

## ‘CRAZINESS’ AND CREATIVITY: PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND POETRY

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### SUMMARY

Not all poets have experienced psychopathology. Conversely, not all those who have experienced psychopathology become poets. The notion, nonetheless, of there being an association between ‘craziness’ and creativity, contentious though it may be, remains a seductive one. Poetry is both beneficial for the person who is composing or reciting it as well as the person who may be reading or listening to it. Poetry Therapy, which falls under the remit of Art Therapy, is increasingly being recognised as an effective form of adjunctive therapy for the treatment of mental health problems. The main aims of this paper are to explore (and to attempt to elucidate) if there is indeed a relationship between the artistic temperament and mental illness and to comment on the rise and recognition of Art Therapy.

**Key words:** creativity – poetry - mental health problems - bipolar disorder – schizophrenia

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*‘Though they go mad,  
They shall be sane.  
Though they sink through the sea,  
They shall rise again.  
Though lovers be lost,  
Love shall not.  
And death shall have no dominion...’*  
Dylan Thomas (1937–1953)  
Death shall have no Dominion

### INTRODUCTION

Not all poets have experienced psychopathology. Conversely, not all those who have experienced psychopathology become poets. The notion, nonetheless, of there being an association between ‘craziness’ and creativity, contentious though it may be, remains a seductive one.

People, when under mental distress in any of its many forms, can be compelled to communicate and express themselves and indeed to deprive someone of that liberty may very well be a form of persecution. One artist might utilize prose another verse in one’s attempts to express oneself and their distress of mind. Indeed we, as a species, derive solace from shared experience (since this may be a form of validating what one has been through and there is nothing more toxic than being made to feel *invalid*).

Poetry is both beneficial for the person who is composing (and/or reciting) it as well as the person who may be reading or listening to it (Singer 2010) (the written word does possess an indisputable power and the ear, after all, is a conduit to the human heart...). The prolific twentieth century German-American poet Charles Bukowski, who himself experienced mental

health problems, emphatically exclaimed that poetry is the ‘*ultimate psychiatrist*’. A foremost authority on bipolar affective disorder (and bipolar affective disorder sufferer herself) Dr Kay Redfield Jamison - Professor of Psychiatry at John Hopkins University (United States) and Professor of English Literature at St Andrews University (United Kingdom) - evocatively wrote in her magnum opus *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* that, ‘*They (artists) learn in suffering what they teach in song. An artist survives, describes and transforms psychological pain into an experience with more universal meaning so that his or her own journey can become one that others thus, better protected, can take*’ (Jamison 1993). So poetry it seems, whether conveying it or receiving it, possesses a certain power to confer protection against psychological wounds and to *heal* someone from them, and indeed *Poetry Therapy* falls under the wide-ranging remit of *Art Therapy* (Deco 1998) which is becoming increasingly recognised as an effective form of adjunctive therapy for mental health problems, as will be discussed and described below.

The main aim of this paper is to explore (and to attempt to elucidate) if there is indeed a relationship between the artistic temperament and mental illness. We also comment on the rise and recognition of Art Therapy for the treatment of mental health problems. This exposition is a synthesis of the material that we have collated and coalesced by conducting a non-systematic review of the literature.

### Creativity: a succinct ‘working’ definition

Defining creativity has proven to be a tricky affair and there is indeed a lack of consensus amongst scholars in this field resulting in numerous definitions of

this term being put forward. Most definitions of creativity, however, emphasize novelty and originality balanced against utility. The following working definition is derived from the Longman Active Study dictionary and is one that the authors favour: '... *Creativity involves the use of the imagination to produce new ideas or things...*' (Adrian-Vallance 2004).

### Historical perspectives

The notion of there being an association between 'craziness' and creativity can be traced as far back as antiquity. In Greek mythology, Dionysus (who was the son of Zeus and a mortal mother) was the god of the grape harvest, wine (and hallucinogenic mushrooms), of ritual madness and religious ecstasy. Alcohol, especially wine, played an important role in ancient Greek culture (and arguably continues to do so today) and much of the greatest poetry during this epoch was dedicated to Dionysus who himself was subjected to episodes of frenzied madness (indeed Dionysus was notorious for inducing savage brutality on those who surrounded him whilst he was at the throes of insanity).

By the time of Socrates (470–399 BC) people believed that priests and poets communicated with the gods through 'inspired' madness. Indeed Socrates argued that, '*If a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by madness of the muses... he and his sane compositions never reach perfection but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman...*' (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3652184/Undeniably-strange.html>). It is almost as if the great Greek philosopher was contending that a pre-requisite for someone to be a great poet was that they had to experience 'madness' first (akin to some kind of 'initiation' process).

The seventeenth century British Poet Laureate John Dryden recognised that, '*Great wits are sure to madness near allied and thin partitions do their bounds divide*' (Jamison 2011). In other words it can be inferred that Dryden realized that there was a very fine line between 'craziness' and creativity and whether an individual can be described as the former or the latter was very much influenced by the time and place he or she was situated in (interestingly the same can also be said about mental illness in a broader sense. For example a despot who exercises tyranny in a totalitarian state may authorise the detainment of an individual who dissents and who he deems recalcitrant on the grounds that this individual is judged to be 'insane' (i.e. for not believing in the demagogue's absolute authority) even though that very individual may not necessarily meet the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnostic criteria for psychosis. Even in the twentieth century such practices in parts of the world where the Arab Spring has erupted, for example, is not unheard of or indeed uncommon (Hankir 2013).

The eighteenth century largely associated genius with moderation however this was almost completely reversed by the nineteenth century romantics (i.e. the 19<sup>th</sup> century British romantic George Gordon (Lord Byron) and the Romantic Movement that heralded him). Indeed Byron himself had a piercing insight of his mental illness (in his case bipolar affective disorder) and the crucial role it played in his creativity. '*We of the craft (poets) are all crazy*' he once stolidly remarked thus betraying that he was not in denial of his perturbed mental state. However despite the fact that his mind was deranged during bouts of mental illness (which, according to his biographers and Byron himself was integral in the production of much of his most brilliant poetry) Lord Byron nonetheless is regarded by many literary critics to be one of the greatest romantic poets in history (Jamison 1994).

In the early nineteenth century Lombroso introduced the concept of 'hereditary taint' to describe the co-existence between madness and creativity (Hankir 2012). The usage of such a term may very well have indicated recognition of a genetic component to the artistic temperament in the context of mental illness.

### Bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia and creativity

The public mind is exposed to portrayals of 'madness' in film, literature and the media and these are powerful influences in shaping our individual and collective perceptions. The term, 'enduring mental illness' has been used to describe bipolar affective disorder and schizophrenia and both these conditions, certainly in the public mind, are perceived to be associated with creativity.

The British television personality and Cambridge University alumnus Stephen Fry (who has been described as a, 'National treasure') composed a poignant autobiographical narrative entitled *The Fry Chronicles* in which he candidly and courageously comments about his personal experiences with profound oscillations in his mood. Such a narrative, we argue, offers a precious qualitative insight into 'the mind of a man with manic-depressive illness' and Fry's prose permeates with the ebullience and creative brilliance that is so characteristic of a mood disorder (in his case the milder form of bipolar affective disorder known as cyclothymia). Fry also produced a multi-award winning documentary entitled, '*The secret life of the manic-depressive*' and in it he interviews famous artists, actors and singers who all had first-hand experience of a mood disorder.

*A Beautiful Mind* is a 2001 American biographical motion picture about the rise of John Nash, a Nobel Laureate in Economics, and his experiences with paranoid schizophrenia. *A Beautiful Mind* depicts the far reaching effects that delusional episodes had on Nash's academic and social functional as well as the

relationship he had with his wife (Funaki 2009). Films such as *A Beautiful Mind*, whether accurate or not in their portrayal of schizophrenia, can profoundly influence the public understanding of this mental illness and the association it can have with intelligence and creativity.

### The psychological basis of creativity in mood disorders

Research utilizing biographical and systematic methodologies has revealed a compelling correlation (if not an association) between bipolar affective disorder and the artistic temperament. The twentieth century American psychologist J.P. Guilford identified the factors that were involved in creative thinking (Guilford 1950). Many of these relate to the cognitive changes that take place during mild manias.

Fluency and flexibility of thinking, as defined by Guilford, is comprised of several related and empirically derived concepts, measured by specific tasks:

- Word fluency: the ability to produce words containing a specific letter or combination of letters.
- Associational fluency: the production of as many synonyms for a given word in a limited period of time.
- Expressional fluency: the production and rapid juxtaposition of phrases or sentences (so crucial in extemporizing and public speaking).
- Ideational fluency: the ability to produce ideas that fulfil certain requirements in a limited period of time.

Indeed, Guilford's findings would be consistent with the results of research spearheaded by Professor Jamison on living writers and artists which revealed many overlapping mood, behavioural and cognitive changes between hypomania and intense creative states (Jamison 1989).

### The psychological basis of creativity in psychoses

Rust et al reported an investigation designed to test the traditionally assumed relationship between creativity and schizophrenia. They uncovered an association between creative originality and the positive cognitive aspects of schizotypal thinking (Rust 1989). A separate paper by Buck and Kramer also revealed the presence of creative potential in a group of hospitalized patients diagnosed with schizophrenia (Buck 1977).

### The Health Humanities and Art Therapy

There is a growing perception that science alone provides overall insufficient foundation for the holistic understanding of the interaction between health, illness and disease (Hurwitz 2009). The Health Humanities has emerged as a distinct in attempts to ameliorate the

limitations in the provision of healthcare services and can be broadly defined as the application of art and literature to medicine (Oyebode 2009).

The British Association of Art Therapists states that, *'The focus of Art Therapy is 'the image' and the therapeutic process involves a transaction between the creator (the patient), the artefact and the therapist. As in all therapy, brining unconscious feelings to a conscious level and thereafter exploring hold true for art therapy, but here the richness of artistic symbol and metaphor illuminate the process...'* (Deco 1998).

### CONCLUSION

Much of the controversy associated with the 'healthy artist' versus the 'mad genius' debate stems from a lack of understanding of what 'madness' really is. But whose purpose does it serve when we label someone as 'mad'? We the authors contend that mental healthcare providers should be mindful about the negative connotations associated with stigmatizing terms such as 'madness' and refrain from 'medicalizing' what can simply be a form of artistic expression. Healthcare professionals must suspend judgement when they are assessing a person who has mental health problems and they should also be aware of 'alternative treatment options' such as *Poetry Therapy* that may exist.

To conclude with the words from General Practitioner Vidal Naidoo, *'We may come across a patient with radical thoughts who, if given the appropriate support, would perhaps reach greatness in life. If only we could be less restrictive in our concept of 'normality' we could be more embracing of gifted patients and this would encourage them to realize their full potential...'* (Hankir 2013).

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