Creativity and Mental Disorder

Meghan Bodwell

ART 490, Senior Thesis II

Dean Mark Towner, M.F.A.

B.F.A. in Fine Art, Concentration in Creative Arts Therapy

Endicott College

May 3, 2010
Abstract

This senior thesis project looks at the correlation between creative ability and mental illness; specifically focusing on depression and bipolar disorder. The author looks at three books for her information, including *Touched with Fire* by Kay Redfield Jameson, *Creativity and Madness* by Albert Rothenberg, and *Strong Imagination: madness, creativity and human nature* by David Nettle. All the authors referenced have their Ph. D. in fields relating to psychology and have done in-depth research on the topic of mental illness relating to the artistic temperament. The information in this thesis project touches upon the symptoms and characteristics of mental disorders, the ideas of imagination and inspiration, controversy, and evidence. The research is complemented by evidence of the author’s visual thesis, including images of three figurative paintings done with oil on canvas. These figures are depicting the extreme mood states examined in the research and are done in a style similar to those suffering from the different mental disorders discussed. The author’s literature review from Thesis I includes information from twenty sources written by medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and professors of psychology. The information includes clinical descriptions of depression and bipolar disorder, historical and contemporary links to creativity and mental illness, aesthetic emotions, and alternative views of creativity and mental illness.
# Table of Contents

I. Introduction to Creativity and Mental Disorder 1

II. Argument Over the Relationship Between Madness and Artistic Ability 3

A. Touched with Fire 5
   a. Manic-depressive Illness 5
   b. Depression 7
   c. Mania 8
   d. Alcohol and Drug Abuse 9
   e. Controversy and Evidence 10
   f. Temperament and Imagination 13
   g. Inheritance of Manic-Depressive Illness 16
   h. Medicine and the Arts 17

B. Creativity and Madness 18
   a. Scientific View of Creativity 18
   b. The Creative Process in Art and Science 20
   c. Inspiration 21
   d. Unconsciousness and Creativity 23
   e. Alcohol and Drug Abuse 24
   f. Controversy and Evidence 25

C. Strong Imagination 27
   a. Disease vs. Difference 28

c. This Taint of Blood

d. Manic-depressive Illness

e. Schizophrenia

f. Imagination

g. Conclusions

D. References

III. Visual Thesis Statement

IV. Creating Art with Children

V. Literature Review Summary

VI. Conclusion to Creativity and Mental Disorder

VII. Addenda

A. Visual Thesis Evidence

B. The Link Between Creativity and Mental Disorder

C. Resume
Introduction to Creativity and Mental Disorder

The topic of this thesis is the link between creativity and mental disorder. Many people who have suffered mental illness are also exceedingly creative, which is a connection that goes far back into history. Affective disorders, such as bipolar disorder, have been shown to increase a person’s ability to be creative, as it has also been found that creative people are more prone to developing an affective disorder. While there seems to be some form of relationship between the two, many argue that there is no direct connection as creativity begins with logical thinking.

The subject of the author's visual thesis consists of figurative pieces displaying the emotional effects of mood disorder. Using oil on canvas, the artist created three pieces ranging from 20” X 24” to 30” X 36”. After researching the affective disorders and artists who had them, depictions were created in a visual style typical to the art made by those experiencing each mood state. The artist’s largest painting focuses on the idea of madness, while the surrounding pieces address the depression and mania experienced in bipolar disorder.

The author completed three internships which revolved around the creative process with children. The first internship took place at Consolidated School in Kennebunkport, ME, where she worked with children in the art room, guidance office, special education department, and resource room. The second internship took place at the Middle School of the Kennebunks, where the author worked with
the two art educators. In the final, semester-long internship, the author worked at Cape Ann Art Haven, where she created a curriculum for after-school art classes and helped the organization with advertising and business.

The topic of mental illness and creative ability has been documented for years and is still being researched. The research will focus on the background and symptoms of both manic and depressive states of bipolar disorder, as well as the origins and processes of creativity. The author also looks at famous artists throughout history who have suffered from mental illness and how it affected their creative ability and body of work.