16. Dismantling the Romanticisation of the Mad Genius Archetype

-Raheeni Bhargava

Abstract

The "Mad Genius" archetype refers to the idea that creative brilliance is intrinsically tied to mental illness and suffering. This paper provides a critical lens on the historical, philosophical and psychological roots of this trope, tracing its birth from ancient thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle through the Renaissance to contemporary media ideations. Through an interdisciplinary perspective, figures such as Vincent Van Gogh and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart have been studied, providing an insight into social and contextual factors that shaped their creative expression. The paper suggests that the appeal of the "Mad Genius" remains largely a product of cultural romanticisation, media propagation and selective attention rather than a scientific phenomenon. Ultimately, it seeks to deconstruct the layers that form this archetype by advocating for a critical understanding to fully recognise mental illness as a serious concern rather than a commercial commodity.

Keywords

- Mad Genius
- Creative Expression
- Media propagation
- Glamorized suffering
- Cultural Romanticisation
- Sad Girl Culture

Introduction

The archetype of a "Mad Genius" has permeated its way through all art forms including media, film, poetry, painting and literature. From ancient philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Kant, to the Renaissance and Romantic period and now the current popular culture, this narrative has remained interwoven into the minds of people. The romanticisation of suffering as a catalyst for exceptional creativity has led to generations of artists misconceiving the prerequisites of what is required to achieve artistic brilliance. Creativity has remained a broad interdisciplinary bracket, spanning philosophy, psychology and the arts. This facet opens up space for multiple expressions and ideas to flourish within a singular idea of what creativity denotes. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) conceived of artistic genius as an innate capacity to produce original works through the free play of the imagination, a process which does not consist in following rules, can neither be learned nor taught, and is mysterious even to geniuses

themselves (Schappell & Lacour, 2023). Weinberg (1992) and Wallace & Gruber (1989) posit that creativity is the capacity to produce an output that not only has an element of novelty and originality, but is of positive value and purpose to mankind.

Such ideas often remain far from the notions of madness, which seems to express the idea of distress and burden over an individual, instead of a pure overflow of creative genius. According to the American Psychological Association, Madness is an obsolete name for mental illness or for legal insanity. In Scripture, "madness" is recognised as a derangement proceeding either from weakness and misdirection of intellect or from ungovernable violence of passion (Smith, 1901). This idea has remained largely philosophical and lacks modern scientific sense. Madness is currently defined as a highly emotional and behavioural viewpoint that can manifest in many forms, from exaggerated behaviours to seemingly irrational ideas (ICN, 2024).

The concept of a "Mad Genius" has been applied to exceptional individuals who have attained the highest levels of achievement, particularly in creative domains such as the Arts. This signified a paradoxical statement; individuals who were able to attain high levels of creativity were more likely to exhibit personality traits that were linked to Psychopathy. The idea of a Mad Genius is a peculiar one, viewing creativity due to mental illness instead of despite it. For artists, the act of creating has fundamentally acted as a cathartic outlet, allowing them to transform emotional turmoil into pieces that hold the power to transcend time, space, religious backgrounds and rigid societal structures. It promoted the idea that people who suffer from mental disorders are inherently capable of thinking, feeling, knowing, and doing remarkable things that non-mentally ill people cannot. This has created a normative hierarchy between mental illness and health, as it "separates those with mental illness as better, smarter, or more creative than the average, neurotypical person". In doing so, it romanticises mental illness as a hallmark of excellence, rather than a crippling health issue.

In ancient Rome, the Latin term "Genius" referred to a guiding purity that was thought to accompany each person throughout their lives and the genius of an artist would occasionally deliver art through a person (Wolf, 2001). The ancients used to say, "*Nullum magnum ingenuium sine mixtura dementiae fuit*", that is, 'there is no genius without a grain of Madness'. During this time, the giftedness of individuals was often attributed to possession by an inspirational "Demon", linking the artist with a higher being (Sweedo, 2013). This phenomenon can be traced back to ancient thinkers. Aristotle (a Greek philosopher) proclaimed that "No great mind has existed without a touch of madness." He incentivised a correlation between exceptional minds and a melancholic temperament, going so far as to speak of the melancholy in the man of genius (Gaut, 2010).

Plato (a Greek philosopher) argued that inspiration is a kind of madness and Kant linked

creativity to imagination; both accounts were powerfully influential on Romanticism and thereby on popular conceptions of creativity. Plato discussed the idea of divine madness, suggesting that artistic inspiration was bestowed by the gods and did not solely involve the artists themselves (Paul n.d.). He believed that true creativity was derived from something that was not purely conscious and treated humans as a 'vessel' for artistic output. The idea of divine inspiration has enjoyed a long afterlife in Western thought, over time these ideas have gotten amplified and have led artists to become fixated on the idea that artistic brilliance required a touch of insanity (Dietrich, 2023).

The period of the *Renaissance*

The Renaissance (1300-1600) was an artistic, scientific, and cultural movement in the 14'th century Italy that flourished throughout Europe until the 17th century. It was a pivotal period in human history stemming from a rebirth of interest in classical learning, challenging the medical norms of thought and creative expression. It was a transformative movement that left an indelible mark on Art, Literature, Philosophy, Science and the Politics of thought.

During the Renaissance, the perception of creativity shifted from one of divine intervention to that of human agency (Britannica, 2025). The basic tenets of Renaissance Humanism considered Man as the centre of the universe, limitless in his capacities for development, and led to the notion that men should try to embrace all knowledge and develop their own capacities as fully as possible (Britannica, 2025). Humanism during the Renaissance was a philosophical and intellectual movement that emphasised the dignity and the potential of human beings. The belief in the importance of education, specifically literature, history and philosophy, was deemed central to the humanistic perspective. This resulted in the celebration of brilliant artistic minds, leading to creativity being seen as individual expression and originality viewed as separate from divine intervention. During this time, calling an artist "Mad" was often a compliment, recognising the paradoxical link between divine inspiration and irrationality. It viewed the artist as someone who could access truths beyond ordinary reason. This movement placed importance on creative brilliance that was directed by eccentricity, reinforcing the belief of a codependent relationship between art and mental illness. During the 18th-19th century, the artist was also referred to as a "Tragic Hero", one who remained isolated and misunderstood throughout his lifetime. This narrative of a solitary genius overlooks the brilliance of working amongst others and fosters the idea of isolation amongst individuals in society. This myth has been further amplified by a long list of achievers such as Vincent Van Gogh, Mozart, Beethoven, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf and Edgar Allan Poe. Some of these individuals are remembered as much for their artistry as for their deaths, making their psychopathology a part of their legacy. Vincent Van Gogh, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe were known for their suffering as much as their creative expression.

Van Gogh faced adverse poverty for most parts of his life, followed by bipolar behaviour (Blumer & D., 2002). Shakespeare survived through disruptive conditions due to the Plague, and Edgar Aallen Poe experienced alcoholism and instability in his life. Due to the presence of differing levels of mental illness within these individuals, the modern culture has undergone a normalisation of mental illness when seen along with the extraordinary creativity of the artist (BBC, 2014; M., 2007).

One of the most prevalent questions during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries was how much should artists suffer or sacrifice for their work? This theme between creativity and suffering was attributed to painters, writers, poets and thinkers alike. Psychiatry had started to develop as a discipline and focused on the emotions and imagination of individuals. At the same time, the concept of a genius developed, which was defined as a person who was able to create extraordinary things and possessed a lively imagination. When artists used their imagination and came up with ideas that did not always correspond to reality, it led doctors to question "What makes the imagination of a genius different from that of the ill minds of my patients?" This further contributed to the creation of a link between genius and madness in the minds of people. This overlap resulted in the blurring of boundaries between heightened experiences, making it difficult for doctors to distinguish them, differing them solely by degree.

The Life of the Artist, *Part One*

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) was one of the most famous Post-Impressionist painters. He once said, "I put my heart and my soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process." His artistic journey and his mental health had sparked a lot of debate throughout the years; his diagnoses included bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, epilepsy and a possible anxiety disorder (Wolf, 2001). Van Gogh's artistry and creative output have been tied to what many psychiatrists believe, but cannot confirm to be bipolar disorder (a mental illness characterised by extreme mood swings that oscillate from high emotional states to low emotional states, known as hypomania and depression).

He was 35 years old when he cut off his left ear in 1888. This was the beginning of a period of uncertainty after which every crisis and attacks followed. Van Gogh indulged in various activities which undermined his health; these habits included constant smoking, excessive alcohol and coffee consumption and eating extremely poorly. There is evidence that he nibbled at his paints; this is possibly connected with his seizures around the New Year 1890. One such explanation suggests the effects of overmedication and the use of Digitalis (medication). Individuals who receive large doses of this drug tend to see the world through a green-yellow tint and complain about seeing yellow spots, much like those in Van Gogh's "The Starry Night" (Wolf, 2001). In one of his latest letters, Van Gogh wrote, "If I could have worked without this

accursed disease, what things I might have done."

He later stated that he had attempted to take his own life, his increasing loneliness, considerable uncertainty about the future, and the idea that he was a burden to his brother Theo might have contributed to his suicide as well.

Due to Van Gogh's suffering, he has often been labelled as a "Tortured Genius", and this reputation has stuck with him even now. Nearly a century and a half after his death, art historians and artists continue to investigate his psychosis in an effort to better understand his mental condition and its influence on his artwork. Kay Jamison (a clinical psychologist) says, "One of the things that's interesting about Van Gogh is that he's so much of a *Rorschach*, people look into him and see so much of what they themselves experience or want to think that somebody who is mad experiences." Many people assume that Van Gogh's artistic genius is a direct result of his undiagnosed condition, while his artistry has been inextricably linked to his mental illness; defining his legacy solely through the lens of an illness diminishes the depth of his contributions as an artist.

The Life of the Artist, *Part Two*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria, on the 17th of January 1756. He was one of the most celebrated composers of the classical era and was considered a musical prodigy. His musical career commenced during his childhood, and during the first few years of his musical career, he achieved a reputation in almost every department of music, such as no other master of the art has ever attained (Measer, 1869).

Mozart is best known for his Opera work, and over the course of his career, he wrote over 30 operas. His behaviour was marked by eccentricities, wild humour, impulsive behaviours and mood swings. His letters documented behaviour that shows both moments of brilliance and episodes of inappropriate behaviour, impulsive actions and emotional volatility. He was known to be extremely social and outgoing, yet he also experienced periods of isolation and withdrawal. During his lifetime, he suffered from Tonsillitis (swelling and irritation of the tonsils) regularly, but apart from that, there is no record of Mozart ever suffering from any kind of illness, except for a few minor health problems (Measer, 1869). There is much debate surrounding the mental health of Mozart; some believe that he suffered from schizophrenia (a disorder characterised by abnormal social behaviour and a lack of ability to understand reality), others believe that he was simply an eccentric genius. Mozart's eccentric personality is much better justified as a part of his unique personality and upbringing rather than by psychopathology (Peter, 2022). Mozart's father was known to be a stern disciplinarian; he kept Mozart in unacceptable slavery, and he claimed that Mozart was responsible for

his mother, Anna Maria, when he was born. Mozart also had six children, two of whom died during infancy; these tragic events also led to a high level of mental and emotional turmoil within him (Peter, 2023).

Distinguishing between Mozart's true creativity and possible mental health issues involves examining his compositional process and personality traits. Mozart mentioned in his letters that musical ideas came to him naturally, often during moments of relaxation and that he would mentally work on these ideas. This methodical process reflects cognitive control and discipline, unlike the mental chaos associated with mental illness. Although his pieces display a wide range of emotions, this largely remains an artistic choice rather than evidence for a potential mood disorder. Application of modern psychiatric categories to historical figures is fraught with difficulty; many behaviours and actions that are considered to be eccentric or abnormal today were not necessarily pathological in those times. Modern research distinguishes his true creativity from mental illness by placing importance upon his systematic and disciplined composition, the lack of clinical evidence and by providing context for his life circumstances. Mozart's putative pathological behaviour was a manifestation of his resilience in the face of multiple adversities and was deeply rooted in his sense of play, not illness. His eccentric behaviours were ultimately viewed as a response to his harsh circumstances; they remain insufficient to account for his creative genius (Powell H., 2015).

Philosophers have largely ignored this body of material in discussing creativity. The relative neglect by Philosophers regarding creativity could not tend in stronger contrast than to the situation in Psychology. In 1950, J.P. Guilford (an American Psychologist) gave a highly influential presidential address to the American Psychological Association in which he pointed out how little work had been done on the topic, though cultural narratives often romanticise suffering, psychological theories attempt to question the existence of a legitimate foundation behind such an association (Silvia, 2010).

Multiple experts argue that the association between creativity and mental illness is often overstated due to selection bias and retrospective diagnosis, leading to an overexaggeration of this relationship (Sweedo, 2013). The traits of a genius are mostly expressed in the very early stages of an individual's life, while mental illnesses, on the other hand, follow a later course. Psychopathology rarely manifests itself in the early stages (apart from schizophrenia). In creative geniuses such as Sylvia Plath, later events, such as the death of her father, proved to be the turning point in her mental health journey, further manifesting symptoms of psychosis. Even though the evidence for a genetic link between psychosis and creativity seems fairly substantial for multiple mental conditions, it would not be correct to assume the same to be true for all other forms of psychotic afflictions. While there is a substantial number of highly creative children born of parents with some psychosis, there is a higher incidence of mentally

healthy, highly creative parents (C. Koh, 2006). Another important factor in this case is the presence of other factors, such as childhood experiences, socioeconomic status, peer groups and one's personality traits (Silvia, 2010). This stereotype also remains extremely specific, and it occurs only in the context of some disorders and for some domains of creativity. It primarily involves mood disorders (depression, anxiety, social anxiety, bipolar disorders, thought disorders and substance abuse), and creativity is rarely seen to be associated with other disorders such as caffeine addiction and animal phobias. Even under the bracket of creative domains, this archetype mainly concerns painting, music composition, poetry, photography and creative writing; this stereotype is not often applied to other forms of creativity, such as mechanical engineers, historians, economists, etc. Even though the landmark innovators made powerful creative contributions in their specific domains, a "Mad Genius" archetype is rarely applied to them (Silvia, 2010). Several humanistic and positive psychologists have argued that outstanding creativity constitutes a sure sign of better mental health (Bacon, 2005). Many creatives, including Vincent Van Gogh and Amadeus Wolfgang Mozart, demonstrate high levels of productivity inconsistent with severe mental illness.

Mental illness has become increasingly visible in popular culture, and the "Mad Genius" stereotype remains largely a product of cultural romanticiation and lacks enough empirical evidence to justify itself in modern times. Social media has continued to reinforce aesthetics such as "Sad Girl Culture", aestheticising trauma, making it a badge of creativity rather than a clinical condition. This phenomenon can also have harmful effects on the health of individuals seeking help and can turn genuine distress into a performative identity, wherein sadness is viewed as a mark of emotional and intellectual depth required to achieve an artist's complete potential.

Conclusion

Societal biases significantly influence which suffering is glamorised and which is dismissed. The media has often romanticised the struggles of certain individuals who fit within specific stereotypes, capitalising on the idea of a suffering artist. This stereotype encourages the idea that mental illness is a prerequisite for creativity, reinforcing harmful ideologies among individuals. The tendency to romanticise one's suffering through media tropes such as "the mad genius" or "sad girl culture" deserves to be viewed through a critical lens, although on the surface, they appear as an effort to honour one's creativity; they frame suffering as meaningful or justified only if it contributes to creative success. It can foster the assumption that creativity and suffering lie on a single thread and may discourage individuals from seeking support through difficult circumstances. Questioning these ideas allows for an objective perspective, recognising creativity and mental illness in their own right and as multifaceted factors, treating mental health as a serious issue rather than an aesthetic to be romanticised.

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About the Author

Raheeni Bhargava is currently a second-year Psychology and Economics student at Sophia College for Women. As an aspiring writer, her interest lies within the intersection of human behaviour and the influence of ideologies on how individuals choose to behave and think.