favorably to her honesty. Finally, she confronts Lenard who, instinctively is seems, attacks her feelings. “It’s just not true,” he shouts when confronted with assertions regarding his lack of sensitivity towards her needs and tastes. “Look at all these things I’ve given you,” Lenard continues, remarking upon the bevy of antiques he has, apparently, showered upon Andrea. With a newfound sense of confidence, Andrea continues, noting, “I don’t like antiques. You like antiques. I like modern décor, which you know.” In a fit of anger, Lenard snatches the chair upon which she sits, pushing her down to the ground and, accidentally, impaling her eye on an antique andiron. The screen then fades to white and

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8 While the death that opens most episodes is generally of a character unrelated the primary narrative, there have been several notable exceptions. The show’s pilot opened with the death of Nathaniel Sr., while “Life’s too Short” (2001), also from the first season, opens with the accidental shooting death of Clair’s ex-boyfriend Gabriel’s younger brother Anthony. “Timing and Space” (2003) opens with Brenda’s father Barnard’s, passing from cancer, while the show’s final episode, “Everyone’s Waiting” (2005) opened with the birth of Willa Fisher Chenoweth, Nate and Brenda’s daughter, rather than a death.
viewers are confronted with a textual memorial to the recently deceased, consisting merely of name, a year of birth, and year of death. “Andrea Kuhn 1964-2004.” Fade to white again, and then the main narrative arc involving the Fishers begins. Such is the format for nearly every episode of the show.

The reference David makes later in the episode to “couples who haven’t learned to fight” is more accurate than even he knows at the time. Viewers, who have seen what David hasn’t, know that the woman’s death was indeed caused by a passionate argument about a most mundane domestic matter: furniture. Much of the episode’s main narrative then goes on to address communication problems within the relationships of Nate and Brenda, David and his partner Keith, Claire and her boyfriend Billy, and Ruth and her husband George. The rather formulaic pattern of each episode’s opening scene works to shock viewers into the tragic world of SFU, in which loss, grief, and depression pervade. The very structure of these opening scenes calls to mind that of a conventional early modern stage tragedy, as the succinct and self-contained dramas – tragedies in miniature – effectively set the tone for the episode, filling a role similar to that of a chorus on the early modern English stage. Regular viewers of SFU, like those of Renaissance tragedy, come to expect that these introductory scenes will end in a death.

These preliminary scenes, combined with the Fisher’s rather morbid vocation and place of residence, collectively insure that death is always present to some degree throughout the program. Such proximity to death has a decentering affect on the psychic states of the Fishers. This often results in the unexpected displays of seemingly irrational emotion. It is not uncommon for one of the Fishers to break down into tears at the slightest provocation, yet later remain utterly stoic in the face of real tragedy. Other
times, their displays of grief and anguish are of an unimaginable intensity, often bordering on the ridiculous.

When Ruth is told over the phone of her husband’s death, she throws the cordless receiver, pushes her cooling pot-roast off of the counter and onto the floor, and begins violently destroying the kitchen, all while barking and howling in pain. The commotion is loud enough to disrupt David, who is downstairs presiding over a funeral service. Ruth becomes almost comical in an anguished and over-the-top performance of suffering. Regular viewers come to understand that the Fishers frequently repress their emotions only to erupt when, at last, pushed too far by life’s many provocations. SFU artfully explores the absurdity of grief, creating quasi-comical scenes of violent emotional release, challenging viewers to decide whether to laugh or cry.

All of this is further complicated by the show’s absurd sense of humor which is often tempered with moments of tender sincerity. It is difficult not to derive some amusement when, in an episode early in the show’s first season, Claire, a troubled sixteen year old, steals a dismembered foot and puts it in the locker of an ex-boyfriend in order to exact revenge (“The Foot” 2001). Just as it is hard not to be struck by the scene that follows, as Claire searches for the foot in an abandoned parking lot with Keith, David’s lover and a member of the L.A.P.D. “I know you and my brother are, like, gay . . . what do you see in him anyway?” asks Claire. “So many men see me, and they just want me to be one thing.” “What?” asks Claire, “like big, black sex cop?” “Yeah, something like that,” laughs Keith. It is easy to see how many viewers struggled to comprehend the seemingly incongruent mix of modern pessimism and affectionate earnestness. Given the manner in which the episode’s initial scenes of casual violence and cynical humor give
way to subtle depictions of ordinary interpersonal connection – moments that can best be
described as intensely human – it is little wonder that program surprised some.

As a result, SFU met initially with generally favorable, though slightly puzzled,
reviews, as many critics struggled to find familiar points of reference. A piece on
National Public Radio by Scott Simon about the show’s pilot episode characterized SFU
as a “dark comedy,” while Noah Adams, on another NPR program, described the show as
a “family drama” (“Profile,” “HBO’s Latest”). The television writer David Kronke
positioned the show as a “sitcom,” while the Boston Herald’s” Marissa Guthrie saw SFU
as a “life-affirming drama about death.” As the season progressed, some critics candidly
registered their confusion, like the Cincinnati Post’s Rick Bird, who noted that “at first it
was unclear if this was some kinky black comedy or a bizarre soap opera.” Bill Wyman,
in an early review for Salon.com, was one of the few critics who was less than
enthusiastic in his reception, terming the program an “experiment that hasn't quite jelled.”
While finding it “fun, black and intermittently engrossing,” Wyman too expressed
significant confusion about the essential nature of the show, finding its purpose “opaque”
and ultimately pronouncing the show a “failure.” Despite the more laudatory nature of a
piece by Tad Friend in the New Yorker, the author, nevertheless, wondered whether “a
family of depressed morticians [was] HBO’s best hope for life” (80).
SFU’s Tragic Roots and the Re-imagining of Familial Depression

In his review, Friend rather presciently acknowledged an aspect of the program that would become more significant as SFU progressed: namely, the familial depression of the Fishers. All three of the Fisher siblings, together with their mother, regularly exhibit what can be seen as depressed characteristics. Nary an episode passes without one or more of the Fishers breaking down into a tearful episode, lamenting a world that seems, at every turn, to conspire against their very contentment. Of further note is that such depressive episodes are most commonly triggered by familial or domestic interactions – by frustration at being unable to properly connect with one another.

Familial love and affection, while real enough in theory, becomes an unattainable ideal within the Fisher family – a comfortable fantasy that is seen to have little basis in reality. Such innate hopelessness regarding familial love is made apparent in an early episode as Ruth observes what appears to be a happy young couple enjoying each other’s company. Observing their affectionate embraces, she smiles benevolently at the pair. “You both look so happy,” she observes. Ruth then proceeds to evince her true despair at the notion of romantic love, continuing:

Just enjoy it while it lasts. Which isn't very long. You think you have forever, but you don't. Soon you start to get on each other's nerves. Then you don't tell the other person as much as you used to cause, really, what's the point? You thought they understood you, but they never did . . . not really. Finally, not only do you not tell the other person anything real, you actively start lying to him. And then when you think it can't get any worse, he up and dies . . . No matter what you do, you end up alone. Not knowing who you are or what you really want (“The Foot”).
Ruth clearly feels alienated, and, despite that she lives in the same house as her three children, she still feels as though she has no one upon whom to depend for emotional connection. Ruth exhibits what are clearly depressed characteristics at this point in the episode. Andrew Solomon, himself a victim of the disease, notes that during a depressive breakdown, sufferers feel as though “[they] are in touch with the real terribleness of [their] lives.” He continues, claiming from experience that “When you are depressed, the past and future are absorbed entirely with the present moment. . . . You cannot remember a time when you felt better, at least clearly; and you cannot imagine a future time when you will feel better” (55). Ruth’s thinking is clearly distorted by her depression. To be sure, while she certainly had cause for grief due to the recent death of her husband, such fatalistic discourse was characteristic of Ruth throughout the show’s five-year run.

The tragic irony within all of this is that deep and profound familial connection is what each of the Fishers seems to crave the most. It is precisely because the formation of strong emotional bonds remains so impossibly elusive for the family that they struggle. It is unclear whether the Fishers are depressed because of their lack of intimate human connections, or whether they are unable to connect with one another due to their depressions. Either way, it is apparent that the family unit is the ultimate seat of their personal suffering. While such depression often lies under the surface, as a character adopts a placid façade, it is always on the verge of erupting. As Brenda, Nate’s girlfriend and eventual wife, says as she begins to understand the Fisher family dynamic: “No mistake you guys are undertakers, you take every fucking feeling you have, put it in a box, and bury it” (“Familia” 2001). Obviously, such psychic repression must eventually manifest itself outwardly. For the Fishers, intensely negative feelings do not stay buried.
Rather, they erupt into depressive episodes that could almost be seen as mere histrionics if viewers weren’t aware of the authenticity of the Fisher’s existential anguish. Nate, when left alone in a waiting room while Brenda is treated after her miscarriage at the end of “A Coat of White Primer,” after publicly maintaining his composure in the face of tremendous loss, breaks down in a private fit of tears. Such moments are typical in SFU, and it is precisely during these private eruptions of familial depression that the program drifts most definitively into the genre that we recognize as tragedy.

Yet, while early critics have tended to focus on the show’s genre affiliations, an analysis of its tragic characteristics has yet to be fully undertaken. The first anthologized collection of SFU criticism, Reading Six Feet Under: TV to Die For, was published in 1995. Underpinning many of these early essays was an exploration of the program’s influences. Critics seemed determined to understand the essential nature of the program – exploring the traditions that the show’s architects had drawn upon when creating their unique vision of Los Angeles in the early years of the twenty-first century. Throughout the anthology, the show was alternately positioned as a morbid dramatic television series, a modern exploration of the American gothic literary tradition, and an exercise in Garcia Marquezian magical realism. While a significant part of SFU’s charm lies is its tendency to blend elements from disparate narrative traditions – to draw on both high and low culture to embody the fragmented nature of the post-modern condition – what is most

9 Mark Lawson provide a compelling analysis of SFU’s subversion of popular dramatic genres, heralding the show’s willingness to violate “mainstream television’s primary taboo” by portraying explicit scenes of death, while also violating network TV’s prohibition on depictions of gay sex (xx). See Bundy and Merck for examinations of SFU’s American gothic characteristics and Lavery for a discussion of the show’s forays into magical realism.
remarkable is the manner in which the show managed to maintain its sense of artistic unity and cohesion despite the panoply of its narrative influences.

HBO and the Marketing of the Televisual Auteur

Although some were initially confounded by the program, SFU developed a fervent cult following that persisted throughout the show’s five year run. Its singular and inimitable approach to themes of loss was, no doubt, a key to its relative popularity and critical acclaim.\(^{10}\) It was precisely the program’s enthusiastic willingness to diverge from established television models that many found most refreshing about SFU. Indeed, the show often self-consciously bucks small screen conventions in favor of a distinctly theatrical and literary approach to drama. Director of photography Alan Caso explains that the crew of SFU eschew deliberately the “the kinetic, almost chaotic movement style of network TV,” noting instead that, “we don’t move the camera a lot unless there is a reason to move it, motivated by the emotional intent of the scene. We do a lot of very formal shots where you let things play out in a proscenium, treating the frame almost like it’s a stage” (qtd. in Akass 78).

Such self-conscious nods towards what can be seen as respectable or culturally legitimized art, particularly the theater, are indicative of HBO’s general approach to dramatic television series. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe make the argument that,

\(^{10}\) The first season of SFU enjoyed a relatively large audience of an estimated 5 million viewers per week, and the show garnered the highest ratings of any new HBO series (Akass 71).
“Central to HBO’s definition of original programming is its promotion of the TV auteur” (71). That is, HBO attempts to frame its original weekly programming as the work of an individual author rather than an artistic collaboration. Christopher Anderson notes similarly that, “HBO promotes the creators of the drama series . . . so that the public learns to identify the artistic vision of a single creator” (36). In this way, HBO is often perceived as taking a more literary approach to drama than that of conventional network television. Anderson continues, claiming that, “In its avid promotion of those who have created its dramatic series, HBO has enhanced the value of its brand while also contributing to a more widespread discourse of authorship in television. In doing so, the network has played a part in making it possible to believe that a television series can be thought of as a work of art” (37). HBO’s original series, then, attempt to raise television’s qualitative bar by intentionally positioning their shows’ creators as the texts’ authors. Yet while such maneuvering may help the network to market its program more effectively to audience members, it is hard if not impossible to attribute authorship of such an expansive and complicated performative text to a single individual.

Nevertheless, the network strives to bind the image of a show’s creators to that of the completed work. As Anderson notes, HBO goes so far as to “encourage . . . reporters to flesh out . . . [the creators] biographies so that the public learns to identify the artistic vision of a single creator behind each series.” In the case of SFU, the text’s purported author was Alan Ball, who, in addition to being the show’s creator, was also intermittently one of its writers, producers, and directors. Still, like any work of television drama, SFU is a collaborative effort, owing its existence to the work of writers, directors, cast, crew, studio executives, and more. While HBO attempts to market the program as
the work of a single creative force – one who gives the program its cohesive and unified aesthetic – the sheer number and variety of individuals involved as writers and directors challenges such oversimplified views of authorship.

While it may be Ball’s vision that initially gave SFU its distinct narrative, thematic, dialogic, and visual pallets, his direct involvement over the course of the program’s five seasons varied. Interestingly, there is even significant dispute regarding the origin of the premise behind the show. Ball himself has alternately traced the show’s origins to an original idea inspired by the death of his sister and also from a suggestion by Carolyn Strauss who, at the time of the show’s creation, was head of HBO’s entertainment division. Adding further complication to the question of authorship was the lawsuit filed in 2006 by Funky Films Inc. against HBO parent Time Warner. Funky Films, on behalf of screenwriter Gwen O’Donnell, asserted that the idea behind SFU was originally hers. O’Donnell claims to have shopped the idea of a program revolving around a family funeral home to Straus who then passed it on to Ball. While the court did not dispute the facts of the case, it did, nevertheless, refuse to rule in favor of the plaintiff. As such, it becomes apparent that even the genesis of show’s premise has been attributed to at least three separate individuals. Complicate this by the bevy of writers used to script individual episodes, and it becomes apparent that SFU is more collaborative than HBO might like to acknowledge within its marketing campaigns. While Ball may have been instrumental in creating SFU’s televisual mise-en-scène – its mood that manages to be at once darkly supernatural and strangely realistic – it is inaccurate to assume that, as HBO would have viewers believe, the show is entirely his.
Again, this calls to mind issues of authorship that echo those seen on the early modern English stage. Indeed, uncertainty regarding authorship of Renaissance drama is still frequently a subject of intense academic debate, virulent dispute, and, at times, irresponsible conjecture. Scholars of English Renaissance drama are often faced with texts lacking authorial claims, plays that were the works of overt collaboration between writers, and unattributed updates and revisions of another playwright’s work.\(^{11}\) It is interesting to note that even in the early years of the twenty-first century, even during the time when a text’s authors are (presumably) still alive, the authorship of drama can still be a subject to intense debate and disagreement.

All of this is to note both the similarities and differences between the conceptions of authorship in early modern English times and those in the first decade of the twenty-first century. That is, although today we are inclined to attribute the authorship of most Renaissance tragedies to a single individual, the degree to which this was truly the case would have varied. Because the theatre, before the rise of Gutenberg’s printing press, was heavily a performative phenomenon, it was difficult for audiences to give credit to a single individual for sole authorship of a play; indeed, actors were often contemporaneously held in higher popular regard than the play’s writers. Yet as drama began to be printed and distributed with increasing frequency, play texts gradually became associated with a single, named creator. As such, writers such as Shakespeare, Johnson, and Marlowe, began to be popularly heralded for their literary artistry. Indeed, today Shakespeare is a paragon of literary achievement while during his lifetime, his

\(^{11}\) See Gurr 18-22 for a full discussion regarding the often collaborative nature of dramatic authorship in early modern England.
fame and regard were, arguably, not nearly as certain; it was only the publication of his plays shortly after his death that allowed for his central place in the western canon. As such, these plays of the early modern English stage were among the first works of western drama for which a single author was credited and celebrated. It is precisely this authorial framework upon which HBO draws upon in their marketing of a televisual auteur. While nearly all drama, both on film and on the stage, is a collaborative endeavor, the printing of early modern play texts created a popular perception of the singular dramatic author that has persisted ever since.

A Tragic Ethos: *Fin de Siècle* Depression and the Temporal Roots of SFU

SFU’s dramatic unity is achieved, in part, by drawing upon one of the oldest and most tested dramatic traditions: namely, that of tragedy. SFU’s very structure recalls that of a temporally extended stage production. Each of its five seasons is comprised of 12 episodes. While each episode can work as a self-contained narrative, the show is best understood when watched sequentially, as each season forms a larger narrative arc, with stories that build throughout the season. Similarly, the seasons themselves can also be viewed in isolation or as part of a supernarrative arc, spanning approximately 61 hours of television by the show’s conclusion. As such, SFU can be seen as an extraordinary telescoping of a Renaissance stage play with the episodes as a proxy for scenes, season as acts, and the series itself as an entire play. Yet, given the nature of the television series, SFU is able to engage in a sustained performance that could last as long as HBO and its
creators saw fit. Unfettered by the practical considerations of space and time inherent to stage plays – most significantly those arising from limitations of human endurance – SFU was a drama that could go on until the writers had told their story.

If, structurally, SFU expands upon that of an earlier stage model, then the thematic and narrative traditions upon which it builds is surely that of the tragedy. Like many tragedies, SFU’s narrative progresses by descending ever deeper into darkness, pathos, and despair. Particularly in its final season – its last act – the show becomes unrelenting in its study of grief and human suffering. The last three episodes of the program, taking place after the death of Nate, arguably the show’s protagonist, offer an intense portrayal of familial breakdown, culminating in a flash forward montage that displays the deaths – one by one – of each of the show’s principle characters. As such, the show plays with tragic devices, putting its post-modern spin on a familiar dramatic convention.

SFU uses its distinctly tragic structure to explore an issue that, since the early 1990s, had been increasingly visible throughout American culture. If we consider the popularity of Elizabeth Wurtzel’s memoir Prozac Nation (1994), the adolescent ennui of ABC’s My So Called Life (1994), and the 1994 suicide and canonization of musician Kurt Cobain, it becomes clear that there was a particularly 1990s brand of depression – one based on the cultural cliché of the directionless slacker, the sloppily dressed, passively nihilistic post-punk depressive. This archetypal figure, combined with the increasing visibility of prescription antidepressants (and the eventual media backlash towards such medicines), saturated the culture with images of clinical depression.

Characteristic of the pop cultural response to depression in the last years of the twentieth
century was a tendency to romanticize the lone depressive. In Cobain’s case in particular, popular news and entertainment outlets perpetuated sentiments regarding a link between intelligence, creativity, and depression. His obituary in The New York Times noted the musician’s “depressive streak,” while heralding his body of work (“emotional and full of pain”) that “spoke to a generation.”

To be sure, sentiments linking introspection, self-expression, and artistry to depression have persisted at least since the time of Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy (1621). Cobain, however, was uniquely positioned by the media as a spokesman for the age bracket who came to maturity in the 1990s – so-called Generation X. Not only was Cobain’s depression aggrandized, but so too was it seen as indicative of a generation’s depressive orientation. Frank Rich, writing several weeks after Cobain’s suicide, describes how, at the time, “headline after headline assured us that the 27-year-old Mr. Cobain, the mainspring of the band Nirvana, was the voice of a generation” (“Far from Nirvana”). If the American zeitgeist of the 1990s was one of angst and depression, Cobain was certainly, for better or worse, the decade’s patron saint.

It is no surprise then that Claire, at her brother’s funeral, remembers fondly the day, April 5, 1994, of Cobain’s death (“All Alone” 2005). In a flashback, viewers see a young Claire enter Nate’s bedroom. Nate is hunched over a record player, furiously smoking a joint and crying as Nirvana’s “All Apologies” plays in the background. Upon noticing his younger sister’s presence, Nate shrugs his shoulders and explains, “Kurt Cobain died today. . . He killed himself. He was just too pure for this world.” Nate, too, buys into the notion that creativity, artistic purity, and depression are intrinsically linked.
Significantly, while Nate romanticizes Cobain’s depression and resulting suicide, his own depression remains merely a subtext running throughout his life.

This is true for all of the Fishers. While it hard to ignore the symptoms that are commonly associated with depression among the Fisher family, their respective depressions are not seen in any way as exceptional or worthy of comment. Nor is depression examined as a solitary phenomenon. Instead, SFU, throughout its five seasons, engages in a concentrated exploration of depression across lines of age, gender, and sexuality. It focuses on the manner in which depression affects interpersonal – particularly familial – relationships. And it is these relationships around which the show’s narrative is firmly centered. Indeed, one of the strengths of the program is that depression is merely a subtext around which are woven simple tales of interpersonal struggle. Depression is infrequently directly alluded to, and when it is, it is always in passing. After overhearing what was thought to be a private conversation between Claire and her mother, psychiatrist Bernard Chenoweth surprises Ruth in the hall, asking, “What steps have you taken to treat your daughter’s depression?” (“The Secret” 2003). The mother professes ignorance. “Surely you must be aware of it,” he continues, “now if you’re averse to talk therapy there are scads of pharmaceutical solutions.” Ruth rushes off, and the matter is never broached again.

One gets the sense that depression is reality for the Fishers. It is never questioned. It is not something to be treated, merely endured. As such, the show is able to deal with the realities of depression without sensationalizing it. The Fishers, while at times likeable, are by no means exceptional. Their depressed conditions do not result in their eventual martyrdom; indeed, as we shall see, their deaths are not in any way remarkable
when compared to the gory spectacle that concludes ‘Tis Pity. Nor are they portrayed as faultless victims of mental illness who are to be pitied – the Fishers are nothing if not flawed. Rather, they are ordinary people attempting to cope with the existential pain in their lives. All of this, as we shall see, makes the series’ climax all the more affecting and tragic.

Writing Familial Melancholy: ‘Tis Pity, SFU, and Social Class

As we have seen, SFU, in its exploration of familial depression, wades deeply into the waters of tragic dramatic convention. While the tropes and tensions at work within the program could readily be traced back to the tragedies of antiquity, it is the violent psychological dramas written by John Ford and first performed on the English Caroline stage that SFU most closely resembles. ‘Tis Pity is especially notable for its treatment of what was then termed melancholia. And although relatively little is know about his life, what we do know suggests within Ford a significant interest in proto-psychological thought. It is now generally accepted that Ford drew directly on the Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy in creating many of his plays. S. Blaine Ewing’s 1940 study, Burtonian Melancholy in the Plays of John Ford, offers an exhaustive analysis of Burton’s influence on Ford’s dramatic oeuvre. Ewing begins his analysis of the playwright’s personal investment in the subject of melancholia by noting that “It is not possible at this distance . . . to arrive at an explanation of Ford’s absorbing interest in the subject of melancholy” (114). Still, claims Ewing, English culture at the time of Ford’s writing was itself
particularly interested melancholia. He notes that “As a member of a group notable for its social activity and intellectual vitality – the Templars – [Ford] was . . . immersed in the ideas current in his time, and melancholy was an important one” (115). Ewing explains that such cultural concerns were birthed by three primary factors at work within Caroline society: “a growing interest in psychology; a new realization of the imminence of death, impressed by the plagues; [and] the changed economic and social organization of the seventeenth century” (115). So while Ford’s scant biography offers little to those would attempt to make biographical assertions regarding the playwright and his personal relationship with melancholia, it is known that images and ideas regarding melancholia were then quite resonant within the culture, particularly within circles with which Ford was associated.

Using the dramatic model of the tragedy as popularized by earlier English Renaissance playwrights like Shakespeare, Jonson, and Webster, Ford explores his upper class audiences’ burgeoning interest in proto-psychology. Larry Champion observes that Ford worked within the tragic genre even as it waned in popularity in favor of the more fashionable tragicomedies (180). He continues, noting of Ford:

[H]e is firmly in the tradition of the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights whose tragedies were vehicles for genuine explorations of the relationship between human suffering and the actions which provoke it and whose vision came increasingly to focus on the social malaise not only as a reflection of the crises of values particular to the age but also universally as a principle contributing factor to the tragedy of the individual. (180)

Given the intensely private nature of the conflicts within Ford’s tragic corpus, and the upper-class audiences for whom he principally wrote, it is possible to see Ford’s plays as
elitist and not fully connected with the broadest segments of his culture. Champion speculates that Fold’s “increasingly isolated audience became addicted to sensationalism, easy reconciliation, and the exploitation of intellectual and moral fashion which in effect functioned as self-gratification” (180). As such, “Ford . . . has not infrequently been identified with . . . dramatic narcissism” (180).

Significantly, SFU has met with similar criticisms regarding what some consider simply a portrayal of upper-class self-absorption. Emily Nussbaum, a critic for the online magazine Slate, was particularly harsh in her assessment, arguing that although “Six Feet Under may have won an outrageous 23 Emmy nominations . . . it's really just Ally McBeal in mortality drag [with its] dream sequences, romanticized narcissism, fake-o self-conscious dialogue.” In comparing SFU to Ally McBeal (1997-2002), Fox’s prime time soap opera centered on the personal lives and relationship difficulties of a group of lawyers, Nussbaum suggests that the concerns of SFU are decidedly individualistic and elitist. Such charges are buttressed when we consider Anderson’s claim that HBO is “designed almost perfectly to solicit the attentions of an educated upper-middle class (34).

Such assertions speak to the twenty-first century tendency to associate the condition of depression itself with privilege. Modern medical science, however, tells us that depression is caused by numerous factors, and that each incidence of depression has its own unique characteristics. Still, there are some factors that seem more connected with depression than others. “We found that in terms of depression, heredity was not nearly as strong a predictor as socioeconomic class,” notes developmental psychiatrist Arnold Sameroff (qtd. in Solomon 182). He continues, observing that “The interaction of
heredity and socio-economic status was the strongest predictor of all” (182). While the specific factors that cause a higher incidence of depression among the poor remain unknown, the notion that increased poverty generally results in a greater chance of depression is virtually certain.

The reason, then, that depression is associated within popular culture with the upper classes likely results from the privileged position that allows those of better means to treat their disorder. Andrew Solomon makes this argument:

> Depression cuts across class boundaries, but depression treatments do not . . . . Poverty is depressing and depression is impoverishing . . . . Poverty’s humility is a passive relationship to fate. A condition that in people of greater ostensible empowerment would require immediate treatment. The poor depressed perceive themselves to be supremely helpless, so helpless that they neither seek nor embrace support. (335)

It is not that depression is an affliction of the rich. Quite the contrary, it is seen more often within those of a lower socioeconomic background. Those who are in the middle class and higher are able to recognize and treat their affliction. They generally have access to information regard depression and better access to doctors and psychologists to treat such conditions. As such, it is possible to see why melancholia and depression are so often explored in dramatic art that is aimed at those of the upper classes. It is their relative privilege that allows them to examine their depressions at all, while the poor simply believe that their depressions are symptomatic of the difficulties inherent to their day-to-day lives. “There is a vast difference between simply having a difficult life and having a mood disorder, and though it is common to assume that depression is a natural result of such a life, the reality is frequently the other way around,” observes Solomon (336).
So while the poor may show evidence of a greater incidence of depression, it is those with stable means who are more likely to recognize, treat, and most, importantly for this analysis, explore the nature of the disorder dramatically. It is certainly true that John Ford and Alan Ball (and Robert Burton for that matter) enjoyed relative financial stability if not wealth. So too, not entirely coincidently, did the men receive a stronger than average education compared to others in their day. Michael Neill notes that Ford’s father was a justice of the peace and a landowner. “The Fords were a prosperous and well-established gentry family, and Ford's mother was niece to Sir John Popham, lord chief justice under both Elizabeth and James (1592–1607),” he continues. Ford was educated at Exeter College, Oxford, and then went on to seek a legal education at the London Inns of Court. Burton, Ford’s near contemporary, was also born into what J. B. Bamborough terms a “family . . . of some antiquity, if no great distinction.” His father is said to have “lived the quiet life of a country gentleman” and Robert himself earned several advanced degrees.

Alan Ball, who was born in Marietta, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta went on to study theatre, acting, and playwriting at Florida State University. Before his success on television he penned several plays in addition to the script for 1999s Academy Award winning American Beauty (Flint). While connections between the artistic exploration of depression and a distinctly upper-middle class ethos are anecdotal at best, it is interesting to observe the similar socioeconomic station of the writers at hand. Perhaps these links are a product of an inability to adequately rationalize one’s feelings of depression. That is, when one must struggle for life’s necessities, a certain amount of despondency might seem natural. It is when one is removed from obvious practical struggle that such pain
begins to seem absurd and irrational to those who observe it. If depression were dramatically represented by characters whose existence was humble and whose means were more meager, their unhappiness might seem better justified. Such emotions seem truly abhorrent to audience members when portrayed among those whose station seems to offer nothing but promise and potential. When depression is observed among the son and daughter of a well-to-do merchant like Florio – just as when it is seen among a family like the Fishers who own their own business and rarely if ever seem to lack a steady stream of income – we see it at its most bold and audacious.
CHAPTER III

“IS THERE NO WAY LEFT TO REDEEM MY MISERIES?: MATROMONY, INCEST AND ABSOLUTION IN EARLY- AND POST-MODERN FAMILIAL TRAGEDY

Much like Six Feet Under in the twenty first century, John Ford deals with his seventeenth century culture’s fascination with depression within a work of familial drama. While certain external forces, particularly those of the Church of Rome and its clergy, come into play as the plot unfolds, the narrative of ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore is firmly situated within the household of Florio and his two children. Significantly, Giovanni and Annabella’s mother is absent. She is dead before the narrative begins. Thus the house of Florio is disrupted from the play’s inception. Despite the temporal and cultural gaps between the periods, the absence of a mother would have likely affected early modern psyches in a similarly negative manner to that of an individual living in the twenty-first century. Certainly the death of a parent would have been a far more commonplace event for an early modern. Patricia Crawford makes this observation, noting that “children were likely to lose one or both of their parents before reaching adulthood” in early modern times (210). More specifically, given the comparatively high
mortality rates in the period, it is likely that “the children of over ten per cent of families would already have lost a parent before becoming adults (211).

Yet despite the relatively high incidence of parental mortality, the loss of a mother would likely have triggered intense feelings of sadness and loss throughout the immediate family. The fact that life in the English Renaissance presented more potential threats to one’s survival seems not to have mitigated the grief that one’s family would have felt at the loss of one of its own. This was particularly true of the parental bond. As J. A. Sharpe notes, “Generally . . . writers on familial matters throughout . . . [the] period regarded the tie between parent and child as one of the closest human bonds. Parental love, so author of conduct book after conduct book wrote, was an emotion of great breadth and depth” (70). Consequently, it follows that in ‘Tis Pity the central familial sphere is already fractured before audience members meet Giovanni and Annabella. Much like SFU, Ford’s tragedy starts with a family whose structure is disrupted. That such disruptions were more common in the seventeenth than the twenty-first century seems to make little difference in the emotional tolls of such a loss.

Robert Burton, in The Anatomy of Melancholy, writes of the death of family and friends as a frequent and specific cause of melancholia. He first describes a particular breed of melancholia felt “after a feast, holy-day, merry meeting, or pleasing sport.” He describes individuals who, “at the departure of friends onely, whom they shall shortly see againe, weepe and howle, and looke after them as a Cowe lowes after her calf” (356). “If parting of friends, absence alone can work such violent affects,” Burton continues, “what shall death doe, when they must eternally be separated, never in this world to meet againe?” (356). He then catalogues an impressive array of anecdotes of individuals whose
melancholic states were said to have sprung from the death of close friends and family. In Burton’s time, then, familial loss was certainly recognized as a possible trigger for the incitement of a melancholic episode.

SFU, of course, employs the same technique that Ford Uses in ‘Tis Pity to establish the depressed and immediately disrupted state of the members of the Fisher family. Yet unlike the play, in which little is known about Florio’s dead wife, SFU adopts a useful narrative flourish by introducing audience members to Nathaniel Sr. in the series pilot, if only to kill him seconds later. This move is effective for two reasons. First, it functions to surprise viewers by breaking the television cliché in which a new program provides short but illuminating character sketches as a means to introduce, one-by-one, the core member’s of the show’s central family. SFU embarks on this course only to surprise expectations by suddenly killing the father, a figure around whom many traditional television programs typically revolve. Second, the swift dispatch of the Fisher patriarch in such an abrupt and unexpected manner serves to give viewers a brief portrait of Nathaniel. By illuminating his kind and mischievous attitudes in the show’s opening moments, audience members are invited to connect with the Fishers in their time of loss. His death is affecting to viewers because, though we know him for mere seconds, we are nevertheless intensely charmed by Nathaniel Sr.

While less is known about the mother of Annabella and Giovanni than of Nathaniel Sr., it is clear that both families are profoundly and harmfully impacted by the loss of an integral part of the familial unit. While it is both impossible and futile to try to pinpoint the specific cause of the depressions of fictional characters, one can image that depression could certainly be exacerbated by such profound loss. Yet the broken home is
merely a starting point for the incitement of familial depression. As they unfold, both narratives advance mainly through the subjection of their characters to increasingly injurious social and familial crises. ‘Tis Pity and SFU prod and pick at their already depressed families, throwing up a series of roadblocks to their domestic contentment. Indeed, the primary work of both SFU and ‘Tis Pity is their respective portrayals of the depressed mind – both modern and early modern – as it is subjected to increasing amounts of familial anguish. Both works revel in the examination of the depressed mind’s incremental response to a slew of domestic catastrophes, and the violence with which they end is the inevitable result of familial strain.

As such, it is possible to argue that the tragic events that follow are wholly incited by the melancholic orientation of both works’ central families. That is both works are, in essence, the story of depression. Most immediately apparent in ‘Tis Pity is the fevered depression of Giovanni. The play opens with the young merchant’s son’s admonishment at the hands of his spiritual advisor, the friar Bonaventura. It soon becomes clear Giovanni is distressed by a problem with love. The Friar’s reaction to Giovanni’s confession, however, is one of fear for his very soul, noting that Giovanni has “Discovered the nearest way to hell, / And filled the world with devilish atheism” (1.1.7-8). Audience members are soon made aware that it is Giovanni’s amorous love for his twin sister about which the Friar is so concerned.

S. Blain Ewing observes the play’s early scenes, noting that “Giovanni is the melancholic of ‘Tis Pity. His ailment is gradually and unobtrusively introduced. Few will notice that in the first scene of the play the Friar has called Giovanni, half-seriously, ‘foolish madman’” (70). Yet despite Ewing’s assertions to the contrary, Giovanni’s
melancholia, seems, to me, fairly pronounced from the play’s earliest scenes, as the young man begs the Friar for some form of psychological relief from his socially abhorrent desires. “What cure shall give me ease in these extremes,” demands Giovanni (1.1.42). The Friar, his onetime tutor, then remarks upon Giovanni’s predilection towards scholarship and book-learning. He notes Giovanni’s aptness as a student and urgently pleads with the youth. “Oh Giovanni,” he questions, “Hast thou left the schools / Of knowledge to converse with lust and death?” ominously prognosticating the young man’s fate (1.1.57-8). Thus Giovanni recalls two particular breeds of melancholia as outlined by Burton. Most notably, he manifests characteristics of one suffering from what he terms “the Misery of Schollers” (302). As Burton explains, quoting Levinus Lemnius, “Many men . . . come to this malady by continual study and night-waking, and of all other men, Schollers are most subject to it” (302).

A second factor suggestive of Giovanni’s melancholia is his continued flirtation with atheism. The loss of one’s religion has long been associated with depression and melancholia. Solomon observes this connection, noting that, while “Periods of greater and lesser fates have alternated through human history . . . [the] relinquishing of the notion of God and of meaning opened the way to agonies that have endured since, far more plangent than the sorrow of those who thought that an omnipotent God had forsaken them” (321). Solomon speaks to such existential depression as Giovanni has apparently spoken to the Friar just before the play begins. While Giovanni’s comments must forever remain a mystery as they occur before the play begins, his rhetoric has obviously provoked his teacher greatly. The play opens with the Friar’s admonishment, urging Giovanni to “Dispute no more in this” (1.1.1). He continues warning the youth:
heaven admits no jests; wits that presumed
On wit too much, by striving to prove
There was no God, with foolish grounds of art,
Discovered first the nearest way to hell,
and filled the world with devilish atheism. (1.1.4-8)

Audiences are thusly informed of Giovanni’s atheism from the plays first lines. The text alludes to his destiny and damnation before Giovanni even speaks.

Ewing describes the specifically Burtonian qualities of Giovanni’s melancholia:
“[He] is afflicted with religious melancholy in deficit. He is a learned and thoughtful youth . . . . His intellectual struggle through the five acts is an attempt to establish the rule of ‘fate’ . . . and ‘nature’ as against the rule of God” (72). Thus the Friar advises him to take to his room and pray. “[He] warns the unhappy youth of the only possible prognostication of atheism: the damnation of his soul, and eloquently recommends the only possible cure: repentance – good Burtonian doctrine” (73). In fact, Burton devoted a significant portion of The Anatomy of Melancholy to the examination of a breed of melancholia particular to “Epicures, Atheists, Hypocrites . . . Carnalists . . . [and] impudent Sinners” (379). As such, Ford establishes Giovanni’s liturgical transgressions immediately.

Significantly, Giovanni takes his heretical behavior even further as he lies to Annabella regarding the church’s approbation of the potential consummation of a sexual relationship between the two siblings. “I have asked counsel of the holy church, / Who tells me I may love you, and ‘tis just / That, since I may, I should; and will, yea, will!” (1.2.241-3), he exclaims, boldly and selfishly lying to his sister. Despite his dishonest rhetoric, Annabella immediately affirms her love for him in return, admitting that “What
[he] hast urged, / [her] captive heart had long ago resolved” (1.2.245-6). She continues by going even further than Giovanni in her amorous vows. “For every sigh that thou hast spent for me, / I have sighed ten; for every tear shed twenty,” she confesses (1.2.248-9). Thus Annabella admits that her lust for her brother is nothing new. Even if we believe that Annabella truly thought that the church was in support of their union, audience members are at this point made aware that the young woman’s incestuous desire had been deeply felt for some time. That she would even believe her brother’s claim is in itself doubtful given the culturally transcendent taboo against incest between siblings.

Annabella is either extremely gullible, or more likely, she merely feigned belief in her brother’s obviously suspect claims as a means to justify her culturally transgressive desires. If true, then Annabella, much like Giovanni, has willfully stood in opposition to social and religious codes of the day.

All of this begs the question of why the siblings would so willingly risk the obvious cultural opprobrium that must necessarily follow their incestuous marriage. Their socially aberrant behavior throughout the play continues to evidence the very desperate nature of their attempts at human connection. As Bruce Boehrer observes, “by Act III of “Tis Pity, Giovanni and Annabella exist in a moral vacuum, surrounded by fools and knaves, for all practical ends abandoned by God and the church, and not even subject to regular surveillance” (122). They have forsaken everything for one another. If we consider the familial loss that the two have already encountered – that of their mother – it is easy to see the pair’s romantic involvement as an attempt to reinforce the family bond – to ensure that the family isn’t further disrupted. Of course, because ‘Tis Pity is a
tragedy, their efforts prove to be misguided and, in fact, serve to obliterate rather than heal the family.

In this way, Giovanni and Annabella attempt to fight their familial melancholia by retreating into one another, thereby relinquishing the world outside their familial sphere. Referring to their earlier familial loss, Boehrer notes:

A . . . consequence of ‘Tis Pity’s social arrangements is that kin become sexually attractive; they represent, as Giovanni understands, the unity of familiar hearts and souls – a unity that exogamous marriage necessarily disrupts, and that provides a haven from the anarchy of public affairs. (126)

Their retreat into one another seems all the more desperate as the siblings invoke both their own mortality and that of their mother as they kneel in matrimonial union. “Brother, even by my mother’s dust, I charge you, / Do not betray me to your mirth or hate. / Love me, or kill me, brother,” she entreats him (1.2.254-6). Giovanni, repeating the oath word-for-word, then swears to her in earnest of his love and noble intentions. The couple then kiss and, as Giovanni leads Annabella away, presumably to consummate their union, he alludes directly to their melancholia. “After so many tears as we have wept, / Let’s learn to court in smiles, to kiss and sleep” (1.2.268-9). Thus it is clear that both want to see their version of marriage as a means to salve their internal anguish and transcend their melancholic dispositions. Their rather morbid vows, however, suggest that the siblings themselves are not wholly convinced of the wisdom of their union.

It is only a matter of time before their sexual relationship begins to further strain the couple’s psyches. When Annabella finds she is pregnant, there is little choice but for her to look for a way to cover up her relationship with her brother. The only solution is
for her hasty betrothal to the all too willing Soranzo as a means to legitimize her pregnancy. By this time in the play, Annabella and Giovanni have already suffered the loss of three relations. The pair had lost their mother before the play had even begun. They lose their status as siblings when they consummate their marriage. Giovanni himself alludes to this as they enter from their chamber after their wedding night. “Come, Annabella, no more “sister” now, But “ love” – a name more gracious,” he reminds her (2.1.1-2). Then, when Annabella marries Sorranzo in 3.6, their marriage is dissolved and Giovanni is left with no one but his father. Annabella fares no better as she becomes the wife of a man for whom it is apparent she feels little tenderness. The siblings attempts to protect themselves from further loss and melancholia through interfamilial marriage thus becomes their eventual undoing. It follows then, fittingly enough, that the very attempt to sooth their despair is precisely what precipitates the play’s tragic denouement.

Marriage and Psychic Reconciliation in ‘Tis Pity

While, as we have seen, critics initially struggled to situate SFU within a pre-existing genre, its ties to tragedy have yet to be explored elsewhere. This may be due to the show’s gradual evolution throughout its five year run. SFU found its dramatic footing by slowly shedding many of its comedic pretenses as the series progressed. By its final season, the show’s narrative had culminated into a concentrated exploration of loss and depression and their effects on the family. Gone was evidence of its early forays into satire; its mock-up commercials for “Millennium Edition Crown Funeral Coaches,”
“Franklin’s Leak Proof Earth Dispensers” and “Living Splendor Embalming Fluid” (“for the velvety appearance of real living tissue!”) were but a memory. While throughout its course, the show drifted into increasingly dark territory, SFU’s fifth season ventured most obviously into the realm of what can be called tragedy. Perhaps this was a natural end for the program, given that the fifth season was known to be its last (it was marketed, from the beginning, with the tag-line “Everything. Everyone. Everywhere. Ends.”). How better to end a show whose very existence was predicated on the exploration of familial grief and depression, but in a sustained, season-long decent into unadorned pathos, as the Fishers – one by one – succumb to the atmosphere of melancholia that has pervaded their worlds for so long? How better to end the show than to hearken back to a tragic tradition that is old as drama itself? And how better to start a tragic story arc than with a wedding?

All of which brings us back to the two weddings that bookend the first episode of SFU’s final season. The marriage scene that opens “A Coat of White Primer” lulls viewers into a false sense of comfort by evoking well-known cultural conventions. This is never more apparent than when Claire, interviewing her mother, asks if she has any final advice for her son. Ruth responds with well-meaning platitudes, advising Nate to “never give up. Even when things get hard . . . never stop trying.” She smiles kindly, and while her advice isn’t altogether innovative, she appears sincere, beaming with and motherly love and hope for her son.

Yet despite the episode’s sunny beginnings, SFU is at its core a post-modern tragedy. As such, things are quickly shown to be less idyllic than at first glance. Nate’s storyline from the previous season involved his coming to terms with the presumed murder of his first wife, Lisa Kimmel, and his eventual romantic reconciliation with his
previous girlfriend, Brenda. In the final episode of the fourth season, “Untitled” (2004), Nate proposed to Brenda, leading viewers to suppose that what they witness as the fifth season begins is the wedding of Nate and Brenda. As Claire opens the door to an upstairs alcove it is revealed that the scene is actually a tape of Nate’s first wedding as Lisa, rather than Brenda, sits in front of a mirror, putting the finishing touches on her wardrobe and hair. Claire, from behind the camera, asks Lisa how she feels. “Like every moment of my life has led up to this one,” admits Lisa. “Like all of it makes sense, like this is the destiny that’s been waiting for me. I know that it’s stupid to think in terms of happily ever after, but that’s what it feels like now.”

Lisa’s prognostications work as a pastiche of well-established literary signifiers, at once evoking traditional western fairytales, familiar romantic tropes, and notions of fate and destiny common to dramatic tragedy. Further in line with tragic convention, Lisa is utterly wrong about her fate. Regular viewers, aware that Lisa has been dead for over a year, are confronted with the unpleasant irony of her glowing predictions, thereby underscoring the essential tragedy of her death. Lisa’s demise, although it occurs off-camera, has distinct elements of classical tragedy. Her murder at the hands of a brother-in-law with whom she had been having a long term affair evokes the tried and true tragic conventions of infidelity, interfamilial betrayal, violence, and suggestions of incest.

So too do the ramblings of Lisa’s cynical boss, Carol Ward, whose casual vitriol hints that Lisa’s notions of impending marital harmony may be misguided. “I love how weddings just erase the past like a coat of white primer. Slap a veil on her and the biggest slut-bag on the planet becomes a fresh faced ingénue,” opines Carol sarcastically. The quip stings all the more given that Lisa was, at the time of her wedding, the mother of
three month old Maya, whose paternity would later be called into question. Viewers, with the foreknowledge of just how tumultuous Nate and Lisa’s marriage would be, can do little but cringe at Carol’s not-so-thinly-veiled slight.

The significance of this flashback becomes clear as the perspective shifts from Claire’s home video and viewers are made aware that it is Brenda who is watching the footage of her fiancé’s first wedding. It soon becomes clear that Nate and Brenda’s nuptials are scheduled to take place in two days. While Brenda claims to Nate that watching the video will ensure that she avoids “do[ing] the same thing [as Lisa] . . . [and] making everyone feel uncomfortable,” it becomes apparent from the intensity of her facial expression that she is compelled to watch for a more compelling reason. It is as though Brenda feels she can avoid Lisa’s fate by studying the tape, succeeding where Lisa had failed before her. As Brenda and Nate engage in playful banter regarding the tape, their conversation takes on a tone of wishful optimism. “I want it to be perfect,” hopes Brenda of their wedding as the couple embraces, their affection for one another apparent. As is generally the case for the Fishers, contentment is generally an accurate prognosticator of impending calamity, and the moment ends as Brenda pulls away from Nate’s kiss. He remains in the room, staring blankly at the tape of his first wedding as Brenda is heard inexplicably vomiting in the bathroom. Something isn’t right.

This becomes all the more clear as Brenda wakes up suddenly early the next morning, as if from a nightmare. She shoots up, awaking Nate who lies beside her. “What’s wrong?” asks Nate, obviously concerned, “did you have a bad dream?” She struggles to remember. “Maybe . . . . Yeah,” groans Brenda. She then fumbles with her blankets, reaches down and violently recoils. “Oh God, I’m bleeding,” she explains, as
she raises her blood-soaked hand. The scene is all the more alarming given that Brenda is several months pregnant at the time. Again, the scene is rife with tragic signifiers. The nightmare has often acted as harbinger and omen of misfortune within tragedy. So too does the genre, given its heavily domestic orientation, often explore the consequences and hazards of pregnancy.

Scenes of the death of violence relating to an unborn child were not uncommon on the Early English stage as well. One need look no further for evidence of this than the bloody conclusion of ‘Tis Pity in which Annabella, pregnant by her brother, is violently butchered at his hands, resulting in the death of both mother and unborn child. After stabbing his sister, Giovanni notes with some satisfaction the irrevocability of his act, seemingly oblivious to the enormity of his offence. “She’s dead. Alas, good soul! The hapless fruit / that in her womb received its life from me / Hath had from me a cradle and a grave” (5.5.94-6). Giovanni, his melancholia clearly exacerbated by the marriage of Annabella to Soranzo, lashes out her not out of pure hatred, but to obliterate the traces of a family that has caused him so much pain. In a melancholic fervor, he destroys what he perceives as the cause of his existential suffering, namely, his family. Killing his sister and unborn child erases all that is left of his family, save his father, who, of course, dies subsequently as a result of Giovanni’s violence.

Brenda’s bloody hand, then, can also be seen as a prognosticator of a depressed family’s eventual demise. Indeed, traces of blood have always been integral to the poetics of dramatic tragedy. Writing of the form’s Dionysian origins – after acknowledging the fact that “tragedy” literally means “goat song” and that the god of wine was thought to drink the actual blood of goats – John Kerrigan argues, “at the source of tragedy . . . is an
act of solidarity reaching the dead through repayment of the god’s wine in blood. And there clearly is a sense in which tragedy gives blood to the ghosts” (37). Brenda’s bloody hand specifically brings to mind the illusory blood on the hand of Lady Macbeth. For both women, the blood is representative of internal guilt. In Macbeth (1606?), the blood is imagined – presumably the psychic residue left by the weight of Lady Macbeth’s sin upon her conscience. The blood that coats Brenda’s hand, although actual and symptomatic of a genuine problem with her pregnancy, points to an intense and inescapable guilt and anxiety regarding her fitness as a mother. When Brenda miscarries, she takes this as a sign – an indicator of what she perceives as her flawed and defective nature. Brenda thus internalizes psychically what is, as her doctor later confirms, merely an accident of chance.

Later in the episode, viewers learn of Brenda’s intense guilt in a scene in which the new bride converses with the ghost of Lisa, Nate’s first wife. Once again, and in playing with tried and true tragic conventions, the world of SFU is heavily populated with ghosts. Characters who have long since died are prone to reappear, often taunting acquaintances, friends, and lovers from beyond the grave. Throughout the course of the show, it becomes clear that such ghosts are a product of the characters’ internal anxieties, self doubt, and, indeed, depression. Such conversations from beyond the grave all work as part of a clever strategy to allow audience members access to the internal anxieties of SFU’s characters. The ghosts give voice to a character’s fears, allowing them to, in essence, converse with the darkest part of themselves. The conversation between Lisa and Brenda gives viewers a window into Brenda’s conflicted conscience, as she laments her pitiable station. While the ceremony was, from outward appearances, successful – a
striking ocean-side service performed in front of a host of smiling friends and family –
viewers, who are aware of Brenda’s miscarriage a day earlier, know of the wedding’s
tragic subtext.

After the ceremony, Brenda wanders off alone. She finds a bench, sits down and
slams a pain pill, washing it down angrily with her glass of Champagne. Lisa appears, in
her wedding dress, glowing in a way that she never did when she was alive. “You don’t
have to worry about it being like my wedding,” she advises Brenda. “I had a three month
old baby when I got married so it was a much happier event, obviously. Really Joyful. It
all came very natural to me, but I was always maternal, unlike you.” “I’m fucking
maternal,” Brenda shoots back angrily. Like most of these encounters, the ghost of Lisa,
while recognizable in her physical appearance, demeanor, and vocal intonation, does not
behave as she would have in life. While Lisa had her many flaws as a character, she was
not a generally vindictive person. Rather, her essential sweetness would preclude her
from ever taunting Brenda in such a mean-spirited manner.

That it is Lisa who comes to embody Brenda’s anxieties is, nevertheless, fitting. It
is precisely Lisa’s maternal quality that Brenda fears that she lacks. She allows the ghost
of Lisa to represent the ideal of a perfect mother. Clad in white lace, Lisa takes on a
virginal quality that she never had in life as she chides Brenda, who is, significantly,
wearing her husband’s black jacket over her white dress. “Come on, look at your past,”
continues Lisa. “You’re a slut bag. You were one. All the moments of your life have led
up to this one. You’re being punished.” “I don’t believe that,” insists Brenda, forcefully
enough to suggest to viewers that she believes it to the core. The ghost’s prodding gets
worse as she mercilessly taunts Brenda, clearly already suffering from her secret
miscarriage. “Your insides must have been damaged by all of that anonymous cock. Oh come on, that’s why this happened to you” she continues, then begins to point out all of the women at the wedding who are pregnant, fanning Brenda’s anxiety by stressing the fertility of other women, informing her that, indeed, she was the only woman at the wedding who had had a miscarriage.

In a vain attempt to deflect Lisa’s mental blows and convince herself of the possibility of her fitness as a mother, Brenda reminds Lisa (and herself) that “I got pregnant the first time I tried.” Lisa has even an answer for that, claiming, “I didn’t even have to try.” She then continues, twisting the knife ever deeper, “But then, I never partied like you did. It’s a miracle you even conceived . . . . Nate is Maya’s father and my husband and he always will be.” In this way, SFU allows for a character’s external expression of their angst-ridden internal dialogue. Such interactions from beyond the grave allow the show to plumb the mind of its depressed characters and explore the complexity of the internal mechanisms of depression. Rather than engage in a dramatic soliloquy, as would have occurred on the early modern English stage, SFU employs the dead as mirrors into which the darkest facets of a character’s psyche are reflected, allowing viewers a remarkable view into the conflicted nature of a depressed mind. Of further note is that Brenda’s obvious depression is concurrent with her ceremonial induction as a member of the Fisher family.
Ford’s tragedy culminates with the utter obliteration of the house of Florio. Annabella has married Soranzo, precipitating the depressive breakdowns of both siblings. As her sham marriage collapses, Annabella loses her very will to live. When she admits to Soranzo that “‘twas not for love” that she married him “but for honor,” he erupts, angrily threatening her life (4.3.22-3). Soranzo’s intimidation is all the more fierce in light of the explicit violence of his taunts and actions. “I’ll rip up they heart” he hisses, only to be met with her laughter (4.3.53). “I’ll hew they flesh to shreds . . . [‘ll] pull thy hair and thus I’ll drag your lust-belepered body through the dust,” he continues, threatening not only her life, but also of the mutilation and desecration of her dead body (4.4.60-1). At this point physical and psychic annihilation is precisely what Annabella craves. She mocks Soranzo, spurring his violence on as she sings songs in praise of fatalistic love, urging him to please kill her.

So too does Giovanni crave death as he begins to perceive the hopelessness and familial ruin he has wrought. His melancholia has overtaken him and he charges purposefully into danger. When Vasques invites Giovanni to Soranazo’s yearly birthday feast, he intimates as much, replying “Yes. Tell him I dare come” (5.3.46). He clearly knows that the invitation presents to him significant mortal danger in light of the discovery of the paternity of Annabella’s baby. The Friar as well is aware of this, as he urges the youth, “Oh, do not go! This feast I’ll gage my life, / is but a plot to train you to your ruin” (5.3.55-6). The Friar comes to realize that this is precisely Giovanni’s design and flees, exclaiming “Parma, farewell! Would that I had never known thee, / Or aught of
thine! Well young man, since no prayer / Can make thee safe, I leave thee to despair” (5.3.67-9). Alluding to the Burtonian doctrine linking atheism to melancholia, the Friar explicitly leaves his former pupil to his depression and tragic fate.

During the siblings final meeting, it becomes clear that Annabella has also come to accept the realities of their imminent deaths. “Be not deceived, my brother,” she warns “This banquet is an harbinger of death / To you and me. Resolve yourself it is, / And be prepared to welcome it” (5.5.26-29). The entire scene is colored not only by the pair’s temporal proximity to death, but also with acknowledgment of the melancholia shared by both. Giovanni weeps and observes his sister’s outwardly vigorous appearance:

    How sweetly life doth run
    In these well-colored veins! How constantly
    These palms do promise health! But I could chide
    With Nature for this cunning flattery (5.5.74-7).

Giovanni observes the disparity between Annabella’s healthy façade and her damaged psyche. In this way, Ford draws sophisticated distinctions between physical and mental health. Giovanni’s symptoms, on the other hand, manifest physically as well as mentally. She observes his “distraction and troubled countenance” (5.5.46), alluding to the fact that his melancholic condition, unlike hers, has gone far enough to begin to manifest itself physically.

In his melancholic fervor, Giovanni tries one last time to exert some power over the family that he has lost. He kisses Annabella one final time before stabbing her to death, cruelly putting an end, not just to his sister and lover, but to their unborn child as well. In the final scene, as Giovanni descends from her chambers with Annabella’s heart literally on the tip of his dagger, the grotesque and tragic bloodbath persists. It is at this
point where Florio, the family’s patriarch, suddenly dies, presumably from the horror of his children’s incestuous actions. The Cardinal rebukes Giovanni, accusing him of breaking “thy old father’s heart” (5.6.63). Giovanni is left to observe the ruin that melancholia has wrought upon his family. He observes:

    How well his death becomes him in his griefs!
    Why, this was done with courage. Now survives
    None of our house but I, girt in the blood
    Of a fair sister and a hapless father (5.5.65-8).

Because of his earlier eager allusions to his own death, it is clear that Giovanni knows he too must soon fall. Given the conventions of tragedy, audience members can do little but anticipate the youth’s demise. As he is overwhelmed by Vasques and the Banditti, viewers are able to see the ruinous effects of melancholia as a family unit implodes under its weight. Giovanni and Annabella’s attempts to cure their melancholic dispositions by retreating into one another are not only futile, but in fact work to exacerbate their problems. While the conclusion of Ford’s play presents audience members with no redemptive prescriptions for dealing with sadness – no tidy morals or overwrought solutions to the problem of the depressed psyche are given – the play strongly suggests that bucking social order in pursuit of happiness will not avail. That is, melancholia does not give Giovanni or Annabella leave to transgress the taboos of their culture. So while Ford shows the utter ruination that melancholia can incite within the family, so too does his play explore the desperate irrationality that the condition can sometimes provoke in an individual. In doing so, Ford examines the potential social costs of melancholia. As Champion observes, “‘Tis Pity . . . is a tragedy of a whole society rather than the tragedy of an individual” (181). The play uses the portrayal of familial melancholy to examine
the truly negative costs that the condition can have on the culture at large. It is not just Annabella and Giovanni who suffer, but many who are merely friends and acquaintances as well.

By the play’s blood end, violence and injustice have become metaphors for the emotional incongruities of depression. The gruesome amorality of the play’s final scenes leaves audience members morally decentered and emotionally exhausted. The Parma of ‘Tis Pity is shown as a place of gross and incredible injustice. Putana, Annabella’s ignorant though well-intentioned nurse, has her eyes put out and is cruelly and inexplicably sentenced by the Cardinal to be “burned to ashes” outside the city (5.6.137). At the same time, Vasques, easily the most malicious character in the play, is let go and merely banished, left to return to his native Spain. Thus, the play’s conclusion has the effect of provoking indignant outrage among audience members. Again, this is fitting for a play largely focused on the realities of melancholia. Andrew Solomon, describes depression poignantly as “a demon who leaves you appalled” (16). Give the irrational violence of its conclusion, it is easy to see the ways in which ‘Tis Pity can have precisely the same effect on audiences, for the gratuitous bloodshed of the play’s ending is nothing if not appalling. In the end, it is not merely Annabella and Giovanni who are depressed, but the corrupted world of the play itself. The piece thus hints at the ruin that depression can engender, not only among individuals, not only among a particular family, but among an entire society. ‘Tis Pity seems to posit the existence of a reciprocal relationship between melancholia and social discord. That is, the play explores the relationship between social disruption and melancholia, while never firmly taking a stand on the causal nature of either.
As is the case with ‘Tis Pity, the conclusion of SFU portrays, quite literally, the deaths of nearly all of its primary characters. This final narrative move definitively situates the show in a tragic context. If there were any doubt among audience members as to the show’s generic affiliation, SFU’s denouement presents a convincing case for its tragic roots. SFU’s final episode, “Everyone’s Waiting” (2005) begins with the Fishers all in the depths of yet another familial misfortune. As the show opens, Nate has been dead for several months, unexpectedly killed in an episode earlier in the season by the sudden rupture of a brain tumor. His death is all the more disruptive to his family given the specifics of its circumstances. The entire family comes to know that Nate’s collapse occurred in the apartment of Maggie Sibley, a woman with whom Nate had just consummated an extramarital affair. As Nate’s deceptive behavior works to damage irrevocably his relationship with his wife and daughter, his subsequent death threatens the foundations of his family. Its circumstances send Brenda and the rest of the Fishers into tailspins of grief and despondency. The family is strained to its limits and is clearly on the verge of imploding. Brenda, understandably, has trouble coping with Nate’s dishonesty and death. Claire has recently quit her job at a law firm after being discovered
by a colleague drunk and high at work. She has apparently retreated into substance abuse as a means to combat the grief she feels at the death of her brother. Ruth is alone in the Fisher house, listlessly searching for a reason to live. David’s relationship with Keith and their newly adopted sons, Durrell and Anthony, has been strained by the loss of his brother and business partner. Nate’s death seems to have triggered a familial meltdown which the Fishers seem unable to repair.

Yet the final episode of SFU, in contrast to the last scene of ‘Tis Pity, offers an element of bittersweet optimism for the Fishers. This is first evidenced in the episode’s opening scenes. Rather than beginning with a death, as has every episode of the program up to this point, “Everyone’s Waiting” starts with the birth of Nate and Brenda’s daughter, Willa Fisher Chenoweth. By rejecting its own established conventions, the show seems to reject any excessive hopelessness. This final episode works to explore the possibility of familial reconciliation and the transcendence of depression. Rather than succumb to such violence as that of the conclusion of ‘Tis Pity, SFU, at last, allows the Fisher’s to make peace with one another. The show does not suggest that each of the Fishers conquer their depressions, but rather that they transcend the misunderstanding, animosity, and hurt that their depressions have caused one another.

This sense of familial reconciliation is made explicit in one of the show’s final scenes, as the Fisher’s and their extended family gather for a final dinner party to bid Claire farewell as she prepares for a career as a photographer in New York. The table is crowded with the core Fisher family along with Keith, Durrell, and Anthony. Brenda, Maya, and Willa are there as well. So too is George, with whom Ruth has recently rekindled a romance. As the conversation turns to Nate, David recalls a tender childhood
memory of his older brother. One by one the family begins to toast to their dead relation. The sense of loss among everyone present is palpable, and while it is clear that Nate had been less than honorable at times, so too is it obvious that he had enriched all of their lives. The family seems to accept Nate, flaws and all. It is this that allows the Fishers, for a moment at least, to transcend their familial depression.

The show then takes an unexpected and bittersweet tragic turn. As Claire drives off to begin a new life in New York, viewers are presented with a montage featuring the deaths, one-by-one and in sequential order, of each of the show’s major characters. The montage intersperses footage of Clair’s drive east through the desert with scenes of each character’s lives with those of their ultimate end. This final scene serves as a fitting conclusion to a program that was so often concerned with the realities of death. Like tragedies of the early modern English theatre, the finale of SFU litters the visual field with bodies. Yet the tone of the program’s final scenes in not colored by violence and despair, but instead retains a sense of optimistic wonder at the sheer multiplicity of deathly possibilities. While the deaths of the show’s main characters can evoke a degree of sadness among viewers, they lack the violent ferocity of those that conclude ‘Tis Pity. We see Ruth die in a hospital, surrounded by George, her remaining children, and the ghostly images of Nate and Nathaniel Sr. We see Keith, having aged considerably, as he is gunned down in an apparent robbery. Rico collapses as he walks leisurely across the deck of a luxury cruise ship. David collapses at a family picnic after seeing the ghostly image of Keith. Brenda meets her death naturally as she listens to her brother prattle endlessly on about his mental state. Finally we see Clair, at the age of one hundred and two years old, as she dies peacefully in her bed. Fade to White. Roll Credits.
The show’s conclusion offers an interesting twist on tragic convention. It acknowledges the realities of depression, pain, and loss while offering an alternative view of familial depression to that of Ford. ‘Tis Pity presents depression as a beast that quickly devours everything in its path. It is seen as a largely domestic matter that, when left unchecked, can seep into the broader culture and disrupt the social order of Parma. SFU, while not denying the awful realities of depression, sees its power to ultimately strengthen familial bonds. It acknowledges the lifelong existential conflict of those who suffer from depression. At the Fisher’s final dinner party, the toast to Nate comes to represent the shared struggle of the Fishers to combat their suffering. The scene acknowledges the redemptive power of true human connection and the benefits of familial forgiveness. The Fisher family does not implode upon itself from the strain of their depressions. Instead, the family explodes, dispersing its members into the wider world. While Ford’s protagonists attempt to use each other as a type of psychic salve, the Fishers, by the show’s end, have learned to rely on their individual selves for existential contentment. As Clair speeds down the road, away from her family and home, we see her smile, every-so-slightly, at the promise and possibility of the rest of her life.

While both SFU and ‘Tis Pity use the tragic form to explore the nature of depression, the work’s respective conclusions evidence significant aspects of their culture’s individual responses to chronic and disproportionate grief. Ford’s play seems to recognize the relationship between personal loss and melancholia. There seems little apparent reason for the absence of Annabella and Giovanni’s mother other than to hint at the fractured nature of their family from the play’s beginning. ‘Tis Pity also skillfully portrays the passionate and single-minded anguish that still, even in twenty-first century,
characterizes our conception of depression. Yet Ford’s play also suggests that the melancholic implosion of the house of Florio is little more than a freakshow – a tragic spectacle from which audiences should recoil. While audience members recognize that Giovanni is in serious emotional pain, it is all but impossible to feel sympathy for the youth.

The Parma of ‘Tis Pity is truly a dark place; those characters that are not deeply morally suspect are generally vapid and undeveloped, mere shadows populating a world of corruption. With the exception, perhaps, of the Friar (though he too aids Annabella in her deception of Soranzo), the play contains no wholly moral characters. While ‘Tis Pity is certainly capable of provoking empathetic responses from audience members, particularly towards Annabella and Putana, it also ascribes a degree of depravity to those suffering from melancholia. Particularly by emphasizing the heretical atheism, selfishness, and eventual brutality of Giovanni, Ford’s play, in the end, works to stigmatize melancholia and those whom it afflicts. ‘Tis Pity, in essence suggests that melancholia, at its most acute, is a threat to the very fabric of society.

In contrast, SFU seems to be far less threatened by the realities of depression. Indeed, at times, it seems to even revel in them. The characters central to SFU, particularly the Fishers, are never portrayed as overly-simplistic, and they all have more than their share of what can be considered moral lapses. Nonetheless, the program clearly manifests a certain degree of respect for the Fishers. Audiences are invited to empathize with them despite their shortcomings. Perhaps this simply speaks to the distance modern psychology has come since the seventeenth century. The nature of mental illness is certainly more clearly understood in the twenty-first century than it was in Ford and
Burton’s time. Indeed, it is somewhat natural that a culture that has reaped the social benefits of modern medical science seems more sympathetic to those who suffer from mental illness. Perhaps it is even because the symptoms of depression can now be, to some degree, mitigated by modern psychopharmacology that the condition has attained a sort of social legitimacy that it once lacked. While ‘Tis Pity clearly manifests the anxiety and horror with which many in seventeenth century England felt at the realities of the depressed mind, SFU seems indicative of a culture that, while still fascinated with depression, has in some ways come to accept those realities as a normal part of human existence.


