A BEAUTIFUL AFFLICTION:
TRACING THE ROLE OF MENTALLY ILL ARTISTS IN
REDUCING THE NEGATIVE STIGMA OF MENTAL
ILLNESS

A thesis submitted to
The Honors Program at UDM
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Graduation with Honors

by

Katherine L. Hoffman

May 2015
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Heather Hill Vasquez for offering her time, patience, and brilliance to this project. Without her direction and guidance, this thesis would not have been possible.

I am also very appreciative of Dr. Annamaria Silveri and Dr. Matthew Mio for graciously donating their time to serve on my thesis committee.

Thank you to my parents, Thomas and Denise Hoffman, for 22 years of love and encouragement, and for instilling a passion for life-long learning in me at a young age.

Finally, thank you to my family, friends, and teammates, for always understanding when I said, “I can’t, I have to work on my thesis.”

***
Figures


Introduction

“Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings ... the men of old who gave things their names saw no disgrace or reproach in madness; otherwise they would not have connected it with the name of the noblest of arts, the art of discerning the future, and called it the manic art ... So, according to the evidence provided by our ancestors, madness is a nobler thing than sober sense ... madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human.”

Plato, quoting Socrates

Madness. Insanity. Lunacy. Psychosis. Demonism. Mental illness has never been a simple term to name or define. However, the working definition for this project’s intent and purposes refers to a range of both physiological and psychological conditions that interfere with a person’s thinking, feeling, control over mood, ability to relate to others, and overall daily functioning. The general opinion of psychologists and psychiatrists today is that mental illness does not discriminate based on age, race, religion, or income, nor does it correlate with poor upbringing, lack of character, or personal weakness. Mental illness can strike anyone at anytime, given the right circumstances, making it even more urgent that we discover better ways to understand and empathize with mentally ill afflicted persons. Although the majority of people afflicted with illnesses of the mind are able to find relief from their symptoms with individualized treatment plans, maintaining a healthy psychological status is typically a lifelong effort.  

---

1 Plato, 1974, pp 46-47.
Long before psychologists and psychiatrists began to analyze mental illness as a physiological abnormality, however, Socrates considered the affliction a gift from the heavens above; a divine power that makes an individual somehow exceptional compared to those with “sober sense.” Thus, in Socrates’ assessment, individuals afflicted with mental illness possess a “manic art” that is not, as society perceives today, a burden, but rather a crucial opportunity. These “nobler” people with madness ought not to be disgraced or reproached, but, instead, celebrated for their differences and ability to envision what others cannot. How different would our society be if we could consistently look beyond the misunderstandings and disparities that surround mental illnesses plaguing so many people, as well as society, and instead see the strengths of these unique individuals as Socrates did?

For centuries, those afflicted by the “madness” have been ostracized by multiple societies and cultures rather than embraced for their valuable differences and potential talents. In short, they have been rejected and cast aside as the Other.

The Other can be defined as anyone on the margins of society. He, she, or they may be a different race, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, or social class, but they share a common characterization: they are seen as not belonging. Moreover, an individual or group of people defined as the Other is often seen as inferior and/or a lesser being by the majority. The mentally ill, by our definitions of the Other, can easily fall into the category, as they have been demonized and ostracized for centuries. Is it possible to change culture – to

---

reawaken Socrates’ thinking – and absorb the mentally ill as an invaluable and indispensable part of society? Furthermore, can the mentally ill not only belong, but also be seen as the source of a valuable deviation from typical perspectives? The change would require us to accept the idea that one’s madness, or mental illness, truly is a gift with potential that can be maximized. Although there are undoubtedly tragic and negative outcomes associated with mental illness, it is up to society as a whole to offer the necessary resources, and eliminate its antipathetic attitude towards those afflicted by mental illness, if this potential of the gift is to be actualized, and the negative outcomes minimized. Fundamentally, eliminating this attitude requires society to acknowledge, on both a broad and individual scale, that a mental illness does not define an individual, but instead provides the affected person with an alternative viewpoint that must be attended to and cherished by others. Above all, a person with a mental illness is still always valuable and worthy. However, sometimes society’s vision becomes so occluded that a person is inherently seen as being a burden, worthy only of being pushed out of sight, outside the walls of the community.

All individuals are deserving of help and understanding, and must not be placed on the margins of society as the Other. Too often, those with mental illness are set aside and used as examples of the abnormal in order to allow us to define what is normal. Society’s inability or unwillingness to accept those with mental illness has grave consequences and ought to be unallowable. Just as those in Socrates’ time period struggled to have their “madness” recognized as something
more beautiful and pure than what it was seen to be, so too are individuals all around us hurting and striving for a change in their existence. Society itself is even suffering from the silencing and ignoring: when mentally ill persons are turned into aberrations, crucial alternative experiences and perspectives that could positively impact our understanding of the world, are lost without hope of return. All individuals who struggle with mental illnesses must be recognized as significant, with strengths and weaknesses that are both valuable to society and worthy of recognition.

***

It can be very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to ward off the snares of the mind, and many who deal with mental illness describe it as the toughest fight of their lives. The struggle of mental illness has existed as long as humankind and, until recent changes made in the past century or so, the societal support for those afflicted by mental illness has been shadowy, vastly insubstantial, and often harmful. The continuous placement of mentally ill people outside the walls of society – or locked away and made invisible within the walls of society’s asylums – has encouraged a strong tendency among “healthy persons” to quickly dissociate themselves with the mentally ill and reject them as Others. Because of this – and combined with a “crazy person” portrayal of the mentally ill through virtually every medium of art, literature, and public news information – eliminating the stereotypes towards mentally ill people is a feat that society has yet to accomplish. However, as this study demonstrates, once mentally ill individuals are allowed to
express themselves in both a private and public manner – an important part of a movement that began in the mid 19th century – an opportunity arises for the mentally ill individuals to find healing from their disease, as well as change the negative stigma from society. This study seeks to explore that concept of healing and change.

Mental illness is a vast subject that was, at first, of interest simply because, despite Western culture’s long history of rejecting the mentally ill, the untreated, uncontrolled, and at times dangerous behaviors of the mentally ill have been a predominant theme in mass media over recent years. Between the frenzy of large-scale shootings, arguments over gun control, and debates on health care coverage and support for the mentally ill, the topic arises nearly daily in public news. “Extreme anxiety,” “irrational beliefs of the world,” and “severe depression,” are common phrases that pop up after the fact to describe the perpetrator of the crime, and “what could have been done to prevent this?” never fails to arise soon after. It is apparent that mental illness typically only attracts attention after something horrific happens, encouraging the idea that mentally ill individuals are freakish outcasts and, again, especially emphatic examples of the Other. Most importantly, the misdirected societal attention that mass media permits and encourages takes the conception of how mentally ill persons are perceived out of the hands of the mentally ill. It was this study’s initial aim, then, to find methods for fixing, or at least identifying, that negative attention and stigma.
This project does not intend to be a cure-all. It does not center on physiological and psychological changes or on genetic influence, both of which indisputably serve as possible contributors to mental illness. Nor does the project focus on the political or socio-economic issues that affect mental illness – such as gun control laws and lack of universal health care coverage. While gun control loopholes surely need to be fixed and health care support for the mentally ill could absolutely be better, this study has simpler, but perhaps more fundamental, aims and intentions. It is imperative to document society’s acceptance, or, rather, lack of acceptance, of the mentally ill, in order to trace what has prevented society from embracing the mentally ill for so many generations. This project follows a specific approach in analyzing the societal response to mental illness: art and written works of the mentally ill themselves are used as firsthand, primary sources of analysis for each time period. Each body of work is taken as a glimpse into the selected writer or artist’s circumstances and viewpoints: the piece of expression, whether public or private, serves as the tool for documenting the mentally ill person’s life. Using these firsthand sources, society’s viewpoints concerning the mentally ill can be traced, and three main patterns can be distinguished in the progression of acceptance of the mentally ill through and by the artwork produced by the mentally ill themselves.

The first pattern recognized is that the increasing frequency of mentally ill afflicted persons writing and producing artwork directly aids their ability to be perceived by society as a cause worthy of assisting, not only because they are fellow humans and not an Other, but because they showcase the valuable talents with
which they can benefit society. The progressive beliefs and actions of the time period regarding those who are mentally ill are often preceded by corresponding work by the mentally ill themselves, which is paramount to the large-scale idea of accepting mental illness. Thus, artwork produced by the mentally ill serves as an important force for convincing the public that mentally ill persons are valuable and deserving of help – that they cannot be rejected and pushed aside as the Other.

Moreover, this study reveals and emphasizes a second pattern: as the past century progresses, there is a steep rise in the amount of work produced by the mentally ill – a rise which has continued into the 20th century. The rise contrasts with past points in western history in which few – if any – art or written works can be found by those afflicted with mental illness. This study asserts that, as more creative works are produced, more attention is given to the possibility of the mentally ill afflicted persons having qualities that are not only desirable, but difficult and sometimes impossible to obtain without “abnormal” processes of the mind. More specifically, this study finds that the works that have most dramatically restructured society’s opinions and prior perspectives of mental illness are those that showcase the individuality and humanity of the afflicted persons and which thus work most directly to overcome the idea of the Other. It is with the recognition of a person who is afflicted with mental illness as a unique personality – with beauty and talents that may only exist because of what society perceives as a flaw – that true progress in the acceptance of mental illness is made. This project, then,
explores both the increase in creative expression by mentally ill afflicted people and that expression’s effect on society’s views.

The third, and perhaps most unexpected pattern which connects societal acceptance of the mentally ill to the production of their own artwork consists of two shared factors – distinct, but related – that affect a mentally ill person’s ability to thrive in society, reach their full potential, and assist in overcoming negative stereotypes. While the interconnections and influence of these two factors – each divided into subsets of private and public, internal and external – will become much clearer as artists are specifically discussed in further chapters, they will be named and explained here briefly.

The first factor is the mentally ill person’s access, as well as ability, to express themselves through both a private outlet (such as journals, personal poetry, and letters) and a public outlet (examples include artwork and writing). The second factor is the individual’s support system, which exists in two forms: the internal and external. The internal support system is comprised of an individual’s family and close friends – anyone who willingly aids the mentally ill person in their struggle and provides a positive influence on the afflicted individual’s life. The external support system is defined as society’s opinion and influence, as assessed through historical literature, on the mentally ill community as a whole. The evidence from this study shows that it is necessary for all four factors (private and public outlets of expression; internal and external support systems) to exist if a mentally ill person is expected to achieve success and find self-worth in today’s society.
The late 19th century is where this project truly begins its analysis. Although there is work created pertaining to mental illness prior to the 1850’s, there is a significant absence of work created by the mentally ill themselves. That is not to say that there were no artists or writers with mental illness creating work prior to the 1850’s. Instead, there were very few, if any, artists and writers with an apparent mental illness who expressed their struggles with that illness through their creative works. Combining the evidence of historical references and the lack of creative works by the mentally ill, I conclude that, prior to the 1850’s and the sharp rise in psychiatric study, mental illness was a subject to be silenced and ignored in every medium of aesthetic expression produced by the mentally ill. The mentally ill were spoken about, but never allowed to speak. They were absolutely, unarguably, shunted aside as the Other. This habit of condemning the mentally ill, which continues even today to a point, was, in the past, almost a complete obstruction to the ability of the mentally ill to ask for help or for society to see their value. In fact, the condemning was so obtrusive that it makes it easy to have the beginnings, albeit humble and tentative beginnings, of expressive works produced by the mentally ill in the mid 19th century serve as the start of the study. Hence, art and literature created pre-19th century will not be a focus here, and, instead, the study will begin at approximately 1850 and will focus on two figures seminal to the understanding of mental illness and its debilitating effects. These two figures are Vincent Van Gogh and Sylvia Plath.
Chapter One will examine one of the most influential artists of the late 19th century, Vincent Van Gogh, and how his desire to communicate his pain and suffering that accompanied his mental illness influenced, and eventually consumed, his artwork destined for public sale. Chapter Two will examine how and why this desperation to express struggle became a losing battle for the brilliant artist, and how his support systems both motivated and destroyed him. Chapters Three and Four will move to the 20th century and the work of distinguished, and deeply troubled, writer Sylvia Plath. Plath’s work demonstrates progress and, in some cases, lack of progress, in advancing the social acceptance of mentally ill persons. Both representative figures are chosen predominantly because they have become individuals whose art and writing are nearly indistinguishable from their struggles with mental illness. Each exemplifies their specific time period’s outlook on the expression of mental illness through the work of the mentally ill, and can be used to identify key factors in both the successes and failures of mentally ill individuals.

***

The 19th century, although it hosts the first glimpses of expression by the mentally ill regarding their illness as reality, is still a time of desperate struggle for them. Chapter One thus argues that works produced during the period model the predominant attitude of the time: mentally ill persons have only two fates: to be mistreated or ignored. The late 19th century is a continuation of the previous hundreds of years’ treatment standards of locking the mentally ill away in prison-
like rooms with no windows or bathrooms. The focus in this chapter is on the talented, but troubled, Vincent Van Gogh and how he exemplifies the internal battle that mentally ill persons fight between their unpredictable moments of strength and frailty. Van Gogh fought bouts of severe depression, and eventually took his own life at age 37. In this time period there was astonishingly little support for the mentally ill, and this led to a relative silence by those who struggled with mental illness. Van Gogh’s paintings, journal entries, and letters to his brother reveal society’s attitudes and responses towards the mentally ill in this time period; they show the areas in which he was ahead of his time in communicating his struggles, as well as how he was simultaneously restricted by societal stigma against mental illness.

Chapter Two shows the triggers for Van Gogh’s downward “spiral” (deeply present, as I argue in my analysis of his *Starry Night* painting), and explores his ultimate decision to end his own life. The feeling of desperation, and a crushing acknowledgement that society, even after his efforts to communicate his struggle, does not appreciate him or his work, is apparent in both his letters and paintings by the end of his life. This very important merging of Van Gogh’s public and private expression is discussed, along with the influence of both his internal and external support systems, as compared to individuals in the rest of his time period. His work demonstrates that the late 19th and very early 20th century was a time of near silence by the mentally ill, but Van Gogh deviated from the standard and sought to

---

express his struggle in an effort to help both himself and other persons afflicted by mental illness. This discussion leads to the realization that Van Gogh is, in fact, a seminal figure for the movement to eliminate negative stigma for those with mental illness.

Chapters Three and Four explores the transition into the next stage of expression by the mentally ill which occurred around the time of Clifford Beer’s autobiography *A Mind that found Itself*. The repercussions of Beer’s book, which details his dehumanizing experience in a Connecticut mental health institution, include a call for reform of mental health in America and the creation of an advocacy organization that would eventually become the National Mental Health Association.6 A few decades later, experimentation with drugs, surgery, electro-convulsive, and insulin-induced comas to treat persistent mental illness gained popularity. It was within this period of revolutionizing activities that Sylvia Plath wrote *The Bell Jar*, a semi-autobiographical account of a woman with severe mental illness who undergoes multiple experimental treatments and failed suicide attempts before being placed in an asylum. A month after *The Bell Jar* was published, Plath committed suicide.7 Yet, despite her unfortunate death, Plath’s ability to communicate explicitly her struggles in a novel shows that the times were changing. In fact, Plath is not as subtle as Van Gogh is when he translates his struggles into art work – she writes painful line after painful line to expose her misery and feelings of being an Other within support systems that do not

---


understand her. The societal pressure to hide one’s mental illness from public forms of expression, then, began to fade as many more treatments became available. However, the miserable conditions to which the mentally ill continued to be subjected still encouraged silence and made such silence the safest route. In spite of this, Plath’s brave attempt to make mental illness a palpable disease is important for the understanding of this second time period, and represents another major turning point in the progression of communication by mentally ill persons. For one of the first times, those with mental illness are allowed to penetrate society as humans instead of Others, and they are considered worthy, at least partially, of help and acknowledgement.

In the final chapter, the era of post-1960’s creative expression and work is explained. The tragic suicide of Robin Williams and his artistry as both a comedian and actor is discussed, and his place within the asserted factors needed for the success of mentally ill individuals is analyzed. The improvement of society’s perception of and willingness to support those with mental illness is evident, but at the same time, as William’s case suggests, it is clear that we have a long road ahead in controlling, recognizing value in, and eradicating the negative stigma of, mental illness.

Although the most recent outbreak of art and writings that describe mental illness from the perspective of the mentally ill shows a distinct change in perspective from a century ago – in that society is much more willing to help and attempt to understand – there is still significant progress to be made. The only way
mental illness can be fully understood and valued is if society stops looking at those
stricken by the effects of mental illness as the Other and starts reenvisioning them
as unique, talented, and beneficial people who deserve help, empathy, and an
opportunity to share their special talents. As Socrates reminds us, someone who is
mentally ill may actually have an exceptional gift, but unless society can see their
illness as only a small part of their overall worth as a person, mental illness will
continue to cause problems within the framework of a community rather than its
creative endeavors serving as a valuable alternative in perspective. Society must be
willing and informed to recognize when there is an outcry for help from any form of
expression, and also be willing to look and consider the world as it is for someone
with a debilitating mental illness.

If the crisis of mental illness is to be solved, it is non-negotiable that we, as a
society, put aside our initial instincts to dismiss someone with a mind different from
our own as the Other, and consider the world through the warping, distorting, but
potentially revolutionizing and enlightening lens of what Plath, for example, called
a bell jar. Both Vincent Van Gogh and Sylvia Plath are brilliant minds that never
reached their full potential due to their inability to deal with the suffering their
uncontrolled and stigmatized mental illnesses caused. Each offers important insight
into what caused their demise – and what can be done to prevent similar situations
today. Their, as well as all mentally ill persons’, alternative perspectives and
creative expressions must be used as an opportunity to help redirect the warping
effects of that bell jar into an understanding and knowledge with potential benefits to all of society.
Chapter One

“I have put my heart and my soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process.”

Vincent Van Gogh

Throughout much of history, there is an almost complete absence of expressive work created by the mentally ill. From 400 B.C., when Hippocrates describes mental illness as an imbalance of the bodily humors, through 15th century plays in which Shakespeare uses his characters afflicted by insanity as comedic devices, the mentally ill are spoken about, but never allowed to speak themselves. In fact, it is not until the 1850’s that one of the first and most striking instances of an artist whose struggle against mental illness – and consequential acknowledgement that he or she is part of society’s Other – can be studied using his writing and artwork. This artist is Vincent Van Gogh.

For one of the first times in history, an individual who battles mental illness daily – not who observes mentally ill persons or tries to cure them – leaves behind a trail of letters and paintings spanning his life and allows a glimpse into the torment that mentally ill persons suffer. Although Van Gogh is restricted in the communication he is able to express through his public artwork, the messages he is able to spread through his artwork (and which are confirmed by his correspondences), offer a deviation from history and literature’s past response toward the mentally ill. Thus, Van Gogh’s life, artwork, and posthumous recognition

---

are a significant marker when tracing the progression of value that society recognizes and places on the mentally ill. He proves to be a seminal figure – that is, he is a strong influencer of eventual change that takes place – because he recognizes his own suffering, and searches for a way to express it, in hopes that he can change the lives of mentally ill persons that come after him.

***

Van Gogh wrote over 800 letters in his lifetime, painted over 900 pieces of art, and created another 1,100 sketches.\(^9\) Van Gogh’s artwork subjects consist of a multitude of people, including himself, as well as nature, scenery, and still-life. He experimented with several different styles and color pallets in his relatively short career as an artist, and his artistic prowess tends to shine through no matter what style he chooses. What is less transparent, however, is that the artist behind the incredible paintings was fighting a tremendous battle with his own mind. Even in Van Gogh’s last year of his life, when his artwork production reached an unprecedented peak, the expression of his mental illness through his artwork remained subtle. Although Van Gogh did actively pursue using his artwork as a form of communication to society to show his suffering as an individual afflicted by mental illness, he was unable to fully express those emotions. Nonetheless, he is a crucial character in the progressive movement towards accepting mental illness – he takes the first, albeit hesitant, step forward in an advancement that the mentally ill so desperately need. Thus, if the issues of degrading and dehumanizing

---

the mentally ill are to be solved, it is important to gain an understanding of why exactly it was so difficult for him to convey in his artworks the deep, haunting emotions of Otherness he was so clearly feeling in his messages to his brother.

An analysis of Van Gogh’s letters reveals that the correspondences, mostly to his brother, served as a private outlet for Van Gogh to discuss his life, his art, his dreams and wishes, and his worries and fears of utter failure. When Van Gogh is feeling confident in his work, his letters to Theo are uplifting and hopeful for the future. And when he goes through his periods of melancholy, especially nearing the end of his life, the optimistic spirit in Van Gogh’s letters disappears, replaced by depression and despair. His awareness of being an Other, an aberration of society, and “a bird trapped in a cage,”\textsuperscript{10} consumes his letters and journals. It is that belief and understanding of his own differences that subtly – but very significantly – slip into his artwork designated for public sale. Van Gogh’s struggle, as well his late-in-life indications of success with expressing his internal battles, expose the beginning of a pattern shared by figures seminal to the representation and expression of mental illness: the communication of their pain humanizes them to society and is itself a beginning to a healing that can take place both for the mentally ill, as well as society, as it learns to find worth in a group of people previously thought to be abhorrent, even evil.

Historically, the mentally ill were oppressed, and, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, there was not yet a unified movement for mental health reform. Van Gogh felt society’s attitude of impatience and unwillingness to accept the mentally ill as a whole, and,

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. “Letter 133” pp. 17.
this is likely why he struggled to incorporate fully his personal feelings of depression and dissatisfaction into his public expression: his artwork. Instead, he used his letters to his brother as an alternative form of an artistic expression of his mental health struggles. However, intermixing of Van Gogh’s public and private expression towards the end of his life presents a major turning point in revealing the oppression of the mentally ill. Van Gogh is a principle instance of an author or artist using his or her artistic voice to communicate the struggle of mental illness in public work, and thus requires attention. Additionally, analyzing the connection between Van Gogh’s extensive private expression (his letters to Theo), and his struggle to incorporate it into his public expression leads to an important understanding of how the two factors of support and expression help determine Van Gogh’s ultimate successes and failures.

Vincent’s letters to Theo, his closest confidant and the backbone of his internal support system, allow us to study the nearest representation of Van Gogh’s true feelings that it is possible to obtain, as well as trace his battle with mental illness as he communicates it to Theo. Theo is the one who constantly encourages Vincent to continue with his work and voluntarily funds the continuation of his brother’s chosen craft. When Vincent is homeless, Theo lets him reside at his house, and when Vincent is dying, Theo is the only person to come see him on his deathbed. Van Gogh’s internal support system had a strong foundation in his brother. However, the internal support system found in Theo is in great opposition with society’s general lack of a support for mentally ill persons during Van Gogh’s
lifetime. Examining the role and extent of Van Gogh’s support system, and relationship between his public and private expression highlight his similarities and differences on an individual level with other mentally ill persons of his time period. The breakdown in support systems and the gaps in Van Gogh’s ability to communicate publicly and privately demonstrate the areas society can, and must, improve to allow those with mental illness to thrive.

Analysis of both his letters and paintings, then, show that Van Gogh struggled throughout his artistic career to incorporate his feelings of pain and rejection into his artwork. He relied heavily on Theo, especially in the beginning of his career, to express his misunderstood personality. However, as he grew better at painting, his ability to incorporate emotion into his art improved, and his letters to Theo revolved less around his mental health, and much more around telling Theo about his developing artistic skill. This transition shows the importance of the connection between expressive outlets and the quality of an individual’s support system; as Van Gogh’s public outlet of expression strengthens in its ability to communicate – his paintings convey much more powerful emotion – he relies less on his internal support system to pull him through his illness. Van Gogh’s ability to utilize his private, and eventually public, outlets of expression, as well as the internal support system he finds in his brother, aid him in overcoming his illness despite a lack of external societal support in his time period. However, the lack of societal support and an external willingness to find value in the alternative
viewpoint Van Gogh brings to the world ultimately force him to feel useless and unappreciated, and hence lead to his demise.

Society’s unwillingness to accept – and its active mistreatment of – mentally ill persons almost entirely restricted Van Gogh’s ability to express his struggles through his art, especially at the beginning of his career. However, Van Gogh’s attempts to assimilate his private struggles into public modes of communication were eventually rewarded: there are instances in his artwork that clearly show how his style of painting demonstrates his struggles with his illness. This important variance from the past pattern of silence by the mentally ill makes Van Gogh’s life, letters, and paintings worth close examination. Although the troubled artist tragically took his own life before he could see his artistic prowess renowned, there are still key issues and insights to discuss that could lead to profound discoveries on how to help others with mental illness today. Thus, this chapter will examine the progress Van Gogh makes in his attempts to lessen the stereotypes that exist for the mentally ill, and Chapter Two will examine the factors that limited him from continuing to produce outstanding outwork and living a life of relative mental stability.

_A Bird Trapped in a Cage_

Vincent Van Gogh experienced and recognized, even very early on in his career as an artist, the debilitating effects of mental illness. He referred to it as his “melancholy,” from the Greek word _melankholia_, meaning “black bile.” (It was
originally believed that an excess of black bile caused depression.) A letter dated July 1880 is one of the first examples of Vincent using his private correspondences with Theo to demonstrate his strong feeling of being different from others – of being cast away by society as an Other. He precedes the letter by telling Theo he is writing, “rather at random ... just what comes to my pen,” but what he describes in the note is a stunning comparison of a depressed man to a bird trapped in a cage who cannot understand why he is unsatisfied with his life.

July 1880

There are quite different kinds of idler. There is the man who is idle from laziness and lack of character, from the baseness of his nature. You can, if you like, take me for one of these.

Then, there the other kind of idler, who is idle despite himself, who is consumed inwardly by a great desire for action, but who does nothing, because it is impossible to do anything. This is quite a different type of idler. You can, if you like, take me for one of these.

A bird in a cage in spring knows quite well that there is something he would be good at, he feels strongly that there is something to be done, but he can’t do it. What is it? He can’t quite remember, then he gets some vague ideas, and says to himself, “The others are building their nests and producing their young, and raising their brood.” Then he bangs his head against the bars of his cage. And the cage is still there, and the bird is mad with grief.

“There’s a lazybones,” says another bird who is passing. “He’s comfortably off.” However, the prisoner lives and does not die, nothing shows on the outside of what is going on inside him. He is in good health, he is more or less cheerful while the sun shines. But then the migration season comes, and a bout of melancholy. “But,” say the children who look after him in his cage, “he has everything he needs.” Yet for him it means looking out at the swollen, stormy skies and feeling the revolt against his fate within himself. “I am in a cage, and so I lack nothing, fools! I have everything I need! Oh for pity’s sake, give me freedom, to be a bird like other birds.”

That idle fellow is like that idle bird.

You can’t always say what it is that shuts you up, what walls you in, what seems to bury you alive, but you still feel some kind of bars,
some kind of cage, some kind of walls. I ask myself: My God, is it for long, is it forever, is it for eternity?\textsuperscript{11}

Vincent’s evocative analogy of himself as a bird trapped in a cage is a means for him to express how he feels as a man shackled by the chains of his illness. His hopes for acceptance and understanding from his peers, his dreams of escaping the bars surrounding his life, and his inability to express tangibly “what shuts [him] up, what walls [him] in,” ring loudly through this letter to Theo. Even if his internal battle is not recognized by anyone else, Vincent prays Theo will empathize with his struggles instead of forcing judgment, as the birds outside the cage in his story do. Nothing shows on the outside of what is going on inside him. The onlooking birds cannot understand, just as individuals in society often do not understand, that a person can appear to have everything, but still feel trapped and useless, as though they are inside a cage. The other birds call the afflicted bird “a lazybones” and criticize him for his inefficiency and lack of success – a similar assumption is made even today of those stricken by the debilitating effects of mental illness. Throughout the years, society believed these individuals were unwilling to help themselves, or selfish because they seemingly did not want to help society; this notion has continued, to a point, to the present day’s culture. While the idea that it is possible to appear happy and satisfied with life, while simultaneously battling internal demons, has become a more widespread idea in today’s perspective on mental illness, in Van Gogh’s time society was so oppressive, so unwilling to believe that mental illness could be a debilitating phenomenon, that many others besides Van

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Gogh surely suffered on an unimaginable level. The sense of isolation Van Gogh feels is exhausting; his feelings and acknowledgement of being an Other eat away at his sense of identity.

Art as the Escape

Despite Van Gogh’s feelings of worthlessness, and self-admitted bouts of melancholy, he recognized and articulated to Theo multiple times that art helped him ward off his demons. He asserted frequently that what he once believed to be a talent beyond his reach – drawing – is now a source of energy and self-confidence. This allowance of an external hobby, or pursuit, to benefit and stabilize his internal chaos is paramount to the argued theory that the output of expression, or lack thereof, from the mentally ill is a vital factor to their ability to thrive within society’s restricting labels and negative presumptions. In the following excerpt from an 1880 letter to Theo, Vincent describes the happiness and intense satisfaction he realizes he gains from practicing his artistic skills.

September 24, 1880

*I can’t tell you how much, in spite of the difficulties that crop up each day and the new ones that keep appearing, I can’t tell you how happy I am to have started drawing again. I have been worrying about it for a long time, but I always thought it was impossible and beyond my reach. But now, even though aware of my weakness and my painful dependence on many things, I have recovered my peace of mind and my energy revives from day to day.*

Van Gogh’s willingness to communicate privately the benefits he receives from practicing art to his brother, and his brother’s readiness to listen, show the strength

---

12 Ibid. pp. 19.
of Van Gogh’s internal support system and ability to express himself privately. Arguably, this is what enables Van Gogh to become a seminal figure in the advancement of the mentally ill; the support he has from Theo encourages and allows him to translate his struggles into art during a time when the mentally ill were marginalized and silenced.

With the aforementioned letter, as well as many of his other letters to his brother, came several sketches of various people near Vincent’s residence in London, The Hague. These sketches subtly reveal, based upon Van Gogh’s choice of subjects, his situation at the time regarding mental illness. The sketches were mostly of people that agreed to let the eccentric artist-in-training practice his skills on them; Van Gogh’s earliest drawings almost entirely revolved around the subjects of middle and lower class life. Women were often featured with water buckets, and men were shown laboring in the fields. Figures 1 and 2 show a few examples of Vincent’s early sketches.

Rural laborers are a definite interest of Van Gogh’s; it is as if he sees the rawness of the working class – he can relate to their pain of working tirelessly to keep food on the table, because it is the same tireless effort he must exert to keep himself afloat against his mental illness. Van Gogh’s desire to draw them – to express their similarities with him using a public outlet of expression – shows how much he needs and wants an escape from the Otherness he feels so heavily from day to day. Similarly, using the working class as his subjects is likely a comment, consciously or not, of his desire to be able to do what they do; he knows others think
of him as lazy because of his inability to work, but he desires to be like the common farmer at times – to be free of the melancholy that suffocates him and prevents him from having a simpler, perhaps happier, life like the laborers he draws.

Finding a Purpose Within Art

As Vincent’s letters to his brother continued, there was a steady increase in the sketches and paintings he attached with his letters. By 1882, Theo had accumulated dozens of slowly improving drawings, as well as a select few watercolors, from his brother. However, Vincent expresses frustration with his work, believing there remained some “element of severity” in his work that he could not eradicate. He tries several times to explain to Theo what art means to him, and his intentions for its creation. In March 1882 he tells Theo, “I am decidedly no landscape painter. When I make landscapes there will always be something figurative in them.” It is the first hint that Vincent demands more from the work he produces; he needs the deeper level of communication art offers. He cannot communicate well with others face-to-face, but he believes he can spread his message of loneliness and rejection in his art, just as he can communicate that message with Theo in his private expressions to him.

As Vincent falls deeper into his artwork’s greater purpose, he develops an almost compulsive focus on its production, which suggests a compulsive attention to how it may help to heal him, as well as a crucial step towards expressing his situation. In June of 1882, Vincent explains to Theo that, “Art is jealous and
demands all our time and all our strength, and then when we dedicate these to it it leaves rather a bitter taste to be taken for some kind of impractical person. Well, we just have to try and battle on.”

Van Gogh became more reclusive and increasingly dedicated to his art, and with that his understanding of his purpose within his art improves. He respects the potential of art to heal his melancholy, and he desires to envelop himself in the process of healing. A shift occurs, then, as his intentions sharpen: in 1882 he makes it clear that he would like to express his feelings of “nonentity” in the “eyes of others” as he again verbalizes his acknowledgment of a societal isolation. Van Gogh shifts from feeling and acknowledging to desiring to express, a key aspect which reveals he is not only an outstanding Post-modern artist, but a seminal figure in a movement towards transforming society’s views on mental illness. While he may not realize the important process he is experiencing and initiating, he is nonetheless a prominent marker of change in a complex progression of societal viewpoints, which is coupled with the realization that he so clearly does not recognize the process he is catalyzing.

Public Expression of a Misunderstood Disposition

As Vincent realizes his purpose for his artwork – and the healing potential it has becomes clearer – his artwork takes off, and with it, his desire to employ it as an outlet for his public expression. In fact, I had already spent years sending art away to his brother – as if he understood that his art needed to grow from a personal, private form of expression to a public form of expression that could benefit

---

others from feeling the effects of society’s stereotypes. As this potential for growth becomes more evident, he increases the amount of art he both produces and sends away. It is as if Vincent knows early on that allowing his art to become a form of public expression is a vital component to healing, and he needs Theo, his internal support system, to help him achieve that goal. He comes to realize that his private expression and the internal support from his brother are not enough to keep his illness from overtaking him. He is aware on some level that a key to conquering his illness is allowing the public to see him for who he truly is and allowing his art to communicate his struggle. For this reason, Van Gogh seeks to develop his public outlet of expression further, perhaps as a way to compensate, or even perhaps change, the lack of external support he felt from society in his time period.

Van Gogh, then, strongly desires to change publicly the way he and other mentally ill persons are viewed. In the following excerpt from yet another letter to Theo, Vincent describes his desire, or rather his need, to show his eccentric – rather than lazy or dishonorable – heart. He realizes that he is poor at communicating with others, and that many find him “disagreeable,” but he wants his art to show the world he is both sensitive and capable of deep emotion. In short, he wants to be understood in a world that does not want to understand him.

*July 21, 1882*

*I want to get to a stage where it is said of my work: this man feels deeply, and this man is sensitive. Despite my so-called roughness, you understand, or perhaps because of it.*

*What am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity or an eccentric, or a disagreeable fellow – someone who has no position in society or will ever have one, in short, the lowest of the low.*
Well, assuming that everything were exactly so, then I would like to show through my work what is in the heart of such an eccentric, such a nonentity.

Although I am often in trouble, there is inside me a serene, pure harmony and music. In the poorest hovel, in the grubbiest corner, I can see paintings or drawings. And as if compelled by an irresistible urge, my soul goes out in that direction.¹⁴

It is this urge to show the public his “what is in the heart of such an eccentric” – what he believes to be his true identity – that sets Van Gogh apart from other mentally ill persons of his time period. He recognizes his inner draw towards a calmer sense than the one that he projects. The “pure harmony and music” he describes is a route of escape for him. He believes he can draw from this place of serenity to bridge the communication gap he experiences; if he can use his art to connect with the rest of society – those birds that believe he is nothing more than an idler – then there is a possibility for a change; a repair for the disconnect; an inclusion of the Other. It is as though Van Gogh knows that, if he can accurately express his struggles and desire to belong, his work will then be of benefit. In fact, he feels “compelled by an irresistible urge” to do so. His entire being begins to revolve around communicating himself, and his disease, in his work.

This obsession drives and accelerates Van Gogh’s growth as an artist; he starts to experiment with colors much more to help him convey his feelings and emotions. He begins with simple watercolors to Theo, but quickly progresses to some of the richer paints that precede some of his most famous pieces of work, such as *Starry Night*. As he gained artistic abilities through long hours of practice, so too he gained confidence. “If you work with love and intelligence,” he told Theo, “you

develop a kind of armor against people’s opinions, just because of the sincerity of your love for nature and art.” Vincent’s artwork, then, becomes a stake of stability for his troubled mind; during the times he is most avid about his art, he speaks the least about his melancholy. The passion of creating seems to drive away the internal feelings of isolation and leave him free to focus on translating his emotions into an expression through his art that has the potential to impact a greater audience than even Van Gogh himself can imagine at the time.

Van Gogh’s passion for producing art for the public eye only grows stronger with each passing day. It is not long after his letter to Theo about “showing his eccentric heart” that Vincent sends another, this time with an important line scribbled at the bottom. After explaining to Theo the vivid details of yet another painting endeavor, he jots down in his cramped handwriting, “I have literally been unable to stop myself, I could not let go or take a rest. There is some sense of color emerging in me that I never had before, something that is wide-ranging and powerful.”15 It is at this point that Van Gogh’s artistic style appears to take off: the artwork he sends to Theo following that statement becomes much more reminiscent of the Van Gogh whose artwork is still well known to this day. Van Gogh began to feverishly utilize colors – which get deeper and stronger in intensity as the years go on. His artistic style emerges: he combines that thoughtful, uninhibited use of colors with multiple layers of paint, intending to induce emotion – specifically, the suffering and despair stemming from his Otherness – in his audience’s eyes. As Vincent vocalized in a July 1882 letter to Theo, “I want to make drawings that will

touch people. Either in a figure, or in a landscape, I would like to express, not something sentimentally melancholy, but sincere sorrow.” As he learns to express his intensity of emotion – that “sincere sorrow” – he simultaneously is able to lessen the negative effects of his own mental illness, as well as attempting, unknowingly – but perhaps presciently – to combat the negative stigma from society for others suffering like him. The realization that his art should be – and in fact must be – made for the public to understand his struggle, is a turning point in Van Gogh’s career, and vital to the understanding of both his success and ultimate demise.

Once Van Gogh understands he has the techniques necessary to express his struggles through his public expression, he finds an unparalleled sense of satisfaction and stability in his work. As will be seen in the following chapter, the quality of his artwork drastically improves as he pursues his public outlet of expression to communicate his struggle. However, it must be remembered that the lack of external support for the mentally ill, extending from earlier time periods into Van Gogh’s, still creates a void in Van Gogh’s life, no matter how much he tries to compensate for it with his public expression. Chapter Two, then, examines how and why society’s unwillingness to pay attention to the mentally ill, combined with a tragedy-triggering loss of Van Gogh’s support system, ultimately proved to be too much for the gifted, yet unstable, artist.

\[16 \text{ Ibid.}\]
Chapter Two

“I won’t hide from you that I would have preferred to die than to cause and bear so much trouble. What can you say, to suffer without complaining is the only lesson that has to be learned in this life.”

–Vincent Van Gogh

While in my previous chapter I focused on the implications of Vincent Van Gogh’s realization that he can, and must, use his art as a form of public expression, I turn in this present chapter to examining why, ultimately, Van Gogh is unable to find lifelong mental stability, regardless of how strong his internal support system with Theo was. Van Gogh, as it will be seen, successfully incorporates his “sincere sorrow” – and the struggle to which so many individuals can relate – to into his art, but at some point late in his life he loses his footing with sanity. It is arguably a poorly constructed – and subsequently lost – support system found in a fellow artist that triggers his downward spiral into madness; but the overarching issue was Van Gogh’s time period and the lack of an external support system, combined with a profoundly negative stigma that surrounded mentally ill individuals. Without any societal support to help him through the low periods of his life, Van Gogh loses himself in a compelling urge to convey his battle with melancholy in his public expression. Unfortunately, that battle overtakes him when he shoots himself in the stomach, but not before he sends a ringing message – albeit not recognized for several years to come – regarding the pain and suffering mentally ill individuals endure in a society which provides no external support system. This chapter, then, examines the process that encompasses the final two years of Van Gogh’s life, as the
artist produces his best work and eventually falls into an unreachable — but arguably avoidable — depression.

**Triggers to Insanity**

Although it is true Van Gogh battled melancholy his entire life, there is evidence that he was able to control his depression up to a point. However, there is a point in Van Gogh’s life that he begins to experience ever-worsening spells of deep depression which he never truly recovers from. It seems that the trigger for this deterioration of his mental health was the same event — interestingly and significantly — for which Van Gogh is most famous for: the self-inflicted loss of his right ear. The story of Van Gogh cutting off his own ear with a razor is well known and often the first connotation people have when hearing the artist’s name. Society, even in the present day, finds mentally ill individuals easiest to remember by their actions and behaviors that deem them “crazy,” rather than by their valuable and often incredible additions to the world. One of these actions pertinent in Van Gogh’s life is the infamous story of the troubled artist mutilating himself. Yet, Van Gogh’s ear incident is a turning point in a significant way: his gradual loss of sanity is marked by increased, and even desperate attempts, to achieve a communication to the public of his struggles with his illness.

There is no piece of work completed by Van Gogh that more strongly emphasizes his “sincere sorrow,” his loneliness, and his feelings of Otherness than his self-portrait with his bandaged ear. The incident, results of which are portrayed
in this painting, began after Vincent lived with fellow painter Paul Gauguin in Arles for several weeks. They developed a strong relationship, and Gauguin became a best friend to Van Gogh – as well as, importantly, an addition to the internal support system that he so greatly needed. However, on December 23rd, 1888, Vincent wrote to Theo, “I think Gauguin had become rather disheartened with the good town of Arles, and the little house where we work, and especially with me. In fact, I think there are some serious problems still to be overcome here for both of us. But these difficulties are inside ourselves rather than anywhere else.”17 Later that night, Gauguin informed Van Gogh that he was leaving. Devastated by the news, and seeing he was losing a large part of a newly found – or perhaps, more self-constructed – internal support system, Van Gogh had an “attack of madness,” taking a razor and partially slicing off his left ear. He was found the next day by police, lying unconscious in a pool of blood, surrounded by blood stained rags and red hand-printed walls.18 It is not known what exactly Van Gogh’s motives were for the self-mutilation, but it seems it was probably an attempt to punish himself for yet another failed relationship in his life. Either way, the action shows Van Gogh’s deeply troubled nature; his loss of the internal support he found in his friend and fellow artist triggers a major psychological event that he arguably never recovered from.

17 Ibid. “Letter 565” pp. 239.
Vincent tells Theo about the incident, describing it with the utmost remorsefulness. It seems he feels he cannot, despite his best efforts, succeed in his relationships with others.

7 January, 1989

My dear Theo,
Perhaps I won’t write you a really long letter today, but anyhow a line to let you know that I returned home today. How I regret that you were troubled for such a little thing, forgive me, for I am after all probably the primary cause of it. I hadn’t foreseen that it would lead to you being told about it. Enough...

He recognizes that he lost control of himself, and that distresses him. He hopes he did not lose the respect of his brother and biggest supporter, because, without Theo, he will lose both his internal support system and private form of expression, leaving him with nothing to battle his merciless melancholy. Vincent knows that if the internal support system for which Theo serves as the backbone is lost, so will the rest of his sanity go with it.

The emotions of “supreme sorrow” he felt are prominent in his self-portrait. The distant gaze suggests a haunted, concerned soul lying behind the light eyes of the fiery red-headed painter. He is an Other in a world that does not accept him or understand him. The smoke from his pipe wafts next to his face, symbolic of a soul needing a new place to reside – a place where it is not marginalized by an unappreciative society. His tweed coat is buttoned up all the way, representing his

---

inability to let others in; he has too weak of an external support system from the rest of society. Above all, the white bandage wrapped around his head signifies there is something undeniably wrong with the man in the portrait. This bandage serves as a sign of battle – an external representation of the internal war he is in the process of fighting. Even the style of his painting – impasto, or the layering on of multiple layers of paint – suggests he is desperately trying to express an inability to “get it right.” He self-describes his style as “crude, often garish,” but nonetheless uses the thick brushstrokes and stark contrasts in colors to reflect his misunderstood soul. He feels the effects of failure – of not selling his artwork or being able to keep friendships and relationships – and he feels the isolation for his abnormalities and eccentricities. The thick brushstrokes reflect his frustrations and inability to blend in: the stark colors show his anxiety and desire to gain attention in a culture intent on ignoring him and pushing him away. Even as he attempts to translate his suffering to a palpable, three-dimensional painting, his madness and melancholy rage on.

This self-portrait is a severe contrast from his past, more experimental, and almost innocent, artwork. With the loss of Gauguin comes the loss of his sanity, and with it, a knowledge that that lack of sanity must be communicated somehow. Vincent knows that the Otherness is not going to improve; he has lived 36 years of his life without seeing improvement in the way the mentally ill are treated. However, he knows something must change, and thus, his artwork morphs into a
much more fluid style – exaggerating movement, emotion, and struggle – withholding nothing even as he undeniably suffers for and with it.

**A Downward Spiral**

Although Vincent recovered physically from the ear-cutting incident and left the hospital in January, his neighbors quickly petitioned to have him readmitted for erratic behavior. The triggers of both public and personal rejection – a loss of internal support in Gauguin, and a continued unwillingness by society to recognize his talent – become too great for the unstable artist to handle. After a few more relapses, Vincent moved his permanent residence to an asylum in Saint-Rémy in April 1889. It was here that he produced artwork at a feverish pace; the open air and rolling countryside around the asylum drove him to produce incredible works that today are scattered around the world’s greatest art galleries. It is in Saint-Rémy that Vincent produces *Starry Night*, one of his most well-known works of art and a principle example of a landscape used to express intense emotions.²⁰ It is as if Vincent recognized before anyone else did that he was running out of time to defeat his illness: he sees that he is not going to receive external societal support in his lifetime, and may not be able to overcome his diseased mind. This final year in which he produces his best work at such a high rate is his last desperate attempt to rationalize and express his illness to the public. He knows on some level that he

---

must be an agent to change, even if he will not live to see the results of that change and his legacy for sufferers of mental illness.

In *Starry Night*, one of his most famous pieces of work produced during this final period (shown in Figure 3), Van Gogh uses bold blues, oranges, and yellows to unite his viewers under an image with which every individual can identify: a cloudless night filled with bright, glistening stars. Did Van Gogh simply like the beauty found in the contrast of blue and orange in nature? Van Gogh did have a deep affection for nature, but it is likely there is a much deeper meaning of struggle and frustration behind his Post-Impressionist painting. The night sky represents his search for subjects that provide a tangible unity between members of society. Furthermore, Van Gogh stated his aims in painting were “to exaggerate the essential and purposely leave the obvious things vague.”21 Thus, examination of *Starry Night* finds an exaggeration of the swirling, overdramatically bright stars. One interpretation of this is that the stars represent Van Gogh’s own bright light in his life – his artwork. The unpredictable, twisting spirals of sky symbolize the instability and imbalance of his life; with the exception of Theo, Van Gogh never has a strong or constant support system, and his life was in many ways a series of tumultuous relationships, with poverty combated only by Theo’s constant donations, and repeated bouts of melancholy. In fact, the dramatic, looming shadow of a tall, undulating entity juxtaposed against the bright background may be representative of just that – his ever-present melancholy. It is very possible that the looming shadow is a depiction of what Van Gogh feels is a diseased mind, at times isolating

---

and devouring the light around him. The black shadow juts into a picture of beauty, no matter how unstable that beauty may be, almost devouring it. It towers above the sleeping city – a seemingly mysterious and unpredictable character in a complex story. However, the shadow adds to the painting, giving it depth and a sense of location and reality: it adds to the beauty in its own way. Similarly, Van Gogh’s illness offers a set of raw, relentless emotions, a twisted vision of reality, and an unwavering passion to produce creative work. The looming shadow, just like his shackled mind, adds to the beauty despite its seemingly monstrous qualities. As he calls Starry Night “a failure,” it is clear that Van Gogh is struggling; he is no longer able to recognize that he plays a much larger role in not only art, but in understanding and reducing the negative stigma of the mentally ill.

***

Although his time at Saint-Remy was productive, more letters to Theo suggest a fear that he will become lost in the artistic process – eaten up, indeed even swallowed by it – if even the faintest bouts of melancholy return. The following letter exposes his escape from reality in painting, especially as his reality spirals further into a darkness from which he cannot find his way out.

25 September 1888:

I have a terrible clarity of mind at times, when nature is so lovely these days, and then I’m no longer aware of myself and the painting comes to me as if in a dream. I am indeed somewhat fearful that that will have its reaction in melancholy when the bad season comes, but I’ll try to get away from it by studying this question of drawing figures from memory.22

---

The “terrible clarity of mind” Van Gogh feels is, to him, a sign that melancholy is on its way (a characteristic of a type of illness that is today classified as Bipolar, or manic-depressive disorder). Unfortunately, Van Gogh predicted correctly, and his time at Saint-Rémy, while being his best period in terms of his work produced, also proved to bring attacks of melancholy and insanity at a greater frequency and intensity than ever before. Van Gogh’s final works included several more additions to a study he worked on from 1885 until his death: the wheat field series. The wheat field series became a representation of his entire artistic career – he worked tirelessly to produce increasingly better paintings of one subject: a barren wheat field – but he does not receive the reception that he desires from the public, just as he does not receive a reception to the struggle and sadness reflected in his paintings.

Van Gogh produced dozens of drawings and paintings for his Wheat Field series beginning in 1885 and continuing until his death. The fields provided him with a subject matter with which he was able to connect on a deeper level with nature. He studied the intensities of colors, especially his favorite contrast of yellow (the field) and blue (the sky).23 In total, he created over 70 pieces of artwork with wheat fields as his subject (two of which can be seen in Figures 5 and 6). Unfortunately, the wheat fields also became a tragic symbol for him: perhaps of being alone, or of being so lost in his artistic dream of using his art to heal himself such that he could no longer find his way out. He recognizes the absence of an external support system and feels powerless to fill the void from this missing

resource that he knows he needs to survive. His obsession with the wheat fields shows his frustration with society’s refusal to listen to him; his communication in his public art repeatedly lacks a reception, and the compulsive choice of wheat fields as a subject is representative of the frustration. It is as if his last hope is to put his heart and soul into his public expression, in hopes that he can help a future generation deal with the debilitating effects of mental illness, as well as society’s oppressive stereotypes.

***

“La tristesse durera toujours.
[The sadness will last forever.]”

Despite Van Gogh’s continued attempts to find solace from his illness through his art, his mental health took a regrettable turn for the worse in the months leading up to his death. He writes to Theo in a letter dated May, 1889 about his ever-decreasing lack of will to live anymore. He no longer has anything motivating to keep him going through the day – his depression has hit an all time low, and his art has lost its purpose and significance without a reception for his public outlet of expression.

May 23, 1889

Now the shock had been such that it disgusted me even to move, and nothing would have been so agreeable to me as never to wake up again. At present this horror of life is already less pronounced, and the melancholy less acute. But I still have absolutely no will, hardly any desires or none, and everything that has to do with ordinary life, the desire for example to see friends again, about whom I think however,

---

almost nil. That's why I'm not yet at the point where I ought to leave here soon, I would still have melancholy for everything.\textsuperscript{25}

Sadly, his last letter to Theo had finality to it. Vincent’s desire “has completely left [him]” and he believes painters are up against too much. Without the reception or willingness of society to acknowledge his work and the suffering reflected in it, he can see no purpose in producing his artwork anymore. He laments to Theo how he and other artists are “fighting more and more with their backs to the wall,” and cannot see why his work is not recognized despite his hard work and dedication.

\textit{July 23, 1890}

\textit{Perhaps I'd rather write you about a lot of things, but to begin with, the desire to do so has completely left me, and then I feel it is useless...As far as I'm concerned, I apply myself to my canvases with all my mind, I am trying to do as well as certain painters whom I have greatly loved and admired...what I think is that the painters themselves are fighting more and more with their backs to the wall.}\textsuperscript{26}

There is no letter that better summarizes Vincent’s frustration with society, with the lack of an external support system that it offers, than this final letter. It summarizes the loss of a purpose for Van Gogh’s artwork, as well as a complete loss of interest in producing more artwork for that same reason.

Vincent Van Gogh’s illness consumed him on July 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1890, when he shot himself in the stomach with a revolver. He was found in a wheat field, the same wheat field he’d painted so many times before. It is a comment on the helplessness Vincent felt that he could take his own life within the same scene that formerly gave his life purpose. Theo, a supporter of his brother through and through, notified

immediately of Vincent’s death, was able to rush to Saint Rémy in time to spend the last few days with his dying brother. Theo wrote to his wife, Johanna, during Vincent’s last days, “We are all together…poor fellow, very little happiness fell to his share, and no illusions are left to him…he feels so alone.” This aloneness, or Otherness, that Van Gogh felt is what marks him as a seminal figure for the time period. He is the first artist willing, and in a sense, compelled, to attempt to communicate that loneliness and Otherness in his public expression.

In his last letter to Theo before he committed suicide, Vincent described the pain and frustration of living in a world that he felt does not appreciate his and his fellow artists’ efforts. Although he “applies [himself] to [his] canvases with all [his] mind,” he still believes “nothing would have been so agreeable as never to wake up again.” He claims it “disgusts [him] to move” in this “horror of life.” The depression with which he struggled is compounded by his feeling of uselessness and inability to achieve success in his chosen profession. The overwhelming tone of the letter points to and proves Van Gogh’s comprehension of himself as an Other. He genuinely feels misunderstood, and aspires to change others’ opinions through his artwork.

While, ultimately, Vincent Van Gogh was not able to change the minds of those around him in time to save himself, he nonetheless sets the stage for the future expression that other mentally ill persons desperately need to experience if they are to overcome their struggle in order to show the rest of society that they are a cause worth helping.

In a final memory of Van Gogh’s life, Emilie Bernard, a fellow artist, attended Vincent’s funeral and described in his journal the tragedy of the talented life that was lost, referencing Van Gogh’s death as a tragic loss of an artistic genius. “All his most recent paintings had been hung on the walls of the room where the corpse was laid out, surrounding him as it were with a halo, and to the artists they made his death still more painful by the brilliance of the genius they revealed.” Van Gogh’s personality, albeit sometimes difficult to get along with, had genius qualities that had much more value than society ever awarded during his lifetime.

***

Although Van Gogh ultimately fell victim to his illness, and never saw any of his audiences appreciate his work (only one painting ever sold during his lifetime), he persevered in his artistic production despite a lack of success, as if he knew there was a greater purpose to the art he was producing. It seems his sanity and freedom from the Otherness, and perhaps, the sanity and freedom of others, hinged on the continuation of his work, regardless of its salability. For this, and for Van Gogh’s ability to utilize his private expression to communicate with his internal support system, Van Gogh must be remembered not only for his contributions to the artistic world, but for his lasting impact on the societal perspective on mentally ill individuals. Had he not had both the strong internal support system in Theo, as well as the confidence to utilize his private expression, he would not have been able to incorporate his struggles and feelings of Otherness into his public expression as well as he did. Although the external support of Van Gogh’s time was lacking, there

is an important message that carries into society today: there needs to be resources to support the mentally ill, and more than just the individual’s family (or in Van Gogh’s case, his brother) to encourage the person and help them find their value if mental illness is to become a controllable and positive issue within society.
Chapter Three

“If I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited. Yet I am not a cretin: lame, blind and stupid. … I have much to live for, yet unaccountably I am sick and sad.”

– Sylvia Plath
The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath

While in the 19th century Van Gogh struggles to reveal his internal battle with mental illness through his artwork, the first half of the 20th century brings advancements in the way the mentally ill are treated: for the first time, the mentally ill are attended to, and it is thought that perhaps, instead of being cursed by demons of madness, they might instead be suffering from medical and/or psychological difficulties. This is a progression in viewpoints that is depicted, likewise, in the art and literature of the mentally ill. One major example of this is seen in renowned writer Sylvia Plath. Thus, although Plath battled mental illness her entire life, she is able to forego the initial struggle that Van Gogh faces in communicating his painful battle with mental illness. Yet as her novel, The Bell Jar; hundreds of published poems; and several personal journals portray, the suffering and anguish she feels, is, like Van Gogh, still so consuming that she cannot find happiness. Like Van Gogh, too, her extensively autobiographical writing provides insight into her deepest fears and frustrations, and, in fact, she is able to generate progress for herself – and others like her – in that she is more fully able

---

than Van Gogh to reveal and portray her mental illness. In this way, she combats societal ignorance in a way that Van Gogh could not.

Unfortunately, there are still certain forces that nonetheless hold her expression back. Although Plath, then, is a pivotal and dynamic figure for literature and the important expressive abilities of the mentally ill, she – like her precuser, Van Gogh – still struggles with completely revealing herself to society even as both she and her society have progressed in their characterization and understanding of mental illness. Thus, even as she pushes the movement of accepting mental illness onward, she herself is unable to escape her own mind, as evidenced by her regrettable suicide. Plath, like Van Gogh, was crucial in assisting those who came after her, but, unfortunately, also like Van Gogh, she could not save herself.

The continued misunderstanding from society, especially the misguided treatment that came with the rise of psychoanalysis, heavily affected Plath, as well as other mentally ill persons of her time period. (For example, Plath refers to the electric shock therapy to which her autobiographical character, Esther Greenwood, is subjected in *The Bell Jar*, which she herself likewise experienced.) However, this misunderstanding, which demonstrates the failure of society to provide a fully comprehensive external support system for mentally ill individuals, much like Van Gogh’s time period, does not entirely explain why Sylvia eventually succumbed to her illness. Rather, through her journals and poems it becomes clear that, as Plath fell further into the depths of her illness, her frustrations and struggles seem to be exacerbated by another lapse in a support system. While Van Gogh reaped the
benefits of a strong internal support system in the form of his brother, Theo, Plath’s internal support system was weakened by the premature death of her father (with whom she did not have a strong relationship), as well as the unfaithfulness of her husband, fellow poet Ted Hughes. This constant stress on her internal support system, despite an improved – but still by no means acceptable – external support system from society, made her final outcome ultimately – and unfortunately – no different than Van Gogh’s.

Nonetheless, both Van Gogh and Plath are seminal figures in combating the negative stigma placed upon the mentally ill. While Van Gogh’s major success in the advancement of societal acceptance of the mentally ill was recognizing the potential to spread his message of struggle to the public eye – a feat largely untouched by artists and authors before him – Plath goes a step further in her open, willing, and public expression of her psychological struggles and her sense of Otherness. Yet, while Van Gogh received great encouragement from Theo, and could always write to his brother when he was going through difficult periods in his life, Plath was not able to do the same with any figures in her own life. In addition to her depression and long periods of insomnia, Plath’s personal journals show she felt ostracized even by her closest friends; she also fearlessly describes what she perceives as the unwillingness of her family and friends to genuinely try to help her. The sense of Otherness she felt pressing in on her – from both her immediate family and strangers she would never meet – is evident in almost all forms of her writing, and it can be conjectured that society’s continued and demonstrated unwillingness
to accept fully those with mental illness as individuals, albeit less prominent than it was during Van Gogh’s lifetime, was still a factor in her expression.

What distinguishes Plath from Van Gogh is that Plath, influenced by psychiatrists’ increasing attention to mental illness as well as artists, such as Van Gogh, who chose to express themselves before her – both of which represent a form of the external support system – is willing to vocalize this sense of Otherness and has no difficulties expressing it in her public writing. In fact, her private and public outlets of expressions are often indistinguishable. Her understanding that she can, perhaps, change the way other mentally ill persons are perceived by sharing her own stories and feelings thus makes her a figure for change, regardless of her unfortunate end.

Although neither Plath nor Van Gogh were able to fully utilize their expressive outlets, as evidenced by their suicides, each marks an important step in the progression of society’s thoughts and beliefs regarding the mentally ill. Plath, especially, is representative of a turning point in historical perspective of the mentally ill, even though she barely lived to see some of her best works published. As Plath searched for an identity within an environment marked by an uncertainty regarding how to treat an Other such as herself, she unknowingly allowed society to find a value in the work she produced. Today, in fact, she is regarded as a troubled, but brilliant, individual, acclaimed for her writing, which would very likely – if tellingly – not have been possible if she had not suffered as she did. Dictionary of Literary Biography essayist Thomas McClanahan described her poems, and
specifically the collection of *Ariel* as, “personal testaments to the loneliness and insecurity that plagued her, and the desolate images suggest her apparent fixation with self-annihilation. . . . In *Ariel*, the everyday incidents of living are transformed into the horrifying psychological experiences of the poet.”

While Plath’s creative works may have been too early to help herself, then, the depth and intensity of her work caused society to take special notice of her work, and, because her writing inextricably intertwines with her illness, to also take special notice of her mental illness. In this chapter, an analysis of her life and her work reveal Plath’s critical role in encouraging society to accept mentally ill individuals as worthy and valuable. Moreover, this chapter attends to both her similarities and differences with Van Gogh, in turn, as a seminal figure in the advancement of the mentally ill’s place in society: the lapses in both figures’ support systems, as well as those support systems’ continued animosity towards individuals who employ alternative outlets of expression, show where progress can – and must – be made if the mentally ill are to find healing and acceptance.

**The Premature Death of a Fragile Support System**

Sylvia Plath was a gifted child of a German immigrant professor, Otto Plath, and his wife Aurelia. She was born in 1932 in Boston, and, by the time she reached her 20th birthday she had already won several prestigious poetry and writing awards; these served as an early indicator of the success she would have in her renowned, albeit short, career as a writer. However, another event occurred in her

---

young adulthood that would also provide an early indication of her life’s direction. In August of 1953, at twenty years old, Plath swallowed several sleeping pills belonging to her mother before crawling under her porch to die. She was missing for three days, and her disappearance reached headlines in more than 170 newspapers, as well as television and radio stations. The search for a missing girl, especially after the discovery of her mother’s missing sleeping pills, sparked statewide attention long before anyone knew Plath was destined to become an iconic writer. Although Plath was eventually found, this first suicide attempt demonstrated the severe depression she battled, and her inability to deal with it, given the weaknesses of her present support systems. In the following decade of her life, she refers to the suicide attempt several times in her writing in an effort to communicate her painful past as well as her issues with society’s treatment of her. The continuous allusions to death and suffering in both her private and public outlets of expression show her frustration and dissatisfaction with being marginalized by the rest of society and oftentimes by her own family. Unlike Van Gogh, however, Plath refuses to allow this treatment to go unnoticed, and she easily assimilates her suffering into her work early and often.

One form of her public outlet of expression that vocalizes that frustration, and which unabashedly references her suicide attempt, is also one of her most famous poems. The following excerpt from “Daddy” demonstrates Plath’s audacious pen and unsettling ability to translate her dark thoughts into heart-wrenching verse.

31 Ibid.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.32

Plath’s father died when she was eight and she tried to commit suicide at age twenty, so this poem especially highlights her ability to transform her personal experiences into dark, haunting autobiographical poems. She describes trying to get back to her father after his death, showing how his premature absence affected her; the hole he left in her life weakened her internal support system, even at a young age. Furthermore, the poem shows Plath’s father was not a strong supporter for the years that he was in her life; she compares him – “a man in black with a Meinkampf look” – to Hitler (the author of Mein Kampf) and continues on to say he has a love for instruments of torture – “the rack and the screw.” “Daddy” also shows Plath’s unwillingness to live again after her suicide attempt, in which some unidentified persons “pulled [her] out of the sack and stuck [her] together with glue.” She, in addition to being unwillingly pulled back to the living world, is disgusted with the treatment she receives when she returns. She did not feel a support system from

anyone around her and she realized, even at an early age, that she was destined for a life of madness and mental instability. She also realized her mental instability was at least partially due to her cruel – and even evil, or Hitler-like – father. He does not support her as a child, and then when he dies, she feels abandoned by him. Her father is representative of her weak internal support system, and her first suicide attempt is a cry for help that she cannot live with her mental illness with such a fragile, and at times, nonexistent, support system.

Additionally, there is foreshadowing in “Daddy” to another lapse in Plath’s internal support system that occurs later in her life. Plath refers to making “a model out of [her father]” to whom she says “I do, I do,” a quote that alludes to Hughes, her husband of six years and a highly critiqued figure in Plath’s life. “Daddy” shows Plath’s belief that she chased a man with the same cruel, Hitler-like qualities as her father. When she speaks of hanging up “the black telephone” and its “voices” that can no longer “worm through,” Plath demonstrates how she is using this poem to attempt to free herself from the limiting effects of her detrimental internal support system. Plath can no longer bear to hear neither that voice of her father, nor, as will be discussed later, her husband, and she tries to escape them through her writing. However, as will also be seen, it is ultimately not enough. Although Van Gogh received an uncommonly strong internal supporter from Theo and was able to use that support to his advantage, Plath, sadly, did not receive strong internal support from her father or her husband, and that tragically contributes to her downfall.
A Determination to Communicate

While Plath’s internal support system was clearly much weaker than Van Gogh’s, she nonetheless is able to succeed in ways that her precursor was not: she is able, importantly, to demonstrate her frustration and pain of living with a mental illness in her public expression (her writing) much faster and with greater efficiency than Van Gogh was ever able to with his paintings. This is demonstrated both in poems such as “Daddy” and in her only novel, The Bell Jar. In the famous Bell Jar, Plath recounts fictional – and highly autobiographical – character Esther Greenwood’s story as she suffers a breakdown, tries suicide, is sent to an asylum, undergoes shock therapy, and ultimately recovers from her depression at the end of the novel. There are numerous resemblances between Esther’s life and Plath’s that show Plath is using the novel as a public outlet for her own desperation and unhappiness. In particular, one of the opening passages of The Bell Jar shows the unhappiness Esther, and thus, likely – because of the string of parallels between herself and her main character – Plath, deals with on an everyday basis. In this early passage she describes herself as someone unable to react to what should be exciting situations; she is alone in the “eye of a tornado,” and lacks control of her own life.

Look what can happen in this country, they’d say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can’t afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. Only I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself. I just
Plath’s pain and lack of direction for her life is evident in this passage. She is “very still and very empty,” and cannot free herself of the loneliness that accompanies being made an Other by society. While she realizes she should be satisfied with her situation, even excited about what lies in her future, she cannot force the happiness, and she is desperately determined to communicate that inability to enjoy her life in her novel.

Plath, like Van Gogh when he describes himself as a bird trapped in a cage, knows she is different from her counterparts. Both she and Van Gogh feel empty and vulnerable due to their illnesses, and both recognize that, on the outside, they appear to be well off – Van Gogh as a physically healthy, middle class man and Plath as a talented young writer who “gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there” – but neither can find satisfaction in their situation because of the torment that comes from within. In a further parallel to Van Gogh’s description of his melancholy, Plath writes in the final chapter of *The Bell Jar*, “to the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.”\(^\text{34}\) Her analogy to her autobiographical character’s depression as a bell jar, descending upon whatever unfortunate person is trapped inside, is reminiscent

---


\(^{34}\) Ibid.
of Van Gogh’s description of a man in a bird cage, unable to escape the imprisoning walls. These similarities between the two artists’ discussion of their depression – Plath, as she describes it in *The Bell Jar*, and Van Gogh in his letters to his brother, show how their views as individuals afflicted with mental illness have not changed despite the later – and supposedly more enlightened – time period in which Plath resides in. The holding pattern that exists in the societal perspective toward the mentally ill – at least, in terms of the mentally ills’ perspectives on how they feel they are treated – is evident in the nearly identical points that Van Gogh and Plath make in their writing.

However, there is a key difference between the two that shows where progress towards the mentally ill has been made. Sylvia Plath, very importantly, chooses to emphasize the feeling of Otherness – of being different from the rest of the aspiring girls in New York City – in her public outlet of expression (her novel) whereas Van Gogh communicates that similar feeling – of being trapped like a bird, of misunderstood suffering – only in a private form of expression (his letters to Theo). Plath’s comfort with blatantly communicating her battle with mental illness in a forum open for public viewing thus contrasts with Van Gogh’s inability to do the same until the end of his life (examples include, as discussed previously, his self portrait of himself with a bandaged ear and *Starry Night*). It is this important difference that shows where the advancements in societal perspectives toward the mentally ill are, in fact, made between the 19th and 20th century. The improvement shows that Van Gogh was unquestionably a seminal figure in allowing the suffering
of the mentally ill to be made public, and that Plath and others likely benefited from his efforts. Plath is herself, then, also a seminal figure, because she is able to move on from Van Gogh’s subtle message of struggle in his paintings and create an unapologetic novel based upon the breakdown of her fictional counterpart Esther Greenwood.

***

Another example which helps to fully encapsulate the idea that Plath is sending a message of Otherness and lack of belonging through *The Bell Jar*, is found when Esther sits in her psychiatrist’s office. She has not been able to sleep for weeks, and is forced to listen as Doctor Gordon tries to explain away her psychological struggles as if he is an all-knowing expert on mental illness. Esther, and thus Plath, wishes to comments on his inability to help her: they are so different, and he does not desire to understand or empathize with her, and, in fact, identifies her as an abnormal object. She is unmistakably an Other, and Plath emphatically – even desperately – desires to communicate that message in the following passage.

*He would lean back in his chair and match the tips of his fingers together in a little steeple and tell me why I couldn't sleep and why I couldn't read and why I couldn't eat and why everything people did seemed so silly, because they only died in the end.*

*And then, I thought, he would help me, step by step, to be myself again.*

*But Doctor Gordon wasn't like that at all. He was young and good-looking, and I could see right away he was conceited.*
Doctor Gordon had a photograph on his desk, in a silver frame, that half faced him and half faced my leather chair. It was a family photograph, and it showed a beautiful dark-haired woman, who could have been Doctor Gordon’s sister, smiling out over the heads of two blond children.

I think one child was a boy and one was a girl, but it may have been that both children were boys or that both were girls, it is hard to tell when children are so small. I think there was also a dog in the picture, toward the bottom – a kind of airedale or a golden retriever – but it may have only been the pattern in the woman’s skirt.

For some reason the photograph made me furious.

I didn’t see why it should be turned half toward me unless Doctor Gordon was trying to show me right away that he was married to some glamorous woman and I’d better not get any funny ideas.

Then I thought, how could this Doctor Gordon help me anyway, with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog haloing him like the angels on a Christmas card?35

Doctor Gordon, with his, “beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog,” demonstrates and verifies to Plath’s autobiographical character the way society thinks of her. She is a nonentity, a problem case, and somehow inferior to the doctor. Moreover, she feels that the angled picture frame – positioned, it seems, specifically for her to see – is his trying to show off his family – his portrait of success – to her, the failure. She feels he is trying to flaunt his normalcy, and her disgust, indignation, and even rage at this behavior toward her – “for some reason the photograph made me furious” – consume her when she looks at the family picture. Through Esther, Plath summarizes her feelings of society’s treatment of her, especially the medical establishment’s treatment, which is part of her external

35 Ibid.
support system, and is clearly damaged and misguided. Shortly after this scene in the novel, Esther is forced to go through a series of electric shocks meant to cure her diseased mind, and after, she distrusts Doctor Gordon even more and vows never to return to the psychiatric center in which she receives the medical treatment.

Plath made great strides through Esther in *The Bell Jar*: she allowed herself to show her perception of the attitudes of society, as well as the desperation to change that perception that she, and others, feel amidst depression and other forms of mental instability. Moreover, she conveys her own obsession with death through Esther’s preoccupation with dying and suicide, and she even allows Esther to find healing in the novel: although her fictional character tries to commit suicide and is put into an asylum, Esther eventually recovers from her breakdown and goes on to develop a more stable existence. This, perhaps surprising, outcome for Esther – given Plath’s decision to end her own life mere months later – is nonetheless logical given the argued idea that Plath’s healing required the use of her public outlet of expression. She is even quoted saying after the novel’s release that she created *The Bell Jar* "as an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past." If her novel was a way to free herself from the snares of her mind, why, then, did she commit suicide a month after it was published? The question must be explored, because it leads to the discovery of what limitations were placed on Plath and others suffering from mental illness, and how these limitations ultimately led to her demise.
Chapter Four

“For I must get back my soul from you; I am killing my flesh without it.”

–Sylvia Plath

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath

Plath’s weak internal support system, discussed previously in Chapter Three with reference to her poem “Daddy,” and shown to drastically differ from Van Gogh’s level of internal support he received from Theo, merits further investigation if it is to be understood why The Bell Jar was not an accomplishment of healing and escaping mental illness for Plath. However, it is important to remember it was not simply Plath’s father who was an unstable presence in her life. Her often-volatile relationship with her husband Ted Hughes shaped in many ways what became her most famous pieces of writing. Indeed, after he left her for another woman in the fall of 1962, she produced forty of her darkest poems, which, in addition to The Bell Jar, are largely responsible for her immense posthumous fame. It is clear in her writing that her feelings of betrayal, despair, fury, and unrelenting sadness are eating her alive, and, not long after Hughes leaves her (five months) her actions support the suffering that is expressed in her writing: Plath locks her children in another room and gasses herself.

Post-humously, Plath’s lack of an internal support system from Hughes is clear. In addition to several negative references to him in her poetry, Hughes himself made some questionable moves in connection with her writing after his

wife’s death – so many, in fact, that he is called a “murderer” by many Plath enthusiasts, and her headstone has been repeatedly desecrated with his name carved over hers. Although he was separated from Plath after leaving her for another married woman, the two did not finalize a divorce before her suicide, and Hughes had control over her estate after her death. Moreover, the fellow poet destroyed his wife’s final journal, which detailed the three years of her life prior to committing suicide, and left her most private confessions and deepest thoughts in that final stage of life – which, assumedly, explains why she could not bear to live in the world anymore – a complete mystery.\(^{38}\) This action in and of itself is enough to draw suspicion to Hughes’ willingness to support his wife through her battle with mental illness, and leaves Plath’s supporters wondering what in those journals could be so incriminating that Hughes needed to destroy every page. His actions betray him in his weak internal support system, and Plath’s public writing reveals just how much that demonstrated lack of an internal support system affected her.

Luckily, although Plath’s private outlet of expression (her journals) from her final years of life were destroyed, a comparison of her earlier poems to her journals shows that she made her private and public outlets of expression interchangeable, so that her struggles can be, in large part, surmised from her public outlets of expression (her published works). Unlike Van Gogh, whose private expression differed drastically from his public expression in its ability to explicitly communicate his struggle, Plath’s journals display the same tone of misery and frustration as her poems and novel. This is evidenced in quotes such as the

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
following, from a journal entry on June 20, 1958: "it is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it."\footnote{Plath, Sylvia. \textit{The Journals of Sylvia Plath}. Edited by Hughes, Ted. New York: Anchor Books, 1982.} In another entry, she states, “If I rest, if I think inward, I go mad.”\footnote{Ibid.} Her battle with mental illness is poured out in her journals; there is no effort made to modify her feelings into beautiful expressions, as she does, understandably, when she writes her poems. Although both her poems and journals express the same feelings and frustrations, Plath leaves little room for doubt in her reactions to life when she writes in her journals; it is little wonder, given some lines of her famous poems such as “Lady Lazarus” – “Beware. / Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air”\footnote{Plath, Sylvia. \textit{Collected Poems}. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1960.} – that Hughes would destroy her final record of him.

Interestingly, and significantly, after Hughes left Plath, she went through a period, much like Van Gogh, in which she produced an incredible amount of dark, vibrant, creations, which became some of her most famous work. It is almost as if Plath had a premonition after Hughes left her that she could not trust her diaries to record her life and her struggle, and so she threw herself wholeheartedly into her poems and novel so that her full message of pain and rejection would be left behind, and, perhaps, be spread after her death. It is an act of desperation, not unlike Van Gogh’s own desperate period of passionate work leading up to his suicide.

Examples of these poems are found in \textit{Ariel}, a collection of poems published after her death (which includes “Daddy”). In “Tulips,” for example, Plath speaks of
the baggage she has come to feel her husband and children have become – they are not what she wants or what she can support, and instead hold her back in life (especially the unfaithful and unsupportive Hughes). She has begun lost her identity and sense of purpose in her work. Just as Van Gogh often tells Theo he loses himself in his art, Plath also repeatedly refers to losing herself in her mind. 

Now I have lost myself, I am sick of baggage –
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.42

And in “A Birthday Present,” Plath describes the real gift she wants – death. “To be uterrly empty,” she believes, would be incredibly freeing, “...you have no idea how free.” Her situation has become so bleak that she no longer accept a simple gift of flowers. Without a support system to claim as her own, she loses her sense of belonging – of belonging to her children, her husband, and even to this world. 

I didn't want any flowers. I only wanted  
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
How free it is, you have no idea how free –  
...  
It is what the dead close on, finally. . .43

Plath’s jealousy of and longing for death are prominent in “A Birthday Present,” and show just how weak her internal support system is without Hughes as a loyal or helpful husband. Revealingly, too, his presence, although she loves him at times, reminds her of her father, who she has always believed cruelly abandoned her at a young age and who also seems likely to have not given her the necessary gift of internal support she so desperately needed and continues to cry out for publicly.

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
An Accidental Admittance of Weakness

Hughes, while he certainly would have never admitted it, unknowingly revealed himself to be a weak internal support system for his wife. In 1998, he published Birthday Letters, a volume of poems addressed to his deceased wife that disclosed his relationship with her, their deeply passionate love, and her path towards suicide – which he believed was impossible to change on his part. In this collection, Hughes manages to blame Plath several times for her own death; he comments several times in Birthday Letters on the mere bystander role he played in her breakdown. Assertions such as, “your life was a liner I voyaged in”; “I was a fly outside on the windowpane / of my own domestic drama”; and “Inside your Bell Jar / I was like a manikin in your eyeball” show Hughes’ passive role in response to his wife’s periods of depression. Unlike Theo, an encourager and constant supporter of Van Gogh, Hughes does not, it seems, make an effort to help his wife use her writing as a form of healing. He allows her to fall deeper into the snares of her depression, refusing to help.

Another poem published in Birthday Letters, “Drawing,” suggests what may in part account for Hughes’ lack of support. Whether he means to or not, he comes off as feeling superior to his wife, and unwilling to accept her accomplishments as a poet, and her success at a profession she shares with him. In “Drawing,” he ignores her talent for writing and speaks only of her being “calmed” by drawing, as if he does not accept her the way she is. He recalls a time when they “sat on the steps in

[their] rope-soles” and enjoyed each others’ presence as she doodled and sketched.

      Drawing calmed you. Your poker infernal pen
      Was like a branding iron. Objects
      Suffered into their new presence, tortured
      Into final position

Moreover, as the description of Plath’s pen suggests, the calming effect of drawing battles Plath’s internal chaos; it is an outlet for her, although unlike Van Gogh, it is a primarily private outlet of expression for her. Interestingly and importantly, the reversal of the two figures’ public and private outlets of expression (Van Gogh’s art was public and writing private; Sylvia’s art was private and writing public) shows the increasing desire by mentally ill creative thinkers to vocalize and communicate their struggles. Whereas art is less overt in its communication of meaning, writing can be more direct in its expressiveness of meaning since it is a verbal art form. As an artist who works primarily with words, Plath leaves no room for doubt in her writing that she is fighting to keep her head above water in a world in which she cannot find satisfaction despite her husband’s active attempts to detract or diminish her worth as a poet.

One final point must be made about Hughes’ continued harmfulness to Plath’s internal support system. Just as Van Gogh had a trigger for his mental illness in his friend and fellow artist Gauguin walking out on him, so too is there a trigger for Sylvia Plath’s devastation: her marriage with Hughes, while tumultuous the vast majority of the time, ended in separation after he left her for another woman in the fall of 1962. Plath was devastated, and less than six months later, she

45 Ibid.
committed suicide. Although her demise cannot, and should not, be entirely blamed on Hughes, as it will be seen through her novel, letters, and poems, he does not help her internal support system – in fact, he often hurts it – so when she begins to fall deeper into her pit of depression, there is no support system to catch her.

**A Failure to Heal**

Plath contrasts Van Gogh in her demonstration that, despite her ability to communicate her private struggles in her public work, a weak internal support system can be an individual’s downfall. While Van Gogh represents the battle that an individual faces when society completely ignores mental illness and all its potential benefits, Plath shows where progress is made in terms of an increased awareness for mental illness. However, additionally, her poor internal support system demonstrates that, while society appears to be moving towards a more optimistic future for the mentally ill, her overall lack of an internal support system eventually is the final determinate, as evidenced by her suicide. In the final chapter of *The Bell Jar*, Plath delivers a famous line from Esther’s character after her fictional character’s recovery from her mental breakdown – it is a line that shows the lifelong struggle of a person affected by mental illness, and the fear that accompanies even moments of sanity. “How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?” Just one month after *The Bell Jar* was published with this simple, haunting and prophetic line, Plath committed suicide. Through Esther, she
expressed the fear that she shared with countless other mentally ill persons – that even, after apparent recovery from a breakdown, she is still in danger of the warping, distorting bell jar hovering above her. Plath’s fear of her depression returning is reminiscent of Van Gogh’s similar expression concerning the uncertainty of the stability of his mind in the future. Recalling his letter from September 1888 (also examined in Chapter Two): “I have a terrible clarity of mind at times...I am indeed somewhat fearful that that will have its reaction in melancholy when the bad season comes.” Although Van Gogh communicates exclusively to Theo, and Plath communicates publicly, both express a fear of the debilitating effects of their illnesses as long as they lack an external (and in Plath’s case, internal) support system.

Plath’s resemblance to Van Gogh in some areas of her life are undeniable, but in other areas, she exemplifies where progress is being made, or progress, in her individual case, has been stalled. The refusal of the individuals’ around her to acknowledge her suffering and loneliness caused a childhood event (the death of her father) to break down her internal support system, consume her attitude towards life, and fuel an obsession with death. In addition, her choice in a romantic partner was, especially in her eyes, affected by her poor relationship with her father, and also affected her desire and decision to leave this world. All of this proceeded due to a continued pattern of a poor internal support system in Plath’s life, which differed drastically from the strong internal support Van Gogh received from Theo.
Although there was a much greater effort in Plath’s time period to understand and help the mentally ill, her internal support system ultimately failed her.

***

At some point in Plath’s life she seemingly resigned herself to not being able to heal from her disease. Although she tries to use her artwork as a form of healing, it is never enough without someone close to her to support and encourage her. Perhaps Al Alvarez summarized it best with his views of Plath, “my own impression of the circumstances surrounding her eventual death is that she gambled, not much caring whether she won or lost; and she lost.” Plath, like Van Gogh, was prescient in recognizing and communicating what was required for healing the mentally ill. However, her realization that she lived too early to benefit from the endeavors she sought did not deter her from exceptional innovation that communicated her painful struggle with a disease of her mind. Although there was much that could have gone better in Plath’s life, she is a seminal figure for her persistence and dedication to communicating her suffering so that others might benefit.
Conclusion

“You’re only given a little spark of madness. You mustn’t lose it.”
– Robin Williams

An analysis of Vincent Van Gogh and Sylvia Plath’s private and public expression demonstrates each artist’s individual support systems’ strengths and weaknesses. This leads to the understanding of how the support systems, or lack thereof, affected their ability to communicate their struggle both privately and publicly, and how that communication aided, but ultimately was not enough, for both artists to obtain complete healing from their illnesses.

Their suicides prompt discussion, not only in this thesis, but in many other areas of mental health research. Many researchers believe both artists had a form of mental illness known as Bipolar disorder, a disease characterized by periods of rapid and extreme mood changes. A person with Bipolar disorder typically experiences days or weeks of an excessively happy or “high” mood, sometimes accompanied by extreme irritability – but that “high” is followed by a frighteningly dark “low” period of depression that lasts for weeks. It is a cycle that typically lasts the entire lifetime of the afflicted individual, and can today usually be controlled by medications.46

The recent suicide of acclaimed comedian Robin Williams induced more media coverage of Bipolar disorder, from which Williams is also believed to have suffered. It is again an example of mental illness getting more attention when an individual thought to have mental illness does something outrageous or negative.

However, in society’s defense, times have certainly changed in that recent media coverage of William’s death centered around awareness of mental illness and asked “what could have been done to prevent this?” rather than ignoring or ostracizing Williams. Society is thus making progress in its ability to provide an external support system for those with mental illness, but there is still a long road ahead in ensuring all mentally ill persons are accepted, valued, and provided with the necessary resources to be successful.

Robin Williams, too, stands out as a contemporary figure who further supports my assertion that mentally ill individuals offer potential benefits, and must be given the attention they deserve. In the same way that Plath and Van Gogh used writing and painting as their public outlets of expression, Williams used comedy as his form of art and way of expressing himself – and he was remarkably good at it. His death shook millions, and many wondered how a man, so happy, free-spirited, and successful on the outside, could be fighting demons so powerful that he did not want to live any more. Williams himself denied for a long time any clinical depression diagnosis. However, in a 2006 NPR radio interview, his responses to questions about a possible illness were unclear.

"Do I perform sometimes in a manic style? Yes,"
"Am I manic all the time? No. Do I get sad? Oh yeah.
Does it hit me hard? Oh yeah."47

Williams, in addition to being one of the best comedians in his lifetime, battled alcohol addiction – and, as evidenced by his suicide, depression – yet still publicly

---

denied a clinical diagnosis. However, it is clear, whether a private clinical diagnosis existed or not, that the status quo as well as this study’s aim of reducing the negative stigma toward mental illness is still not where it needs to be. If a man, so successful and loved by so many, cannot openly speak of the mental illness with which he struggles, how is an individual without that encouragement and support expected to reach out for help? Although Robin Williams undoubtedly lived with his mental illness in a more supportive time period than either Van Gogh or Plath, his final decision to commit suicide is still extremely concerning.

The statistics of suicide are daunting. It is the 10th leading cause of death of any age group, behind other killers such as heart disease and cancer.48 In the United States alone, every 13 minutes someone commits suicide, leaving 38,000 families a year without a certain loved one in their life.49 According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, only half of all individuals experiencing a major depressive episode will receive treatment.50 And, for every one suicide, there are an estimated 24 other unsuccessful attempts made, meaning many others battle mental illness so severe that they, too, desire to leave the world.51 Suicide is an issue that is not, as many would hope, decreasing in rate. This is a testament to the fact that mental illness is still thriving, still not receiving enough support, and still a problem worth fighting for people worth valuing.

***

49 Ibid.
A retrospective, clinical analysis of individuals after their death, such as a diagnosis of artists such as Plath, Van Gogh, or even Williams, with Bipolar disorder, is not what this project intended or the achievement it fulfills. Instead, this study sought to find patterns in the expression and communication of mentally ill artists, in order to apply practical solutions to decrease the negative stigma, marginalization, and ostracizing to which the mentally ill are too often subjected. The two patterns uncovered were that mentally ill artists and authors directly help themselves by producing communicative artwork, and that, with a rise in the attention given to mental illness, comes an increase in the amount of artwork produced by the mentally ill. This was demonstrated by the artwork of the seminal figures Van Gogh and Plath, and their determination to communicate the feelings of loneliness and Otherness they experienced. An attention to Van Gogh and Plath also achieved the realization that two major factors influence a mentally ill person’s overall ability to thrive in the world: their support system and their expressive capabilities.

While Van Gogh had a strong internal support system, as seen in his letters to Theo, and thus was able to express privately his mental illness with ease and honesty, his external support system, that stemmed from society’s treatment of him, was severely lacking in his 19th century lifetime. This made public expression difficult, but he still managed to subtly express his struggles in his art, making him an instrumental figure for his deviation from his time period’s sense of normalcy. The lack of external support ultimately proved to be his downfall, however. He felt
that his “back was against [a] wall,” and that artists, as well as his individual suffering, were not appreciated, and he committed suicide.

Plath, in contrast, had a very weak internal support system, which originated with a cruel father who died early in her life, and was exacerbated by an uncaring, unsupportive husband. Since Plath’s time period made a greater effort than Van Gogh’s to actively help the mentally ill, Plath is able to communicate her continued feeling of being an Other as well as an obsession with death in her novel *The Bell Jar*, in several published poems, and in her personal journals. She, importantly, is able to express herself through both private and public outlets of expression. Yet, due to an absence of an internal support system, as well as a weak external support system, she, too, commits suicide.

These patterns are important for attending to the mentally ill because they represent areas of focus for our own modern day approach to supporting the mentally ill. Mentally ill individuals desperately need, perhaps even more so than someone considered mentally healthy, a strong internal and external support system, as well as adequate outlets of expression. These are concepts that cannot be ignored, and, indeed, upon which some organizations are building in order to develop mental health therapy programs.

For example, the National Art Exhibitions of the Mentally Ill, Inc. (NAEMI), an organization located in Miami, Florida, is dedicated to increasing public awareness for some of the world’s most talented artists who suffer from mental illness. Established in 1988, NAEMI now has almost 1000 works of art in its
permanent collection and has published five books of art by the mentally ill. NAMEI considers themselves pioneers in recognizing talent in those who struggle with mental illness, while simultaneously providing an outlet of expression for many brilliant artists. Most of the art showcased is produced by individuals who have received no formal training, but instead have taught themselves to create intensely personal works that are often intricately tied to their experiences and struggles within their own minds, and with a society incapable and or unwilling to support them. NAEMI’s goals include educating the public through art and overcoming the negative bias associated with the producers of the displayed art. The positive nature of individuals who are afflicted with mental illness and the importance of creativity is the overarching theme of all of NAEMI’s exhibitions.\textsuperscript{52} In short, NAEMI seeks to construct an outlet of expression for the mentally ill which should, ultimately, improve the external support system that exists in society.

The message NAEMI sends is that mentally ill persons are valuable and worth saving, because they offer outstanding alternative experiences and potential benefits to the world. It is a message similar to that which this study seeks to send. Instead of allowing ourselves to see mentally ill individuals as outcasts or otherwise freakish people, it must be realized that mental illness can strike at any time, and that it does not have to be a negative, harmful disease. By offering our support, both as individual and societal advocates, internal and external support systems, we can maximize the benefits that mentally ill persons have to offer, as well as, possibly, aid in their healing. In addition, the effects of appreciating and enjoying a mentally

\textsuperscript{52} National Art Exhibitions of the Mentally Ill. www.naemi.org (Accessed February 4, 2014).
ill person’s expressive efforts, no matter what medium they may appear in, cannot be underestimated. Above all, it must be remembered that mentally ill individuals are valuable – if not invaluable – members of society. They are simply stricken with, as Socrates would say, a “gift of heaven...by which we receive the greatest blessings.” It is a gift that we would be foolish to ignore.
Bibliography


Plato, 1974, pp 46-47.


Although this quote is widely circulated on the world wide web, a direct source was not able to be found. It was left in the chapter because many other letters written by Van Gogh communicate a similar message, and I still believe it to be an accurate representation of Van Gogh’s thoughts and feelings.

Many sources also mention Sylvia Plath’s mother when discussing her mental health issues. For the sake of the parallel between Van Gogh and Plath (and the antiparallel between Theo and Ted Hughes), Plath’s mother, as another factor, was omitted from this discussion. Aurelia Plath was, however, arguably another large part of Sylvia Plath’s weak internal support system.

A direct source for this Robin William’s quote was not able to be found. It is, however, quoted in many articles surrounding the actor’s tragic death.