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**Myths of Women of Letters:
Bipolar Disease in Female Artists**

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Introduction

Bipolar disorder (formerly called manic-depressive illness or manic depression) is a mental disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels. And the ability to carry out daily tasks. In general, there are three types of bipolar disorder which includes different levels of “manic episodes” (when the mood is extremely “up”, elated, irritable, or energized) and depressive episodes (when the mood is very “down”, sad, indifferent, or hopeless). The film *Sylvia* depicts the life of the poet and novelist Sylvia Plath who committed suicide at the age of 30. While *The Hours* is a story that revolves around three women: Virginia Woolf and two of other women who have been affected by her works. All three are battling with the issues of freedom, responsibility and identity. This research project aims to analyze the mechanism, behavior, and mental activities of the Manic Depressives (focusing on the females) by inspecting the two movies: “Sylvia” and “The Hours”, in order to compare the depicted to the reality.

Literature Review

I. Definition: symptoms of Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is a kind of extreme mental health condition that includes emotional highs (mania) and lows (depression), and that they shift in between. When depressed, one may lose interest in most activities and when the mood shifts to mania, one may feel full of energy or unusually irritable. All those emotional shifts can severely affect sleep, energy, judgment, behavior and the ability to think clearly.

II. Types and myths of Bipolar Disorder

In fact, there are actually several kinds and phases of bipolar disorder, which can be divided into bipolar 1, bipolar 2, cyclothymic, and other related disorders.

The main difference of 1 and 2 is about the severity of the manic episodes. Manic episodes usually contain: exceptional energy, restlessness, concentration issues, euphoria, poor sleep, and risky behaviors. One must have had 1 manic episode to be confirmed of having bipolar 1 disorder. On the other hand, people who are diagnosed with bipolar 2 disorder go through the depressive episode that lasts for at least two weeks with at least one hypomanic episode (less severe than a manic). Bipolar 2 is often mistaken as depression, since the depressive symptoms may be the major syndrome at the time the person seeks medical attention. Moving back to bipolar disease, it contains extreme emotions, mania, hypomania, and depression. People who are in the manic phase of bipolar disorder don't necessarily mean that they do dangerous things, it also means that they cannot make rational decisions at the time. For instance, spending large amounts of money on things they can't really afford. As for the hypomanic episode, though less severe than a manic episode, it still influences your behavior, and the differences will be extreme enough that people around you may notice. The depression episode includes loss of interest, concentration issues, irritability, changes in eating and sleeping habits and so on.

Multiple Personality Disorder, which is now called Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), is often mistaken as Bipolar Disorder. DID features at least 2 different personalities that endure. Relatively, these personalities are seen as individuals so they usually have different names and life stories. Even though shifting between different personalities may seem to be determined as “temporary” behaviors, they last long in DID.

For a DID patient, they may go through memory loss due to the shift of identities. For now, some experts point out that childhood trauma is the cause for the DID since 90% of cases indicate that the patients have the experience of childhood abuse. In this case, DID is somewhat a technique to protect themselves from feeling the pain. Others say that it is a by-product of some techniques from certain therapy processes. If this hypothesis is somewhat true, then the distinct personalities are iatrogenic or to say provoked by the therapist. As for Bipolar Disorder, depressed and manic/ hypomania phases are the main symptoms. Moreover, the treatment for the 2 mental disorders are quite different. While DID is often treated with therapy, Bipolar Disorder is often treated with medication.

III. Etiology and defense mechanisms

Until now, there are no clear reasons to put out what actually causes bipolar disease. Nevertheless, it has been proved that it runs in the blood. Other assumptions are the imbalance in brain chemicals and severe stress, abuse of alcohol or drugs, and extremely sad experiences. There are researches focusing on the defense mechanisms of the victims of the disease. A study found that there are different types of defense mechanisms in bipolar mania, bipolar depression and (unipolar) depression based on their use of denial, identification, action level defenses, borderline level defenses, narcissistic level defenses, neurotic level defenses and adaptive level defenses (Sharma and Sinha). Higher denial and lesser neurotic level defenses are used in the bipolar manics. While the bipolar depressions used a higher level of neurotic defenses. As for the unipolar depression group, they used denial, borderline level and narcissistic level defenses.

Main Discussion

i. Reason for causing the disease

Sylvia portrays the life of poet and novelist Sylvia Plath, who was one of the most celebrated literary figures back then. Plath (played by Gwyneth Paltrow) developed a talent as a writer at a very young age, yet, she also encountered the unexpected death of her father. As years gone by, though she's an outstanding student, she also began suffering due to depression and she attempted suicide but saved by her mother. After getting married with Ted Hughes (Daniel Craig), a respected author who would later become the British Poet Laureate, Plath still couldn't find happiness. She became fascinated with death and after Hughes left her for another woman, she committed suicide. The movie starts with Plath's monologue:

Sometimes I dream of a tree, the tree is my life

One branch is the man I shall marry, and the leaves are my children,

[...]

Another branch is a glittering academic career.

But as I sit there begin to choose, the leaves turn brown and blow away until the tree is absolutely bare.

The text basically summarizes Plath's life as she sees it. Even though having a happy marriage, a sweet family and a glamorous career don't seem to be contradicting to each other; yet, in her way of living, it is impossible to maintain a balance. She could only choose one. Plath has always wanted to become a poet, and published her works at a rather young age, nevertheless, "essentially commercial, bourgeois poetic, nakedly ambitious" was what she got, the reviews of her works weren't really positive. When she fell in love with Hughes, she told him about her past experience of attempting suicide

described herself as “lady Lazarus”, which is her poem about the “art” of death. After becoming Mrs. Hughes, they went back to America (Plath’s hometown) and met her mother.

Plath: why can't you just be pleased with me

[...]

Mother: what do you want me to say

Plath: say that you like him

Mother: do you love him?

Plath: I love him

Mother: then I like him

Plath expressed conflict about her relationship with her parents. Plath’s father died when she was 8 years old due to untreated diabetes. Plath felt she had lost not only fatherly love but male love in general and blamed her mother for his death, since she married him despite the age difference between them. As for her mother, Plath claimed to love her mother yet resent her, she struggled with the hostility she felt for her mother.

ii. Behavior

Plath once tried to commit suicide, and her problems of being depressed soon reoccurred when she started to feel insecure about her marriage. Plath quickly learns that others are enchanted to her husband for his combination of appearance, charisma, fame and success. Whenever she started to suspect on someone, they eventually move to another city/ country. However, problems still remain unsolved. After they moved to Devon because of the affair between Hughes and his student, he started to get close to Assia, who rented their flat in London, thus, Plath left Hughes with her children at last.

I've never been happier and I've never written more. Now he's gone, I'm free.

I can finally write.

I wake up between 3 and 4 because that's the worst time. When I write until dawn, I really feel like God speaking through me.

Plath told the critic Al Alvarez what she actually felt during the era without Hughes.

Plath had endured emotional shifts, she seemed to lost interest in most of the things during the depression episode; while during the manic episode, she wrote, that was when she had exceptional energy and finished many works.

The despair, the overpowering sense of foreboding and yet without a trace of anger or hysteria or any appeal for sympathy.

The wealth of imagery, such horrors, but expressed with a coolness, like a murder's confession.

This is a review of her work "Lady Lazarus". Plath's acclaimed works were mostly finished during her depressed era. Since she was free, she can fully express her true feelings (or to say, facing her true self). She showed signs of desiring death, yet, maybe because she still had that yearn for love, she deceived the sharpness and dreadfulness and presented death as art, as a gift.

When Plath didn't have any inspiration for writing, she chose to bake to draw her attention away. Plath got anxious for being unproductive, but she didn't choose to relax and take a walk, instead, she delved into baking. Finally, there were 6 cakes and dozens of pancakes in the kitchen. This can be seen as an act of being irrational since they are just a household of 2, they couldn't really consume that much pastries. Having exceptional energy, restlessness, concentration issues are symptoms of a manic episode,

and Plath was enduring it at the time. Later on, Hughes took her out for a sail and claimed that she actually already has a subject (which was herself), but she was just skirting around it and insisted her to just start working. “Write, that’s what poets do”, the male-dominance power started to emerge from then on. While they were talking about the issue, they gradually became further away from the coast. “The tide is dragging us out [...] people drown like this” Hughes said, somehow also symbolizing the drowning of Sylvia Plath.

After Plath knew that Assia was pregnant, she was totally frustrated and hopeless, and eventually committed suicide. The film ends with her poem “The Arrival of the Bee Box”:

The box is locked, it is dangerous

I have to live with it overnight

And I can't keep away from it

There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there

There is only a little grid, no exit.

The bee box can be seen as an allusion to Pandora’s box, which contains evil. It is also implying the reader of Plath’s mental status and her tug of war with her inner demons. Even though she knew it was dangerous, but she “can’t keep away from it”, Plath was still longing and fascinated for death. “There are no windows”, the poetess is clearly repressed and somehow trapped by her own state of mind and cannot see a way out.

Hughes played a crucial role in Plath's adult life. His way of behavior in the period before her death and his subsequent acts overshadowed her poetry and also his. Some may treat Plath as a martyr while they see Hughes as a murderer. Her life has become, a

stifling poem of women's self-expression in a male-dominant literary environment before feminism aroused.

The Hours is a story that revolves around three women: Virginia Woolf and two of other women who have been affected by her works. All three are battling with the issues of freedom, responsibility and identity. In the film, they try to deal with their different depressive states: Virginia Woolf is struggling to write her novel "Mrs. Dalloway" in 1923, as she recovers from depression; Laura Brown is a depressed and pregnant L.A. housewife who reads Woolf's novel in 1949, as she plans her husband's birthday party; and, the exasperated Clarissa Vaughn is a book editor in modern-day New York, who is planning a farewell party for her AIDS-inflicted former lover, Richard who is a famous author who had nicknamed her Mrs. Dalloway.

i. Reasons for causing the disease and behavior in Laura Brown

Laura: They came home from the war, they deserved it, didn't they? After what they'd been through."

Kitty: 'What did they deserve?'

Laura: "I don't know. Us, I guess."

Laura Brown (played by Julianne Moore) is a housewife living in Los Angeles in 50s. She feels trapped by the constraints of her role as a suburban housewife and struggles between her true identity. The dialogue between Laura and her friend Kitty implied that she married Dan, a soldier who participated in World War II, due to a sense of obligation. This is what makes her constantly depressed. In her perceptive, she thinks that since the world was been saved by the soldiers, she should take on the responsibility as a perfect wife and mother, even though this might not be the life she wants. Therefore,

her true personal desires must be fulfilled by other things. For instance, she decides to bake a cake for Dan on his birthday and baking actually serves as an outlet for her in the case. She tries to persuade herself that the cake is fine, but somehow, she just throws it away and bake another one. After she sees Dan spits on the cake (when he blows out the candles), she breaks down. No matter how hard she tries to do something, her “obligations” (Dan and Richie) will be there to “ruin” it. So, she leaves home eventually, which is another extreme radical decision she makes in her life other than committing suicide.

ii. Reasons for causing the disease and behavior in Clarissa Vaughn

Clarissa Vaughn (Meryl Streep) has developed a rather stable and familiar routine. although she is considered to have an outsider societal status, she is still not happy with her life. “Oh, Mrs. Dalloway, always giving parties to cover the silence”, her ex, Richard (who is Laura’s son Richie), indicates that she is trying to hide her anxiousness and become a typical “society wife. Clarissa feels alienated from the domesticity of the environment from time to time. She feels dislocated from the places that originally should bring her comfort and satisfaction. She seems to be questioning herself whether she has made the right decision by making such safe choices.

iii. Reasons for causing the disease and behavior in Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) has a history of confinement. She was brought to Richmond because she has a history of moods, fits, blackouts, hearing voices. She realizes her own condition and embraces the role of being a “mad writer.” She asks herself why she can’t be the kind of women who manage household and their lives

perfectly, just like her mother or her sister Vanessa. In fact, Virginia can't even manage her servants well enough even though she knows exactly how to.

She's going to die, that's what's going to happen.

She'll kill herself over something that doesn't seem to matter.

Virginia is very sensitive. All of her senses seem to be magnified when it comes to life.

Virginia's awareness of the environment makes her think about her own existence repetitively. This sensitivity did make her a successful author, but it also brings her pain and make her over-react or give radical response. Hearing voices, trying to seek death, and the sudden kiss with her sister can all be seen as signs of the manic. Writing, is her creative outlet. It is a way to channel her energy and diverse emotions, it is her escape from reality. Yet, instead of describing her works as stories under her control, it is rather something that happens to her. Virginia sees the world in a profound way that the feelings of madness haunt her all along.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath is insecure in her surroundings; she grapples between life and death. Virginia Woolf is tired of her suburb life, which makes her feel exiled; she struggles against insanity. Clarissa Vaughn's friend, Richard, commits suicide in front of her; she fights her fear of mortality. Laura Brown is not satisfied by just being a housewife; she struggles between obligation and being her true self. All women in the two films have stories and that they all have demons to cope with. Moving back to the two renowned female writers of all time, Plath and Woolf, there are many comments and criticisms about their mental disorders. In fact, there are researches that points out creativity is

somehow related to psychopathology, especially in female creators, which also causes the increasing risk for having suicidal attempts.

Marital discord and the death of Plath's father are Plath's stressors and eventually brought her longing for recognition. She felt isolated and being inward and decided to put all her energy into writing. Her works give out her intense and deep feelings. On the other hand, Woolf actually had a family history of mental illness that indicate a biological component that led to her outbreak. Nevertheless, trauma also serves as a manifestation of manic-depressive disorder other than genetic components. Woolf went through some unpleasant experiences when she was younger, such as, the death of her mother and sexual abuse.

In fact, there are researches done in 2 ways. Prentky (2001) implied that cognition patterns (templates when humans meet something or cope with something) associated with creativity also bring biological influences to an individual. In addition, personality is another factor that connects creativity with psychopathology (Chavez-Eakle, Lara, & CruzFuentes, 2006). In this research, creatively successful participants were being analyzed for psychopathology. On the other hand, the other research was conducted in the opposite way. Participants with the disorders were being analyzed for creativity. The results pointed out that the milder the orientation or symptoms of affective disorders, the more creative an individual, implying that more severe mental disorders may restrain one's creative potential (Richards et al., 1988).

Even though people cannot determine what actually evokes to connect creativity with psychopathology, the connection between the two is clearly obvious and that creative professions possess a higher rate of mental disorders (Ludwig, 1992). Among

them, writing professions, especially poets, tend to have a greater risk of mental disorders. Kaufman (2005) pointed out that poetic writing doesn't provide therapeutic benefits as other forms of writing since it lacks formal narratives and it is fragmental.

To conclude, even though there are no specific and clear rules of how the mechanism works in between creativity and psychopathology, yet it is very clear that the two are linked together firmly. The two films show how the "celebrity" women are depicted in the media world. What the audience see may be one-sided or fragmented, they may think that women are just over-reacting; nevertheless, the films did not reveal what happened in the past, during their childhood or their family. The films also present women's self-expression before feminism aroused, moreover, to raise people's awareness of the disease since many people have misunderstandings between Depression and Bipolar Disease.

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