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Art and Suffering

Oil paint on canvas

My installation and essay address the tortured artist trope, and its cultural ramifications. The belief that suffering fuels creativity is deeply pervasive. Prominent individuals such as Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and Ludwig van Beethoven exemplify the suffering artist archetype. My piece is inspired by *Blue Nude*, a Picasso figure painting created during his blue period. Between 1901 and 1904 Picasso painted almost entirely in monochromatic blue and cool tones. This stylistic shift was incited by Picasso's emotional and financial strife. This piece encapsulates the tortured artist archetype with its melodramatic aura. I mirrored this by using exclusively shades of blue and portraying the figure in a wistful pose.

Before my research, I neither agreed with nor denied the correlation between suffering and art. However, after reviewing information on the topic it became clear that suffering does not denote better art and that the tortured visionary trope is harmful fiction. The cultural fixation with art created out of suffering has ramifications for artists. They are pushed to view suffering as necessary to creating art, which can encourage self-destructive behaviors. Ultimately the tortured artist trope is a facet of the societal glamorization of mental illness and needs to be viewed critically.

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OS46

Writer's Note: The archetype of the tortured artist has been prevalent throughout much of human history. Many prominent artists subscribe to the belief that suffering is necessary for the creative process. The implications of this presumption go mostly unacknowledged. Is the suffering artist a reflection of reality? Is the cultural fixation with the tortured artist influencing artists to view suffering as necessary to their work? Are the pressures of the art world what bring about the strife that is perceived as standard for artists?

In a cultural context, suffering is often seen as intrinsic to the artistic process. Edvard Munch, the painter of *The Scream*, once professed “my fear of life is necessary to me, as is my illness” (Armitage). The archetype of the tortured artist is a creative who has had a difficult life and experiences mental and emotional strife. Their creative genius is believed to be a result of their disturbed state. To emphasize the pervasiveness of this belief, in the 4th century BC, Plato was quoted as saying “a poet’s inspiration could arise only from divine madness” (Johnson 5). Prominent individuals such as Vincent van Gogh, Ernest Hemingway, and Ludwig van Beethoven exemplify this stock character. Along with this archetype comes the notion that mental illness is more prevalent in artists.

I used to wholeheartedly subscribe to these beliefs, especially when undergoing depressive episodes. The touted romantic idea of an artist being inspired by their suffering seemed very appealing. It meant my mental illness was not a hindrance to my art; instead, it gave me a creative edge. I was convinced that my art would only have integrity if it was imbued with my negative emotions. To me, art created out of joy or simply aesthetic appeal was hollow and trite. This mindset meant I genuinely believed my art would decline in quality if my depression subsided.

The reality of mental illness is a far cry from the romanticized version represented in film or literature. Rather than being pensive or artfully melancholic, I was crushingly apathetic and unmotivated. I was essentially incapable of creating anything. Receiving treatment was the best possible course to revitalize my drive and inspiration. Using art as a means of catharsis versus allowing your mental health to deteriorate in the name of creativity is vastly different. It is challenging to acknowledge that my depression has shaped my identity while not viewing mental illness as necessary to my art. The romanticized tragic artist character is difficult to let go of, as it is so highly celebrated in the art world. Ultimately life as a suffering artist, while it may make for a good movie, is not an enviable or enjoyable way to live.

The possibility of a correlation between mental illness and creativity is also a topic of academic interest. In addition to artists, researchers have personally reinforced the validity of this trope. While it is unsurprising that many artists lend credence to the suffering artist trope, there are a perplexing amount of academics that endorse this notion as well. Psychologist Kay Jamison has written extensively about the link between creativity and mental illness. Jamison's 1989 study, conducted by surveying and recording accounts of artists, reported that 30% of artists and writers had major depressive illness, and 7% experienced manic-depressive illness. Additionally, Jamison found that artists experienced 18 times the average suicide rate, 10 times the rate of depression, and 10-20 times the rate of manic depression and cyclothymia (Jamison 6). Congruently, Dr. Arnold Ludwig studied the biographies of artists and postulated those in artistic professions had a 48-68% rate of lifetime psychiatric comorbidity (Johnson 7). Whether these findings are accurate or not, there is certainly a significant interest in proving a correlation between art and mental illness. The academic fixation with the tortured artist myth illustrates how pervasive this misconception is.

There is an undeniable demand for art that addresses the horrors of the wider world and the human psyche. However, is it possible that this pressure for deeply personal, shocking art is encouraging artists to be dependent on their suffering for inspiration? In a 2014 study led by psychologist Wijnand van Tilburg, 38 students were presented with van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and asked to evaluate it. One-half of the students were told that the artist likely heavily self-mutilated, while the other half was not. The group that was informed of van Gogh's erratic behavior rated the piece more positively (Armitage). The history of Van Gogh's mental health reveals nothing about the piece besides the artist's temperament. Does van Gogh's suffering improve the painting, or add some sort of meaning that was not present before? Or is the notion of a tortured visionary simply more interesting? The artists that tend to remain culturally relevant often have a tragic story to go along with their art. The details of their calamitous lives make them more intriguing to a general audience. It is a mixture of romanization and morbid fascination that makes suffering artists so appealing. Research conducted by Darya Zabelina, David Condon, and Mark Beeman discovered that clinical psychotic disorders prevent artists' social success. However, they found that less debilitating mental illness could be positive for an artistic career due to self-serving behaviors seen in those with mild psychotic tendencies, such as attention-seeking (Tipton). It is also possible that a more subdued form of mental illness is intriguing, without causing the issues related to a severe condition.

Author Carol Beeman, regarding the role of the artist, stated "by serving to reflect the state of man's existence, the artist is a conservator of sanity... the work he suffers through there serves as our common catharsis" (Johnson 9). It is expected of artists to transmute personal issues into something that represents the human psyche. This means that deep, painful self scrutiny is perceived as a requirement for artists. Original thinking is also key to success as an artist. It is

expected of artists to defy social norms and exhibit themselves through their art. Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung addressed this expectation: “The artist’s life cannot be otherwise than full of conflicts, for two forces are at war within him – on the one hand, the common human longing for happiness, satisfaction and security in life, and on the other a ruthless passion for creation which may go so far as to override every personal desire ... There are hardly any exceptions to the rule” (Johnson 8). Countless artists have risked their mental and even physical health for their art. Occurrences of this vary from artists exposing themselves to disturbing topics to artists undergoing serious physical harm.

Rhythm Zero, a performance piece by Marina Abramovic is a prime example of a piece that took a serious toll on the artist. Abramovic stood in a studio for 6 hours while allowing the audience to enact any action they wanted upon her. Abramovic stated that the blame for any harm done would rest squarely on her. She had laid 72 items out on the table including razor blades, a saw, and a loaded gun among other more innocuous things. Throughout her performance, she was fully undressed, cut with razors, and at one point threatened with the loaded gun. At no point did Abramovic object, she was fully committed to the piece (Duran). The piece is acclaimed for revealing the dark nature of humanity. This was entirely Abramovic’s decision and within her right to perform, but with the competitive nature of the art does this become a precedent? This is an extreme example, but artists are constantly sacrificing in the name of art. It is entirely possible the collective obsession with the tortured artist is creating an expectation for emotionally and physically taxing art.

Despite the popular belief that mental illness rates are exceptionally higher in creatives, there is not much viable information to confirm this. The research conducted on mental illness and creativity is viewed with heavy skepticism by many experts. Regarding this psychologist, Scott

Kaufman states, “The oft-cited studies by Kay Redfield Jamison, Nancy Andreasen, and Arnold Ludwig showing a link between mental illness and creativity have been criticized because they involve small, highly specialized samples with weak and inconsistent methodologies and a strong dependence on subjective and anecdotal evidence.” More recent studies seem to dispel the supposed correlation. A 40-year study of 1.2 million Swedish artists and scientists revealed that these groups did not have higher rates of psychiatric syndromes with the exception of a slighter higher percentage of bipolar disorder (Kaufman). The sample size and span of this research are leagues above any contradicting studies. Even taking higher rates of bipolar disorder into consideration, correlation does not conclusively equal causation. Studies of mental illness rates and professions have found major depression is prevalent among lawyers and that farmers or those in other agricultural professions have the highest suicide rates of any career (Green). So artists certainly do not have markedly higher rates of mental illness than those in other professions. Another issue with studies of artists or creatives is the question of categorization. Are only career artists considered, and hobbyists not? This discounts the fact that many artists can not feasibly pursue art professionally. Ultimately, the tortured artist archetype is not representative of the vast majority of artists.

The cultural fixation with the tortured visionary is creating damaging expectations for artists. Having a dark or shocking backstory behind a piece is an immediate draw for audiences, which encourages artists to rely on suffering to create. Many artists may not want to seek help for mental illness because they have been convinced that it gives them a deeper insight. However, to be prolific and consistently motivated an artist needs to be stable and content. Art can be a great form of expelling negative emotion, but suffering should not be required to make art. The suffering artist trope may be intriguing and tragically poignant, but it needs to be viewed as what it is; fiction.

Hollywood stories of artists' romanized self-destruction must be viewed with scrutiny and realism.
For the benefit of artists, the myth of the tortured visionary needs to be examined critically.

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