The Door That Leads Into Madness:
Eastern European Poets and Mental Illness

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The courage of the poet is to keep ajar the door that leads into madness. (Christopher Morley)

The image of the poet as a doomed, lonely, depressed figure is a persistent archetype in our culture. Poets themselves may not appreciate such associations—former U. S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins, for example, argues “the assumed association of poets with mental disorders and depression is a romantic holdover” (quoted in Levin, 2003), and writer Carol Muske-Dukes has said, “The way poets write has nothing to do with their health” (quoted in Murillo, 2004). Yet a multitude of research studies have demonstrated some type of association between mental illness and creativity, even if there is still much debate over the extent and nature of this relationship (e.g., Jamison, 1993; Rothenberg, 1990; Waddell, 1998).

Some studies have further specified a link between creative writing and mental illness. Andreasen (1987) explored this relationship by comparing writers with a control group and found that not only were writers more likely to suffer from affective disorders (specifically bipolar disorder) but so were the writers’ first-degree relatives. Ludwig (1994) studied 59 female writers and 59 matched controls. He found that the writers were more likely to have mental illness, including mood disorders and general anxieties.

Ludwig (1995) also conducted a separate large-scale investigation of over 1,000 eminent individuals who were the subjects of major biographies written between 1960 and 1990. He found a higher incidence of mental illness among those in artistic professions (e.g., writing, art, and theater) than in nonartistic professions (e.g., business, politics, and science). Jamison (1989) studied British artists and writers and found that a significantly higher percentage of them suffered from some form of mental illness than would be expected from the rates found in the general population, with affective disorders again especially prevalent. Post (1994, 1996) studied and diagnosed eminent men and found higher rates of personality disorders and depression (1994) and mental pathology (1996) in writers.

Other research has focused on what kind of writing may be most linked to mental illness. Many studies have specifically found that poets may be at a higher risk. In Ludwig’s (1995) large-scale study, he found poets to have among the highest rates of psychosis and depression of all of the many different professions studied (ranging from business to art). Jamison’s (1989) study found that poets had the highest rate of bipolar disorder of the writers studied. Jamison (1993) also specifically studied a sample of eighteenth century British poets and found their suicide rates to be far higher than expected from the national rates; Martindale (1972), in a similar vein, found higher rates of psychosis and pathology in a sample of eminent poets than expected. Post (1994) found mixed results for poets: they were more likely to have bipolar disorders, but less likely to have affective and personality disorders than fiction writers and playwrights.

Kaufman (2001) found that female poets were significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness than other types of women writers (fiction writers, playwrights, etc.).

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playwrights, and nonfiction writers), male writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and nonfiction writers), and other eminent women (journalists, politicians, actresses, and visual artists). In addition, Kaufman found that male nonfiction writers were significantly less likely to have experienced a personal tragedy, although no significant differences were found for physical illness.

Attempts to replicate these findings across different cultures have been less successful, in part because it is harder to find reported evidence of mental illness in biographies of eminent authors. Oral, Kaufman, and Sexton (2004) studied Turkish writers and found individual differences on such variables as receiving awards—but there was not enough information to study mental illness. Niu and Kaufman (in press) found that female Chinese writers (particularly poets and fiction writers) were more likely to have experienced a personal tragedy than male writers. They found no significant differences across types of writing in mental illness, perhaps because of very few reported instances. In addition, they found no differences in physical illness and political persecution. For both studies, the reference works often did not discuss a writer’s personal life.

The goal of this article is to examine the same four variables that have been studied in these earlier investigations (mental illness, physical illness, personal tragedy, and political persecution) in a different culture. A sample of eminent Eastern European writers was chosen in part because it is an understudied population in this area; nearly all previous work on creativity and mental illness focus either on traditional Western culture (particularly British and American) or traditional Eastern culture (particularly Chinese). The few papers that do exist tend to be case studies (e.g., Hardi, 1997) or from psychiatric perspectives (e.g., Saarinen, 2003).

Methods and Materials

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of Eastern European Literature was used as a biographical source (Pynsent & Kanikova, 1993). The earliest inclusion was a writer born in 390. Writers from the following countries (some of which are no longer unique countries) were considered to be Eastern European, as per the source’s standards and definitions: Albania, Bulgaria, Byelorusia, Croatia, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sorbia, and the Ukraine.

This encyclopedia was chosen for several reasons, primary among them its status as the first comprehensive reference work on Eastern European writers. The Encyclopedia Britannica, for example, includes this reference as its sole recommendation for further reading about authors from the Czech Republic (Czech Republic, 2004). Other reasons included its inclusion of extensive biographical detail, and that it was written in English. The use of an encyclopedia as a general data source is often used in historiometric research (Simonton, 2003).

Inclusion in the book was based purely on literary merits—a writer’s life details might determine the

| Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Mental Illness, Physical Illness, Personal Tragedy, and Political Persecution for Four Groups of Writers |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Variables                  | Total Writers   | Fiction Writers | Poets           | Playwrights     | Nonfiction      |
|                            | \(N = 826\)     | \(n = 251\)     | \(n = 396\)     | \(n = 59\)      | \(n = 120\)     |
| Mental illness             | 0.08 0.27       | 0.04 0.19       | 0.12 0.32       | 0.05 0.22       | 0.03 0.18       |
| Physical illness           | 0.08 0.27       | 0.05 0.22       | 0.10 0.29       | 0.10 0.30       | 0.05 0.22       |
| Personal tragedy           | 0.11 0.31       | 0.10 0.31       | 0.14 0.34       | 0.07 0.25       | 0.06 0.24       |
| Political persecution      | 0.19 0.39       | 0.19 0.39       | 0.20 0.40       | 0.15 0.36       | 0.18 0.38       |
length of the entry, but not whether he or she entered the book. Four different types of writer were included in the book: fiction writers (of both novels and short stories), poets, playwrights, and nonfiction writers. The breakdown was as follows: 251 fiction writers, 396 poets, 59 playwrights, and 120 nonfiction writers, for a total of 826 writers. Only 56 women were included, making a specific comparison for writer type by gender difficult (e.g., there were only three female nonfiction writers included in the entire volume). The likely reason for the predominance of men is the wide scope of the time frame studied; the earliest writer included was born in 390 and the most recent was born in 1957. Throughout history, literature has long been one of the few areas where women could have any type of steady success (Simonton, 1994), but even this level of success has been severely limited (Spender, 1993).

Four other variables were entered in addition to gender and writer type: mental illness, physical illness, experiencing a significant personal tragedy in one’s life (e.g., losing a child or having parents who died early in one’s life), and being the victim of political persecution (e.g., being sent to prison or exiled solely for political reasons). These items were scored as dichotomous 0 to 1 variables. A breakdown of the results for each of these variables for the different types of writers can be seen in Table 1.

### Results

How was writer type affected by mental illness, physical illness, personal tragedy, or political persecution? Logistic regression was chosen as the appropriate analysis, because this statistical test uses multiple regression techniques as applied to dichotomous variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). Logistic regression was performed on all four variables (mental illness, physical illness, personal tragedy, and political persecution) using the Quasi-Newton estimation method to assess differences among fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and nonfiction writers.

No significant results were found for political persecution, personal tragedy, or physical illness, but mental illness showed significant differences. Poets were more likely to be mentally ill and fiction writers were less likely. The final loss was 212.45, with –2 Log Likelihood of 424.91. The Chi-Square fit was 20.41 (3), \( p < .01 \). The logits can be seen in Table 2.

A univariate ANOVA was conducted for further examination of the mental illness variable. Mental illness was the dependent variable and the type of writer was the independent variable. The ANOVA was significant, \( F(3, 822) = 6.66, \ p < .01 \). Post hoc analyses using Tukey’s Least Significant Differences were conducted and poets were significantly (\( p < .01 \)) more likely to be mentally ill than both fiction writers and nonfiction writers. All other comparisons were not significant.

Further analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and mental illness, physical illness, personal tragedy, and political persecution across all types of writers. A Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted with gender serving as the independent variable and the four additional variables (mental illness, personal tragedy, physical illness, and political persecution) serving as the dependent variables.

The MANOVA was significant, Rao’s \( R (4, 821) = 8.59, \ p < .01 \). To further investigate the significant MANOVA, univariate ANOVAs were conducted separately for each of the other variables. Although mental illness, physical illness, and political persecution were not significant, personal tragedy was significant, \( F(1, 824) = 28.21, \ p < .01 \). Female Eastern European writers were more likely to have experienced a personal tragedy than male Eastern European writers.

### Discussion

This study replicates, in a non-Western culture, one of the main research findings on creative writing and mental illness. Poets were found to be more likely to suffer from mental illness than other types of writers (particularly fiction writers). This finding suggests that the body of research on poets may represent a universal phenomenon.

| Table 2. Logistic Regression Results for Mental Illness Across Four Types of Writers |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                       | Estimate        | Odds Ratio      |
| Fiction writers                       | –3.30           | 0.04            |
| Poets                                 | 1.30            | 3.65            |
| Playwrights                           | 0.37            | 1.45            |
| Nonfiction writers                    | –0.05           | 0.95            |

Note. Final loss: 212.45, \( \chi^2(3) = 20.41, \ p < .01 \).
Why might poets be more likely to be mentally ill? Many of the reasons that have been proposed in past studies (e.g., Kaufman & Baer, 2002) may apply to Eastern European poets (indeed, many American poets have strong roots in Eastern Europe). Poetry may appeal to people who are less able to choose functional coping strategies. Poetry tends to be more introspective, expressive, and emotional than other written work (e.g., Whalen, 2000). Subjective and emotional artistic areas have been found to be associated with mental instability (Ludwig, 1998). In addition, there are strong associations between rumination and depression. People who suffer from depression are more likely to ruminate (and, perhaps, turn these ruminations into poetry), and such ruminations can further depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999). Conversely, there could be a third variable (e.g., a biological factor) that may lead to both a mental illness and to increased creative writing ability. There have been several studies that have suggested that such a relationship may underlie the connection between schizophrenia and creativity (Kinney, Richards, Lowing, LeBlanc, & Zimbalist, 2001; Richards & Kinney, 1990).

Another possibility is that poets do not benefit from the possible health benefits that are present in writing. Pennebaker (1997) has conducted a great deal of research on the association between writing about an emotional experience and improvements in physical and mental health. Yet it is not clear that writing poetry would have the same benefits as other kinds of writing. Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) found that the formation of a narrative was essential for mental and physical benefits. Many poems do not have narratives; most stories and plays do. In addition, participants who wrote for a longer and more intensive duration benefited more than participants who wrote for a shorter amount of time (Páez, Velasco, & González, 1999). Certainly, poems are traditionally shorter than fiction and other literary works (e.g., Guth, 1996). Does the difference in length translate to a difference in time spent writing? Perhaps poets write for a shorter duration than other writers.

One final point is the relationship between tension and stress growing up and eventual creativity (Runco, 1994, 1999). Goertzel and Goertzel (1962) found that a high percentage of 400 eminent people studied experienced trauma and stressful life events at a young age; the highest rates tended to be found with those in the arts. Gifted and creative students are more likely to have parents who are aloof (Albert & Runco, 1987), sibling competition (Subotnik, Kassan, Summers, & Wasser, 1993), and a tense family life (Albert, 1991). Indeed, childhood trauma is strongly linked with mental illness in adulthood (Everett & Gallop, 2001).

A second finding of the study was that female writers were more likely to have experienced a personal tragedy than male writers. This finding replicates the earlier results of Niu and Kaufman (in press). They propose that experiencing such a personal tragedy may provide an impetus for female writers to defy traditional roles and begin to write—both by providing material that may spur them to write, and by making them pause, evaluate their life, and decide to pursue a more independent career. It is certainly possible that such reasons may explain the same findings in a different culture.

**Conclusion**

The question of how Western findings generalize to other cultures is an important one. If research that is true in the United States is not true in a different culture, then the implications for such research must be radically changed. Eastern Europe is a vastly different culture than the United States or the United Kingdom, yet their writers nonetheless displayed the same pattern shown by many earlier studies of American and British writers: poets are more likely to suffer from mental illness than other types of writers. This finding implies that the image of the poet as a depressed or manic figure may be more accurate—and more universal—than poets would like to admit.

**References**


