



## MADNESS AND GENIUS: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN? BY JUDY CHINITZ

A question for the ages: why is genius all too often associated with mental illness? What is it in the brain of the genius that makes them so prone to madness? From artists, VINCENT VAN GOGH to Frida KAHLO; from literary giants, Virginia Woolf to Edgar Allen Poe. From musical titans, Germany's Robert Schumann to Russia's TCHAIKOVSKY. The two are so related, that we even STEROTYPE the "mad scientist," closeted in his secret lab creating all manner of brilliance and havoc. In his satiric film, *Young Frankenstein*, comic genius – speaking of genius – Mel Brooks spoofed the stereotype with Dr. Victor Frankenstein, wild hair flying all over, eyes wide and red rimmed EMANATING insanity, as vials and potions SURROUNDING him froth and boil. It is only in very recent years that scientists are beginning to understand why the two are so closely INTERTWINED.



Gene Wilder as Dr. Viktor Frankenstein, in Mel Brooks' movie, *Young Frankenstein*. He is a stereotype of a stereotype!

SPELL: EMANATING SPELL: SURROUNDING SPELL:  
INTERTWINED

What satiric film is mentioned in the above paragraph? YOUNG  
FRANKENSTEIN

What comic genius created *Young Frankenstein*? MEL BROOKS

What nationality was Tchaikovsky? RUSSIAN

What authors are mentioned in this paragraph? VIRGINIA WOOLF,  
EDGAR ALLEN POE

Name an artist mentioned in this paragraph: FRIDA KAHLO,  
VINCENT VAN GOGH

First, let's take a look at a few of the most famous of these  
"TORTURED geniuses." Vincent van Gogh, the brilliant Dutch artist,  
is one of the most renowned. Born in 1853, young Vincent was always  
highly EMOTIONAL, and showed signs of social STRUGGLES early  
on. He had trouble holding a job, had unhappy and unsuccessful  
romances, and finally decided to pursue art, as he approached 30  
years of age.

SPELL: TORTURED SPELL: EMOTIONAL SPELL:  
STRUGGLES

What nationality was Vincent van Gogh? DUTCH

What difficulties did he show early in life? HIGHLY EMOTIONAL,  
SOCIAL STRUGGLES

How old was he when he decided to pursue art? 30

In what year was van Gogh born? 1853

What country are the Dutch from? HOLLAND, NETHERLANDS

In 1886 he went to Paris, where he studied art, meeting some of the  
greatest masters who ever lived: Monet, GAUGIN, Pissaro. His  
genius was recognized, but already, signs of manic behavior were  
becoming more apparent. In 1888, a disagreement with Gauguin led  
van Gogh to chase his COMPATRIOT with a razor, ending with him  
cutting a portion of his own ear off. He began to alternate between

fits of madness and LUCIDITY, and was finally placed in an ASYLUM. In 1890, he was thought to be better, released from the asylum, and ended up dead 2 months later from what is believed to be suicide – he shot himself. Almost all of his finest works were created in a 3-year period of intermittent brilliance and madness. His 1889, *Starry Night* is quite literally one of the most famous paintings ever, and was created by him while in the insane asylum.

SPELL: COMPATRIOT SPELL: LUCIDITY SPELL: ASYLUM

What city did he go to in order to perfect his art? PARIS

Which of his own body parts did he accidentally slice off? EAR

What is one of the most famous paintings in the world, mentioned in this paragraph? STARRY NIGHT

Name an artistic master with whom van Gogh met: MONET, GAUGUIN, PISSARO

Under what circumstances did he accidentally slice off a piece of his ear? CHASING GAUGUIN WITH A RAZOR, DISAGREEMENT WITH GAUGUIN

In what year was he placed in an institution? 1888

How old was he when he died? 37 (1890-1853=37)

In what country is Paris? FRANCE

In what museum is *Starry Night* housed? MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN NEW YORK CITY



Starry Night, by Vincent Van Gogh

Let's take a bit of a closer look at another artistic titan: the great German composer, Robert Schumann. Born in 1810, he was the son of 2 CLINICALLY depressed parents. Throughout his life he suffered from severe DEPRESSION, ATTEMPTING suicide twice, and eventually died in an asylum from self-starvation at only 46 years old.

SPELL: CLINICALLY SPELL: DEPRESSION SPELL:  
ATTEMPTING

What composer are we talking about (first and last names)?

ROBERT SCHUMANN

What nationality was Schumann? GERMAN

From what did Schumann suffer? SEVERE DEPRESSION,  
DEPRESSION, SUICIDAL THOUGHTS, STARVATION



How old was he when he died? 46

It is hypothesized now by experts that Schumann suffered from BIPOLAR DISORDER. Bipolar disorder entails dramatic mood swings, between a hyper ENERGETIC, manic state of happiness or euphoria and severe, sometimes life threatening, depression. He named his energetic and passionate (manic phase) self FLORESTAN, who could write an entire symphony in 4 days. Conversely, EUSEBIUS [you-see-bee-us] was his depressive introvert personality. Can we hear his mental illness in his music? In 1854, he suddenly rushed downstairs in the middle of the night to get down on paper a melody that he claimed was being "DICTATED by angels." By morning, he was highly agitated and claimed that he heard demonic "tigers and hyenas" that sang "HIDEOUS music" to him. But...the melodies he heard in his head that night became the basis for 6 piano variations called The Ghost Variations...and were the last thing he wrote before being committed to the asylum where he died. His mind had so far DETERIORATED by this point that he did not realize that, far from being dictated by angels, or sounding like hideous music, the theme upon which the variations are based, was actually written by him several months before for his violin concerto.

SPELL: ENERGETIC SPELL: DICTATED SPELL: HIDEOUS

From what mental illness is it believed Schumann suffered?

BIPOLAR DISORDER

What was the name Schumann gave his manic persona?

FLORESTAN

What did he name his depressive personality? EUSEBIUS

What did he write just before being committed to an asylum?

GHOST VARIATIONS

For what was the theme in the Ghost Variations actually written?

VIOLIN CONCERTO

How would you define bipolar disorder? DRAMATIC MOOD SWINGS, MOOD SWINGS BETWEEN MANIC STATE AND DEPRESSION

What did he hear on that fateful day in 1854? MUSIC DICTATED BY ANGELS, DEMONIC TIGERS AND HYENAS, HIDEOUS MUSIC

How many variations are contained in the Ghost Variations? 6

**VAKT:** Here is Robert Schumann's Ghost Variations.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCmMYh6S5XA> [ Schumann:  
"Ghost Variations," WoO24 (Anderszewski, Levit)]

While perhaps there are SUBTLE signs (in the wild brush strokes) of IMPENDING madness in Vincent van Gogh's Starry Night, and certainly none to be heard in Schumann's Ghost Variations, the writings of Edgar Allen Poe often seem like the work of a complete lunatic. Some have wondered: how could a sane person write so CONVINCINGLY, for example, about a killer who hears the thumping of his dead victim's heart (the Tell Tale Heart)?

True! --nervous --very, very DREADFULLY nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses --not destroyed --not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily --how calmly I can tell you the whole story...Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing.

**SPELL: IMPENDING SPELL: CONVINCINGLY SPELL:  
DREADFULLY**

**What writer are we talking about in this paragraph (all 3 names):  
EDGAR ALLEN POE**

**Which of his stories is mentioned in this paragraph? TELL TALE  
HEART**

**What does the narrator of this Poe short story hear? THUMPING OF  
THE HEART OF HIS VICTIM, DEAD VICTIM'S HEART BEATING**

Is it the NARRATOR of the story speaking of his lack of madness... or...is it somewhat AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL, and Poe is talking about his own experience of madness and hyper sensitivity brought on by an illness? Well, in Poe's day (he died in 1849), people "...often thought that artistic work reflected upon the "...personality of the creator." Well, FORTUNATELY, Poe was not walking around ax murdering people, like the characters in his stories. On the other hand, he did suffer from depression, probably bipolar disorder actually – and was a drug and alcohol abuser, an AFFLICTION from which he eventually died. A really interesting article about him in *Smithsonian Magazine* points out that, "His stories typically featured death, corpses and mourning." And yet, in spite of his stories EXEMPLIFYING the MACABRE, they remain among the best known and most popular pieces of literature ever written.

SPELL: NARRATOR    SPELL: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL    SPELL: LEGACIES

What publication states that Poe's stories typically mention death, corpses and mourning? SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE

From what did Poe suffer? DEPRESSION, BIPOLAR DISORDER, DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE

What is a synonym for macabre? GHOULISH, GHASTLY, CHILLING, GRISLY, GRUESOME

In what year did Poe die? 1849

Do you believe there is an autobiographical or personal element in the words of Poe's narrator in this story?

So why are madness and genius to often ENTWINED? The question has been studied by scientists, and here is what we know. There are many kinds of mental illness, but CREATIVITY appears to be most closely linked to mood disorders, especially bipolar disorder. In one study, the intelligence of 700,000 16-year-olds in Sweden were tested, and then all were followed up on a decade later to see which had developed mental illness. The results were published in 2010 and were considered truly remarkable: those that EXCELLED in intelligence were 4X more likely to develop bipolar disorder!

Why is this? One researcher at the University of California, Irvine, JAMES FALLON, stats that when a bipolar patient's mood swings toward the manic phase, brain activity actually changes too: the lower part of the frontal lobe decreases in activity, while the upper part increases...and that upper part of that lobe is highly associated with creativity. That is, there is something in the CONSTRUCTION or FUNCTIONING of the brain that leads to hyper activity in the creative portions of their brains leading to both – a manic emotional state and brilliant, creative output.

SPELL: ENTWINED SPELL: CONSTRUCTION SPELL: FUNCTIONING

In what country was the above study conducted? SWEDEN  
What University of California researcher has conducted brain studies? JAMES FALLON

In what part of the brain does creativity and manic symptoms arise? FRONTAL LOBE, UPPER PART OF FRONTAL LOBE

How many 16- year-olds were in the study? 700,000

How much more likely were highly intelligent teenagers to develop bipolar disorder? 4 TIMES

There are 3 kinds of data supporting the relationship between madness and genius:

1. HISTORIOMETRIC Research is the study of historical data which is subjected to quantitative and objective analysis. From this we know that PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL symptoms are higher in EMINENT creators – they are overall about twice as likely to experience some mental disorders, including bipolar, depression, alcoholism and suicide.
2. Secondly, PSYCHIATRIC research, which depends on the incidence of clinical diagnosis and treatment also finds higher rates and intensity of symptoms among creators, especially artistic creators.
3. PSYCHOMETRIC Research involves using standard assessments instruments, including testing and accepted QUESTIONNAIRES. This finds that creativity is positively



CORRELATED with higher scores on these tests of various forms of mental illness.

SPELL: PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL SPELL: QUESTIONNAIRES  
SPELL: EMINENT

What kind of research involves the study of historical data?  
HISTORIOGRAPHIC

What kind of research involves using standardized tests and questionnaires? PSYCHOMETRIC

What is a synonym of eminent? FAMOUS, WELL-KNOWN, RENOWNED, IMPORTANT

So what is creative genius? A functional “brain disorder”? A PHYSIOLOGICAL abnormality? Or, can we simply use this definition which comes from Dr. DEAN KEITH SIMONTON of the University of California, Davis, who wrote on the e-zine, *Psychiatric Times* that it is the “...cognitive ability and DISPOSITIONAL willingness to ‘think outside the box’; to explore novel, UNCONVENTIONAL and even odd possibilities; to be open to SERENDIPITOUS events and fortuitous results; and to imagine the IMPLAUSIBLE or consider the unlikely.” Scientific creativity tends to be somewhat more “constrained” he points out, because scientists take into account logic and fact more than artistic creators. However, ultimately, this ability to move past the mundane obviousness of the world and to look at it through unconventional, uninhibited eyes means that there is much in common between creativity and psychopathology.

SPELL: PHYSIOLOGICAL SPELL: DISPOSITIONAL SPELL: SERENDIPITOUS

What scientist is quoted in the above paragraph? DEAN KEITH SIMONTON

At what university does Dr. Simonton work? UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

In what publication does the above quote appear? PSYCHIATRIC TIMES

What word in the above paragraph means unlikely or improbable? IMPLAUSIBLE

How does Dr. Simonton describe the cognitive ability and dispositional willingness to think? OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Why is scientific creativity more constrained than artistic? LOGIC AND FACT, SCIENTISTS TAKE INTO ACCOUNT LOGIC

The great English ROMANTIC poet, WILLIAM BLAKE, likely suffered from some kind of mental illness and yet, he was not “insane,” as his CONTEMPORARIES often called him. His poems certainly have a VISIONARY element to them and he deeply believed in the power of imagination. He wrote that, “The IMAGINATION is not a State, it is The Human Existence itself.” He had visions starting from age 4, seeing God appear at his window. But is this really the result of madness or just an extremely active imagination? After all, he believed that the divine and the human were one and the same, and that using imagination was a spiritual act. This “insane” belief is clearly stated in his poem, *The Divine Image*. What we can conclude then is this: there is a fine line, without a doubt, between mental illness, brilliant creativity, an active imagination and just extreme open-mindedness. And we know too that it is from those who tread that thin line that much of mankind’s greatest scientific advances and artistic achievements come.

SPELL: ROMANTIC SPELL: CONTEMPORARIES SPELL: VISIONARY

What poet believed that imagination is the same as human existence? WILLIAM BLAKE

What was Blake’s nationality? ENGLISH

What poem is referred to in the above paragraph? THE DIVINE IMAGE

There is a fine line between mental illness and what? CREATIVITY, IMAGINATION, OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Name another English romantic poet: WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE, SHELLEY, KEATS, BYRON

Share an extremely vivid daydream you’ve had, or another highly creative thought, image or idea, or a favorite poem or story that you believe illustrates this concept.

VAKT: Read *The Divine Image*, by William Blake:

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
All pray in their distress:  
And to these virtues of delight  
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
Is God, our father dear:  
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity, a human face:  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,  
That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine,  
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,  
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.  
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell,  
There God is dwelling too.

**CREATIVE WRITING:** Write a short story or poem about the blending of madness and creativity.

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