



From Humors to Auras: Historical and Literary Perspectives on Headache

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Objective

Explore how headaches have been perceived and described throughout history and discuss how they conform to or deviate from modern clinical definitions of headache disorders.

Methods

This was a qualitative interdisciplinary review of medical publications and selected literary works. Sources were chosen based on their relevance and descriptive accounts of headaches or headache-related symptoms, using a purposive sampling approach across different time periods. Secondary academic sources were consulted to place the findings in context. The accounts were analyzed in the light of contemporary diagnostic models, particularly the International Classification of Headache Disorders (ICHD-3).

Results

Historical medical authors developed sophisticated, though pre-scientific, frameworks for understanding headaches. Hippocrates was the first to describe visual symptoms associated with migraines, such as shining lights, followed by violent pain that began in the temples and eventually reached the entire head and neck. He also linked this experience to environmental and lifestyle factors, such as exercise and intercourse. Galen, a Roman physician, associated bilious content in the stomach with attacks of pain in the head, which he realised ceased with vomiting. Avicenna, in *The Canon of Medicine* described over ten types of cephalgia, some resembling modern migraine classification.

In literature, headache and migraine are frequently referenced as a literal and metaphorical device for psychological tension or social burden. In Shakespeare, cranial pain often signifies emotional or political strain ("a tempest in my skull"). In 20th-century modern literature, writers such as Virginia Woolf, who suffers herself from migraines, incorporated vivid descriptions of visual disturbances, light sensitivity and dissociation, that mirrors clinical features of migraine with aura.

Conclusion

These texts reflect a persistent and complex character of headache, even prior to the understanding of their neuroscientific mechanisms. Despite the humoral or symbolic construction of these descriptions, they are in close accord with contemporary diagnostic standards: throbbing pain, photophobia, nausea and vomiting, and sensory disturbances. Furthermore, they reveal an empirical attention to subjective experience that anticipates modern knowledge. Revisiting these viewpoints offers valuable insight into the cultural and clinical development of headaches and into the ongoing human process of pain through the centuries.