

“The Gift of Madness”

Jennifer Harrison

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath are confessional poets troubled by mental illnesses. They possess the power to lure us into their fantasy worlds with their picturesque, rhythmic words. They open our minds and nurture our imaginations. Through poetry they reveal their deep, personal emotions, the emotions threatening their sanity. Anne Sexton’s poem “Her Kind” depicts psychological and feminine angst:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
Haunting the black air, braver at night;
Dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
Over the plain houses, light by light:
Lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind. (Kennedy and Gioia 607)

Sylvia Plath’s poem “Edge” illustrates a disturbing image:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity
Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over. (Plath 93)

Are these verses the products of creative madness? As events throughout Plath and Sexton’s lives worsen their mental stability, they find solace within their poetry. Anne Sexton says, “Poetry led me by the hand out of madness” (Neihart 47). Yet, creative madness is paradoxically destructive. It inspires Sexton and Plath to create haunting poetry, but it also entices their self-destructive urges.

One source explains that as a child Anne Sexton grows up in a dysfunctional family. She is born on November 9, 1928, in Newton, Massachusetts. Her father is an alcoholic, and she feels that her parents are hostile toward her. She has a close relationship with her great-aunt, Nana, and is traumatized when Nana has a mental breakdown and is hospitalized. In 1945 her parents send her to Rogers Hall, a boarding school. Poetry and acting spark her interest. Her beauty attracts many men, and when she is nineteen years old she elopes with Alfred “Kayo” Sexton II. After she gives birth to two children and her beloved Nana dies, depression overwhelms her. Her husband is a traveling salesman and is frequently away from home. During this time she occasionally abuses her children. After several suicide attempts she is institutionalized. Her therapist encourages her to write, and her poetry becomes central to her life. She unexpectedly loses both of her parents, which leads to further mental breakdowns. Through her poetry she strives to find stability (Wagner-Martin pars. 1-5).

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Sylvia Plath's life is unstable and characterized by depression and anxiety. According to one source, she is born on October 27, 1932, near Boston, Massachusetts. She is eight years old when her beloved father dies. She feels abandoned by her father and suffers greatly from his loss. She distracts herself with academics and becomes interested in writing. When she is in high school some of her writings are published. She enrolls at Smith, a prestigious college for women, and is accepted to be a student guest editor for Mademoiselle magazine. Yet, despite her accomplishments, she is close to a mental breakdown. After she tells her mother that she wants to die, her mother rushes her to a psychiatrist. Still distressed, Plath attempts suicide. She hides in a basement crawl space and swallows a bottle of sleeping pills. She is discovered and spends the next several months recovering in a psychiatric hospital. Assumed to be cured and healthy, she returns to Smith and resumes her top-of-the-class ranking. She receives a scholarship to Cambridge University and moves to England. In England she meets and marries Ted Hughes, a poet (Kehoe 88-94).

Although Plath is now married and seems to have her life set in the right direction, she is not happy. One source reveals her jealousy over her husband's success as his writings are published and receive critical acclaim. Friction grows between the couple. Plath has trouble writing and trouble becoming pregnant, which irritates and depresses her. She attends Robert Lowell's writing class at Boston University and meets Anne Sexton. Drawn together by their fascination with death, Sexton and Plath develop a friendship. They influence and admire each other's work. Plath's first book of poems called The Colossus and Other Poems is published, and she gives birth to a baby girl. She continues her success in publishing her poetry, starts writing a semi-autobiographical novel, and gives birth to another child. When her husband has an affair their marriage fails. With the stresses of divorcing her husband, supporting two children, and being low on cash, she seeks refuge by immersing herself in her writing. She is beginning to assemble her poems into a manuscript she titles Ariel and is anticipating the release of her novel The Bell Jar, but her feelings of rage, fear, and abandonment overpower her. After setting out bread and milk for her children in their room, she goes into the kitchen and seals the door with tape. She kneels in front of the oven and turns on the gas. The next morning a nurse discovers Plath's dead body (Mondragon pars. 28-48).

Plath becomes more famous after her death. According to one source, her husband, Ted Hughes, becomes the executor of her literary estate. He arranges for the publication of Ariel. A review in Time magazine highlights Plath's self-destruction, making Ariel sell in massive numbers. When her book The Bell Jar, which is scheduled to be released only weeks after her death, is published in 1971, it is a bestseller for six months (Kehoe 88-94).

Plath's suicide upsets Sexton. Sexton tells her psychiatrist, "Sylvia's death disturbs me. Makes me want to do it. She took something that was mine, that death was mine" (Morrow 76). Sexton's fixation with wanting to die increases. Death would release her from her conflicting, upsetting emotions. Her poem "Sylvia's Death" expresses her anger and pain:

Thief!
How did you crawl into,
Crawl down alone
Into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
The death we said we both outgrew,
The one we wore on our skinny breasts,
The one we talked of so often each time
We downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,
The death that talked of analysts and cures,

The death that talked like brides with plots,
The death we drank to,
The motives and then the quiet deed? ("Sylvia's Death")

Sexton has a long flirtation with death. According to one source, she attempts to numb her emotions with alcohol. She checks in and out of sanitariums where doctors try to minister her hysteria, depression, anorexia, insomnia, and wildly alternating moods. She engages in many love affairs, including a long sexual involvement with her psychiatrist. Her writing career peaks as she receives rewards and honors for her poetry, but her celebrity status strains her marriage. After she and her husband are divorced loneliness, depression, and alcoholism consume her. She begins writing poems with religious themes and becomes nervous when readers do not like them. She searches for compassion through love affairs, but her needs for comfort and security are not fulfilled. In October of 1974, she pours herself a glass of vodka, goes into her garage, closes the door, starts up her car, and listens to the radio as exhaust fumes kill her (Morrow 76).

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Sexton and Plath are victims of their mental illnesses. Their poetry explores taboo issues of their time: addiction, abortion, incest, and mental illnesses. The depths of their creative madness grasp our fascination and curiosity.

Since ancient times people have linked creativity and madness. According to one source, Plato says that creativity is a “divine madness...a gift from the gods” (Neihart 48). Seneca records Aristotle saying, “No great genius was without a mixture of insanity” (Neihart 48). These beliefs have prevailed throughout history, but they are only observations without scientific research to support them.

Throughout history there have been many fantastically creative yet tormented people. According to one source, psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison has compiled a list of artists who have mental illnesses and are also highly creative. The list includes poets, novelists, playwrights, and visual artists. Critics charge that giving dead artists retroactive psychiatric diagnoses and treating those diagnoses as evidence to the link between creativity and mental illnesses is not valid. They point out that bipolar disorder, which Jamison links to creativity, is only the latest in a list of organic conditions associated with creativity. Epilepsy, syphilitic paresis, tuberculosis, and alcoholism have also been linked to creativity (Gutin 75-76).

Jamison suggests that certain types of moods open up thought, which is followed by creativity. Cognitive processes associated with certain moods are the link between creativity and madness. She notes that restlessness, grandiosity, irritability, intensified sensory systems, quickening of the thought process, and intense feelings are all typical cognitive changes that characterize both mania and creativity (Neihart 48).

As Plath and Sexton try to work through and gain a better understanding of their destructive urges, they obsessively write poetry. To them creation and destruction are closely related. Their cognitive changes are both of madness and creativity, resulting in unsettling poetic verses. Six months before her death Plath writes:

Outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness. I
look down into the warm, earthy world. Into a nest of lovers' beds, baby cribs, meal
tables, all the solid commerce of life in this earth, and feel apart, enclosed in a wall
of glass. (Mondragon par. 49)

The intense feelings of anger and confusion Plath has toward her father's death may have opened up her thought process, encouraging her creativity and madness to soar. Her poem “Daddy” expresses the complexity and depth of parent-child relationships. As she develops her father's character he takes on the roles of a shoe, a nazi, a teacher, and a vampire:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (Kennedy and Gioia 977)

One source explains the characteristics of mood disorders that are associated with creativity. Dr. Monica Basco, a clinical psychologist, says, “More than half of my patients have some creative talent” (Marvel par. 5). Basco believes that the highs and lows of bipolar disorder are

intimately linked to creativity. The creativity comes during the manic phase of the disease, the upward swings. Major depression without the manic highs also seems to confer some creative benefit (Marvel pars. 6-7).

While Plath is suffering from an episode of depression, she creates a poem called "Mushrooms", which paints an eerie, vivid picture:

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly
Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.
Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.
Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,
Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,
Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We
Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking
Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!
We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,
Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiples:
We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door. (Adventures in American Literature 861)

The madness of our world being taken over by mushrooms is bizarre yet almost humorous. For a moment we look at the world through Plath's eyes. Her descriptions can make our hearts pound slightly faster while making us uneasily smile.

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During a manic phase people have racing thoughts, they stutter, and their minds jump from one idea to another. They are able to create brilliant writings or paintings, but after these manic phases they are exhausted. Depression overwhelms them. According to one source, between ten and fifteen percent of people with severe forms of mental illnesses eventually take their own lives (Gutin 74). By admiring the creativity of mentally ill people we may be worsening their conditions. One woman, who suffers from bipolar disease, explains, “I hate for people to admire the creativity and support an illness that ends in something so criminal to the self as suicide” (Gutin 74). Praising the mentally ill may be destructive to their health. If they believe that their illness is making them creative then they might be reluctant to get better.

A. Alvarez, a British critic and poet, argues that Plath’s self-destructiveness is “the very source of her creative energy.... It was, precisely, a source of living energy, of her imaginative, creative power” (Plath 99). Death is the price she pays for the immortality of her words. The poems that she furiously writes during the weeks before her death expose her strong desire to die and be released from her pain. Her poem “Lady Lazarus” expresses her suffering:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call. (Plath 8)

Arnold Ludwig has spent a decade learning what kinds of factors combine in order to produce creativity. He finds that creative artists display much higher levels of mental illness than do their counterparts in more structured occupations. Poets, musical performers, and fiction writers exhibit the most psychiatric symptoms. However, Ludwig does not believe that inspired artists are only creative when they are in manic moods. He says, “Anybody who achieves creative greatness is dedicated. These people persevere; they’re almost monomaniacal” (Gutin 75-78). Dedication rather than madness may be the real factor that generates creative greatness. Sexton and Plath are dedicated to their crafts and continue to produce long after the point of physical exhaustion, yet their works are still sometimes met with criticism and rejection, which can accelerate the vicious cycle of self-abasement.

Albert Rothenberg is a clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard and has spent twenty-five years studying the creative process. He believes that there are particular and specific thought processes used by creative people during the process of creation:

Translogical types of thinking characterize both psychotics and highly creative people. Translogical thinking is a type of conceptualizing in which the thinking processes transcend the common modes of ordinary logical thinking. This type of thinking involves janusian and homospatial processes. Janusian thinking is a conscience process of combining paradoxical or antagonistic objects into a single entity. Homospatial process is the essence of a good metaphor. Janusian thinking tends to occur in the beginning stages of creative work when ideas are generated, and homospatial thinking characterizes the development of the creative ideas. There are similarities between the primary process thinking of psychotics and translogical thinking, and there are some subtle distinctions. (Neihart 49)

Metaphors and paradoxes are essential creative elements in poetry. Poets cleverly make use of them to enhance their works. One source lists a group of famous American poets, many of whom have won the Pulitzer Prize. Among them are Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, along with Robert Lowell, John Barryman, Hart Crane, and others. Most of these poets have had mental diseases, and many of them have committed suicide. Many writers and artists speak of periods of inspiration when thought processes quicken, moods lift, and new associations are generated. It is possible that genetic vulnerability to mood disorders is independently accompanied by a predisposition to creativity. Genetic patterns associated with bipolar disorder may carry the spark of creativity (Barlow and Durand 198).

We should not conclude that all creative writers and artists are mentally ill. A study conducted by Bob Boice, a professor of psychology, suggests that “productive creativity seems to occur more reliably with moderation of work duration and of emotions, not with the fatigue and ensuing depression of binge writing” (Boice 435). Boice defines binge writers as people who write with few breaks, in a hurried pace, and are exhausted after their writing sessions. In contrast, regular writers write in brief but regular sessions and without heated emotions. His study concludes that in comparison to regular writers, binge writers are less likely to achieve editorial acceptances, have fewer creative ideas, and accomplish far less overall. He believes that efficacy operates better than madness (Boice 450-460).

However, it seems to be more than a coincidence that so many astounding writers and artists throughout history have been emotionally unstable. A variety of social forces and events occurring in their lives may have contributed to their emotional distresses while simultaneously enhancing their creative expressions. Binge writing helps Plath and Sexton produce numerous works of literature, but in the long run madness takes its toll. Episodes of depression, anxiety, and insomnia follow their creativity, leading them to take their own lives.

Although Sexton and Plath are accomplished, famous writers, their mental illnesses, which may have sparked their creativity, defeat them. The process of creativity is a mystery we have yet to fully understand. It may be influenced by a variety of social as well as biological factors. Although creative madness has helped produce fascinating works of literature and visual arts, it has also contributed to the destruction of lives and the ruination of dreams.

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