



Shadows of genius: Exploring creativity and madness in writers

Aashrita Dass¹, Dr. Aareena Nazneen²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Integral University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Languages, Integral University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the association between creativity and madness with emphasis on literary writers. It shows that writing together forms a testimony, and suffering can be transfigured into creativity and healing. It focuses that creativity serves not just as an artistic outlet but also to heal. The link between the struggle of writers in their personal lives and the stimulation of creativity due to depression is discussed in the paper. Theories of post-traumatic growth suggest that people who endure severe suffering gain deeper emotional awareness and increased creativity.

Keywords: Anxiety, bipolar disorder, creativity, madness, alcohol

Introduction

The creativity/mental illness is the most common debatable question in modern creativity research. According to Shelley H. Carson, Andreason (1987) in his study, concluded 30% writers had a strong association with alcoholism. He also found that 90% of writers suffer from DSM personality disorders, including Erika Lauronen, Juha Veijola, Irene Isohanni, Peter B. Jones, Pentti Nieminen, and Matti Isohanni.

Wills (2003) examined the life histories of forty influential jazz musicians and found that 28.5 percent were affected by mood disorders. Likewise, Kaufman (2001), in a study of more than 1,600 distinguished writers, observed that female poets exhibited the highest incidence of mental illness, showing particularly elevated rates compared to other groups. Kyaga and his associates conducted a study in 2011 and 2013 in which it was found that people involved in artistic occupations had higher rates of bipolar disorder, and writers suffer from unipolar disorder and other forms of psychopathology. The study reveals that there is a positive relationship between creativity and mental illnesses like bipolar disorder, anxiety, unipolar depression, etc.

According to Ciobica Irina and colleagues, Alcohol is linked with arts and literature due to its strong association with the creative process. Statistics indicate that in the United States, five out of seven native-born Nobel Prize-winning writers were diagnosed with alcoholism. The groundbreaking research was carried out by Americanist Roger Forseth, whose meticulous and thought-provoking studies of authors like William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway applied close textual analysis within the framework of the medical model of addiction. He also drew connections between the writers' own struggles with alcoholism and those of the characters in their novels. Acclaimed writers often possess a flaw—a *charismatic weakness*—which is frequently drinking, famously referred to by Fitzgerald as the “writer’s vice.” Dr. Donald W. Goodwin, a psychiatrist, suggests that writers’ tendency to view themselves as loners is what paves the way for their drinking, noting that both writing and alcohol can induce trancelike states. Writing and drinking are complementary

to each other. Felix Post found in his study that 93 out of 100 biographies show the signs of psychopathology.

Ancient Greeks believed in summoning the muses with the help of alcohol. Experimental studies show that a moderate dose of alcohol can enhance creativity, as Carson puts it, In his drama *The Knights*, Aristophanes (424 bc) has the character of

Demosthenes utter “Come, bring hither quick a flagon of wine, that I may soak my brain and get an ingenious idea... Dardis (1989) noted that of the eight American novelists who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature before 1990, five were confirmed alcoholics. (Carson 302-303)

According to folklore and pre-Grecian myths, madness and genius are interrelated. Also, mental illnesses and disability are also usually linked as it is said that these two may be found in the same person, “mental illness stimulates creativity” (Tayebeh 6). In this context, it is said,

Mood disorders usually include deviation of mood, in most cases towards depression, but also leading to a rise of mood. Creative, labile persons are in “God’s swing,” as is expressed by Eino Leino, the Finnish national poet who had an unusual, Bohemian way of life with alcoholism and an early death. These people might be vulnerable to rise of mood as well as to depression especially during and after creative crises. (Lauronen et. al 90)

Freud believed that insanity is interlinked with artistic imagination, and the mad artist masters their illness to convey the message successfully. It is believed that F. Scott Fitzgerald, a literary genius, had an esoteric mind. Scott suffered from depression throughout his life since he was unhappy due to his miserable condition. Alcohol played a significant role in Fitzgerald's life, shaping his literary career. He had a narcissistic impression on his mind during childhood and was considered a failed student. He had an artistic personality, gifted with a high IQ and a sense of expression without many words to express, as “Plato, for example, remarked that poets, philosophers, and dramatists had a tendency to suffer from “divine madness” (Carson 297).

Fitzgerald had three wounds in his mind: he failed to become a football star, a warrior in the First World War and

finally dropped out of university. He struggled with this partial feminine identity, and this is the reason why he wanted to take part in the First World War. His personal life was disturbed due to his spendthrift attitude, eventually leading him to be in debt. He had a lot of bad memories in his life, which made alcohol his second partner, "Many writers have used alcohol or drugs to enhance creativity and to stimulate brain functioning" (Lauronen et. al 91). He suffered from depressive illness, which includes personality traits like hostility, attention-seeking, and risk-taking behavior.

Thomas Stern Eliot was awarded the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 for his contribution to twentieth-century literature. He used to believe that poetry is emotional relief or a way to release psychological pressure, or what he calls "an escape from emotion". Poetry released the pressure of a bank clerk who used to care for his sick wife simultaneously writing for the Times Literary Supplement. Being a famous poet, he wrote more criticism than poetry. His creative output was more productive during the time of intense upheaval in his personal life, "In Aristotle's Problemata, the author asked why all those who have become eminent in philosophy, poetry, or the arts tend to be melancholic" (Carson 297). His wife could be very creative, but she suffered from chronic mental and physical illness. Her nervous system collapsed due to migraine and drug addiction, resulting in suicidal attempts.

Eliot was knackered caring for his ill wife and managing extension classes, leading to his own depression. He was an admirer of popular culture, and he drew many things from low culture, including contemporary slang and popular music. Both husband and wife struggled with their debilitating illness at different times and Eliot then underwent psychiatric treatment due to his nervous breakdown. This period of collapse proved to be productive for him, and he composed *The Waste Land* as "people with mild and subclinical types of mental illnesses and relatives of patients with severe forms of mental disorders indicate that they have a high potential for creativity" (Ourtani 38). Though it was written with an apparent detachment, it seems to be a personal poem.

Maya Angelou depicted trauma in her autobiographical fiction narratives as she suffered from mutism and anxiety disorder when she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. The traumatic experience of rape left an indelible mark on her memory, and she eventually remained silent for five years. Her whole story is written in a series of seven autobiographies written in conventional style. She has written it all, from Arkansas to Africa and back to the U.S., from the beginnings of World War II to the assassination of Martin Luther King. Her grandmother was the nurturer as well as protector, as she was abandoned by her mother. Later on, she was taken back to her mother, Vivian Baxter, by her father Bailey Sr. She couldn't get love anywhere, so she used to remember those motherly figures that became the reason for her living and instilled strength in her mind.

Writing became a means of survival and protection, allowing her to take back control from the violence and oppression that had silenced her. Later, Angelou's works, especially her autobiographical series that starts with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, revealed the struggles she

had once kept hidden. Angelou's life illustrates a deep relationship between suffering and creativity, "the most creative work was accomplished at the border between sanity and insanity" (Carson 297).

Psychological pain often heightens self-awareness and sensitivity, pushing individuals to search for meaning through art, "authors of the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop were four times more likely to suffer from bipolar disorder than matched controls and that 80 percent of the writers reported suffering from a mood disorder... as well as bipolar disorder specifically (6.4 percent), in award-winning writers and artists in the United Kingdom" (Carson 299). Likewise, Angelou's creativity thrived amid pain, making her voice both personal and universal.

Virginia Woolf also suffered from bipolar disorder, which is directly associated with her creativity. She attempted suicide several times, often corresponding to her manic episodes. In between these attempts, there were several releases of her books. There are a lot of composers, writers, artists, and poets who have suffered from bipolar disorder, like Robert Schumann, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and others, yet they produced creative output.

Writers who suffer often become more creative because their struggles sharpen their perception of life. Pain forces them to notice what others overlook—the fragility of joy, the cruelty of injustice, the hidden strengths of the human spirit. Suffering deepens empathy, and through empathy, art flourishes. Writing becomes their way of lifting that agony, of turning silence into speech, wounds into wisdom, and trauma into testimony.

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