

# The Idealization of Consumption: Perpetuating Female Gender Roles

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**ABSTRACT:** Tuberculosis is a highly infectious pulmonary disease that is passed via airborne transmission. Each year it kills an estimated 1.7 million people and generates more than nine million new cases. During the nineteenth century, the disease, more popularly known as consumption due to way it seemed to consume its sufferers, produced not just painful and debilitating symptoms for the afflicted, but also profoundly influenced society's behavior and aesthetic ideals. Eighteenth and nineteenth century romantics sentimentalized it as the illness of gifted intellectuals. Idealized in literary and artistic works, the public were led to believe that certain qualities made particular individuals more susceptible to contracting tuberculosis, including attractiveness, youth and sensibility. These beliefs were even echoed by medical professionals, some of whom vocalized support for a consumptive death because of its slow, albeit painful progression that allowed its sufferers to make peace with God. Consequently, the consumptive aesthetic was popularized as a desirable standard of beauty, internalized by women who sometimes deliberately harmed their bodies to achieve a fashionable consumptive chic. Through examination of artistic and literary works, this paper argues that the glorification of tuberculosis subverted traditional notions of sickness as undesirable, compelling women to employ physically harmful strategies in pursuit of the consumptive aesthetic that ultimately reinforced normative female gender roles.

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