

# Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

## Anorexia Nervosa as Socio-Cultural Pathology in Lori Gottlieb's *Stick Figure: A Diary of My Former Self*

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## Abstract

The desire for slenderness, whether consciously or unconsciously, has always been in the back of our minds yet many people are not aware of the parameters of this contemporary need. Although the media is not the only harmful agent, it presents a paradox: either people may be oblivious towards it and think there is nothing wrong with the display of an – of course imposed – ideal female body, or they may think the media is, in fact, the only possible agent that may bring about an eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa (AN). In this dissertation the traces of the female's *imposed need* to keep their body “in-shape” will be thoroughly explored through three main different areas: the birth of eating disorders in contemporary culture and what exactly encapsulates the concept of “contemporary culture”, how the mind of the anorectic often works, and lastly, the other external factors apart from the media which will also affect the possible victim, such as the family environment. In order to do so, *Stick Figure*, the fictionalised diary by the North American author Lori Gottlieb, will be analysed around the main character, who is an eleven-year-old female who happens to be a victim of anorexia. It is through the use of irony that these parameters that have been previously mentioned are questioned since her point of view is that of the innocent child.

## Resumen

El deseo por la delgadez siempre ha estado en el fondo de nuestras mentes, sin embargo, muchas veces no somos conscientes de las posibles variables que lo han convertido en una necesidad contemporánea. Aunque los medios de comunicación no son el único agente dañino o culpable, se presenta la siguiente paradoja: o se acepta el ideal impuesto en las imágenes que puedan presentar los anuncios sin ir más allá y reflexionar sobre ello, o se piensa, por otro lado, que los medios pueden ser la única causa que provoque un trastorno alimenticio como puede ser la anorexia nerviosa (AN). Este trabajo explora cómo surge la necesidad de la mujer de “mantener su figura” a través de tres áreas diferentes: la raíz los trastornos alimenticios en la cultura contemporánea, así como el concepto de “cultura contemporánea”, cómo la mente de la persona con anorexia suele funcionar y, por último, demás factores externos, aparte de los medios de comunicación, que también pueden ser causa de un trastorno alimenticio, como el entorno familiar. Para ello, *Stick Figure*, la obra en forma de diario ficticio de la autora norteamericana Lori Gottlieb, se analizará en torno al personaje principal, una niña de once años víctima de la anorexia. Es a través del uso de la ironía que se cuestionan los parámetros mencionados anteriormente debido a que su punto de vista es aquel de una mente inocente.

## Introduction

*I mean, everyone's mom loves talking about their diets and how full you can get from eating lots of salads. (Gottlieb 34)*

*Stick Figure: A Diary of my Former Self*, written by the North American author Lori Gottlieb, recounts through the eleven-year-old Lori her own experience suffering from anorexia as well as the internal and cultural dynamics that shape it. Extensive research has been carried out about anorexia nervosa in the last decades and a wide number of female authors around the world have made it its central focus on young adult literature in order to denounce the impact contemporary society has had on women up to these days.

Lori's diary reflects the gradual but direct transition towards an obsession with her self-perception due to the stimuli surrounding her: diet books, magazines' advertisements, her mother's major concerns over physical appearance and gender roles, or the "pieces of advice" she is given by her cousin. However, it is important to highlight the role of *silence* in this fictional narrative as well, which is as significant as that of the constant ludicrous suggestions about losing weight. Generally, concerning the female body and self-perception, it is women who are believed to have a mental disorder. However, in a society that embodies female success in the form of thinness, *who or what is "disordered"*? What I want to prove in this dissertation through the analysis of this diary is that it may not be women but modern society that is contaminated, failing to convey the acceptance of the female body in its purest form. I will select the relevant examples of this fictionalised diary to prove how damage is caused to such an extent that the hospitalised character does not understand the reason why everyone else is worried about her as all she is doing is trying to *fit in* society, never better said.

# **1. Western Culture and the Birth of Eating Disorders as a Pathology**

## **1.1. The Influence of Consumer Culture on the Female Body**

Contemporary culture is so obsessed with thinness that when 500 people were asked what their greatest fear in the world was, far from giving a transcendental answer, “getting fat” was unfortunately a top one chosen by 190 respondents (Bordo 140). This fear comes from the normalised desire for slenderness, and it is far from gender neutral as statistics proved that out of all anorectics 90% are women. Besides, in contrast to the male body, the female body is denied more autonomy not only by men and culture, but by women themselves. Therefore, we need to explore why women are the most obsessed with their bodies and less satisfied with them. For instance, as Bordo pointed out, in 1984 *Glamour* magazine conducted a poll of 33,000 female participants from which a total of 75% considered themselves to be “too fat”, whereas in reality only 25% of those women were heavier than their optimal weight, and what is more, a full 30% were below that weight, as the Metropolitan Life Insurance Tables stated (154).

Culture is the worst adversary of self-acceptance and the axes of continuity prove that the female body has always been the focus of attention in contrast to the male body. The axes of continuity refer to cultural streams that converge together in a specific time. What happens when these streams or currents, for instance bodybuilding or jogging, converge is that they may become overwhelming to certain individuals, which will eventually make them show their real but underlying character in an exaggerated way. That is, they will eventually bring about a psychopathology such as, in this case, anorexia. In addition to the last point, several cultural practices had already put the female body under extreme manipulation throughout history, such as tight corseting, which would cause malformations and medical consequences yet it had “many positive connotations

of social status, self-discipline, artistry, respectability, beauty, youth and erotic allure” (Steele 1). The female body has always been linked to the essence of a woman in numerous domains such as in family life, mythology, literature, religion, philosophy or science: “Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture” (Bordo 142). But *which culture* are we referring to?

Anorexia Nervosa (AN) is often referred to as a Western “culture-bound syndrome” since it is majorly thought to be extremely rare in places that are not North America, Western Europe, Australasia, and South Africa. However, according to Lee (21), it has been found in a survey conducted among college students in Nigeria that the frequency of eating disorders was similar to that in Western society. The researchers, Oyewumi and Kazarian, concluded: “nowadays abnormal eating attitudes associated with anorexic behaviour may be a universal phenomenon that transcends cultural boundaries” (in Lee 21). Subsequently, they suggested that in Japan, which is one of the four highest industrialized societies in the world and the second in Asia, not only the number of eating disorders was rather large, but the style conformed to typical Western disorders. In other words, as soon as Asian countries became westernized adopting the western stereotype of “perfection” was inevitable, which brought about a “tsunami of eating disorders” in China, South Korea and Japan, as Eunice Park stated in *Asian Week* magazine (Turner 251). On the other hand, the desirability of thinness may sound paradoxical in the case of Nigeria considering that in Central Africa, where poverty has reigned for such a long time, a skinny body meant merely death and sickness. However, this desire appeared when Nigeria opted to participate in the Miss World Competition – a Western beauty contest of course – and the participants had to be hyper-skinny despite the local ideals. Agbani Darego was chosen, and became the first Black African to win the Miss World Pageant, which made her become a role model to many Nigerian teenagers who started

fasting and exercising, due to the new concept of thinness-equals-beauty in their culture (Bordo XVI).

Therefore, we can agree that the stereotype originated in Western countries, especially in America and after the Second World War, although it suddenly found a way to spread and influence other cultures. In other words, eating disorders can be considered a product of the Western world yet, due to the influence of this society upon the rest of the world, AN prevails in other societies as well.

Let us focus now on the root of this almost world-wide admiration for a skinny figure. During the eighteenth century, concepts related to beauty, refinement and health started to be incorporated steadily into the discourses of dieting. This was the consequence of the increase of food supplies, from which eventually culinary innovations were brought about by wealthy members of society whose main aim was to stand out from the lower class (Carolan 86). Contrary to the Middle Ages, in which feasting would be a sign of social status due to the shortage of food supplies during that time, more and more people could afford access to food now. Hence, those members of society who wished to distinguish themselves from the lower class needed to find a way to do so. It is for this reason that moderation became the new symbol of civility and refinement.

Later, during the post-Second World War period, the means of communication's first concern was proclaiming the values of the new consumer society that was emerging. Therefore, adapting a new kind of relationship between the self and others became crucial to self-perception especially for women, as the female body became commodified and sold by the media as an object of desire (Orbach 84). Subsequently, TV advertising has been body-shaming the female body since the 1950s and the amount of advertisements which have brought the female body shape and size into focus is unmeasurable. For

instance, in 1958 the cereal brand Post's slogan was "any protein cereal *helps keep you the same size*, as long as it's Post Grape-Nuts". Besides, and of course, the image on the cardboard box was a mother addressing her daughter as she smilingly tightened her belt on her skinny waist. Furthermore, the image of the "perfect body" has become progressively thinner since the 1970s. Concerning gender, being a woman means not only having but *being* a body, in contrast to men, whose inner virtues are still considered regardless of their appearance. Therefore, being a female, according to the media, means that either you have the "perfect body" or you will no longer be able to achieve romantic success or social status. For instance, the slogan of an advert in 1970 to market cigarettes was "Cigarettes are like women. The best ones are thin and rich".

## 1.2. A Brief Introduction to Anorexia Nervosa (AN)

Whether the audience is aware of the media industry's cynicism makes little up to no difference. Many young females, as it is understandable, lack the power to resist the message a fake image may convey if it is constantly being displayed. They know, and we know, that "inner beauty" may not often be considered regarding a culture in which size zero is the status symbol (Bordo XXVII). Consequently, a *need* to fit in develops in the individual, either consciously or unconsciously, bringing about a paradoxical search for a "needless self": a self who will be accepted through denial, in this case, of the fundamental human need that is nourishment. In other words, and briefly put, the female will aim to change her self to look like those portrayed in movies and commercials, as that is her new conception of "survival" or being accepted. This is the consequence of the images in the media reflecting individuals who seem to have rejected their "needs and wants" – skinny figures. The problem begins when the young female finds satisfaction in controlling her image through deprivation, as she gains self-esteem by realising notable



changes which lead her to look like the girls on TV (Bordo 87). Therefore, the individual starts refusing nourishment and hunger becomes a motivating force.

The rate of anorexia cases has dramatically increased in the last decades. During the beginning of 1970s anorexia was still “rare” as so was considered by Hilde Bruch, one of the pioneers in studying and treating eating disorders. In 1984, it was already estimated that around 23 percent of college women would control their weight through vomiting, diuretics, and laxatives. Statistics suggest that 90 percent of all anorectics are women and that out of all the people who get part of their intestines removed each year with the aim of losing weight, women represent 80 percent. Furthermore, according to Paul Garfinkel and David Garner, anorexia nervosa is considered a “multidimensional disorder” with familial, perceptual, cognitive and possibly, biological factors interacting in varying combinations in different individuals to produce a ‘final common pathway’ (Bordo 140). Cultural factors would suddenly start to be regarded as significant considering the pathogenesis of eating disorders, although it was not until very recently that socio-cultural analysts would look beyond the emphasis on fashion and its relation to slenderness allowing space for the study of other deeper questions such as *how* did size zero become the status symbol in contemporary society.

Furthermore, the consumer society presents the following paradox: it encourages the individual to spoil themselves and indulge their desires while glamorizing the skinny figure. Subsequently, dieting, body enhancement and exercising are constantly being addressed either explicitly or implicitly, while the concept of fatness steadily acquires a negative connotation, either of laziness or lack of willpower. Spreading “filtered, smoothed, polished, softened, sharpened and rearranged” body images that convey nothing but love, success, self-acceptance and happiness, is the role of the media, and therefore, they eventually become our model since “they are teaching us how to see” (6).

Additionally, this paradox will be just one of the many tensions women must deal with due to their position in society. In other words, slenderness will become more than a need to women as this paradox provides them with something they can “finally control” in life: their own body, gaining satisfaction and a feeling of power by doing so.

## **2. *Stick Figure*. Dismantling the Idea of the Victim of AN as the One to Blame**

The diary as a genre is characterized by its emphasis on only what seems relevant on any specific day, that is, a personal writing addressed to no one but the diary itself and for the individual's interest: “First of all, I should probably tell you about me and school and stuff, so you'll know what I'm talking about when I write in you. I mean, I know you're not a real person” (Gottlieb 15). The diary lacks pattern and design, which distinguishes it from biographies or autobiographies as they tend to recount what is important in the lifetime of the individual (Matthews). When we talk about *Stick Figure* as a fictionalised diary, we are referring to it as a literary piece that has been written based on the events of a real old diary which, structured now from the perspective of a grown woman, aims to *tell a story*, affecting style, content and structure this time (three sections with different entries of the same length and a title each). This fictionalised diary is divided in three sections which, at the same time, are divided into segments of nearly the same length each and all of them under a title.

*Stick Figure* is divided in three parts which coincide with the winter, spring, and summer of 1978, completing a whole cycle not of a year but of her process from the beginning when she is still “sane”, to her recovery after being hospitalized. Several aspects on which the story is grounded will be categorised in three groups and analysed in order to explore anorexia and where it may come from in this eleven-year-old's story.

To begin with, we will explore Lori's personality traits – which coincide with those people who are more likely to suffer from an eating disorder under certain conditions or environments, such as perfectionists. Secondly, the role of Lori's parents not only as *silencers* but also as incapable to understand how they are collaborating on the enhancement of their daughter's mental disorder. Also, the personification of gender roles in the character of the mother, and how women in the story behave in the same way towards the female body and food. Lastly, we will explore the kind of magazines, advertisements and diets spotted throughout the story and how irony is used to bring to light all their contradictions.

## 2.1. Lori Gottlieb and the Profile of the Anorectic

A research was carried out by Theander to study whether the messages and images in advertising constituted a major cause of both bulimia and anorexia. The sample involved the psychiatric analysis of 44 high school female students. One of Theander's findings was that the most common victims of eating disorders were white middle and upper class. The major contribution of the research was that the messages in advertising conveying thinness as an object of desire, such as in clothes and food commercials, *do* impact students. In addition, 33 out of the 44 students that participated in the study claimed to be a victim of an eating disorder (Peterson 496).

The conclusion of this research is alarming: 75% of the high school students who participated are victims of an eating disorder, and one of the main reasons for it is the constant bombarding with the now regarded as “ordinary” messages which surround us in our everyday lives: advertising on TV, magazines, radio, newspapers, etc. considering

that, by that time, Instagram and other social media sites did not exist *yet*. Hence, there is nothing the individual can do to escape the media industry:

It appears that those with eating disorders are not exposed to television or magazine advertisements more than those without eating disorders, but that they respond much more strongly. They appear to be more persuasive than members of the second group. This suggests that just cutting back on the volumes of advertising would not necessarily be effective in combatting bulimia and anorexia, but that making the ads less suggestive of desirability of being thin might. (Peterson 498)

I agree with this: throughout history, the different archetypes have depended on time and place, and most importantly, on those in control of cultural capital. That is, stereotypes and models are imposed and promoted by external sources with social status and power regardless of how harmful they can be for the individual as long as they keep the market alive. Briefly put, our deep desire for slimness, which has been unconsciously engraved in our minds changing our perception, comes merely from profit.

Regarding Peterson's research, victims were more likely proven to be white middle and upper class, which coincides with Lori's family's condition. He also concluded that many victims "are overachievers who excel in academics, sports, and other activities" and that a large number of them "has obsessional personality traits and are moody and perfectionist in their performance and appearance" (496). There is evidence on Lori being obsessive, for instance, she repeats several times throughout the story how she would die if she got a B at school: "I'd rather die than get a B on my report card!" (Gottlieb 25) or if she skipped class: "I'll die if I miss school" (Gottlieb 48). Or "Mom's always telling me [...] how I care too much about math" (Gottlieb 29), which reveals her personality as an overachiever. There are several aspects which confirm the fact that she has an obsessional personality as well, for instance, convincing herself not to pronounce

“B” or “be” in order not to summon a B on her report card; or her “sidewalk thing” – which consists in walking straight ahead even if people do not move out of her way – becoming a habit (Gottlieb 32). It is not surprising that Lori matched the description of this study as it was in fact 75% who are victims of eating disorders.

To conclude, even though the “disorder” or problem may grow inside the individual due to the way the person may respond to external stimuli, it is obvious that the root is the information one gets from the outside world: powerful and negative *external* stimuli. And it is only normal to believe these bombarding messages since they have become a part of our daily lives. That is, it is highly unlikely that someone will question something that has been normalised. However, the factors outside the individual’s control cover more than just TV commercials: Crisp, Harding and McGuiness, have considered the characteristics of parents of eating disorder victims as possible predictor variables (Peterson 495). The way in which the family of the anorectic may not only respond to the female’s behaviour once being a victim of AN, but become the main force that “pushes” the kid into the disorder will be covered in the next point.

## 2.2. Lori’s Dysfunctional Family and the Parents’ Role

The role of parents is crucial for a daughter who may be struggling with an eating disorder, as happens in *Stick Figure*. Several factors contribute to the enhancement of AN in Lori’s case: the miscommunication and passiveness in the family, as well as an obsessive control on the child.

To begin with, Lori is not taken into consideration whenever she interacts with adults: “Whenever I start to talk to adults they start nodding their heads up and down like they aren’t even listening” or “I didn’t want to be invisible anymore. All of a sudden I wanted to scream ‘Fuck you!’ to my parents” (Gottlieb 16-17). Making their daughter

feel irrelevant steadily grows to the point that it ends up becoming a sort of a “rule” at home:

Now Mom and dad are always explaining how it is not polite to say certain things [...]. Mom didn't like my sarcastic tone [...] but because of this new rule about keeping your feelings at secret, I am not allowed to watch TV this week. I had to apologize to Alan even though everyone knew I wasn't sorry. The new rule is more than just Don't Say What You Really Feel, it's also Say What You Really *Don't* Feel. (Gottlieb 20)

This shows how Lori is aware of the way things work at home and how she is never given a chance to express her feelings or opinion, which makes her feel oppressed and invisible. Besides, whenever she tries to do so, she gets either ignored, punished, laughed at or even blamed for: “Mom yelled that I was embarrassing, selfish, crazy, and some other things [...] she said she wouldn't love me if I wasn't her daughter [...] I really hoped she would take back what she said [...] she never did” (Gottlieb 75). Her parents control her by grounding her and, therefore, not only do they abandon her verbally, but physically, too: “Then Mom and Dad left me in the hallway *again*. I don't know how long I stayed there [...] everyone went to bed” (Gottlieb 50). She also compares herself to a chameleon, implying how she finds survival in blending in, disappearing and withdrawing, since no matter the conflict she always seems to be the victim: “at least they stopped punishing me. So that's why I am not talking to Mom and Dad anymore. Maybe you really *do* have to be invisible to survive” (Gottlieb 50). Lori concludes by claiming that “Most parents would do something if their kid didn't say a single word for a week straight. But mom and dad are acting like it's perfectly normal” (Gottlieb 51). It is therefore important to consider her parents' role in the outcome of Lori's mental problem: It is now that she realises food is the only thing she can take control of: “she made me go down to breakfast, she couldn't make me eat” (Gottlieb 52). This is when she starts

gaining satisfaction in doing so, taking advantage in the only thing she feels she has power over, her body, and strictly modifies it according to the messages that surround her.

According to Klaus Engel and Michael Stienen, there are four types of fathers of anorexia nervosa patients, *the weak, the brutal, the bonding, and the absent father*, whose different parental values will be significant for the genesis of anorexia in the daughter. According to the distinction the research makes, Lori's father would be included in the Weak Father, whose role implies that "the daughter generally feels unaccepted, the family itself lives very socially withdrawn, [...] parents share few activities, father spends much time at home" (Engel 146). Furthermore, this type of families will often give much importance to eating and mealtimes. The study concludes that the role of the weak father figure is little significant to the anorectic daughter. However, in this case, together with the role of the mother, it ends up becoming an issue.

The mother's role in this story is similar to what Halliwell claims in his research on Karen Carpenter's case, "the family dynamic was partly to blame, particularly Karen's mother Agnes, who, he assessed, was an 'oppressive-dependent' presence who would not allow her daughter to grow up" (155). To summarize this point, as Sim et al. concluded in their study, "elevated family problems and distress in adolescent anorexia has been well established" (536), that is, when comparing the mothers of two girls with AN and the mothers of healthy girls, the former beckoned more family conflict and their parenting role was not as satisfactory or efficient:

Mothers of girls with AN may wrongly blame themselves for their daughters' condition, and research suggests that self-blame often leads to feelings of shame and guilt, reducing a parent's effectiveness in supporting their child's recovery, and this only furthers the emotional stress of the condition on family members. Moreover, a parent of a child with an eating disorder may feel that they have failed in a central task of

parenting, that of feeding one's child. [...] A parent of a child with AN may attribute the child has some personal control over their eating disorder symptoms, which can lead to anger and frustration. (537)

Considering *Stick Figure*, the parents soon try to control Lori's behaviour in the only aspect she feels "to have a voice": "they didn't care when I wouldn't *talk* for a week but they sure cared if I *ate* today. They cared so much they said we wouldn't leave the restaurant until I ate something" (Gottlieb 61) or "Food is medicine! Dad yelled at me yesterday morning. He's been yelling it at every meal" (Gottlieb 89). However, this is counterproductive since more and more quarrels start taking place during mealtime, which makes Lori feel even more repulsed towards food.

Sim et al. concluded in their research that not only "families of girls with AN experienced greater family conflict, reduced parental alliance, and increased feelings of depression" but that "once the emotional impact of the illness on the mothers was statistically controlled, group differences were no longer significant" (536). Lori's mother does not seem to understand what is happening to her daughter, "Mom thinks anorexia means being unstylish [...] 'Fabulous, now you have anorexia of the hair' she sighted, 'what will be next?'" (Gottlieb 205). What is worse, the judgement towards Lori's appearance does not cease even when she is hospitalized: "Last night on the phone, Mom asked me again why I can't look like Shereen" (Gottlieb 183). However, the Mother is at this point only trying to express how Lori is now *too thin* after previously criticising her for being *too fat*. This is a clear instance that shows how the female body is constantly being put on the spotlight, either for being too fat or too thin.

Furthermore, it is crucial to mention how Lori is treated this way in contrast to her brother who, for being a male, does not have to deal with the diet restrictions the mother seems to be imposing on Lori. Since it is the female body the one which, as previously



stated, is denied more autonomy not only by females themselves but by males and culture in general, it is therefore only natural to be critical only of the female body:

[Mom] was busy looking at the chubby lady sitting at the next table. The lady was ordering pancakes and sausage with extra syrup, and David said he didn't think she needed extra syrup. That made mom and dad laugh, but no one laughed when dad and David also ordered pancakes with extra syrup. (Gottlieb 55)

During mealtime, males in the story seem to just enjoy feasting without any worry. However, females seem to be "at war" with food and what should be a basic need becomes a triggering situation. They are obsessed with keeping their or losing weight through controlling the quantity of food they ingest through behaviour that at first may seem more ordinary than pathological. A perfect example of this which clearly shows how mealtime can be a constant battlefield for women is found on page 57 of the diary:

Kate and her mom took tiny helpings of everything, and just like Mom does with Dad and David, they said they'd taste Lou's dinner. I wasn't about to go tasting someone else's dinner, though, so I took normal helpings. That's when Kate said, "You must be really hungry," but she didn't say that to David even though he took the same amount of food I did. "You must be really full," I answered. [...] Kate's mom laughed again, even though I wasn't trying to be funny. (Gottlieb)

To sum up, the parents' overcontrolling behaviour in *Stick Figure* makes their daughter cling to the only aspect she can take the control of in her life, food, giving her a feeling of satisfaction since it also becomes her way to rebel against her parents: "mom and dad ignored me again [...] I didn't care for once. [...] I was happy that I didn't have to eat anything if I didn't want to" (Gottlieb 63). Furthermore, as Halliwell claims, an eating disorder "has to be seen as a 'stylistic' breakdown resulting from cultural pressure, since it amounts to a pathological exaggeration of society's message to women" (163),

which is very well depicted in the previous example of how women see nourishment as a battle, them against food, that is, their enemy.

### 2.3. Advertisements and the Mother's Role as the Ultimate Example of a Western Mentality

*Stick Figure's* rhetoric is characterised by the use of irony in order to criticise the several paradoxes of the media industry in contemporary society. The narrator uses irony by playing with the innocent perspective or view of an eleven-year old female. In other words, in order to put to the test western conventions and beliefs regarding the female body, the narrator uses the voice of a character who has not been "brainwashed" yet and, therefore, does not understand the "logic" of the rules a woman is supposed to follow. These remarks are what makes the reader reflect most on the impositions and oppressions of contemporary society, which are related to both the different portrayals of the body in magazines and the reaction of the majority of the women in the story towards these representations.

Let us first focus on the advertisements. On page 81, Lori brings to the fore the paradox of the imposed dietary pieces of "advice" in advertisements: "I've learnt a lot about diets... to be very committed you have to follow their rules. The only trouble is, each book has different rules [...] I've learnt so many rules I can't keep track of all of them". This statement greatly exemplifies how each magazine "advises" a different thing, since their only purpose is *to sell*: if the aim of the female is to lose weight, the magazine will need to provide the reader with new and different tips they have not heard of before, as Halliwell claims "the danger is that the anorexic body merely ends up mirroring media obsession with slenderness and dietary control becomes just another form of addiction" (153). Another instance of the paradox of diet advertisements is well represented on the

following quote: “mom’s magazines have recipes in them [...] but then, on the next page they always have articles called ‘12 great diet plans’ that tell you never to eat what you just baked” (79). In addition, media will focus not only on the shape and size of the body, but on the whole appearance, either explicitly or by use of subliminal messages: “Mom’s magazines said if you have ‘dishwasher brown’ hair, you should take that ‘boring’ hair and make it more ‘exciting’ by dyeing it”, to which Lori sarcastically reacts, since she understands the implicit meaning of it: “so now I’m stuck with hair that makes you cry” (Gottlieb 16).

Furthermore, in order to create expectations in the consumers, as a marketing technique, they will make reference to the rules of a diet as some kind of “valuable knowledge”, that is, something you should keep to yourself if you do not want others to know. In other words, this kind of commercials somehow implicitly conveys that if others acknowledge the rules you are following to lose weight, they may start the diet too, and therefore, will get thinner than you – which, illustrated this way, makes it sound like a “nightmare”. This is perfectly demonstrated when Lori is talking about a *New York Times* article: “you’ll lose a pound a day, and all your friends will be jealous of you [...] everyone will ask ‘how do you do it?’ but you shouldn’t tell them because it’s ‘your little secret’. Then right above that part it says, ‘*New York Times* bestseller’. *Some secret*” (81). Lori’s ironic response, “some secret”, briefly summarizes the inherent irony of the advert itself: they tell you not to tell anyone, but they are selling the magazine to thousands and thousands of women. In a mass consumption society, it is clear how marketing easily makes “innocent diets turn into dangerous habits for vulnerable young women” (Halliwell 155).

A special mention needs to be done for the Special K advertisement to which Lori herself dedicated a whole entry of the diary. In the commercial, as she recounts, a lady in

a bathing suit appears and keeps walking around for you to see her skinny body. Suddenly, she asks the audience “Can you pinch an inch?” to which Lori’s *reasonable* reaction is “She means on your stomach. [The girl on the commercial] She’s still smiling, *of course*, because when she pinches her own stomach there’s no fat at all” (95) and adds, “I can almost pinch an inch. So now I eat Special K” (96). This shows the accurate technique of commercials: they aim to sell something, they seek the way to persuade vulnerable audiences and they sell the product, forgetting about all the consequences it may have upon the individual as long as they get profit. For instance, Lori bought the Special K, *but she also bought the lies*: harmful images that enhanced her desire to get skinny. Many would blame Lori for being credulous, yet they will forget to condemn the advert for imposing and perpetuating ideals that will cause trouble to many women’s mental health.

Furthermore, the female body is the focus of attention not only in diet advertisements: the kind of bodies displayed in magazines such as *Playboy* is the greatest example of the commodification of the female body. Women are displayed as mere objects for male consumption, and therefore, all the stereotypical physical traits which are emphasised enhance the desire of the consumers for this type of bodies. However, not only does it raise expectations on males but also on females themselves: “I keep planning on taking one of the magazines when David’s not home, just to see what a sexy woman looks like” (Gottlieb 80). Lori ends up considering the concept of “sexy” that is sold without questioning *who* established the parameters. Furthermore, this is something that happens to most of the women in *Stick Figure*, an idea that will be covered next by analysing the mother’s performance, which encapsulates that of the other females too.

Cussins claimed in her study that “The mass promotion of commodities [...] has a regressive effect on the individual who becomes ever more dependent on external judgements of what is necessary for his/her well-being and produces an inner state of

chronic anxiety” (106), which provides the background knowledge we need to understand why Lori’s mother behaves the way she does: all she can think about is physical appearance, make-up, jewellery, her body and *her daughter’s* body. Every remark she makes towards Lori, as has been previously mentioned, conveys the “waste” it is for her to have a not-so-girly daughter. This character imposes her own mindset, obsessed with gender roles, on her daughter’s to such an extent that it creates a vicious circle: the mother does not accept Lori the way she is and thus, she does not give up trying to “convert” her, whereas Lori cannot stand her mother anymore. Therefore, the relationship between them, of course, is affected by this in a negative way.

Considering gender roles and to provide an example of the many one can find throughout *Stick Figure*, Lori narrates how her mom’s advice for having more fun at a party is to “wear lip gloss like the other girls do”, and how “a woman *needs* to wear makeup if she wants to attract a man” (42) to which Lori ironically reacts “like if a lady walked outside without any lip gloss, a huge lightning bolt would suddenly crash down from the sky and kill her”. Another great example which significantly emphasises how the mother is desperate for her daughter to be like she would want her to be, instead of just accepting her, is the following:

She hates me being unique, so she is always asking questions like “Why don’t you wear your hair down instead of putting it on a ponytail?” “Wouldn’t you rather wear cute little sandals instead of those dirty sneakers once in a while?” Yesterday she asked: “Why can’t you put on a nice cotton skirt with those cute little sandals for school?” I told her that I *obviously* can’t [...] when I’m playing softball in the muddy grass at recess. *Duh.* (18)

This behaviour makes the daughter feel rejected by her own mother since she never gets support from her but judgement. Lori does not follow the “standard” or

common practices of a “girly” girl, yet her mother does not give up, and Lori uses sarcasm to fight against something she finds obvious. This being the only kind of “feedback” or reaction a daughter gets from her parents, it will only make her feel useless since she has been made to believe that she is not good enough, regardless of how true or how false that may be in reality. Hence, it is this issue that brings about lack of communication between the two generations, which will only increase with the passing of time.

In conclusion, taking control of the daughter’s appearance is just one of the many issues that indicate how the mother’s dependency on external judgements is the core element of her behaviour. For instance, when considering her self-perception and the issue of nourishment, it can be concluded that she aims to make everyone think she is fine with eating so little in order to proudly maintain her shape. However, she eventually finds herself more than once binge eating fattening food in the kitchen at midnight – when no one can see her – as if she was *committing a sin*. There is a great example that provides evidence on her preoccupation of what others will think of her: “every time she throws something fattening into the cart [...] she says ‘Dad will love this’ or ‘David loves these’ just so whoever might be listening in the grocery aisle won’t think Mom’s buying the food for herself” (Gottlieb 84), a common behaviour among female victims of Western ideals.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, *Stick Figure* perfectly illustrates the different and most common external stimuli that may affect young females such as Lori, bringing about a mental disorder such as AN. This desire for slenderness has been steadily increasing since the post-World War II period in Western societies, which has spread to other societies such as Asia, where the

Western ideal has been adopted, bringing about an increase in eating disorders as well. Furthermore, and occasionally, the media illustrates the female body as an object of desire, converting it into a commodity of modern society. It is only normal for the public – but most critically, for the target audience, namely, women – to believe the messages of images which convey the idea that slenderness beckons happiness and success regardless of how edited or fake the images are. However, although the media may be the most damaging cause of an eating disorder, it is not the only one. The role of parents, lack of communication in the family or having one's body or image constantly compared to others' – due to the significant role of physical appearance in contemporary society – are also crucial factors which will very likely make an individual vulnerable towards an eating disorder. Lori's innocent but ironic voice in *Stick Figure* raises awareness of all these issues and contradictions the media and the environment often present nowadays.

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