

I Bask in Dreams of Suicide: Mental Illness, Poetry, and Women

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A consistent research finding in creativity research has been the tendency of poets—especially female poets—to suffer from mental illness. We explore (a) Why poets? and (b) Why *female* poets? We posit that poetry may attract those with a predisposition toward illness, the domain of poetry may particularly reward those who exhibit illness, and unusual aspects of the domain of poetry writing may increase the likelihood of poets succumbing to illness. These domain-specific aspects of writing poetry affect men and women alike. In addition, the greater difficulty that women tend to experience in ignoring extrinsic motivational constraints may cause successful female poets to have an even higher incidence of psychological stress, and of mental illness, than male poets.

If wild my breast and sore my pride
I bask in dreams of suicide
If cool my heart and high my head
I think, "How lucky are the dead."
(Dorothy Parker, 1991)

Our hospital was famous and had housed many great poets and singers. Did the hospital specialize in poets and singers, or was it that poets and singers specialized in madness? . . . What is it about meter and cadence and rhythm that makes their makers mad?
(Susanna Kaysen, 1994, p. 48)

"It is hard to feel a sense of mystery about why there are more eminent men than women," Ravenna Helson (1990) wrote, when one "realizes that social roles have not been structured so that many women would ever become high achievers" (p. 46). But although a history of gender discrimination has often made it more difficult for women to succeed, there are some arenas throughout history that have been more open than others to talented women. Simonton (1994) noted that "until recently, creative writing was the only area where women could really

shine" (p. 34), and he argued that "male domination of resources alone could explain why women have the best prospects in literature. It doesn't require a well-equipped laboratory, a full orchestra, or a large block of marble to write a masterpiece of fiction or poetry" (p. 36). Even in literature, however, the opportunities for a creative woman to succeed have been (and, to some extent, continue to be) severely limited (for an in-depth study, see Spender, 1993).

But there is reason to suspect that the greater (albeit still limited) access that the field of creative writing has offered women—female poets in particular—has come at a large psychological cost. Given that poetry is a field in which women have been able to create with a greater degree of freedom and with a greater chance of having their work recognized for its creativity, there is sad irony in reports such as Kaufman's (2001b) that mental illness plagues female poets far more than either male poets or women in general.

In this article, we first discuss what is known of linkages between creativity and mental illness, especially in the domain of poetry and among female poets. We then explore reasons why poets, and especially female poets, may be unusually susceptible to mental illness. Next, we examine several theories regarding the high incidence of mental illness among poets in general and one theory regarding the especially high incidence of mental illness among female poets.

There is some debate over the nature and extent of the relationship between creativity and

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mental illness (e.g., Jamison, 1993; Rothenberg, 1990; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2000), but such a relationship clearly exists. Although it is easy to criticize methodologies or participant selection (see Rothenberg, 1995, 2000), a wide range of studies incorporating diverse methods suggest that there must be some type of connection. Next, we address some of the key studies that have examined creative writers and mental illness.

Some investigations have examined creative individuals and evaluated them for mental illness, such as Andreasen's (1987; Andreasen & Glick, 1988) comparison of rates of mental illness among 30 creative writers attending the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Andreasen paired the writers with 30 matched controls (nonwriters with similar demographic characteristics), in addition to studying the first-degree relatives of both groups. The creative writers had significantly higher rates of mental illness (24 of the 30 suffered from an affective disorder) than the control group (9 of 30) and also had a tendency toward bipolar illness. The relatives of the writers were more likely than the relatives of the nonwriters to show both higher creativity and higher rates of affective disorders (unipolar and bipolar depression). These results are consistent with similar, earlier work conducted by Andreasen and Canter (1974) and later work conducted by Ludwig (1994). It is worth noting that, in Ludwig's study of 59 women writers and a control group, more writers had parents with psychopathology, and more writers were abused as children. Perhaps the most striking finding was the differing rate of depression in Ludwig's writers and controls: 59% versus 9%.

Whereas experimental work such as Andreasen's is one method of studying creative writers and mental illness, the methodology of "historiometric" research allows for much larger sample sizes than are possible in experimental work. Historiometric work involves analysis of biographical data of historical figures. One of the largest such investigations was Ludwig's (1995) examination of more than 1,000 eminent individuals who were the subjects of major biographies written between 1960 and 1990. More than one fourth of this sample was composed of writers of some type: poets, nonfiction writers, and fiction writers. Ludwig found higher rates of mental illness

among those in artistic professions (e.g., writing, music, art, and theater) than among those in nonartistic professions (e.g., athletics, business, and politics), as well as higher rates among family members of those in artistic professions. It is also worth pointing out that Ludwig found poets to have among the highest rates of depression and psychosis of all of the groups.

In a similar vein, Post (1994) analyzed biographical data on 291 eminent men, categorizing them according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (fourth edition; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) when applicable. He found that visual artists and writers were more likely to suffer from a personality disorder than were members of other groups, and writers were more likely to suffer from depression. Although poets were more likely to be categorized with bipolar disorders, they had *lower* rates of overall affective and personality disorders than did fiction writers and playwrights.

Jamison (1989) studied British writers (and artists) and found that a significantly higher percentage of them suffered from some form of mental illness (particularly affective disorders [38%]) than would be expected from illness rates in the general population. Her sample size (in total, 47 people) was small, however, for comparisons between different types of writers. It is worth noting that the highest rate of bipolar illness (the most extreme of the disorders she studied) was found within her sample of poets. Jamison (1993) also found suicide rates in 18th-century British poets to be far higher than expected, whereas Piirto (1998a), in a review of the lives of 80 women creative writers, found consistent themes of depression and self-destructive acts. Martindale (1972) found higher rates of psychosis and pathology in a sample of eminent poets than found in the general population. Post (1996) found higher rates of mental pathology (as diagnosed postmortem) in a population of writers than in the general population. Preti, De Biasi, and Miotto (2001) found more suicides among literary creators than music creators, and Preti and Miotto (1999) found significantly higher rates of suicide among poets and fiction writers than among visual artists (architects, painters, and sculptors).

One particular group of writers who experience an especially high incidence of mental illness is female poets. Kaufman (2001b) con-

ducted two historiometric studies on mental illness and eminent creative writers. The first, which examined 1,629 writers, showed that female poets were significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness than both other types of women writers (fiction writers, playwrights, and nonfiction writers) and male writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and nonfiction writers). The second study, which examined 520 eminent women, showed that poets were more likely to suffer from mental illness than journalists, politicians, actresses, and visual artists. This finding has been given the preliminary label the "Sylvia Plath" effect. The effect was named after the famed poet who committed suicide as she is a common image of a female poet who suffered from mental illness.

Some caveats regarding these studies are needed. Obviously, approximately half of the overall population is female. In most of these studies (e.g., Kaufman, 2001b; Ludwig, 1995), only one quarter of the sample was female, and some studies (e.g., Post, 1994) included only men. This discrepancy may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Another key issue is that these studies were, for the most part, conducted with eminent creators. There are simply so many more data available on eminent (as opposed to "everyday") creative people that well-known artists and writers are often a more appealing group to examine. However, the choice of which group to study may be an important one. Richards (1993a, 1993b, 1999) has pointed out that this distinction may explain conflicting research findings, in that eminent creators may be more prone to suffer from mental illness than less eminent creators. Indeed, some studies (Kaufman, 2001a; Ludwig, 1995) have shown that the extremely eminent may be more likely to suffer from mental illness than those who are merely very good. Can conclusions we might draw on female poets extend equally well to Sylvia Plath and to a college student writing poetry in her journal? Not necessarily, although we believe similar factors may come into play.

Why is mental illness so prevalent among successful women writers, and especially eminent female poets? As described earlier, there is evidence that women creative writers in general experience more mental illness than their male

counterparts. This finding, in and of itself, is consistent with a great deal of past literature revealing, for example, that women report suffering from depression at a much higher rate than men (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990, 2001). The combination of this finding and the finding that poets (both male and female) are more likely to have mental illness than other creative writers leads to a possible cumulative effect for female poets that may make them especially susceptible to mental illness.

In attempting to discuss the reasons behind this phenomenon, we have chosen to focus on mental illness as a whole. As a result of space considerations, we had to select which aspects of the question to study. In an attempt to explore in depth issues that are not as frequently examined, we do not delve into detail about the specific mental illnesses involved. Questions regarding how schizophrenia, bipolar depression, and unipolar depression (for example) specifically interact with creativity and different creative acts have been covered in great detail, and we would refer interested readers to Runco and Richards (1997). In addition, Sass and Schulberg (2001) have covered creativity and schizophrenia, and Goodwin and Jamison (1990) have provided an extensive overview of manic depression.

The two central questions addressed, then, are as follows: (a) Why poets? and (b) Why *female* poets? We hope that the answers to these questions will shed light on why female poets are at such risk.

Why Poets?

In this section, we argue that several factors associated with poetry combine to produce an additive effect: the types of people who are drawn to poetry, the inability of poetry to assuage mental illness, the impact that the field has on poets, and a possible age effect. First, the nature and style of poetry draw people who may be more likely to be unstable. Second, unlike other forms of writing, poetry does not alleviate mental illness. Third, implicit expectations from the field may result in successful poets being expected to be ill. Finally, poets typically peak at a younger age, when mental illness is more likely to strike.

Nature and Style of Poetry

The nature and style of poetry may make it more introspective and expressive than other forms of writing. Nonfiction writers have been found to use a more “paradigmatic” thinking style, whereas creative writers (i.e., fiction writers and poets) have been found to use a more “narrative” thinking style (Kaufman, 2000). A paradigmatic thinking style is realistic and logical, whereas a narrative thinking style sees connections and is focused on what might be and could be (Bruner, 1986). Similarly, nonfiction writers have been found to be more likely to use an “executive” thinking style, and creative writers have been found to be more likely to use a “legislative” thinking style (Kaufman, in press). Legislative thinkers prefer to create things and to be self-directed. Executive thinkers prefer to follow directions, to carry out orders, and to work under a great deal of structure (Sternberg, 1988, 1997).

Efforts to distinguish the thinking styles of nonfiction and creative writers (as just described) have received more attention than comparisons of the thinking styles of poetry and fiction writers, but one recurring theme is that poetry may be more expressive, emotional, and introspective than fiction. The concept of fiction being more concerned with reality and poetry being more focused on emotions, internal feelings, and introspection has been raised in both psychology theory (e.g., Gardner, 1993) and psychoanalytical research (e.g., Szajnberg, 1992). The connection between poetry and the strong expression of emotions is also raised in educational research (e.g., Whalen, 2000) and research on literature (e.g., Olsen, 1998). Obviously, no one claims that all poetry is expressive and abstract and that all fiction is reality based and concrete. Certainly, however, poetry may more often be expressive, abstract, and introspective than fiction.

The tendency toward being more expressive may make one more prone to illness. Ludwig’s (1998) investigation of more than 1,000 people in 18 different professions showed that people who pursued professions that were more objective and formal were less likely to be mentally unstable (e.g., suffer from illnesses such as manic depression, depression, and mood disorders) than those who pursued professions that were subjective and emotive. Such a pattern

was also found in the visual arts in regard to artistic style; more expressive work was more linked with mental illness. On a case study basis, Silverman and Will (1986) analyzed how Sylvia Plath’s depression worsened when she shifted from a more traditional poetic style to a more expressive style.

This extra introspection that may be involved in writing poetry may also be associated with mental illness. Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, and Grayson (1999) found that women who suffer from depression are more likely to engage in rumination, whereas men are more likely to distract themselves. This finding was also produced in a nondepressed sample of eighth graders (Sethi & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1997).

The link between rumination and depression can run both ways. Not only are individuals who suffer from depression more likely to ruminate (and, perhaps, turn these ruminations into poetry), but such rumination can also have a deleterious effect on their depression (Kuehner & Weber, 1999). If poets—especially female poets—are already inclined toward depression, then perhaps the actual act of writing poems may add to their mental instability.

This type of a direct relationship of creative style affecting psychopathology is one of five relationships described by Richards (1981, 1999) in her typology of creativity and psychopathology. Another involves the fact that pathology may affect creativity. We explore this relationship next.¹

People with mental disorders who also consider themselves to have artistic and creative talent may naturally gravitate toward the medium of poetry precisely because of its personal nature. VanTassel-Baska (1996) explained that female poets would channel their emotional disturbances into their writing, whereas women fiction writers (such as Charlotte Bronte and Virginia Woolf) found their mental instabilities to interfere with their creative work. Runco (1998) has examined in depth the way that Plath’s enormous personal investment in her poetry was connected with her depression.

¹ Her other three types include an indirect relationship of pathology to creativity, an indirect relationship of creativity to pathology, and a third factor that affects both creativity and pathology.

An additional possibility is that the linguistic style of poetry is such that it may appeal more to people who are prone to suffer from mental illness. Lynton and Salovey (1997) assigned participants to different writing conditions and then measured their mood. They found that being in a bad mood was associated with writing about abstract concepts, and being in a good mood was associated with writing about concrete concepts and a narrative style. Poetry tends to tackle more abstract concepts, whereas fiction may often deal with more concrete issues. In addition, although there are certainly many narrative poems, a narrative style is nonetheless more consistent with writing fiction.

Poetry's Link With Mental Illness

A second possibility is that whereas other forms of creative writing may alleviate mental illness, poetry does not. This is counterintuitive to such forms of psychotherapy as "poetry therapy" (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Rojcewicz, 1999). Research clearly supports the therapeutic value of *writing*, but the value of writing *poetry* is less clear.

Lepore (1997) found that students who engaged in expressive writing before an anxiety-provoking event (graduate entrance examinations) reported a significant reduction in depressive symptoms relative to a control group. This research is consistent with Pennebaker's (1997) notion that there is an association between writing about an emotional experience and improvements in physical and mental health.

Yet, conversely, expressive writing about a traumatic experience may be deleterious to one's health if adequate support and therapy are not in place (Honos-Webb, Harrick, Stiles, & Park, 2000). A study of suicidal and nonsuicidal poets showed that suicidal poets were more likely to use words associated with the self (as opposed to the collective), perhaps an indicator of more emotional and expressive work (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001). If the expressive work is focused on negative experiences, then the writer may experience an increase in negative mood (Marlo & Wagner, 1999). Another study showed that people who reported that writing served a cathartic function were more likely to suffer from poor health (Pennebaker, 1989).

In addition, it is not clear that writing poetry would have the same benefits as other kinds of writing. Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) found that the formation of a narrative was essential for mental and physical benefits. Many poems do not have narratives; most stories and plays do. In addition, participants who wrote for a longer and more intensive duration benefited more than participants who wrote for a shorter amount of time (Páez, Velasco, & González, 1999). Do poets write for the same duration each day as fiction writers?

The psychological impact of the acts of writing a piece of fiction and writing a poem may be different. This is an area that needs more research, and because it is not yet known whether poetry writing has a different psychological effect than fiction writing, the hypotheses that follow are speculative and based on what we acknowledge is an undemonstrated empirical difference.

Why could poetry *not* prove therapeutic? Could poets actually be harmed instead of helped by the act of writing poetry? The answer may be found in Bandura's (1977, 1997) theory of self-efficacy. Bandura focused on the importance of thinking positively about one's abilities. If people believe in their aptitudes—and see evidence of competence—they will tend to be more persistent in their efforts to succeed and less likely to be anxious or depressed. People high in self-efficacy will tend to focus on possibilities rather than limits and inadequacies. One reason for this perception is the feeling of being in control. When people perceive themselves to have an internal locus of control, they will tend to give themselves more credit for their successes (Rotter, 1990). An internal locus of control is also associated with having an optimistic explanatory style, which is often highly associated with a variety of good outcomes, such as better health (Peterson, 2000).

Yet, many people in the arts, because of the very "mystical" nature of how a person creates, may (even unconsciously) credit "divine inspiration" for their work. Piirto (1998b) found that many writers—even to this day—see their source of inspiration as being found in a "muse." Poets, in particular, were likely to credit such a "muse" for their creative work (Piirto, 1998b). Even if such a misattribution results from superstition or modesty, it may produce a perceived external locus of control.

Writers (and especially poets) may mentally assign credit—and, indirectly, locus of control—to such a muse, and this may give them less sense of self-efficacy. This, in turn, may make them more prone to depression and other emotional disorders. Belief in external agents (of which a “muse” would be just one example) has been found to be linked with a decreased ability to recognize one’s own active role in achieving desired outcomes (Gilbert, Brown, Pinel, & Wilson, 2000). Writers who credit a muse for their ideas and what they write—and who are thereby making external attributions of the causes of their successes—may have a greater likelihood of suffering from such disorders as anxiety or depression because they have a lower sense of self-efficacy than writers who do not invoke a muse to explain their accomplishments.

This phenomenon may particularly affect women, who have been found to be more likely to have an external, rather than internal, locus of control (Sherman, Higgs, & Williams, 1997; Smith, Dugan, & Trompenaars, 1997).² Women who have low self-esteem—and who may therefore be at higher risk of showing signs of illness such as depression—are known to have a more external locus of control (for both success and failure) than women with higher self-esteem (Chubb, Fertman, & Ross, 1997).³

Thus, even though writing may have therapeutic rewards, these rewards may not be applicable to writing poetry. Indeed, some poets may be inadvertently engaged in a pattern of external attribution and control that may not merely deprive them of these rewards but actually be detrimental.

Implicit Expectations of Illness

Many of the studies that have revealed a connection between poetry and mental illness have examined eminent writers. Perhaps one confounding variable in these studies is that the publishing field (editors, publishers, agents, and so forth) unconsciously rewards poetry that is produced by mental illness. The field is an important component of the creative system; Csikszentmihalyi (1999) described creativity as an interaction of domain, person, and field. A specific person produces a creative work in a particular domain (such as mathematics or fiction writing), and this work is then given to the field,

the “gatekeepers” of the domain. The gatekeepers of the domain of creative writing include professors, agents, literary critics, and magazine editors. If the field has expectations or preconceptions, then these beliefs may eventually influence other components, such as the work of people involved in the creative activity.

Where would these preconceptions be rooted? One frequent stereotype is that male poets tend to write about less personal issues (such as war, spirituality, and “pure” love), whereas female poets turn inward for inspiration. A content analysis of poetry and prose could provide insights into whether this stereotype is true or false.⁴ Regardless of whether it is grounded in fact, however, such a stereotype may still exist in the conceptions of the gatekeepers. The field may accept the stereotype and unconsciously create expectations.

Perhaps one cause of Kaufman’s (2001b) “Sylvia Plath” effect is that creative writing gatekeepers may unconsciously expect a quality poem written by a woman to be heartfelt and moving without holding similar expectations for a poem written by a man. This dichotomy could create a situation in which female poets who suffer from mental illness and pour out their troubles in their poetry may actually be more likely to have their work praised (and

² It is worth noting that some psychologists (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) object to such findings on gender differences, and these results should be interpreted cautiously.

³ One key variable in determining the possible risk to mental health may be whether writers perceive themselves as being in control of their muse. Some writers may see the muse as a resource for inspiration over which they have power. In this situation, they maintain an internal locus of control. The muse serves a beneficial purpose—it is a resource to be tapped—and these writers’ primary reason for writing is still intrinsic motivation (i.e., enjoyment). But other writers may conceive of their muse in a different way. They may envision the muse as the sole source of ideas and see themselves as a vessel for their creative works. In this (extreme) situation, they are not writing for their own reasons but, rather, are viewing themselves as pawns. These writers would be moved by external forces, which can lead to an emphasis on extrinsic motivation instead of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As Deci and Ryan (1980, 1985) have argued, intrinsic motivation is a key ingredient in higher self-esteem, better self-determination, and more positive emotions.

⁴ Such a study could involve a format similar to Schaller’s (1997) examination of the work of John Cheever, Kurt Cobain, and Cole Porter or Stirman and Pennebaker’s (2001) ongoing use of computer programs and text analysis.

published) than female poets who produce less intimate work. Similarly, women fiction writers who suffer from mental illness may be at a disadvantage in trying to get their work known if the gatekeepers of the fiction writing field prefer work that is less personal.

The gatekeepers may very well have these ingrained stereotypes about women writers without necessarily being aware of them. Banaji and her colleagues (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Blair & Banaji, 1996; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), for example, have found that stereotyping can occur unconsciously; even when people may explicitly say they are not prejudiced against a particular group, implicit measures reveal that such a bias may very well exist.

Age and Mental Illness

Simonton has done extensive research on productivity, creativity, and age and has found that people in the arts peak earlier than people in the sciences (Simonton, 1990). More specifically, and more appropriate to this article, poets peak markedly earlier than novelists (Simonton, 1975, 1989); indeed, poets produce twice as much of their lifetime output in their 20s as novelists do (Simonton, 1984). This earlier productivity may be one reason why poets can produce great work yet still die younger than other writers and artists (Cassandro, 1998).

Many mental illnesses—particularly bipolar depression, the most common illness studied in conjunction with creativity (e.g., Jamison, 1993)—are more common at younger ages than older ages. The onset of bipolar affective illness is often remarkably early; 20% of patients have shown evidence of the disorder as early as adolescence, and the peak of the disorder is in the 20s (Loranger & Levine, 1978). Indeed, adolescence and young adulthood are considered to be particularly essential periods in determining whether an individual will develop bipolar disorder, unipolar depression, phobias, and drug and alcohol abuse (Burke, Burke, Regier, & Rae, 1990). Bipolar depression and most other mood disorders are more common in younger adults than in older adults (Eaton et al., 1989).

If mental illness is most likely to be an issue during young adulthood, particularly one's 20s, and poets are most likely to produce their greatest output during their young adulthood, also in their 20s, then the connection between poetry

and mental illness may be strengthened by the poet's age. Other writers typically peak later, and by that time in their lives, they are less likely to be affected by illness. Poets peak earlier, when mental illness is most likely to be an issue.

Summary

The answer to the question "Why poets?" may very well be that several different and unrelated factors build up and compound each other. People who may be more likely to suffer from mental illness may be more drawn to writing poetry. Other types of writers may accrue therapeutic effects from their writing, but poets may gain fewer benefits and may actually be harmed. The "gatekeepers" who decide which poems are selected into journals and magazines may have implicit ideas about what makes an "appropriate" poem, thereby skewing eminent poets toward topics and ideas that might be more related to mental illness. And, finally, poets peak earlier, at a more vulnerable time for the onset of mental illness. Each of these issues may not in itself be enough to result in the connection between poetry and mental illness, but the combined weight may create a group of writers who are at risk.

Future Directions

One future direction to be explored is the question of style versus form. Is it poetry that is more likely to be linked to mental illness, or is it styles associated with poetry (e.g., expressiveness and emotionality)? There is some evidence focusing only on writing style. Pennebaker and King (1999) analyzed language dimensions, linguistic profiles, and personality variables. They found that using the first-person singular (I, me, and my) and writing in the present tense were two factors that loaded on a dimension labeled "immediacy." This "immediacy" dimension was significantly correlated with "neuroticism." Stirman and Pennebaker (2001) found that suicidal poets were more likely to use first-person singular than a control group of nonsuicidal poets. These results indicate that perhaps fiction writers who use the first-person singular would be more prone to mental illness than poets who use the more distant style of third person.

Another possible avenue for future research would be to not only analyze the style of the work in greater detail but also analyze the writers' lives in greater detail. Many writers with mental illness have affective disorders such as manic depression (Jamison, 1993), a disorder particularly known for periods of intense affliction and periods of comparative peace. How would writers' most troubled and least troubled times be correlated with their most productive and least productive periods? Would writers produce the most when they are the most afflicted or the least afflicted?

Andreassen and Glick (1988) suggested that creative people would be most productive when their illnesses are under good control. Zausner (1998) used chaos theory to contend that physical illness could have one of four effects on an artist's work, one being that illness would transform his or her creative process and the art produced. Could a similar transformation occur with mental illness, with mental disorders playing an integral role in the type of work produced? Berman (1995) has argued that artists are the least productive during the calm periods of their lives. But is the reverse true? Could the moments of tranquility be just as essential to the creation process?

Certainly, several psychologists would argue that the mental processes involved in the creation of great work and the mental processes involved in an emotional illness may simply coexist and not interact. Richards and Kinney (1990), for example, studied people who were diagnosed with bipolar and unipolar depression and asked them when their most creative mood states occurred. A majority of the patients (more than 75%) reported that they were most creative when they were in "normal" or "mildly elevated" mood states, as opposed to more severe mood states.

Jamison's (1989, 1993) study of writers and artists produced different results for those who had been treated for manic depression and those who had not. Those who had not been treated had similar trends in terms of both productivity and mood ratings: When they were in a better mood, they were more likely to be productive. Ratings of mood and productivity diverged, however, among writers and artists who had been treated for manic depression. Productivity peaks occurred before and after mood peaks by approximately 3 to 4 months. One reason for

this difference, Jamison (1993) hypothesized, is that an elevated mood may actually be a hypomanic state that would reflect "greater distractibility, irritability, increases in seeking out of other people, and alcohol abuse" (p. 139). The key seems to be that it is more important for the mood to be balanced than for it to be necessarily good.

At times, perhaps, mental illness (especially in its most severe forms) may impede and interfere with creativity. Singer (1966) emphasized that the positive daydreaming and fantasizing that are involved with imaginative thought are not necessarily associated with the more negative flights of fancy that may be manifested in such disorders as schizophrenia. Rothenberg (1990) advanced the theory that many of the mental processes involved in creativity are often healthy and productive. A creator's mental illness may have nothing to do with the act of creation itself and may, if anything, impede the process; the production of a piece of writing requires coherent thought, not something one associates with mental illness. However, Jamison (1993) argued that periods of clear and logical thought are certainly consistent with the cyclical nature of such illnesses as manic depression. Shapiro and Weisberg (2000) argued that much of the past research that has examined these questions, however, may have been confounded by the confusion between mental illness and normal correlates with creativity in the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions. More in-depth research that focuses on how mental illness affects the creative process and different types of creative writing is needed if any larger conclusions are to be drawn.

Why Female Poets?

In this section, it is argued that differences in the ways in which women and men deal with extrinsic motivational constraints may contribute to the observed differences in rates of mental illness among writers. Such factors appear to have a greater impact on women than on men, and this effect would be especially striking among women writers who have achieved critical acclaim. This theory is based on the following chain of reasoning.

First, women tend to show greater concern with maintaining interpersonal relationships

than men, and men tend to be less sensitive to the effects of interpersonal communications than women. This results in greater attention by women to salient extrinsic constraints in the environment (Claim 1). Second, high levels of creativity require one to “defy the crowd” and to ignore extrinsic motivational constraints (Claim 2). Third, because women are more attuned to the needs of others and have more difficulty ignoring extrinsic motivational constraints than men, the act of creating at high levels produces more stress in female creative writers than in male creative writers (Conclusion 1). Finally, highly successful female creative writers—and especially poets—typically suffer from greater psychological stress than both other women who are not successful writers and successful male creative writers. This heightened level of stress causes psychological distress and results in a higher incidence of mental illness (Conclusion 2).

We first present evidence supporting Claims 1 and 2. These are the basic premises of our argument, and they lead to the final two links in the chain of the argument, which are the conclusions.

Claim 1

Piirto (1998a), who surveyed 80 successful women creative writers about various aspects of their writing and personal lives, found that these women “experienced conflict between the social expectations of being a woman and being a writer” (p. 61). This conflict, rooted in women’s role in Western society as caretakers, begins at least as early as middle school and is not limited to women who become writers. It is characteristic of 20th-century American women in general.

“Caretaking has to be done,” Bateson (1989) noted, and “somebody’s got to be the mommy” (p. 140). Although the ability to empathize with others, a willingness to pay close attention to others’ needs, and the interpersonal communication skills needed by caretakers can be practiced and learned by all human beings, women have traditionally taken up the role of caretaker in Western society more than men (and it is therefore immediately understood what Bateson meant when she stated that someone must be “the mommy”). From a very early age, Bateson (1989) argued, “girls are encouraged to imagine

themselves into maternal and caretaking roles” (p. 160) far more than boys.

Gilligan (1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990; Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988) has written extensively about the different developmental trajectories of boys and girls in the United States. One consistent finding is that girls are more sensitive to interpersonal communications than boys. Girls value group cohesiveness more, and they emphasize more than boys the importance of maintaining good relationships with others. Gilligan’s work has been confirmed by other researchers in psychology and women’s studies (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Hancock, 1989; Pool, 1994).

These findings are consistent with personality research showing that, across many different cultures, women score themselves as being more “agreeable” on five-factor personality inventories (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001). In addition, women have been found to assign more positive ratings to other people on all of the Big Five personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) than men (Winqvist, Mohr, & Kenny, 1998).

There is experimental evidence of this gender difference in sensitivity to interpersonal communications that relates directly to creative performance. Baer (1997) instructed eighth-grade participants (66 girls and 62 boys) to write original poems and stories under conditions favoring both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In the intrinsic motivation condition, participants were told that their poems and stories would not be evaluated; in the extrinsic condition, participants were led to expect evaluation, and the importance of the evaluation was made highly salient. The poems and stories were judged for creativity by experts. Results revealed a significant Gender X Motivational Condition effect. Among boys, there were virtually no differences in creativity ratings under intrinsic and extrinsic conditions; among girls, however, these differences were quite large, with a significant drop in performance under extrinsic constraints.

In three later studies conducted with middle school students, Baer (1998) found that both anticipated evaluation and rewards had a significant impact on the creative performance of girls but not boys. Similarly, Kogan (1974),

Cropley and Feuring (1971), and Katz and Poag (1979) found that girls were more susceptible to differences in testing situations and testing instructions than boys taking divergent-thinking tests. Baer (1997, 1998) argued that girls' greater sensitivity to interpersonal communications and desire to please others made them more susceptible than boys to messages that would affect their levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

A caveat is necessary: With the exception of Piirto's (1998a) study of successful women writers, all of the research cited in this section refers to women (or girls) in general, not specifically to highly creative women or successful women writers. What is true of other women may not be true of the small subgroup—highly successful writers—whose high incidence of mental illness we are attempting to understand. In this regard, it has also been suggested that creativity may be correlated with either biological or psychological androgyny. For example, Hassler (1992), in an analysis of 117 composers, instrumentalists, and nonmusicians, offered evidence suggesting that the salivary testosterone levels of male composers were lower than those of male instrumentalists and nonmusicians and that the testosterone levels of female composers were higher than those of female instrumentalists and nonmusicians. In addition, Chrisler (1991) found that androgynous individuals (according to Bem's, 1974, Sex-Role Inventory) scored higher on the verbal, but not the figural, forms of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1962).

Barron and Harrington (1981) listed a number of studies of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny and reported that indices of each of these three traits "were sometimes positively and sometimes negatively associated with indices of creative achievement, ability, or self-concept" (p. 458). This remains an intriguing possibility but one that, at present, is substantiated at best weakly (Baer, 1999, in press; Thurston & Runco, 1999). If such a connection between androgyny and creativity exists, however, it might have implications for our theory; specifically, this could mean that highly creative women may be unlike other women in regard to attention to interpersonal communications and relationships. We recognize that more work needs to be done to assess whether highly successful women writers do in fact (as we are

assuming) share this trait of greater concern with interpersonal relationships and extrinsic constraints that has been demonstrated in other women.

Claim 2

Amabile (1996) and her colleagues have shown, in a wide variety of studies, that extrinsic constraints decrease creativity (and, conversely, that higher levels of intrinsic motivation are associated with higher levels of creative performance). Although there may be conditions under which extrinsic constraints do not hinder and may even enhance creativity (e.g., see Eisenberger & Cameron, 1996, as well as the "updates" that Amabile added to her original [1983] book in its 1996 republication), the generally negative impact on creative performance of attending to extrinsic constraints has been well documented. Hennessey (Hennessey, Amabile, & Martinage, 1989; Hennessey & Zbikowski, 1993) has also demonstrated experimentally the importance of being able to ignore extrinsic constraints, even when they are highly salient, and of the possibility of increasing this ability through training.

Amabile's (1996) research evidence stemmed from studies of everyday or garden-variety creativity, however, not the high levels of creativity associated with the women creative writers whose tendency to suffer from mental illness is being addressed here. Amabile (1996) did provide a great deal of anecdotal evidence of the negative effects of extrinsic constraints on genius-level creativity and the importance for creators of minimizing these constraints (e.g., see pp. 5–16), as did Sternberg and Lubart (1995), whose book title *Defying the Crowd* emphasized the importance of being able to stand alone if one is to create at the highest levels. Moreover, Amabile (1996) argued that creativity is a continuum, with factors such as the salience of extrinsic motivational constraints important at all levels. Although many agree with Amabile, there is not a strong consensus among creativity theorists on this issue of the similarity of creative processes underlying different levels of creative performance. However, even those who suggest that creativity is a discontinuous concept, with qualitatively different processes affecting genius-level creativity and more common garden-variety creativity, generally acknowledge the importance for the creator of maintaining high levels

of intrinsic motivation and of not being distracted by extrinsic constraints (e.g., see Gruber, 1981, and Gruber & Davis, 1988).

Conclusion 1

Success as a creative writer means (among other things) receiving increased public attention and acclaim, and it also brings more critical review of one's work. All writers, successful and undiscovered alike, may sometimes fantasize about unknown future audiences of their work (and may even at times be haunted by the thought of others' anticipated evaluations of that work); among successful writers, however, such thoughts are much more likely to be salient, because people actually are already reading and reacting to their words (and presumably will be doing so in the future). They have reason to assume that there will be an audience for whatever they are currently working on, and book sales, awards, financial compensations, reviews, and so forth also remind them with great force and regularity of the extrinsic motivational factors that are attached to the kind of creative work they are doing.

Why should having difficulty ignoring extrinsic constraints result in increased stress? Producing work of great creativity while extrinsic constraints remain salient is much more difficult than producing creative work when one's motivation is primarily intrinsic (Amabile, 1996). The likely result of such tension is higher levels of psychological stress. And to the extent that one is unable to ignore salient extrinsic constraints (something that is generally more difficult for women than for men), the effort expended in suppressing one's tendencies to attend to such factors is likely to be tension producing.

Conclusion 2

According to many theories of mental illness, such as the general diathesis–stress theory and most psychodynamic theories, increased levels of stress will typically lead to a greater likelihood of mental illness. Women creative writers have higher levels of stress than their male counterparts, and poets have a higher incidence of mental illness than other creative writers (Kaufman, 2001b). Female creative writers should therefore be expected to have a higher

incidence of mental illness than male creative writers (and female poets to have the highest rate of mental illness among writers). And, indeed, this pattern has been observed (Kaufman, 2001b; Ludwig, 1995).

Summary

Piirto's (1998a) study of contemporary women creative writers showed that these women exhibit the "same personality characteristics and drive as men writers, but they also experience the conflict of being women and reconciling family duties with their creative work" (p. 68). The explanation that is being put forward here, based on a quite different line of evidence and argument, parallels Piirto's conclusion with the exception that our emphasis is on differing ways in which women and men experience and deal with extrinsic environmental constraints. Women creative writers in contemporary Western society will tend to struggle more than men with the increased salience of others' expectations and evaluations that accompany creative success. Because poets in general are already more at risk for mental illness than other creative writers, female poets suffer from a "double whammy" of factors contributing to mental illness.

Piirto (1998a) suggested that young writers might either find comfort in her findings or decide, on the basis of the difficulties such a life is likely to entail, to reject creative writing in favor of a more psychologically safe profession. It is hoped that the current analysis will also help women creative writers understand—and perhaps find better ways to deal healthfully and productively with—the special demands of success and recognition as a writer.

Future Directions

Much work will need to be done to test the validity and the limits of the theory being proposed. For example, do female poets—and especially successful female poets—exhibit the same pattern of greater sensitivity to extrinsic motivational constraints that has been observed in other women (in comparison with equally successful male poets)? This assumption needs to be verified. Also, do successful women creative writers who are *not* poets experience similar patterns (in comparison with their male

counterparts) in regard to (a) the amount of attention they give to such extrinsic constraints and (b) the effects of such attention to extrinsic motivators on their levels of stress and mental illness? Research in these areas could help either to extend or to show the limits of the range of our theory.

There are also questions regarding the underlying processes that mediate these effects. Do male and female poets have similar or different mechanisms for dealing with (or ignoring) extrinsic constraints? And what techniques or training might allow those who have difficulty putting aside or ignoring such extrinsic motivators to acquire an "immunity" to them? Answers to these questions would help us understand how the observed effects are produced and perhaps give clues as to how to lessen the negative effects, which appear to fall most heavily on female poets, of the increasingly salient extrinsic constraints that inevitably follow success and recognition as a writer.

Conclusion

The adage that creativity and "madness" are linked together is by and large supported by the existing research. This idea is currently being explored in many new ways and venues. One especially well-established connection is that between the writing of poetry and the incidence of mental illness, and one of the more puzzling and unfortunate parts of this linkage is the unexpectedly high rate of mental illness among female poets.

There are many possible reasons why poets may be more likely to experience mental illness than people who either write in other genres or do not write at all. Poetry may attract those with a predisposition toward mental illness, and the domain of poetry may particularly reward those who exhibit mental illness. Unusual aspects of the domain of poetry writing, such as the typical age at which poets peak and the possible failure of poetry to provide the kinds of psychological benefits that often come with other kinds of writing, may also increase the likelihood that poets will succumb to mental illness. These domain-specific aspects of writing poetry affect men and women alike. In addition, the greater difficulty that women tend to experience in ignoring extrinsic motivational constraints may cause successful female poets to have an even

higher incidence of psychological stress, and of mental illness, than male poets.

A great deal of research has sought to determine what types of mental illness are associated with creativity. The illnesses examined have included bipolar depression (e.g., Jamison, 1989, 1993; Richards, Kinney, Lunde, Benet, & Merzel, 1988), affective disorder (Richards, Kinney, Daniels, & Linkins, 1992), psychoticism (Eysenck, 1995), schizophrenia (e.g., Andreasen, 1987; Andreasen & Glick, 1988), negative schizotypy-social anhedonia (Claridge, 1997; Cox & Leon, 1999), and unipolar depression (Post, 1996). Although all of this research has certainly been valuable, it represents only a piece of the puzzle. If there is to be a complete understanding of the ways in which mental illness and creative writing interact, the form and content of the writing must be examined at a similar level of detail.

Understanding why poets, and especially female poets, so often succumb to mental illness is of more than theoretical importance. It might also allow poets, their loved ones, their mentors, and their therapists to act in ways that lead to better mental health among poets. It might, for example, make it possible for women writers to learn ways to deal more effectively with the various extrinsic constraints that are likely to follow success (perhaps in ways analogous to the "immunization" studies that Hennessey and her colleagues conducted to help children keep extrinsic motivators in perspective; Hennessey et al., 1989; Hennessey & Zbikowski, 1993).

The purpose of this article was to explore possible reasons for the high rate of mental illness among female poets. As such, it has been somewhat speculative. We hope that these speculations will not only help psychologists better understand why so many talented female poets suffer from mental illness but also increase and focus research on this topic. Empirical studies of writers from both past and present times can be used to eventually help writers of future generations.

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