

Excerpt from *Finding Your Bipolar Muse*

By Lana Castle

The Creative Mystique

PEOPLE EXPECT CREATIVE artists to suffer. To be outcasts. To live in drafty flats in seedy neighborhoods in heartless cities. Or worse, in their cars or on the street. People expect creative artists to chain-smoke and drown their sorrows with alcohol and drugs. Many aspiring artists even begin smoking, drinking, and doing drugs in the effort to live up to this mystique.

Celebrities – living and dead – who’ve been diagnosed with a mental illness, or who’ve had problems with drugs and alcohol, reinforce this view. Might the perceived creative/“crazy” link be an illusion born of the challenges of creative life itself?

Doubts About This Connection

IN THE BOOK *Pressure Sensitive: Popular Musicians under Stress*, British psychologist Geoffrey Wills and writer Cary Cooper describe the very real stressors that struggling musicians often face to make a living. These authors say the ways in which musicians deal with these stressors may make them seem a bit “off,” but that may not indicate mental illness.

In *Touched with Fire*, psychiatry professor Kay Redfield Jamison writes, “Another argument set forth against an association between ‘madness’ and artistic creativity is that a bit of madness and turmoil is part and parcel of the artistic temperament, and that artists are just more sensitive to life and the experiences of life than are other people. This is almost certainly true, and it would be foolish to diagnose psychopathology where none or little exists.”

Thomas Szasz claims that poverty and rejection, accompanied by mood swings, can reinforce society’s false perception that an artist is mentally ill when the true problem is the situation.

Some researchers point out parallels between creative personalities and the symptoms of mental illness, suggesting that these parallels explain the perceived connection.

There’s also the chance that what’s “crazy” depends more on creative artists’ audiences than on the creators themselves. English teacher Dea Mallin illustrates

this point by relaying Freud's observations about Edgar Allan Poe. Freud asserted that the obsessions, compulsions, fantasies, and nightmares in Poe's work might not indicate a mental illness. They might instead represent his audience's buried feelings. Perhaps the pleasure readers find in Poe's work relates to the release of their own obsessions, compulsions, fantasies, and nightmares.

Creativity expert Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, in *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, "Creativity is a systemic phenomenon that involves a new and valuable idea or action that relates to interaction between the creator's subjective belief and the sociocultural context." What's considered "crazy" in one culture isn't in another. We have a long history of shunning all kinds of creative people and their works and calling them "crazy" when we're not yet ready for their ideas.

In *Creators on Creating*, Frank Barron notes that both exceptionally creative people and people with mental illness can tap their heightened sensitivity to produce vivid works of truth and beauty that profoundly touch others' lives. Although healthy creative artists sometimes "push sanity almost to the breaking point" and find their way back, Barron says those with mental illness go far beyond and sometimes can't return.

Might the link be based on choice of occupation? Wayne State University psychiatrist Leon Berman asks: "Is it simply that pathological personalities are more attracted to creative fields? Or is there something intrinsic in the creative process that predisposes to emotional illness? Is madness the risk they run . . . the price they pay for their creativity? . . .

"Yet, this is not the only way in which the artist experiences his creativity. In some it is sustaining, reparative, and even life saving. . . . While psychoanalysts have important contributions to make to this subject, it must be concluded that we know a great deal more about madness than we do about creativity."

Although we can't yet absolutely conclude that the creativity/"crazy" connection is real, some will swear it exists. Others will remain skeptical, no matter what creative people with mental illness say. I suspect that individual experiences greatly influence everybody's point of view. I encourage you to read on and draw your own conclusions.