



## Art and Ruin: A Glimpse into the Darker Pasts of Brighter Futures

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to delve into the lives of artists associated with mediums of art across the board and to primarily assess their struggles with mental health as we do so. The purpose of this research paper is to possibly shed light on how the intimate struggles of their lives played a role in their creative processes that led to their widespread recognition and admiration while also hoping to extract a correlation, if it exists, between them and the scores of others that have gone through similar or worse adversities, and yet struggle to not only excel, but also exercise average participation in their societal lives. As trifling an endeavor as this may be, the best we can hope to achieve through the research conducted here is to conceive a narrower and more definite perspective on how an individual can better understand and overcome the terrors of their mind that hinder their daily life, and to come out stronger as they either embrace them as a part of themselves, or eradicate them entirely.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The study of art has been a vast form of occupation for people from all cultures and backgrounds around the world and the practice of which has been associated with a learned or intellectual individual. The earliest forms of art were dated to be found from about 30,000 years ago which happens to be the European cave paintings, and throughout centuries have been preserved, admired and conversed about by a fairly substantial community that flourishes to this day. The fact is however that the general populace is not as exposed to the details of the lives lived by great artists as opposed to their art, and while this is understandable, it has also been proven that learning about the progenitor of the art medium they are consuming helps the public appreciate that particular form of art better as they are made aware of the context which give them a deeper understanding of the artistic minds that conceived their art. We will be focusing on the collective geniuses that were able to transform their pain into

art, or were able to produce art in spite of their suffering, some of whom were awarded posthumous recognition and widespread admiration, which at some point could be argued to have become an aesthetic in and of itself, but that would be a research paper of its own for another time.

#### Van Gogh



It would be only fair to start with the most popular 19<sup>th</sup> century artist, who was unfortunately recognized for his humble genius following his untimely demise, Vincent Willem Van Gogh. Van Gogh is arguably the most well-known “tortured artist”, for lack of a better term, in our current time. Critically acclaimed for one of the most well-known paintings of the post-impressionist era, *The Starry Night*, Van Gogh is an artist who is more or less known to have been mentally distressed. The mere fact that *The Starry Night* was painted by Van Gogh as he looked out of the window of an asylum should speak volumes about how disturbed Van Gogh's mind was.

The famous painter in his early life was convinced to have found his calling as a true servant of God and had begun working for the church as a result. Following this however he was let go by the church as it did not agree with his methods of charity which included giving away almost the entirety of his material possessions and consequently living in squalor. This is ironic



considering that this mode of servitude to God was more or less closer to the practices of the true teachings of Christ than the church at the time was. This shift of current in his life is what led him to make up his mind to follow what he thought was his true passion in life, painting. Even at these early stages, Vincent was battling his inner demons that so torment many a people today as well, emotions such as self-doubt and depression and even loneliness. Van Gogh is known to have once written in one of his letters to his dear brother Theo, "If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint', then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced", but even as this was handwritten by him to his brother, it may be argued that it was that very voice, that expressed a range of negative emotions to this man that fueled his creativity and shaped his worldview, that ultimately drove him to wind down a spiral of despair as he churned out the masterpieces that we so admire today. To further solidify this theory we can shed light on another quote written by Vincent to his brother while he was in the Saint-Rémy asylum in 1889, "I put my heart and soul into my work, and I have lost my mind in the process." To add to his we can also draw attention to his earlier darker tones that were considered to be closest to his sense of self as opposed to his later works that were produced with the intention of replicating works that were popular and selling at the time and were heavily inspired, although even these works, upon closer observation to the use of colors, had evident glimpses of the chaos that welled within him.

There is one major episode from Vincent's life to be mentioned in passing that can lay out a clearer picture of how his mental health declined throughout the years. Vincent had at one point invited his close companion Paul Gauguin to stay with him at his residence at Arles in southern France. The two were very fond of each other initially as they grew closer to each other but throughout the years after they had started living together their relationship had begun deteriorating and in their final encounter Van Gogh had purportedly threatened Paul with a razor blade before he cut off his own ear which he later bequeathed to a woman named Rachael who was employed at a nearby brothel. This turn of events caused him to be institutionalized. Ultimately Vincent shot himself in the chest and died three days later in his brother's arms with his final words being "The sadness will last forever."

#### **Analysis:**

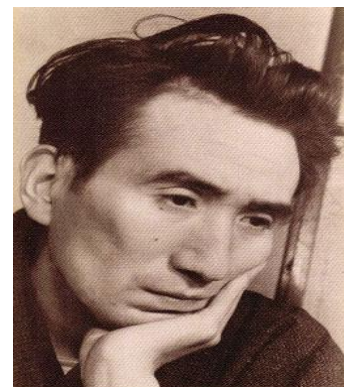
The major portions of Vincent Van Gogh's life has been recounted here to represent a highly recognized figure whose internal shortcomings set him on the path that would lead to his overwhelming success, although posthumous, and to his becoming a staple in the art community in the following centuries and Vincent possibly will remain as such for a long time to come. The aforementioned shortcomings however can be attributed to his external environment that gave way to his depression and loneliness and self-deprecation, all of which we can say with near certainty played a role in his art.

It is widely hypothesized that for an artist to excel in their artistry, they must broaden their horizons and have an open-mind in consequence of which they might manifest thought patterns and visualize ideas that the average person may never consider throughout their entire lives. This opens the door to intense trains of thought that can result in experiencing mental breakdowns and existential crises that they may never recover from or do so too late.

To obtain more concise results we will now look into a very well respected author hailing from an entirely different setting, one of a higher quality of life, who chose to walk down the grisly path of misery regardless.

#### **Dazai Osamu**

Shuji Tsushima, more popularly known by his pseudonym, Dazai Osamu, was a Japanese author in the early 1900s whose works are still revered in Japan and whose final novel, *No Longer Human*, which is considered to be



one of his most harrowing works, is still one of the most popular novels of the country. Dazai Osamu was born in a city called Mitaka in Japan and into a wealthy family of landowners, which perturbed him as was later discovered. Despite coming from a high-class family, Dazai Osamu loathed his background for that very reason and disagreed with



their practices that mainly involved lending money to farmers as they seized the farmers' properties if the money was not returned. Owing to him loathing his being a part of a family that was well-to-do but expedient, he took to reading to soothe this anguish he felt and to hopefully come to terms with his reality. By the time he was 16 Dazai Osamu made up his mind to become an author while being influenced by one of Japan's most prominent authors yet, Akutagawa Ryunosuke, who himself had committed suicide at the age of only 35. This event alone was so shattering to Dazai Osamu that he no sooner than the incident dove right into debaucheries that included abusing drugs, alcoholism and womanizing. This alone is a testament to how vulnerable the human mind is if it wholeheartedly reveres a very specific entity in or out of their lives and a testament especially to the vulnerability of Dazai Osamu's mind. Reading is known for illuminating one's mind, broadening our perspectives and making us aware of the 'why' of a lot of things around us but all of this knowledge comes with potential negative subtexts that hinder the positive nourishment of the human mind and soul, young and old. In Dazai Osamu's case it is possible he at some point consumed such forms of content but ultimately he himself published works that could be classified under the kind of content that has just been described. This comes as no surprise as shortly following the commencement of his profligacies, Dazai Osamu attempted a double suicide with a woman, an incident in which Dazai Osamu survived and the woman, unfortunately, did not. Prior to this he had also been disowned by his family in consequence of him living together with a geisha while he was still a university student. It is safe to assume that the death of his idol author only pushed him off the edge.

Following that incident however Dazai Osamu, at the age of 26, in order to flee his cycle of self-hatred that was leading him nowhere, he dedicated himself to following his passion of becoming an author. After discovering an insignificant amount of success in this goal, Dazai Osamu once again plunged into misery until he decided return home where he found peace and a fresh perspective and a more pleasant idea of things to come. This moment of clarity did not last very either unfortunately for following that he decided to deliberately live a life of despair and anguish to better comprehend the human soul. In this quest, Dazai Osamu, on account of his overwhelming triumph in his field, was hugely successful. It is also worth noting that fans of Dazai Osamu's are

known to have stated that they especially admire his novels because they find solace in his words and feel like they share the despair or loneliness they feel with someone other than themselves and by extension thousands of others that have passionately consumed his works. They see themselves in Dazai Osamu for all of the negative emotions welling up inside of them and this very fact should motivate a person to give credit to Dazai Osamu for putting into words everything he learned about the pains of the human soul that it so reverberated throughout an entire country and beyond for nearly five decades following his demise.

#### **Analysis:**

Dazai Osamu's life was not particularly one of hardships with the exception of outside forces acting on him as a result of his attachment to said forces. Albeit facing dire circumstances at various points in his life Dazai Osamu in his later years very evidently channeled his pain and suffering toward his creative process and wrote everything he was feeling. He embraced his anguish and despair so he can truly understand them and materialize them in his books, something few artists can achieve. Most were simply products of their environment, almost never daring to distort that environment in pursuit of greater artistic depth. For all intents and purposes this does not imply that pain is a prerequisite to achieving excellence in the arts but that negative emotions have more often than not played a part in an artist's creations. Dazai Osamu himself attempted suicide four times, that we know of today, before he tragically succeeded in his final attempt.

#### **The Tortured Artist Hypothesis**



The Tortured Artist Hypothesis in a nutshell states that a person's suffering and their inner turmoil can drive their creative expression. This hypothesis mainly raises

the question of whether the relationship between the negative psyche of a person and their art is one of correlation or causality. While it is unlikely that



mental turmoil always breeds art, we cannot completely overrule that possibility since there exists studies that have shown that having a psychological condition can draw a person's interests toward more creative fields. The reason for this is that their condition may either induce in that person the need for an outlet or skew their worldview such that it remarkably contrasts the perspective of an average person.

Integrating this theory with the concept of affective management, which refers to a person's emotional response to performing tasks, can help us paint a more concise picture of how a person's feelings toward the action they want to, or think they have to, perform affects the end result of that action. We can best describe this with a quote by the famed author Jose Saramago, "Chaos is order yet undeciphered." This essentially implies that as a means to achieving order you must observe the existing chaos intelligently so as to restructure it to shape your desired result. Artists have inadvertently taken this very path of uncertainty that was paved by their disoriented thoughts and mental crises throughout their lives as they pursued their art.

These hypotheses must not be misinterpreted to mean that personal suffering is essential to the creative process of making good art. The sole purpose of the research is only to study the correlation in order to understand the effects of intense negative emotions on the refinement of one's skills. An enormous amount of artists have struggled with mental health some of who are well-known for it even, but there are also a handful whose struggles don't define their art but whose stellar works manifested in spite of what they went through in life. Many people argue this to be the case for Van Gogh in accordance with some of his letters to this brother highlighting optimism and all the beauty in the world. To appropriately highlight this we can recount and analyze the life of a renowned poet and novelist whose works are considered highly impactful and influential and that have stood strong in the test of time.

### **Sylvia Plath**



Sylvia Plath, a renowned novelist and poet, serves as prime example of artists who have been recognized as 'tortured artists' by people with only a surface-level understanding of every single one of their lives

and work. These are the foundations that breed dangerous tropes that spread false ideas that iterate the notion that inner turmoil is guaranteed to generate an influx of creative ideas and inspiration and could potentially lead other aspiring artists down a darker path that will lead only to their ruin.

In her early life Sylvia Plath was known for being precocious and exhibited encouraging signs of intellectual ability and ambition and was already writing poetry and also had her first poem publish in the Boston Herald when she was only eight years old shortly after her father had passed away. This is seen as the impetus that began her writing journey during a period where she was experiencing profound personal loss as her father had an enormous influence in her personal life which planted the seed in Sylvia that eventually blossomed into a fascination with the natural world. There is also some conflict as her father was also a strict and distant figure, an uncertainty that she later explores in her later work. Following her father's passing away Sylvia began showing signs of what would become an indication of her lifelong struggle with her mental health. As she continued performing exceptionally and writing prolifically, as was true to her character, this soon enough became coupled with an endless pursuit of perfection in every endeavor she undertook. This internal struggle she experienced in her youth created a rift between her achievements as a writer and her inner emotions. Sylvia Plath's hardship tragically did not end here as when she was 23 years old she fell in love with and married another notable author, Ted Hughes. This relationship which turned simply went downhill no sooner than it began which came to a close following Ted Hughes' affair with Assia Wevill who had been subletting their flat. Plath's psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Barnhouse, later brought to light another harrowing fact that Sylvia had allegedly stated that Ted Hughes had been psychologically and physically abusive in the later years of their relationship.

Taking all her struggles into account that followed her from youth into adulthood led people to label her as a 'tortured artist' which becomes a problem as it disregards who she was as a person. Sylvia Plath was driven and ambitious since she was a child and her external issues, while they affected her, never influenced her art of skillful writing. Her process was too refined and disciplined to maneuver anyone into hypothesizing that her personal suffering fueled her art when the fact of the matter is that she prospered and triumphed in her art regardless of how she was affected by the tragic events that transpired in her life. Sylvia Plath's life





and achievements emphasize the inherent issues in propagating the tortured artist trope that could have potentially overshadowed her deliberate craft – one that masterfully incorporates her own skill along with what she absorbed from her literary influences.

#### **Analysis:**

Sylvia Plath's case with respect to this research is an open and shut case of a flourishing talent whose growth was stunted by tragedies in life that commonly affect one too many in this world. In her unabridged journals Sylvia Plath talks about her mental health crises a fair amount none of which played a role in her art but did the very opposite and only discouraged her literary talents.

#### **The 27 Club Phenomenon**

The 27 club phenomenon is a supposed myth that proposes the notion that big rock-stars and musical artists are more likely to die by the age of 27. While this theory is not true in any case it gives us reason to consider a theory that presents itself on the other side of this coin. As stated in a research conducted at the Indiana University, "While the legend states that famous persons are more likely to die at 27, in actuality dying at 27 makes a person more famous than they would have been otherwise." It is a simple theory that posits that already famous people receive increased widespread attention and appreciation following their early demise. It is a phenomenon worth studying and provides insight into how society works.

Analyzing, interpreting and popularizing people's works posthumously can almost be seen as an aesthetic at this point in time. Although calling it an aesthetic might be a reach since the majority of those people's works have shown real talent and skill, there also is a vast amount of examples that follow this pattern, namely, Edgar Allan Poe, Fernando Pessoa, Johann Sebastian Bach, Emily Dickinson etc. All of this only goes to show the extent people will go to in order to preserve and admire what they deem as art, a concept that already is a broad spectrum and exists at the height of subjectivity.

## **II. Conclusion**

Upon examining this research paper with the benefit of hindsight we can postulate that there exists a significant likelihood that mental health, fragile or sound, has an almost direct correlation to the creative process of one's art. Admiration of

artists from earlier times has almost become an aesthetic that can not only have been shaped through their art itself but as a product of other intersecting factors such as public perception, studies into their lives, and certain drastic changes in what the general public would categorize as art.

People's environment or an inherent passion they develop might contribute to the path they choose to either do what they love or do what they need to do to survive. Often times great artists had to choose between the two and by consequence of their decision have excelled incredibly and have accomplished to create much that has withstood the test of time. The handful of artists whose lives we delved into prospered in their field either owing to their state of mind or in spite of. Regardless of the correlation it is safe to regard that the possibility surely exists and it is most definitely worth looking into much further so as to shape a more tangible future for those that want to follow their passion into the arts and perhaps prosper like many before them have.

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