

The Chicken and The Egg of the Sylvia Plath Effect

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Introduction

Sylvia Plath was a famous poet known for her astounding command of the English language and her autobiographical prose. Born in Boston, Plath studied English at Smith College and Newnham College in England. She was the first poet to receive a Pulitzer Prize posthumously. Plath suffered greatly from depression, undergoing several in-patient stays, electroshock therapy, and multiple suicide attempts throughout her life. She was married to fellow poet Ted Hughes, with whom she had two children. Unfortunately, she took her own life in 1963 at the age of thirty. Her work has since been often taught as a characterization of the depressed writer, despite it covering much broader topics than Plath's own mental health struggles.

The tortured artist is a widely known and accepted phenomenon, with examples such as Vincent Van Gogh and Kurt Cobain being tossed around as household names that prove the idea from different time periods and disciplines. However, there are nuances within this concept.

One such nuance, as detailed by James C. Kaufman (2001) in his analysis of a study on writers' mental health, is referred to as the Sylvia Plath effect, named after the late poet. The Sylvia Plath effect asserts that among all creative writers, female poets are more likely to suffer from depression than other writers. Kaufman's study tracked the prevalence of mental illness, lingering physical illness, and personal tragedy among male and female writers. The study also distinguished between writers of four different genres; fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and nonfiction writers. All of the surveys found that female poets are most likely to suffer from mental illnesses, most often depression.

Kaufman's paper has been controversial, with some readers claiming it reduces Plath to her mental health struggles and concerns that it may discourage young writers from pursuing poetic endeavours. This paper is in no way intended to speak for Kaufman or Plath, it simply acts as an exploration of Kaufman's research that has become associated with Plath's name. This paper also acknowledges that there are more than two genders, but writes about research primarily conducted with biologically male and biologically female individuals as the subjects.

While recognizing Plath's many accomplishments unrelated to her mental health state, this paper will explore the Sylvia Plath effect, specifically focusing on correlation versus causation. If there is a correlation between the two identities, which is the preceding incident? Do poets develop depression due to writing or are depressed individuals drawn to writing poetry?

Poetry Leading to Depression

When it comes to the idea of poetry causing depression, many arguments focus on the hardships that come with working within the poetry industry. Kaufman (2001) himself is quick to point out that even within the competitive world of creative writing for any genre, poetry has extremely high rates of rejection which can lower one's self-esteem leading to developing a negative self-image.

One paper, published by *The Academy of Management Learning & Education*, even states that rejection by publishers can lead the writer to feel their sense of identity is threatened (Day, 2011). This is corroborated by a study published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* that tracked trends in how one's narrative identity can affect their mental wellbeing (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The McAdams and Mclean (2013) study asserts that rejection of one's personal narrative by others can lead an individual's sense of meaning to be disrupted. What is referred to as "meaning making" in personal narratives is crucial to the mental health benefits that come with having an identity that one feels is agreed upon and accepted by others (McAdams & McLean, 2013). When one's writing is rejected, they can lose their sense of meaning since their narrative identity is not accepted by others.

Another interesting claim comes from the development of these narratives. As detailed in the McAdams and Mclean (2013) study, healthy development of personal narratives leads to improved mental wellbeing. It

is said that one mental health benefit of writing comes from the practice of forming narratives within writing (Pennebaker, 2000). In writing, a narrative is defined as having a beginning, middle, and end. Because poetry is often shorter than prose, it is less likely to contain a narrative (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006). This also means there is less opportunity for shifts in perspective or emotion, both of which are seen as improving mental health in writers (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001).

In several essays on the subject, social psychologist James Pennebaker (2001) asserts that writers have more practice in forming narratives that help them derive meaning out of difficult life events. A study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* states “even though [writers] may be burdened by their problems, their writing seems to represent an important way of unburdening themselves. By imposing a narrative structure on their experiences, many writers seem able to satisfy their needs for communication and to establish order in their otherwise chaotic emotional world” (Ludwig, 1994, p. 1654). However, as stated, due to the nature of the artform, poets are less likely to develop narratives in their work than other writers, meaning they do not reap the same potential benefits as fiction writers, playwrights, or nonfiction writers. Kaufman and Sexton (2006) speculate that “perhaps drudging up personal and emotional topics without putting a [narrative] order to them can cause an inner sense of confusion and frustration in a writer’s emotional life” (p. 277).

Additionally, the specific words used in writing can have an effect on mental health. A study by Stirman and Pennebaker (2001) analyzed 300 poems from nine suicidal poets and nine non suicidal poets from different time periods to discern if there were any trends in diction that could differentiate between the two. It was discovered that those who use first person plural (we, us), see more mental health benefits from their poetry than those who use first person singular (I, me), and are less likely to be suicidal (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001). The study concluded that suicidal poets view themselves as isolated and are less ingrained in society, stating that the first person plural pronouns that they lack are what indicate “an awareness of and an integration in social and personal relationships (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001, p. 521).

There are also many arguments for writing as a whole being an isolating and harrowing profession. By nature, writers are required to spend excess time in solitude. Additionally, they are often required to exaggerate their own sense of empathy for their work which can be damaging to one’s mental state if taken to extremes. A 2016 study by Bechtoldt & Schneider found that higher levels of Emotional Intelligence (EI) are associated with higher recognition of negative emotional cues in social instances, which may lead those with a high EI to retreat from or avoid social situations, further drawing them into isolation. The study also found that higher EI is associated with higher cortisol reactivity levels (Bechtoldt & Schneider, 2016). In other words, the more you are able to emotionally connect to others, the more likely you are to produce excess amounts of stress hormones. Because successful poetry often discusses complex emotions, it can be reasoned that writing poetry increases one’s EI level, leading to increased cortisol levels.

Depression Leading to Poetry

However, many of these points could also be used on the other side. Although writing necessitates individuals spend large quantities of time alone, individuals with depression are often drawn to spending time alone, perhaps insinuating that individuals with depression become drawn to solitary activities, such as writing (APA, 2013).

An important addendum to the development of the original study by Kaufman (2001) that coined the Sylvia Plath effect is a consequent study that surveyed and interviewed women writers as well as non-writer matched controls. Among other things, the study revealed that female writers, of any genre, are more prone not only to depression, but mood disorders, panic attacks, generalized anxiety, and eating disorders (Ludwig, 1994). While this is a compelling discovery, it is likely attributed to the idea that women in general are more prone to mental disorders than men (Kaufman, 2001).

This gender disparity particularly in poets can be attributed to the concept of rumination, which is defined by the US National Library of Medicine as “a form of perseverative cognition that focuses on negative content, generally past and present, and results in emotional distress” (Sansone & Sansone, 2012; Garnefski, et al., 2004). A study published in *Personality and Individual Differences* sampled over 600 individuals to research emotional regulation strategies (Garnefski, et al., 2004). They discovered that women are more likely to use

rumination, catastrophizing, and positive refocusing. Additionally, those who utilized self-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing strategies were more likely to report higher rates of depression.

A separate study published in *Emotion* used path analysis methods to survey just under 100 college students in an attempt to decipher whether depression can be linked to creativity (Verhaeghen, et al., 2005). They found that there is no correlation between those who are depressed and those who are creative. However, there is a link between those who practice rumination, intentionally or otherwise, and those who are creative (Verhaeghen, et al., 2005). Creativity was both self-reported and objectively measured in this study, via surveys about the participants' creative interests as well as more objective methods, such as questions from the Abbreviated Torrance Test for Adults and the Purdue Creativity Test. This study also corroborated Garefski, et al.'s (2004) findings that rumination is linked to higher rates of depression.

One study measured the positive effects associated with writing and rumination, having half of the participants utilize "expressive writing" after ruminating, and the other half writing objectively about the subject they were ruminating about (Sloan, et al., 2008). Expressive writing is defined as "a technique that involves writing about thoughts and feelings that arise from a traumatic or stressful life experience" (Harvard Health). The study found that those who used expressive writing saw a decrease in depressive symptoms, while the control group saw no change (Sloan, et al. 2008). However, this cannot be generalized to all writing since "the formation of a narrative is a necessary precondition for expressive writing to have salutary effects" (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009, p. 30) and as discussed, poetry is less likely to have a narrative within it, meaning poets do not reap the same benefits from ruminative writing.

Because rumination is associated with higher rates of both creativity and depression, and is a more common emotional regulation method in women, it can be reasoned that female poets are more likely to implement it in their writing process, despite it not offering any emotional benefits. Kaufman & Kaufman (2009) speculate that rumination plays a prominent role specifically in the revision process, as writers must read and reread work that may be reflective of difficult situations within their own life. In addition to being more likely to utilize rumination, women are more likely than men to write about personal concepts as opposed to more abstract ones, meaning this rumination will often center around themselves rather than outside forces (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009). It is also stated that rumination about oneself specifically leads to decreased problem-solving abilities and increased rates of depression, further suggesting that this becomes a deadly combination raising the risk of suicide (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009).

There are certain general traits that creative people are more prone to than non-creatives, including openness to experience, impulsivity, emotional sensitivity, and aloofness (Kaufman, 2001). It's important to note that even on a larger scale than poetry, creativity in general is not associated with higher mortality rates, but creative occupations are (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009). Additionally, any claim that writers are more prone to certain experiences than others must take into account the fact that writers are more likely to have a large platform as well as the mental tools, such as an expansive vocabulary, with which to convey their experiences due to the nature of the profession. It is additionally possible that creative fields tend to have less stigma surrounding mental illness which would lead those with existing mental health conditions to be drawn to such fields. Ludwig (1994) asserts that this lack of stigma leads writers to feel more comfortable admitting to emotional difficulties as opposed to those in other professions.

There is also significant evidence for depression hindering creativity. Psychiatrist Albert Rothenberg's (1994) work centers around proving that creative endeavours cannot lead to the development of mental illnesses because mental illnesses themselves disrupt cognitive and emotional processes necessary to expressing creativity. Rothenberg (1994) also states that creative individuals produce better work when in treatment for their mental illnesses.

This has been highly debated throughout history even as specifically as among Boston born poets, such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. Lowell, a poet who suffered from bipolar disorder believed that he was actually more creative after being medicated with lithium (Hamilton, 1982). Psychiatrist Mogens Schou (2018) conducted a study to investigate lithium in particular, studying a group of test subjects that consisted of writers, composers, and painters who were suffering from bipolar disorder. He found that around half of the subjects saw an increase in creativity after taking lithium, with the rest split evenly between seeing no change, and

seeing a decrease (Schou, 2018).

However, treatment improving creativity is not always the case. The titular Sylvia Plath was vocal in how she felt about her treatment, especially regarding her experience with electroconvulsive therapy, (ECT). ECT is the practice of intentionally inducing seizures in a patient via small electric shocks. It is believed to alter brain chemistry and relieve the patient of symptoms associated with their mental illness (Mayo Clinic, 2018). While many scholars have argued that additional ECT could have saved Plath's life, her viewpoint on how it affected her creativity may have differed. In *The Bell Jar*, a fictional novel by Plath that dramatically mirrors her own life, after undergoing her first round of ECT, the main character, who is often thought to represent Plath, states "I felt dumb and subdued. Every time I tried to concentrate, my mind glided off, like a skater, into a large empty space, and pirouetted there, absently" (1963, p. 145).

When it comes to Plath specifically, many scholars have published differing opinions on both how her depression affected her work and how other aspects of her life affected her depression. One commonly held belief is that her marriage to Ted Hughes contributed greatly to her depression and hindered her work. Plath confided in friends and therapists that Hughes was abusive towards her (Kean, 2017). Following Plath's discovery of Hughes' infidelity in July of 1962, Plath arguably experienced an increase in creativity, writing twenty-six of the twenty-eight poems originally published in her final collection, *Ariel* (Poetry Archive, 2019). It is unclear whether Plath was experiencing symptoms of depression during this time. Despite keeping a detailed journal, only two of Plath's entries from July of 1962 remain as Hughes burned Plath's final journal (Plath, 2000). Both remaining entries are about the death of her neighbor, Percy Key. Key's death inspired several poems by Plath, with her stating "Percy Key is dead...I have written a long poem 'Berck-Plage' about it. Very moved" (Plath, 2000, p. 671).

Some scholars argue Plath's separation from Hughes in September of 1962 may have briefly dulled her symptoms as she and her children transitioned out of an abusive environment (Edmund, 2018). However, letters have revealed that just a few months later Plath experienced severe depressive symptoms, including a lack of sleep and extreme weight loss (Cooper, 2003). The remaining two poems in *Ariel*, in addition to fifteen not originally included, but later added to the collection, were written during this period of hardship and depression in Plath's life during the winter of 1962-1963 prior to her passing in February of 1963 (Chiasson, 2018). The prolific work completed by Plath during these periods of hardship implies that her depression did not in fact hinder her creativity levels.

In fact, many poets write their best work immediately prior to suicide (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009). Speculation about the cause of this has arisen, especially surrounding the revision process. Does writing without revision foster impulsiveness and mental instability that leads to suicide or is the lack of revision itself a result of heightened levels of depression?

There is an additional facet regarding treatment's effects on creativity that is specific to poets. The average age of onset for depression and the average peak of a poet's career both occur in one's twenties (Loranger & Levine, 1972; Simonton, 1975). It can be surmised that once depression is diagnosed and one begins treatment, their productivity when it comes to writing poetry also decreases due to said treatment, leading so many poets to peak in their twenties. However, this correlation has not yet been proven.

Aside from studying the rates of mental illness, Kaufman's 2001 study also tracked what he defined as "personal tragedy" among writers of different genders and genres. Again, female poets topped the list, being the most likely to have experienced personal tragedy within their lives. Ludwig's (1994) later, more specific study found that female writers are more likely to have experienced some form of abuse during childhood than non-writers. This clarification implies that tragedy leads to writing rather than the other way around, since it is likely that in most cases the childhood abuse occurred before the individual took up writing.

Verdict

It's important to note that tragedy can be a pre-determining factor for many mental disorders. While not all individuals who experience tragic events will develop mental disorders, they can become more prone to do such without any guarantee one way or the other (Ludwig, 1994). Because Kaufman's (2001) study does not establish when the "personal tragedy" occurred it cannot be determined whether the tragedy led to poetry or

vice versa. However, Ludwig's study only accounts for tragedy occurring before the age of thirteen and yields the same results of writers being more likely to have experienced tragedy. Thus, by combining Kaufman's (2001) specificity regarding genre and Ludwig's (1994) specificity regarding age, it can be assumed that tragedy is what leads to both depression and poetry. According to both Kaufman (2001) and Ludwig (1994), those who undergo traumatic events are more likely to become poets, likely for the emotional release it provides, but separately are also more likely to develop depression due to the tragedy they endured.

This clears the moral question of whether writers should be discouraged from pursuing poetry as it proves that while writing poetry may exacerbate negative emotions by indulging in them, it cannot cause an otherwise mentally sound individual to develop depression.

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