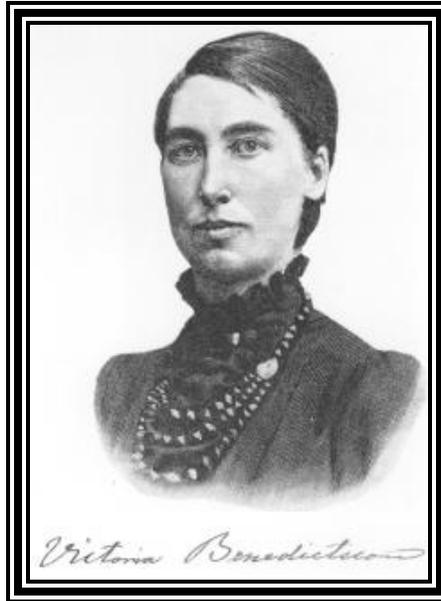


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Suicide among women writers

## When Creativity Meets Madness



Through the ages, the high suicide rate in the artistic community has been a disturbing phenomenon. Writers belong to this high-risk group. Many researchers have tried to elucidate the circumstances that lead writers to commit suicide. The most plausible explanation turns out to be that creative people have a tendency towards depression. Women writers are no exception.

Over the past years, women have shown a common will to express themselves freely. Victoria Benedictsson's story is one among many. She was born in Sweden in 1850. At the age of 21, she was forced to marry a 49-year-old man who already had five children: her unhappy marriage inspired most of her writing. She used a man pseudonym, Ernst Ahlgren, in order to romanticize her personal story. In her first novel,

*Money*, she wrote about the obligations of sex within marriage. Her profound need to create soon became a need to denounce the injustices towards women. The London newspaper *The Independent* in an article about Victoria Benedictsson described her novel as follows : « She compared bourgeois married ladies to prostitutes – both exchanged sex for financial gain, though in the case of marriage it was a way to buy into a whole lifestyle. »

Benedictsson's true nature is reflected in *Money* since she creates a heroine who dreams about becoming an artist in order to be financially independent. In chapter II, her protagonist declares: « Most likely I won't ever marry, that's exactly why I want to work. » Propelled by the success of her first book, Benedictsson moves to Stockholm, leaving her husband, five step-children, and two daughters behind. At that point, she believes that she will be treated with all the respect that an artist deserves and without any discrimination towards her female status. But again, Benedictsson suffers from the fact that her work is not taken seriously by the man with whom she has a love affair, the famous literary critic Georg Brandes. Benedictsson struggles through her relationship, craving recognition and equality. Although her work is celebrated in the literary world, Brandes never acknowledges Benedictsson as his equal. She will never recover from the day he declines to review her second novel which he classifies as a *ladies' novel*. The Swedish author calls this event her «death sentence»: her pride is hurt by Brandes' denial of her talent. Gradually, her mind is taken over by this obsession about being acknowledged as a genius by her peers and especially by her lover. Powerless and incapable of speaking up against male domination, Benedictsson slowly falls into depression.

According to a recent study by Dr Janka Z, a specialist in analyzing depressive symptoms, creative people are predisposed to have nervous breakdowns. In an article entitled “Artistic Creativity and Bipolar Mood Disorder”, Dr Janka Z writes «madness and genius characters share common roots. » Like many other people with high creative achievements, Benedictsson’s skill drove her to suicide. In 1888, she locked herself in a hotel room and slit her throat with a razor. Approximately one year before her death, she writes in her diary: «My own life is but a dear image, to be enclosed in a medallion; my work is a picture gallery, to be given to my contemporaries. » <sup>1</sup> Benedictsson tried to draw a line between her intimate life and her openly displayed work. Philippa Gregory mentions in the book *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, that «The restrictions and pains suffered by women two hundred years ago in the real world were reflected and exaggerated in the fictional world. » An observation which appears to accurately reflect Victoria Benedictsson’s case.

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<sup>1</sup> Mitt eget lif ar blott en kar bild, att slutas i en medaljong, mitt arbete ar ett tafvelgalleri, art skankas at min samtid

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