

## **Artistic Demons and Addictions**

### **Donna Kiser**

The romantic image of the tragic, tortured artistic soul was, and may well still be, my immediate perception of the connection between psychology and creativity. Possibly a stereotypical viewpoint, however when we look at the standard definition of psychology: the scientific study of the mental processes, emotional and behavioral characteristics of the brain. Then we take into account the psychosis of Van Gogh, the schizophrenia of Gauguin, the alcoholism of Poe, the depression of Woolfe; and then to include the sciences with the early learning disabilities of Einstein, it seems a logical assessment. Anguish and deep, inner turmoil seems synonymous with artists and geniuses.

We must ask though, if the torment is something that can or even should be cured? From a humanistic stand, we must voice the affirmative. If possible, all suffering must be eliminated, or at least eased. There are those who believe that creativity does not flow from the pain but rather only from the “encounter”, and this may be true to some extent, however would that encounter and the result be the same under the influences of Ridlin or Prozac? John Nash’s mind could not function when drugged. He made the conscious choice to live with his demons in order to allow his creativity to flourish. Einstein was a troublesome child and today would be drugged. Would his mind have created the Theory of Relativity under those circumstances? With the invention of therapy and therapeutic drugs, Sylvia Platt and Virginia Woolf may have lived longer, seemingly happier lives, but would their contributions to the world been on the same

level? Then we must wonder also, if their lives would have been truly happier without the passion to pour into their creations.

This is not to say that all children faced with what parents and professionals might deem personality or behavioral problems should not receive intervention, with the concept that they may all be prodigies. This is also not to say that all artists have some form of psychosis, or even that psychosis is required to be an artist. Perhaps it is required, and possibly most artists do have some form or another; just that some deal with it better than others do. Some may have the strength to confront problems, as did Nash; others may choose addictions. Addictions may provide the escape from whatever is plaguing them. It may provide the escape from the “encounter” they so drastically need to release the passion. It may provide the confidence to perform in the medium of choice. Whatever their reason, consciously or subconsciously, I believe addictions and/or demons play a role in creativity or artistry. The demons may manifest as illnesses, as in the case of Mozart or Hubert Selby, Jr. They may be something so inconsequential as an occasional feeling of aloneness. They may be something that the individual has no idea exists. There is an internal drive, a momentum, and a force that demands existence so that the creativity can emerge and blossom. It may be only that persistent drive itself, which some psychologists and psychiatrists label as a form of psychosis anyway. Whatever the label and however managed, artists have an internal mechanism that I do not believe everyone has. I say this not to set myself above others, but to set artists above others. It helps to explain what society terms as eccentricities in artists and mental health disorders in the layman. Therefore, my mental health disorders are eccentricities because I am an artist.

Sometimes, it is the unconscious denial of the eccentricities, the desire to not be different that hinders the artist from recognizing or realizing their abilities. For example, a person may truly be an introvert, but has lived their entire life as an extrovert, a social butterfly, subconsciously knowing that society's view of an introvert is a lonely person, incapable of relationships. This person's life at some point may become miserable and so they try something different, a significant change from whom they have always been. Inside of this change, which may include occasional isolation, they may find that they paint exquisitely, or they write eloquently, and so as they delve deeper into their expressive medium, they embrace the isolation. Consequently, they find they enjoy the isolation, which is a demon of sorts, an unaccepted lifestyle in society, and then find themselves an artist, with a talent they never knew. A talent, nonetheless, that was present all along, but until they accepted a "disorder", it was unable to emerge. Therefore, it is possible, I believe, to have demons and addictions unknown, yet are almost required to release the passion of the talent. Possibly, it is most beneficial to the artist and society, if they are aware of their demons and/or addictions from the beginning. They then do not waste any precious time in denial, but immediately wrestle with them in the creation process.

Having established the belief that there are strong connections between psychosis, if you will, and creation, I believe that there is a universal consciousness that also drives the creation process, causing artists to speak out on topics of societal interest. How they convey their messages, or what their message contains, is also determined by the societal consciousness of the time. For example, Michelangelo lived an extraordinarily long life in his time. He began his work at the "beginning" of the Renaissance and worked through

the entire period. On the other hand, did he actually “start” the Renaissance? Were not people ready for his three-dimensional depictions rather than the Byzantine look of the Middle Ages? This may explain recognized talents of artists posthumously. They were ahead of their time, as the saying goes. In literature, author Zora Neale Hurston, a strong African American female voice, whose work was not recognized and studied for its worth, until years after her death. Society was not ready for the strong feminism her work embodied. The sciences do not fair any better in this realm. In mid 200 BC, Aristarchus suggested that the sun, not the earth, was the true center of the universe. What an outrageous idea! When the universal consciousness was able to accept this theory, and Hurston's feminism, they miraculously became great artistes. Of course, now we maintain that they were great all along. Society was not ready for their greatness or the demons that drove them to speak out so loudly in their mediums. So, it seems that the underlying subconscious of society was ready to accept the strange newness of Michelangelo, which allowed him to then wholly “change” the art forms as they were; the subconscious was not even close to understanding Hurston or Aristarchus, consequently they were completely rejected. It can be said then, that when life seems to mimic art, it was universally moving in that direction anyway. Therein lies that infamous question, “Does art mimic life, or does life mimic art?”

It is difficult to choose one artist or medium that illuminates this concept. There are so many great ones, and more emerging daily. So said, I have chosen two. George Gershwin and Marvin Gaye. Both, wartime artists in the musical medium, both tortured, both speaking to the universal consciousness of their time. Many ask, “What part does an artist play in informing society and addressing issues of the day?” Some say that it is an

artist's duty to participate, inform and address the concerns of society. Did George Gershwin and Marvin Gaye know they were performing a duty? Probably not, but they were driven nonetheless, and by that drive, they performed their duty without exception. Both wrote lyrics that fed into the stream of consciousness of the time. Although both were extremely talented, neither fit into the category of being ahead of their time, rather both were exactly what society wanted. This is not to say that either sacrificed their talents to conformity. Their passions were in harmony with the universal consciousness, even though their own psyche was in turmoil, one physically and the other emotionally. Their greatest works created at the height of their torment, and so based in universality that the works endured through the years.

In 1935, the folk-opera *Porgy and Bess*, with songs written by Ira and George Gershwin, opened on Broadway. At a time when Jews in Germany were being stripped of their rights and concentration camps were being opened on a regular basis, Gershwin and America was singing about the sweet ole' *Summertime*. The melody was bluesy but the words told a tale of "livin' easy". Critics disagree on what piece is actually Gershwin's best; some say it was *Rhapsody in Blue*, which is another up-tempo creation. Written in 1924 just after Hitler became leader of the National Socialist Party and one year before Mein Kampf, *Rhapsody in Blue* swung through America. Four years later, Wall Street would crash. It was definitely a time of denial, blindness and wishes to continue the status quo. People would not have accepted lyrics that spoke the truth. The truth was known, Gershwin surely knew that his kinsman were being tortured, yet it was not a time of speaking out, so it didn't even cross his mind to do so. Buoyancy, happiness and joy were the themes of the day, and he was intrinsically in tune with that. In 1937, George

Gershwin died from a brain tumor. What we know of brain tumors today tells us that he was in horrible pain when he created his exuberant masterpieces.

Marvin Gaye rose to fame, as did many young black artists in the 60's, with the Motown record label. He wrote much of his early music under the constraints of Motown and supported the persona they wished to project. It was not until he experienced the death of his close friend Tammy Terrell that he confronted, or was confronted *by*, his own demons and subsequently created his best pieces. After almost two years of isolation and drug addiction, Marvin released *What's Going On*, a highly political song that spoke directly to racism, war, poverty and drugs, all of the issues effecting America, and the world, at the time. It was widely accepted and critically acclaimed because the populace was in a place, consciously, to see and hear the truth. Not all people and not all truth, but most. His drive to create such a passionate, universal piece was inspired either by the addiction, because of the addiction or in spite of the addiction, and depression. Marvin Gaye would ultimately be shot to death during a dispute with his father, just months after professing his wish to be dead.

In conclusion, the portrait of an artist, in my opinion, must contain tragedy and torture of the soul in some capacity, physical or emotional, known or unknown. There may very well be some that lead seemingly normal lives, yet driven by some internal force, divine inspiration, if you will, where the average person is not. Some are able to tap into this force with relative ease, whiles others do so at great detriment to themselves. Whichever the case, both are to the magnificent benefit of society.