

What is so attractive about mental illness? Why is the idea of writing a book about a “broken” girl who gets “fixed” by the right guy so appealing? Mental illness is so poetic and deep, right? Wrong. It’s scary and confusing, and something that no one should have to deal with. But we do. Nearly one in five Americans suffer from a mental illness. Mental illness is something no one should ever wish for, but it’s also something that becomes a huge part of who you are. It is believed by some that mental illness can influence great creativity in artists and writers, but unfortunately, many of these artists don’t see it that way.

Vincent van Gogh was a Post-Impressionist painter whose work was known for its emotional rawness and bold color. Vincent, however, had a great fear. He feared that his work would be eclipsed by his illness, and he would be forever known as a “mad artist.” Vincent van Gogh was diagnosed with manic depression, also showing signs of bipolar disorder. In one of his last letters, Vincent wrote, “If I could have worked without this accursed disease, what things I might have done” (Van Gogh 630). Society had trained him to believe that his depression made him less of a person and less of an artist.

Mental illness, also known as mental disorder, is an imperfection, right? Imperfection is defined as an undesirable feature, but what exactly is perfection, then? Perfection is defined as the state of being free from all flaws and defects. I’ve personally always believed that perfection is ugly, I think that wrinkles, calluses, and scars tell a story in ways that nothing else can, which is truly beautiful. Imperfections can include mental illnesses, which cannot usually be detected upon looking at someone, but at the same time, have a very strong presence. So if perfection is defined as a lack of flaws, and imperfection is defined as a flaw, then that means that perfection cannot be defined without imperfection.

If mental illness is by definition a disorder, why have we as a society romanticized it into something that it’s not? Many people don’t have a full understanding of what it’s actually like to experience mental illness. For example, depression is often thought of as just being sad all the time, but there are many more aspects to it. I’m hoping to delve deeper into this subject and allow the audience to witness mental illness.

What I’ve come to notice is that when many people talk about Vincent Van Gogh’s work, it’s often along the lines of “Those are amazing paintings considering he was crazy.” In truth, however, his art is amazing because he was “crazy.” He understood and saw the world in a different way because he was depressed, anxious and afraid. Anyone with a mental illness can say that a therapist has told them, “Mental illness doesn’t make you who you are.” I disagree; I think it does and I think it’s beautiful.

I continued to look at his work with the working class, and found it extremely beautiful. I love the way he captured the stories that imperfections tell the journeys they illustrate. Some of my favorite pieces from all of Vincent’s work are the pieces he did with Clasina Maria Hoornik, also known as Sien. Sien was a pregnant woman who lived on the streets after having been abandoned by the father of her child. She worked as a seamstress, but had to also resort to prostitution as a means of making money. Vincent spotted her and took her in. He fed her and provided her with shelter in exchange, he used her as a drawing subject. According to Vincent, “She caught my eye because she looked so ill... To me, she is beautiful” (Van Gogh 224). One of my favorites from this series is Sorrow, a drawing of Sien with her knees tucked up under her arms and her face buried in them. I love his work because it is so raw and emotional, yet extremely simple, and expresses a large amount of pain.

Depression is the most common mental illness, and affects nearly 350 million people worldwide. It can come in many different ways, including unipolar and bipolar depression, in

which case unipolar depression results in depressive episodes and bipolar depression results in manic “ups and downs”. Due to estrogen, women are actually twice as likely to suffer from depression than men, which can have an effect on the neurotransmitters in the brain. Of these millions of people who suffer from this disorder, nearly 15% of them will take their lives. Depression may occur in 1 in 33 children and 1 in 8 teenagers in the United States.

It has been proposed by many that there is a link between mental illness and creativity, and has often been supported by the fact that many artists, writers and musicians. Suffer from some type of depression. For my project, I’d like to explore this idea and bring the glorification of mental illness into the light. This includes a few narratives written about fictional characters who all suffer from depression.

water.

She stands in the sand, her bare feet red with cold as the gentle waves brush against her toes. Her long hair tangles over her eyelashes in the breeze, and goosebumps are rough against her skin.

I'm ready, she thinks. I'm ready to feel something.

She looks out onto the seemingly limitless expanse of the ocean, the quiet fog clouding the edge. A warm tear streaks down her cheek, barely numb against her skin. She shrugs her shoulders, pulling off her dad's jacket and letting it fall against the sand. She stands in her boardshorts and rash guard, shuddering against the wind and an odd smile spreading across her face.

And I'm sorry, she thinks. I'm ready.

She takes a step forward and the cold water swirls around her ankles, then her calves, her thighs. She lets out a shaky breath and closes her eyes before she lunges forward and disappears beneath the waves, the cold water moving her muscles to tense and her throat to tighten. She kicks her legs with all of the strength that she has left and comes bursting out of the water, panting and shaking violently. Everything is so silent. A faint humming noise rests in the back of her mind and she looks up to the grey-blue sky. Seagulls fly overhead, their distant cries echoing in her ears.

She smiles with tears in her eyes, peace flooding over her with a quiet wave. She squeezes her eyes shut and lets out a deep breath, sinking beneath the surface as the air escapes her lungs. She opens her eyes, squinting against the salt water. Before long, she can feel the pain. Her throat constricting, her lungs bearing down, her heart pounding in her chest. She begins to lose control of everything, her arms beginning to claw at the water and soon her mouth opens and she sucks in a huge amount of water. Her throat burns like dry ice and her muscles ache. Everything turns quiet and dark like falling asleep, gradually then too fast to even remember.

voices.

She lies in bed, her white sheets tucked up under her chin and her eyes falling heavy with sleep. She’s calm- so calm that she can hear her own heart beating in her chest like a clock. She jumps when a sudden noise bellows violently against her ears. Whispering. She can’t understand them, and she looks around only to see the darkness of her room. It’s so loud, she can swear it’s real. They won’t stop, they just get louder and whisper unintelligible screams in her mind. Her heart pounds and her hands shake as she reaches for the sheets, yanking them over her head and burying her face in the mattress.

“Go away,” she says, though she can’t hear herself. “Please...”

Terror creeps up in her throat and she squeezes her eyes tightly shut. Why won't they go away? Tears stream down her cheeks and her knuckles turn white as she claws her nails into the heels of her hands.

easy.

I wish I could say life is easy. That it's just like in the movies, and the worst it gets is when you get in a catfight with Regina George or you fail your driving test. But it's not easy, it's scary and you have to work hard.

I wish I could say my life is easy. That it's just the way I'd dreamt it would be, and I'm popular and skinny and my only concern is which college I want to go to. But the truth is, I'm scared. I'm afraid that I won't have enough money to survive after college, that I won't be able to have a family of my own. I'm worried that my dad blames himself for the way I am. I hate myself for rubbing off on my younger sister, who's starting to show symptoms of my illness. I'm scared that my dad is disappointed in me, and even worse, that my mom is disappointed in me. I hate that I don't know what I want to do with my life. This isn't how it was supposed to be. I'm supposed to be getting straight A's, going to parties, falling in love.

I wish I could say life is easy. It's not.

sneakers.

There is an old pair of sneakers that sits in her closet. Only worn once, dustings of dried mud have crusted over in the crevices of the soles, and a single leaf hanging from the shoelace. Her mother bought her those sneakers when they went to the mall for the last time, and she'd claimed she wanted nothing more than a good pair of running shoes. She doesn't run- nor does she plan to again. But when she did, it was as if she'd never stopped.

After she was given the news about her mom, she retreated to her room. That was when she noticed the clean little shoebox under her bed. That day, she ran. She ran for the first and last time- and she never stopped. Sitting in bed, she's running. Spending time with friends, she's running. No matter what she does, she feels her heart thumping in her chest and her feet pounding beneath her because she will always be running in those sneakers that she never wore again.

stars.

So there are millions of stars. They live in that dark empty space past the clouds and atmosphere. They're giant hot balls of gas that sometimes line up in a funny way and remind us of a lion or some dude's belt. In reality though, the stars are everything. They seem so infinite and immortal, like they'll always be there. They aren't like that- stars die. And what about them is so beautiful? The way they twinkle in the night sky, or cluster together in limitless galaxies? What's beautiful is that when you lay down in the grass and stare at the stars, you can pick one out of the hundreds in front of you, and you think to yourself that maybe - just maybe - someone else is looking at that exact same star, hundreds of miles away. That person could be just as afraid as you are, or even more so.

So when I go to sleep, I like to make up a story about that person. What kind of t-shirts they wear, what their family is like, how they make the perfect cup of tea, their favorite TV show. My favorite is Luke, a young construction worker who wears light blue Gildan t-shirts and has parents obsessed with vitamins. He takes his tea like I do- Earl Grey with lemon, and has watched House over again four times.

These people always end up being reflections of myself.

They're all diagnosed with depression, like myself because I simply cannot imagine a world in which people aren't like me. Great mindset, right? Great for writing, not so great for making friends.

The stars are what I have, the stars protect me.

In addition to these narratives, I would like to create a journal that works off of the characters' points of view, and is essentially their personal journal where they document art, 'diary' entries, etc. Although these characters are entirely fictional, I want their stories to be very real, and make this journal into something like a historical artifact. My favorite way to learn about any historical figure, especially artists, is to be able to look at their work in progress, journals, letters, etc. because it allows you to step into their world. Once I add sketches and entries to the journal, I'm going to dirty and whither it so that it looks decades old, and have it be displayed in front of the video that's going to be playing. The viewer is allowed to thumb through the journal, and experience however they want.

The video I'm going to make is going to be about the characters as well, titled "Falling.", and is going to be following each of their stories, as well as bringing the viewer into the world of someone diagnosed with depression. I want the video to have a cinematic aspect to it and send a huge message, but I don't just want the video to send a message or tell a story, I want it to be there to allow the viewer to feel something for the characters.

To create the journal, I'm going to be using a normal moleskine journal and pens to create entries by the characters from the narratives. In some way, each of the characters has come across the journal, and has suffered from some form of depression. I'm going to do my best to give each character different handwriting, drawing style, etc. The narratives, if they aren't already in first person, will be translated into the character's perspective and written in the journal as their personal entry.

For the video, I'm going to be using a lot of cinematic qualities that make the piece very beautiful and dramatic. I'm going to be creating very rough storyboards that give me an idea of what I want to shoot and how I want the visuals to pair with the narratives. I've decided that I'm going to use white noise as the sound for my piece because I think that although it is very steady and almost seems pointless, it has a very cinematic quality to it. Originally I wanted to use an orchestral piece, but the white noise seemed more easily interpreted and changeable. The title of this piece is "Falling.", which to me is a key word when it comes to depression. Once someone with depression has dragged themselves into that place of doubt, hatred, and confusion, it's very hard to stop themselves from falling and breaking. My friend is going to be the only character in my videos, portraying all of the characters as one person, who in a sense have the same story. The journals are going to be overlapped in the video, as well as paired with some jumbled narrations- that of depression, which makes me who I am, as well as 350 million others.

Mental illness affects millions of people worldwide, yet it seems that we still don't understand it. 'Mental illness' does not translate to 'crazy', and it doesn't translate into 'broken'. It is seen as an imperfection that should be fixed or kept away from society, or it's even seen as a broken girl with anxiety or depression who can be fixed by the right guy. Imperfections, in my opinion, are beautiful. They tell a story and illustrate a journey in ways that nothing else can, and should not be frowned upon or covered up. They should be appreciated.

I'd like to tell you a story about depression, and it isn't fun or happy, but it is beautiful.