

FEATURES

Issues in Creativity and Madness, Part Two: Eternal Flames

Judith Schlesinger

*Pace University
New York*

This brief article explores psychological and cultural reasons for the enduring popularity of the “mad creative” myth despite its continuing lack of scientific validation. The idea that great talent comes with special suffering is not only romantic and thrilling, but it also enables non-creative people to blunt the intimidation of genius. It also soothes whatever discomfort is inspired by artistic lives that seem freer and more passionate than their own. The article suggests that mental health professionals are not immune to this impulse, given the eagerness of so many of them to pin pathological labels on creative people.

The creative person, the person who moves from an irrational source of power, has to face the fact that this power antagonizes. Under all the superficial praise of the “creative” is the desire to kill. It is the old war between the mystic and the nonmystic, a war to the death. (Sarton, 1965, 1993, p. 169)

For most people it is far more fascinating to focus on tragic, creative heroes and their ruined potential than on the contented artists who remain stable and productive. True, it is haunting to contemplate the early deaths of Sylvia Plath and Lord Byron, or Charlie Parker and Janis Joplin, and to search for portents in their lives and work, but so much emphasis is placed on the artists who fall, and so little on those who keep standing that the first group appears far more crowded than the second. Moreover, the grief over wasted talent tends to linger, deepening the popular perception that creatives must pay for their special gifts with a special vulnerability.

But there are other reasons why the mad creative myth remains powerful and ever-green despite its continuing lack of empirical support. Like any other myth, it springs from psychological needs and fears in the population. A few of these are suggested here.

BLUNTING INTIMIDATION

Creativity has intimidated mankind since we first wondered who made the weather and our earliest myths reflect our awe of creators. Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise for daring to know too much; the Tower of Babel was demolished when it got too close to the

heavens. Prometheus stole the secret of fire and gave it to man, a creative empowerment so horrific that he was forced to spend eternity chained to a rock, with a vulture snacking on his liver. Independent ambition also killed Icarus, who dared to fly too close to the sun.

Bringing our icons down also brings them closer—even Zeus, king of the gods, was forever changing his lovers into animals to avoid the wrath of his wife. His anxieties made him more familiar, and his power less threatening. The belief in creative danger also endures in the familiar phrase, “Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.” Classical scholar Ruth Padel found nothing but suggestive fragments when searching for the origin of the phrase, concluding that we need to believe that the thought is ancient because we want it to be “so horribly true” (1995, p. 5). What we need to believe often determines what we will believe, particularly in the absence of fact. Since neither creativity nor madness can be quantified, and their precise origins and mechanisms remain mysterious, it’s natural for the public to bundle them together in one tantalizing X-file of fantasy, envy, and fear.

LIVING TOO CLOSE TO THE EDGE

Sigmund Freud, the most influential pessimist the world has ever known, insisted that the creative is a frustrated individual who lacks fulfillment in sex and other normal aspects of life—in lieu of love, he makes art. Related to this, and still widely promulgated and shared, was Freud’s profound suspicion of strong, primitive emotions: Roiling in the deep cauldron of the id, unreliably contained by reason, they threaten our stability during the day and sneak out at night to do their mischief in dreams. The artist who deliberately explores this realm for his raw material is therefore in greater danger of losing control—he spends his life walking around the rim of a volcano.

Even if he avoids falling in, he’s still in jeopardy—probably bipolar, schizoid, obsessive, or depressed, he only grabs for creativity to patch up his wobbly psyche and substitute for the love he cannot get elsewhere (Storr, 1993). To be truly compelling, a myth must be dark, so those who cherish the mad creative notion have to minimize any possibilities for joy, volition, or healthy fulfillment in the committed creative life.

What thrills people now, as it has for centuries, is the image of the shooting star—someone brought down from a sparkling height by forces that are out of his control. The special tragedy, also common to Shakespeare’s least fortunate heroes, is that these forces are internal.

Being out of control is a terrifying prospect to most people who only permit themselves small doses of it and then from an external, predictable source with a definite end point, like a scary movie or a roller coaster ride. Some adults cannot achieve true abandon without some kind of pharmaceutical assistance. For many, the idea of habitual surrender to intense, primitive, wordless feelings is too much like madness.

ENVY BEGETS HOSTILITY

You don’t have to be a mental health professional to recognize the intimate connection between hostility and envy. As writer Gene Lees explains it:

An artist who is widely admired may be worthy of consideration if he or she has suffered a miserable life. This gets a lot of drunks and junkies into the Pantheon on a pass. There is an implicit condescension in this process: I can admire him because I feel sorry for him, affirming my own superiority. Condescension to brilliance is the ultimate arrogance. (1999, p. 6)

There are many reasons to be jealous of highly talented individuals who devote their lives to autonomous self-expression. Certainly, it's more satisfying to focus on artistic suffering—real or imagined—than on painful disparities in talent. Creative lives also seem full of unusual passion and purpose, with the ability to derive joy from a source that is unavailable to most people. Worse yet, artists have no obvious boss, daily dress code, or fight with rush-hour traffic; freelancers get to both stay up and sleep late, a pattern usually associated with vacation, adolescence, and other forms of hedonistic irresponsibility.

Another problem is that so much of what they do is private and intangible. Most dedicated creatives work as long and hard as any conscientious professional, but all that time they spend in their own heads, planning and preparing, can look like self-indulgent loafing to those with more external standards for accomplishment. Even more threatening is the perception that they have turned their backs on the occupational values, goals, and requirements of the larger society, being less inclined to relinquish their personal dreams for the sake of a steady paycheck. To many people, this alone is sufficient evidence of psychological disturbance.

Moreover, as creatives rely so much on their intuition, they can afford to stay more childlike, open, and playful; they can transform their negative emotions and experiences into beauty, and their vocational footprints may actually stay in the sand after they're gone. None of this endears the artist to the hard-working discontented. Finally, while the ideal is for people to enjoy their work, to many the notion of having to "love" it seems immature and unrealistic—after all, society depends on people doing their jobs whether they love them or not. How many can honestly say, as master guitarist Gene Bertoncini recently told me, that "we [musicians] live life the way we want to"? Any jealousy generated by the above factors can be at least partly relieved by the "news" that artists pay dearly for all these privileges.

SHRINKS ARE PEOPLE TOO

Mental health professionals are not exempt from any of this. After all, their job is to reign in human wildness—to keep the lid on the id, to monitor which thoughts and behaviors are appropriate, and to calculate the cost of those which are not. Some are drawn to the profession because of their own timidity, since they can vicariously experience adventures they would never dare to have, and find intimacy without risk. Most toil their entire lives in a field not exactly known for its conspicuous exuberance, where success often requires obedience to one bureaucracy or other. As both servants and agents of the status quo, they cannot afford to be rule-breakers.

This can inspire jealousy of lives that seem more passionate and freer than their own, with their unique potential for occupational exhilaration. It is conceivable that a few might retaliate with the best weapon they have: labeling such behavior and its hosts as "mad," or at least "deviant" in some way. It makes creatives "less than," helping blunt their genius with the distancing, diminishing mechanisms of pathology and pity.

CONCLUSION

To be fair, the myth is also happily perpetuated by those creatives and wannabes who use it as an excuse for their own bad behavior ("What can you expect of me? I'm an *artiste!*"). But it's primarily the public fascination that keeps it alive, as we flock to all those films about talent that distort the facts to serve the stereotype, like "Shine" and "A Beautiful

Mind.” Even the American Psychological Association’s *Monitor* recently reported the notion (Ballie, 2001, p. 17) that the great innovation of jazz derived from one man’s schizophrenia, as if no other explanation were possible.

The truth is that there is far too much at stake for society to allow its great talents to operate without a handicap. In Greek mythology, the prophets were blind; in modern mythology, the creatives are pathological. That’s why we embrace all the shabby pseudo-science in this area: it “proves” what we so deeply need to believe.

REFERENCES

- Ballie, R. (2001, October). The melody behind mental illness? *Monitor on Psychology*, 32, 10, 17.
- Lees, G. (1999, February). *Jazzletter*, 18, 2, 6.
- Padel, R. (1995). *Whom gods destroy: Elements of Greek and tragic madness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sarton, M. (1993). *Mrs. Stevens hears the mermaids singing*. New York: W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1965)
- Storr, A. (1993). *The dynamics of creation*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Offprints. Requests for offprints should be directed to Judith Schlesinger, PhD, by e-mail: judith-schlesinger@compuserve.com