

## 'Such tricks hath strong imagination'

Jan. 7, 1972: John Berryman — Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, regents' professor at the University of Minnesota, alcoholic and manic-depressive — jumped to his death from the Washington Avenue Bridge on the Mississippi River. His father had blown his own brains out 45 years earlier. Berryman thus bore the 2,000-year-old reputation of artists as wild, moody, suicidal souls from unstable families.

Shakespeare, as usual, got it exactly right: "The lunatic, the lover, the poet/ Are of imagination all compact," all with "seething brains," but only the poet can give shape and beauty to the imaginings.

In our time the disciplines of neuroscience, genetics, psychology and art history have joined to develop a theory about creativity, especially in the arts. Creativity, it is proposed, is somehow linked genetically to the disorders of brain chemistry that give us manic-depression, also known as bipolar illness. As a poet myself and with some inclination to be gloomy, I was curious to explore the matter further.

**The evidence for the theory** runs something like this:

1. Bipolar illness runs in families; not always, but enough to alert psychiatrists when they see a patient for the first time.
2. Creative people are more likely to suffer mild to severe symptoms of bipolar illness or, if not, to have it in their families.
3. Conversely, people with bipolar illness who are not themselves creative are more likely to have healthy relatives who are.
4. What we call personality or temperament — such as outgoingness, shyness, exuberance, irritability, obsessiveness — also tends to be inherited. Temperament thus represents the normal, healthy end of a spectrum of behavior that includes full-blown bipolar illness at the other end. Some temperaments are thought more likely to produce creativity than others.

(It's important to note that most creative people are not manic-depressives, and most manic-depressives are not creative; we're dealing here with tendencies and averages.)

**Then the speculation:** The reason genes for manic-depression remain in the population is that they are linked to creativity, a gift that allows human beings to survive all kinds of circumstances and climates.

That might seem a reasonable summary, but the full story is actually more complicated.

Much of the theory originated from analyzing the biographies of famous artists of the past. The poets Byron ("mad, bad, and dangerous to know") and Tennyson ("the heir of madness") had family trees filled with eccentrics and "lunatics." Many artists, like Berryman, committed suicide or were otherwise considered deranged by their contemporaries, their biographies filled with anecdotes that sound like episodes of manic-depression.

Byron had a violent temper, drank heavily and was adulterous, even fathering a child with his own half-sister, finally dying while on a madcap mission to fight for Greek independence. The difficulty with such evidence, of course, is the lack of control groups: biographies and family trees of not-so-famous artists or just ordinary people, for instance.

**Joyce Carol Oates put it** quite neatly: "Neurotic people or alcoholics who go through life make better copy, and people talk about them, tell anecdotes about them. The quiet people just do their work."

Some people thought to be manic-depressive actually had other illnesses: Robert Schumann died insane from syphilis, Beethoven had lead poisoning, Robert Burns was treated with mercury, and so on. Yet what

strikes me as remarkable is that even today, among all artists, poets are much more likely to be diagnosed with some degree of manic-depression. We may also wonder what kind of temperament it takes to scramble for artistic success and, once there, to withstand popular adulation: "Whom the gods would destroy, first they make famous."

Then again, madness and creativity have not always gone together. Margot and Rudolf Wittkower ("Born Under Saturn") analyzed the biographies of dozens of painters and sculptors from ancient Greece through the 19th century and found that in some eras madness was expected of artists — the artists even promoted such an idea to distinguish themselves from ordinary craftsmen — while at other times the artists were as normal as white bread and green grass. Suicide among them was rare. In the 19th century, Romantics like Byron purposefully created their mad life-styles.

Psychological patterns can thus be strongly influenced by culture and popular expectations; bulimia in women is a present-day example. In addition, many artists considered mad were also alcoholic or took opiates or were treated with neurotoxins like mercury, which surely had effects on their behavior.

**The genetic theory linking** madness and creativity may turn out to be right, but I prefer a more subtle explanation. I believe people with a certain melancholy, contemplative nature often turn to the arts as a kind of release. When a mood of elation seizes them, they, like people with true bipolar illness, are able to make original, creative leaps of invention and association. Yet it still takes hard work, long apprenticeship, and discipline to craft a fine poem, painting, sculpture or composition.

Above all, creativity requires a love for words, sounds, forms, colors. As Shakespeare put it, "And as imagination bodies forth/ The form of things unknown, the poet's pen/ Turns them into shapes, and gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name./ Such tricks hath strong imagination."

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