

The Long-suffering Artist

Frédéric Chopin would appear to be the poster child for the frequently cited paradigm of the long-suffering artist. There is little doubt that he did in fact suffer. His childhood frailty, his early-established belief that he would not live to an old age, and his recurrent bouts with the progressive illness that began in his early twenties, together with the inexorable decline of his health until his death at thirty-nine, combine to paint a morbid picture of chronic suffering and depression. Some believe that this suffering affected the style of his creative output, resulting in the melancholic mood of much of his music. They even maintain that a depressive illness in the context of a creative mind can be a definite advantage for an artist. The question is then, was Chopin's creativity aided by his suffering?

The connection between mental illness and creative genius dates back to the time of Aristotle. The ancient Greeks believed that creativity came from the gods, in particular, from the Muses. These were the nine daughters of Zeus, the sky and thunder god who ruled as king of the gods from Mount Olympus. Perhaps that's why the sculptor, Auguste Clésinger, depicted the Muse of Music, Euterpe, strumming her lyre atop Chopin's grave in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. The supposed connection between mental illness or what was once called "madness" and creativity probably peaked during the Romantic Age, when it was commonly believed that illness, especially a chronic one, could confer upon its host an artistic advantage. The spooky image of the pale chronically ill and suffering artist was frequently associated with Chopin during his lifetime and his illness credited for much of his genius.

A contemporary of Chopin, Lord Byron, was one of the greatest British poets and a leading figure in the Romantic movement. Dying at the age of thirty-six from what was thought to be tuberculosis, this often mentally unstable man maintained that there were strong connections between his creative talent and his mental and chronic physical ailments, writing, "We of the craft are all crazy. Some are affected by gaiety, others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched." More recently, some psychologists, such as J. Philippe Rushton, make a correlation between intelligence and mental illness and argue that there are particularly strong links between creativity and depressive disorders. He cites examples of writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf, artists such as Michelangelo and Van Gogh, and prominent composers such as Robert Schumann and Pyotr Tchaikovsky, whose depressive disorders he believes enhanced their creativity. Is this really true?

I cannot accept that it is. Although it may prove difficult to dissuade some from still believing in the myth of the suffering artist, science has now proven that those in the creative professions are no more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders than other people, and that illness does nothing to enhance one's creative abilities. Chopin had an amazing ability to compartmentalize his concerns about his health, his grief over a lost love, and his sadness after leaving his family and his homeland. The prophetic note he left in his diary after that time in Stuttgart when he first heard of the brutal repression of the Polish November Insurrection in 1830, is revealing. He wrote, "I will heal the wounds of the present with the memories of the past." This hastily-written phrase would eventually become his musical legacy. From then on, he would tirelessly strive to

connect his deep feelings of grief, longing, and sadness with his music. Somehow, despite his health travails, his artistic abilities remained undimmed until nearly the very end.

Rather than believing that a depressive illness in the context of a creative mind can at times create a definite advantage for an artist, I feel an artist can manage to take something appalling and make it into art because an artist is an artist. Suffering does not enhance someone's abilities, yet it certainly may be a subject for one's creative talent. Artists have access to an unusual creative process that can sustain them through very dark times. They can use their talents to transform life's pain and suffering into something communicative and alive. Chopin's success came about despite his long suffering, not because of it. While success and pain do not mix, comfort is the friend of creative endeavor.

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