

<http://www.yaledailynews.com/news/university-news/2006/04/20/panel-discusses-link-between-art-insanity/>

It is typically accepted that Tolstoy, Van Gogh, and Nietzsche were all brilliant thinkers, but their other common link is less well known:

They all suffered from some form of mental illness.

A diverse panel of speakers addressed the connection between creative genius and psychopathology

Wednesday night at a discussion sponsored by Mind Matters, an undergraduate mental health organization.

The panelists spoke to a crowd of about 75 students and other Yale affiliates in William L. Harkness Hall.

Harvard psychology professor Shelley Carson and Rider

University psychology professor John Baer offered scientific explanations for the experiences shared by fellow panelists, such as art therapist Martha Hessler and artist George Moore a recovered drug addict and one of Hessler's patients.

Carson said there has been anecdotal evidence of a link between creativity and madness since the time of Plato and Aristotle.

In Plato's "Phaedrus," the Greek philosopher posited that artists were bestowed with a divine madness, and Aristotle was the first to connect creativity with depression, Carson said.

"There are specific types of psychopathology associated with creativity, usually mood disorders, psychosis-proneness and all sorts of subclinical, eccentric and odd behaviors,

as well as drug and alcohol abuse,” Carson said. Carson said the theory she finds most plausible to explain this connection is that psychopathology and creativity share certain genetic components, and one or the other is expressed based on other genetic factors. One such genetic component common to both creative individuals and those suffering from mental illness is latent inhibition, Carson said. LI is a cognitive mechanism that allows people to filter out irrelevant stimulants, and studies suggest that those prone to psychosis have reduced abilities to repress irrelevant information, she said. Creative people also have a high tendency to have attenuated LI, Carson said, but their relatively high intelligence keeps them from exhibiting psychopathologic behavior. “Highly creative people tend to almost exclusively have low latent inhibition, and furthermore the combination of a very high IQ and a low LI is a highly significant predictor of creative achievement,” Carson said. “Reduced latent inhibition allows the individual to access a large amount of sensory and internally-generated stimuli, but their high IQ would allow the person to process this additional information without being overwhelmed.”

But Hessler argued that the link between creativity and mental illness is less explicit than Carson suggests, though she does believe there is some connection.

“I used to work in patient psychiatry at Yale-New Haven and saw many Yale students as patients,” she said.

“One young man, a Yale student, told me he was an artist and that he had to be psychotic to be an artist.

I struggle with the idea of the difference between the two.”

Moore, Hessler’s patients, said he began creating art while being treated for drug addiction and mental illness, and he credits substance abuse with motivating his artistic production.

Baer said there is a more pronounced correlation between creativity and mental illness in women, specifically in female poets, citing Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf as examples. There is also a connection between an artist’s measure of success and her likelihood of exhibiting signs of psychopathology, he said.

“We know that for successful writers to be creative, they need to defy the crowd and ignore extrinsic constraints,” Baer said. “Once you become famous, though, it’s harder to do this. Successful artists bring a lot of stress upon themselves to be creative. Therefore, this increasing level of stress may be why they have greater incidents of mental illness.”