

Saving Sylvia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Genius, Gender, and Madness Research & Presentation by Cimarron Burt

Beginning in the late 19th century, the field of psychology increasingly concerned itself with the study of creativity; at the same time, female authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman were criticizing the deleterious effects of psychiatry on the creative woman. Just decades later, Virginia Woolf publicly mused upon the deadly consequences of “the heat and violence of a poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body” Seven decades later, in 2001, Dr. James. C Kaufman coined the “Sylvia Plath effect,” referring to the “preliminary finding of notable mental illness in female poets.

An interdisciplinary exploration of the links between “genius” and “madness,” madness and gender, and gender and genius offers several perspectives of the Sylvia Plath effect. Despite the historical trends related to this issue, there are lessons to be learned and help to be offered to future female poets so that they are able to thrive in their profession as well as in their personal lives. Therefore, philosophical, medical, and literary perspectives are reframed here as potential solutions and suggestions, enabling the mentors of postgraduate/professional female poets to encourage the stability and eminence of those under their tutelage by mitigating the effects of mental illness and increasing sustainable creativity.

Some of the most compelling examinations of the relationship between creativity and mental instability predate modern psychology by hundreds--- even thousands --- of years. Philosophers first began examining the nature of creativity during the Classical Period: Socrates allegedly believed great poets were out of their minds, composing their poems not by art, but because they were inspired and possessed.

In one Platonic dialogue, Socrates meets a rhapsode, Ion, along the road. Ion has just come from a festival, having won first place in a recitation contest; he is pompous and a braggart. Socrates questions Ion about the merits and skills of a rhapsode; Ion, at first, claims to be divinely inspired. Socrates quickly reveals that Ion is a fraud; the gods speak to the poet directly, who in turn inspire the rhapsode. Poets, as a result of their direct contact with divine inspiration, simply go mad:

. . . the lyric poets are not in their senses when they make these lovely lyric poems. [...] a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until [...] reason is no longer in him. So long as he has this in his possession, no man is able to make poetry.

Plato’s suggestion, that poets are God-addled and feeble-minded, influenced millennia of creative people, thinkers, and scientists.

Another Classical example: in the thirtieth book of *Problemata*, Plato’s protege Aristotle asks, “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of [a melancholic] temperament?” He answers his own query, in a quotation attributed to him by Seneca: There is no great genius without a mixture of madness. At the time, this claim was probably sensational; now,

it's merely a truism, insanity being a given condition of genius.

Likewise, Immanuel Kant effaces geniuses' agency by ascribing creativity to solely extrinsic factors, writing, "Talent is an innate productive ability of the artist [...] if an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he came by the ideas for it; nor is it in his power. . ." Again, we see the eminent creative individual represented as an instrument through which fine art is created, though Kant carefully avoids any discussion of pathology, instead focusing on the role of inherent talent and innate abilities. Still, the Socratic notion of creativity as a supernatural or paranormal occurrence persists in Kant's work, continuing to influence other esteemed, contemporary philosophers such as Ian Jarvie and Daniel Hausman.

Early in the twentieth century, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud took an interest in inspiration and creativity. In *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, Freud posits that writers draw their material from their heroic and/or erotic daydreams. Like dreams, he argues, creative writing allows an individual to experience wish-fulfillment; writers transform their daydreams and fantasies into works of literature. Freud's theory of creativity, while still supporting the idea that inspiration is ultimately a function unknowable to its practitioner, was novel in that it identified fine art as having its conceptual origin within the human mind: writers are not divinely inspired, he argued, but rather draw from experience and memory to compose their beautiful strains.

Curiously, Freud's protege, Carl Jung, did not continue this line of thought, but partially regressed to the Socratic notion of art as an automatic process. "Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being & makes him its instrument," he explains. "The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purpose through him." Jung goes on to claim that the artist's life is "ruled and moulded" against his will by unconscious creative forces, though the influence is not bilateral: ". . . the personal life of the poet cannot be held essential to his art --- but at most a help or hindrance to his creative task. He may go the way of the Philistine, a good citizen, a neurotic, a fool, or a criminal."

In 1992, Arnold M. Ludwig reported on the relationship between creativity and psychopathology within different professions, having found professionals in creative fields were found to be at a greater risk for experiencing more personal tragedy, emotional instability, substance abuse, depression, mania, anxiety, and psychoses than politicians, businessmen, etc. Poets were found to be especially prone to "certain types of psychopathology," such as alcoholism, depression, and suicidality. Two years later, Ludwig reported that twice as many writers as nonwriters experienced at least one mental disorder, the most common being depression --- 56% of writers in the study were clinically depressed.

Female writers in particular had "substantially" higher rates of depression, panic disorder, and generalized anxiety when compared to the US (female) population-at-large; this finding corroborated earlier studies, which concluded writers were at a

higher risk for affective disorders than comparison groups.

Kaufman, for his 2001 report delineating the Sylvia Plath effect, conducted two historiometric studies examining the relationship between creativity and madness, in which he accounted for variables including genre, gender, and signs of mental illness and trauma. In the first study, Kaufman analyzed 1,629 writers from four literary genres. Poets were found to be significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness than their peers; of all the subjects, female poets were found to have the highest rate of mental illness. Kaufman's second study compared 520 eminent women from several occupations. Again, female poets were found to be much more likely than their peers to exhibit psychiatric disorders.

The biological sciences have weighed in on the link between "genius" and "madness" as well. In 2015, Scandinavian scientists confirmed a genetic basis for artists' "melancholy temperament," claiming creativity --- measured by one's professional involvement in the fine arts --- "comes with an increased risk of psychiatric disorders" A team of researchers tested the accuracy with which polygenic risk scores for bipolar disorder and schizophrenia could predict creativity; researchers then looked for associations between these risk scores and measures of creativity.

"Creativity," the researchers concluded, is "conferred, at least in part, by common genetic variants, and comes with an increased risk of psychiatric disorders conferred by the same genetic variants.". This finding corroborated Ludwig's 1994 study, which found "a familial basis for creativity, demonstrated by the fact that close relatives of creative individuals have higher rates of profound mental illness than control groups.

Indeed, there are a handful of acclaimed writers whose close relatives suffered from mental illness: Nicholas Hughes, the only son of poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, committed suicide in 2009, while Lucia Joyce --- daughter of Irish novelist, James Joyce --- suffered from schizophrenia and received treatment in Switzerland.

Joyce was skeptical of Carl Jung's diagnosis of Lucia, writing to a friend, "my daughter is not myself. I wouldn't go to him, but maybe he can help her" Joyce vehemently protested Jung's psychoanalysis of his daughter's poetry: what Jung considered disordered language characteristic of insanity, Joyce believed was proof of Lucia's literary audacity. Joyce reportedly belittled Jung, declaring that his daughter was no more or less mad than he. Jung agreed, "with the difference, however, that the ordinary patient cannot help talking and thinking in such a way, while Joyce willed it and moreover developed it with all his creative forces. Which incidentally explains why he himself did not go over the border. But his daughter did . . . merely a victim of her disease.

Though many psychoanalytic theories have been disproved, discredited, and discarded, Jung's hypothesis that Lucia and Joyce were merely two sides of the same coin was exceptionally insightful. Neuropsychologist, Dr. Andreas Fink, after

examining patterns of neural activity via medical imaging, found schizotypy and originality are manifested in astonishingly similar ways at the biological level. "The finding that creativity and schizotypy show similar effects at the level of the brain," Fink concludes, "would thus support the idea that similar cognitive processes may be implicated in creativity as well as in psychosis proneness"

Despite the disheartening inquiries into the phenomenon of creativity and "a history of gender discrimination," Kaufman & Baer note, "there are some arenas throughout history that have been more open than others to talented women" (271). Literature has traditionally been one such "arena" in which creatively inclined women are able to achieve eminence, though not for a prolonged amount of time: female poets have the shortest lifespans of all creative individuals.

In 1933, after the collapse of her marriage and a lengthy battle with pneumonia, Sara Teasdale took her own life by overdosing on barbiturates; two years later, Charlotte Perkins Gilman followed suit. Her poison of choice was chloroform. In 1941, at the age of 59, novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf drowned herself in the River Ouse. Two decades later, Plath was found dead in her London flat, with her head in the oven and the gas valves open. Eleven years following Plath's death, her friend, celebrated poet Anne Sexton, locked herself in the garage as her idling car filled the space with lethal carbon monoxide. In the space of four decades, at least five distinguished, female members of the literary community had committed suicide.

The literature produced by these women often spoke frankly of their struggles with mental illness and gender discrimination, factors which undoubtedly complicated their already-fraught lives and contributed to their suicidality.

The general consensus among female writers is that womanhood is rife with unnecessary difficulties, conferred in large part by women's historically disadvantaged sociopolitical position. Women who do break the mold, as Woolf points out in *Women's Fiction* are plagued by mental states and creative texts that are "twisted and deformed , issuing from a strained and morbid imagination."

As time goes on, other female writers will unfortunately follow in the twisted, deformed, strained, and morbid tradition established by the likes of Woolf and Plath --- it is a biological inevitability and a psychosocial likelihood. It is critical though to find meaning in the tragedies of these individuals. Kaufman asks, "Can conclusions we might draw on female poets extend equally well to Sylvia Plath and to a college student writing poetry in her journal?" .

The perspective presented here accounts for the complex convergence of psychological and social issues centered in women poets, and seeks to better manage the negative effects of mental illness and sustain creativity for the long term. By taking an interdisciplinary perspective, valuable insights gleaned from varied discourses can be reimagined to provide guidance for the creative mentors of female poets. There are

a number of provisions which contribute to the safety, longevity, and success of female poets.

The goal of the proposed model of mentorship is twofold: mitigate the effects of mental illness and increase sustainable creativity.

Consider the effects of untreated mental illness: unhappiness; conflicts; social isolation; alcohol and drug abuse; absenteeism; legal problems; poverty; poor physical health; and physical harm. Fortunately, in 60 - 80% of cases, treatment improves one's quality of life significantly. Therefore, it is critical for all mentors to encourage students to practice good mental health and respond to struggling students.

Creative individuals often report feeling frustrated or despaired by 'blocks' or a lack of inspiration. However, research suggests individuals who perceive themselves to have an internal locus of control tend to be less anxious or depressed, and more persistent in their efforts to succeed. Furthermore, extrinsic constraints and motivations preclude a decrease in creative performance. It follows then, that cultivating a personal sense of self-reliance in female poets should mitigate deleterious effects of mental illness and engender sustainable creativity. Therefore, mentors should orient themselves toward developing students' agency, which "involves the activity and the initiative of the learner."

Practical pedagogical recommendations for contemporary educators are as follows: First, read student work with close attention to style, theme, and language. Second, cultivate a classroom environment in which agency is valued.