



## Evidence of the “Mad Artist”

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Savannah James synthesizes diverse cultural, biological, and psychological evidence surrounding the “Mad Artist” trope. While conceding a valid link between mental illness and creativity, James argues finally that “madness” remains a reductive, damaging, and counter-productive label for a wide range of human experience. This essay was written for Writing I with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

“I CAN NOT GET RID OF my illnesses, for there is a lot in my art that exists only because of them,” wrote expressionist painter Edvard Munch, most famous for *The Scream*. The “Mad Artist” is a cultural trope that’s endured for centuries, even as far back as the 4th Century (Sussman 21). In ancient Greece, Plato supposedly said, “Madness . . . is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings. . . . Madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human.” Because centuries of human belief have insisted that madness is the source of creativity, does that mean it’s true? There is proof that this cultural trope has logical and scientific evidence. There is a link between madness and creativity, but of course, it is not as simple as it seems.

First of all, to find the link between creativity and madness, one must define “creativity” and “madness,” which are awfully broad

terms. According to behavioral and social sciences professor Jonathan Appel and his team of researchers, “The definition and depiction of madness can greatly alter the opinion on whether or not creativity and ‘madness’ are related. ‘Madness’ is often a social construction of non-conformity and creativity” (95). “Madness” itself is only a term used for any person behaving strangely according to the traditions of the time. The term was once used to describe anything from homosexuality to being a “hysterical” woman (AKA, not behaving as a woman should). “Madness” is an outdated and derogatory term, but “mental illness” can also be applied to the “Mad Artist” trope. This term is more reliable and easier to analyze.

Mental illness is a condition of the brain and its neurology that negatively affects a person’s mood, thinking, and behavior. “Creativity” can be defined as the ability to find novel ideas and solutions that are useful. One thing that makes them similar is that they both involve thought processes that are unusual compared to the general population, or as Appel et al. put it,

The connection between ‘madness’ and creativity may be found in the shared biological, cognitive, or personality features, related to the presence of cognitive and social disinhibition. Hence, ‘madness’ may mean something more than merely ‘bad’ genetics and malfunctioning neurotransmitters, or cognitive variation. (108-09).

In the case of cognitive originality, creativity and mental illness overlap by definition.

Another point that supports their connection is that creativity is correlated with the actual physical presence of mental illness, namely bipolar disorder, mood disorders, depression, and schizophrenia. A lot of creative processing happens in the frontal lobe of the brain, and that activity can be observed through various brain scans. As psychologist Adrienne Sussman writes,

Unusual activity in the frontal lobe, and in particular the prefrontal cortex, is characteristic of both schizophrenia and manic depression. Hyperactivity in this region may cause a person to draw unusual connections between seemingly unrelated items or ideas, resulting in the delusions of the paranoid schizophrenic or mania. (22)

These “unusual connections” are the very mark of creativity.

Schizophrenics draw inspiration from their unusual sensational experiences. Schizophrenics with creative success include Nobel-prize-winning mathematician John Nash and painters Vincent Van Gogh and Louis Wain. In artists with bipolar disorder or mood disorders, mania leads to bursts of creative activity. According to Sussman, “some manic-depressive artists also credit their depressed periods with giving them important insights that manifest in their work” (23). Artists Van Gogh and Georgia O’Keefe, composer Ludwig Van Beethoven, and writers Jack London and Virginia Woolf are all suspected to have suffered from bipolar disorder, as evidenced by recorded periods of high creative output alternated with periods of severe depression. Mental illness can sometimes naturally lead to artistic expression as evidenced here.

Another thing that links creativity and mental illness is intelligence. According to a study led by psychology researcher Emmanuel Jauk,

Intelligence is highly relevant for creativity, but the kind of relationship depends on the level of intelligence as well as on the actual indicator of creativity. . . . [I]ntelligence may increase creative potential up to a certain degree where it loses impact and other factors come into play. At this, it possibly applies that the more complex the measure of creativity that is considered, the higher the threshold up to which intelligence may exert its influence. For the most advanced indicator of creativity, namely creative achievement, intelligence remains relevant even at the highest ability range. (219-20)

Intelligence and creativity are linked because they also involve thought processes that are different from the general population. Intelligence and creativity are both means of problem-solving. Creativity is the finding of novel ideas, and intelligence is the effective application of those ideas and the skills of creativity. What ties intelligence to mental illness, however, is that with intelligence comes a separation from average peers and a lack of mental similarity. Because an intelligent brain is gifted differently, it also has different flaws, those that are less acceptable to society. Creative people are often intelligent, but their cognitive gifts are alienating, and, as mentioned before, madness has been defined as being different. That mental difference may lead to “unusual” thought patterns that fit the diagnoses of mental illness: “Those with high intelligence are at significantly greater risk for the examined psychological disorders” (Karpinski et al. 20).

All of these connections have shown how the “Mad Artist” stereotype is true. *However*, I have reason to believe that those artists labeled “mad” are *not* as people say they are. The “Mad Artist” is the collective symbol of centuries of categorization. It is a character invented by a species that just loves to make sense of things it does not understand by creating labels: “One should not ignore that the stereotype of the eccentric artist or of the mad scientist also plays a protective role in the collective imagination. It acts against the fear and suspicion that excellence and the diversity of others always engenders in the majority” (Preti and Miotto). This trope is a fiction because no individual artist fits it entirely. Artists, just like people in general, are diverse individuals. The label is only meant to separate people based on their eccentricities. It is easier to think of these artists as a different breed. The label enforces the idea of conformity, that there exists a group of people who are “normal,” and whoever doesn’t fit the “normal” standard is “mad.” In fact, none of those groups exist. They are only words. Humanity is too complex to categorize. Because of those who push for conformity, there are those who, in rebellion, try to be more different than ever. According

to Antonio Preti and Paola Miotto, individuality encourages creative people to behave even more eccentrically, because the eccentric artist stereotype is glorified by society. The crazies are enshrined as geniuses in the annals of history. Therefore, to some point, the concentrated focus on mad artists perpetuates a cultural trope that doesn't match up to the fact that the majority of creative people are *not* mentally ill.

Despite the stereotype of “madness,” the effects of mental illness are unfortunately real. This is where mental illness is counteractive to creativity. Those artists that do suffer mental illness may experience things that cripple their creative ability. The depressive periods of mood disorders result in a dramatic plummet in motivation. A bipolar artist may spend weeks creating many pieces, but not create anything at all for months afterwards. Those who suffer from depression may lack motivation to create for long periods of time. It is also very difficult to create when hospitalized for suicide attempts or institutionalized for mental breakdowns, and—dare I say it?—nothing is created at all if they kill themselves, as did Van Gogh, Mark Rothko, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Jack London, and Sylvia Plath. In an occupational working situation, mental illness negatively impacts productivity. As Dr. Lipskaya Velicovsky's team found, “People with mental illness scored lower on work performance, cognitive functioning, and hand dexterity while sitting and working with tools. They were assigned lower job loads than were controls, and perceived the physical environment at work as more constraining than did controls” (1396). This can be detrimental to those making a living from their creative work.

Although a person's symptoms of mental illness can negatively affect them, those very symptoms can be a source of inspiration. Some mentally ill people use creativity as a constructive coping mechanism. Cognitive struggle can be a driving force to express the torments of the creator, to find meaning in the way they experience the world, and to gain understanding within their chaotic situations. These are the reasons why there are higher levels of mental illness

within creative communities. An intelligent person is more likely to be tormented, but at the same time their intelligence gives them a great capacity for creativity. Therefore, they turn to creative expression to alleviate their inner struggles. Their biggest problems come from having a different mind, but that very difference also contributes to their greatest attributes: a vibrant experience of the world's sensations and emotions that many do not perceive with such intensity and a frame of mind that interprets things differently and therefore finds novel ideas and solutions. Who are we to say a mind that is different from the majority is "wrong"? "Mental illness" is broadly defined as a condition in which one's mind deviates from *normal* psychological function, but what authority defines what is normal? All people have flaws, but societies tend to ostracize those who make the biggest disturbances to the natural order. Each mental illness is a category, based on thousands of similar individuals with similar behaviors and thought processes, but any mental illness is still only a label, invented by people who are flawed themselves. The fact that any mental illness has a spectrum of variability and function emphasizes the biggest problem with such labels: humanity is incredibly varied and cannot be divided into boxes without contradictions or exceptions. To be flawed is part of being human. Some people just have different problems from others. To call artists "mad" is a capital insult to the diverse range of survivors, innovators, and dreamers that call themselves artists. It creates a divide between "us" and "them" when we are all human. As David Wolpe from *Time* puts it, "To be a person is to be unbalanced, struggling, wounded. So long as we see these things as deviations from what should be and not the natural condition of life, we will be less willing . . . to learn the ways affliction can yield mastery." The mark of a great artist is an exceptional nature, a type of mind that sees and interprets everything in a unique way. Their "madness" may just be creativity with a different label, or they may just be brave enough to let everyone see the strangeness inside. ►►

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