



Illnesses of the Soul: Manifestations of Mental Illness in Art and Literature

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Abstract

The study aims to analyse the connection that resides between mental illness- schizophrenia, paranoia, depression, anxiety to name a few conditions, in artists and writers from different epochs. Their work was affected by the torment in their soul. However, though the impact has had a toll on the patient, it has produced a work long remembered by generations of artists to come. We will look into the art and influence of writers and artists such as the German artist Unica Zürn, a patient-writer remembered for her novel *Dark Spring* and *Jasmine Man*, for her anagrams- original poetic constructions, as well as her drawings of the human body, the anatomy of the soul, the body portrayed in a unique manner, resembling the surreal sketches of Victor Brauner, as well as other similarities with the life and work of the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe. From Georg Heym to Edward Munch, with each and every glimpse through the kaleidoscope of art and literature, of writers suffering from mental illness we try to get closer to the influence of mental illness, illness in general that affects the artist's view on rendering life.

keywords: illness, art, schizophrenia, psychosis, literature

1. Introduction

This work is dedicated to researching the motif of madness in literature and art, focussing on its various aspects in different literary epochs and movements. The work thus enters the fascinating area of interference between literature, art and medicine and hopes to gain new insights from this interdisciplinary approach to the motif of madness.

The work primarily uses the interdisciplinary method, as constant references must be made between the two fields of literature, art and medicine. Secondly, the comparative method is used to compare the medically defined symptoms of madness and schizophrenia with the symptoms described in the literary texts and art works, representations of pathological medical symptoms in art and on paper that is in literary texts.

Last but not least, the third part of the work also makes use of the hermeneutic and text-immanent method in order to ensure the closest possible proximity to the literary texts in the interpretation.

The connection between creativity and mental illnesses has been a source of interest towards researchers for years. Mental illnesses have a large impact on the sufferer's creativity and how they express themselves. Many artists and writers have dealt with mental illnesses such as: depression, anxiety, mania, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia. These illnesses and their impacts are visible in some of the world's most famous paintings, literature.

2. Madness in Ink and on Canvas- Artists Suffering from Illnesses of the Soul

In the German literature of the 1970s, a wealth of so-called first-person documents emerged in the wake of this literature, almost exclusively by women, in which former patients processed their experiences of psychotic illness and psychiatry. These include the books by Unica Zürn *Der Mann im Jasmin. Eindrücke aus einer Geisteskrankheit* (1977), Maria Erlenberger *Hunger nach Wahnsinn* (1977) or Emma Santos *Ich habe Emma S. getötet* (1978). The depiction of psychotic illness in these texts is often closely linked to an examination of the male institution of the psychiatric clinic (see Jagow & Steger, 2005, p. 688).

To this day, no further information is available about the person behind the pseudonym Maria Erlenberger. From texts by the author, it can only be deduced that she was around thirty years old when her first book was published and is presumably Austrian. She caused a sensation in 1977 with her first book, *The Hunger for Madness*, which was critical of psychiatry and feminist, in which she describes in a radical way how she almost starves herself to death in protest against her role as a woman and is admitted to a psychiatric institution with the diagnosis of 'schizophrenia'.

The French writer Marie-Anne Le Rozick (1943-1983), born in Paris, hides behind the pseudonym Emma Santos. In her book *Ich habe Emma S. getötet* (translated *I Killed Emma S.*) (1978), she links the motif of madness with the language and identity of women and their exclusion from bourgeois society. Similar to Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina*, the protagonist is humiliated and abandoned by her husband, tortured with electric shocks after her obsessive reaction, locked in closed rooms and finally abandoned to the depressing uniformity of a 'day clinic'.

Severe depression also prompted the Austrian writer Christine Lavant (1915-1973) to intern herself in a mental hospital in Klagenfurt in 1935 at her own request. She wrote about her experiences in the text *Aufzeichnungen aus einem Irrenhaus* (2001), which was only published posthumously.

Probably the most popular example of the "mad artist" stereotype was none other than famously talented painter Vincent van Gogh. "I put my heart and my soul into my work, and lost my mind in the process," he once said.

Edvard Munch is another famous artist that was plagued with mental illness, schizophrenia, including anxiety and hallucinations. Munch is the creator of the very famous painting, *The*

Scream (1893). Munch's painting, titled *Self-Portrait in Hell* (1903), is made to show his feelings on his life at the time as a man and an artist: a private hell.



Figure 1. Edward Munch, *Self-Portrait in Hell* (1903)¹

Schizophrenia is a 'serious mental health condition that affects how people think, feel and behave. It may result in a mix of hallucinations, delusions, and disorganized thinking and behavior. Hallucinations involve seeing things or hearing voices that aren't observed by others. Delusions involve firm beliefs about things that are not true. People with schizophrenia can seem to lose touch with reality, which can make daily living very hard.'² Because many people with schizophrenia don't know they have a mental health condition and may not believe they need treatment, many research studies have examined the results of untreated psychosis.

In a third branch of research, attention is shifted to writing inmates of mental institutions, who largely remain a marginal phenomenon in literary studies. The German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn and the Swiss psychiatrist Leo Navratil believed that every psychiatric patient had artistic potential which, if it could be activated, would lead to visible and serious results. Prinzhorn's first and most influential work, *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken*, was a pioneering achievement in the field of analysing the creations of the mentally ill. *Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung* (1922) is a study in which the author analyses the borderline areas of individual artistic forms of expressiveness and the creative characteristics of the mentally ill. He richly illustrates his book with images from the collection of patients found to be mentally ill. While Prinzhorn's colleagues in psychiatry reacted reservedly to his published work, art lovers, art experts and psychologists were deeply impressed by the documented patient works.

Prinzhorn was followed by the works of Leo Navratil, his extensive documentation *Die Künstler aus Gugging* (1983) and his widely distributed monographs *Schizophrenie und Kunst* (1965) and *Schizophrenie und Sprache. Zur Psychologie der Dichtung (Psychology of Poetry)*, (1966). The collections of the Swiss psychiatrist Leo Navratil are among the most important documentations of poems by schizophrenics. The texts of his patient Ernst Herbeck were published in his own volumes of poetry and served as inspiration for Heinar Kipphardt's film,

¹ <https://www.google.com/search?q=google+images+munch> , [12.12.2024].

² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/schizophrenia/symptoms-causes>, [12.12.2024]

novel and drama about the artificial figure of the schizophrenic poet März. Similarly, Navratil's documentary *Die Künstler aus Gugging* also formed the basis for Gerhardt Roth's novel *Das Labyrinth* (2005), which revolves around questions about the connections between art and madness. One of the narrative figures who form the labyrinth of different narrative perspectives is the psychiatrist and director of the asylum in Gugging, Dr Pollanzy. Other narrators are patients of the asylum.

This branch of research is given attention in the context of German studies. In her book *Verrückte Sprache. Psychiater und Dichter in der Anstalt des 19. Jahrhunderts* (2012), the Germanist and physician Yvonne Wübben attempts to summarise the fault lines and interactions between the language of madness and that of science, between illness of the body, mind and its representations and forms.

2.1 Representations of the Pathological in the Works of the German Writer Unica Zürn

Unica Zürn (1916-1970) was both a German artist and writer. She made ink drawings, painted and wrote both fictional prose and poetry and, above all, texts with autobiographical features. The author developed paranoid schizophrenia in the early 1960s. As a result, she stayed in a psychiatric clinic in Paris from 1961 to 1963 and was hospitalised several more times in the following years.



Figure 2. Picture of Unica Zürn³

She processed this experience of her illness in the story- *Der Mann im Jasmin. Impressions of a Mental Illness* (1977). The text will be later analysed in the seventh chapter of the work. She was born in Berlin-Grünwald in 1916, the daughter of a writer who travelled a lot. She was unable to build a good relationship with her mother, who was cold and rejecting towards her. In the strongly autobiographical story *Dunkler Frühling* (Dark Spring), she describes her mother as an 'unsatisfied woman' (Zürn, 1977, p. 174), for whom she developed 'a deep and insurmountable aversion' (Zürn, 1977, p. 175). Zürn attended grammar school in Berlin, but left before taking her school-leaving examination. From 1934 to 1942, she was employed by Universum Film AG (UFA), initially as a secretary and archivist, later as a dramaturge for advertising films. At the time, she paid no attention to the politics and violence surrounding her, something she would later never forget in her own horror.

³ <https://www.google.com/search?q=google+images+zurn>, [12.12.2024].

Zürn's literary work was little recognised during her lifetime. It consists on the one hand of autobiographical and often fragmentary prose, which mainly deals with her love affairs, her illness and its treatment, and on the other hand of poetic texts, of which her 123 anagram poems are the most important.

She had a long-standing friendship with Ruth Henry, a German journalist and translator living in Paris. It is largely thanks to her that Zürn's texts were published. An essential characteristic of her literary work is the strong interpenetration of life and fiction. In her autobiographical story *Dark Spring*, written three years before her suicide, she makes fundamental references to family constellations and events that are significant for her life and work. At the centre of the text is a girl who, left alone by adults, withdraws into her own fantasy world and deals with the problems of sexuality within it. The rape by her older brother, which she experiences as highly shameful and disappointing, distances her even further from the reality she perceives as miserable and throws her back into the imaginary world of her fantasy.

After falling in love with a much older man, the now twelve-year-old puts an end to her life, realising that this is the only way her love can last forever. The literary leap out of the window therefore heralds the real fall to her death. The author Unica Zürn herself stands behind the sober narrator in the third person. Sigrid Weigel points out that Unica Zürn not only anticipated the manner of her suicide in her writings, but had also determined the time at which her life would come to an end long beforehand. Namely, in her numerical mystical operations in 1957, the writer had arrived at an age whose sum of digits was her favourite number 9 (Weigel, 2000, p. 136).

Weigel therefore views the author's life as a kind of postponement between an image of death that has always existed and its final realisation in her own body (Weigel, 2000, pp. 136-137). On the one hand, she understands Zürn's life and death as an uncanny imitation of a literary image; on the other, she associates her art with the dialectic of Eros and the death instinct described by Sigmund Freud (Weigel, 2000, p. 137).



Figure 3. Representation of human life on music- drawing by the author⁴

The text *Der Mann im Jasmin. Impressions of a Mental Illness* was written in the mid-sixties and completed in 1966. Ruth Henry translated the manuscript into French for publication in France, which did not happen until a year after Zürn's death in 1971. Six years later, the notes were published by the German publisher Ullstein. As Henry notes, the book was celebrated as a literary 'discovery' when it was published, with critics expressing admiration for the

⁴ <https://www.google.com/search?q=google+images+zurn>, [12.12.2024].

harrowing documentary sharpness of the self-observation and the unsentimental, confident literary treatment (Henry, 1985, p. 209).

In this literary text by Unica Zürn, too, the author's first person is concealed behind the third person personal pronoun. *Zum Verhältnis von Körper, Sprache und (Re)Produktivität* bei Unica Zürn (1997), Rita Morrien points out that Zürn's life and literary activity are so intertwined that the writer frequently uses the personal form 'she' even in private notes, letters and diaries and that an 'I' hardly ever speaks (Morrien 1997, p. 74).

However, this attempt to view herself through the eyes of an outsider could also be linked to the writer's erupting schizophrenia. Henry states that the power to record in a detached observer's tone was the only one left to the author by her illness and adds that the madness may have encouraged detached observation (Henry, 1985, p. 206).

The protagonist, who remains nameless until the end of the text, enters a parallel world, a world outside the known universe beyond the mirror. However, the loneliness that the girl experiences in this other world, is also characteristic for the author's literary style. The dream has such a strong influence on the protagonist that she gets out of bed after waking up to push the mirror aside. However, there is no door behind it, just an impenetrable wall. Nonetheless, in these notes Unica Zürn tries to convey to her readers the world beyond this wall, beyond the mirror, beyond logical comprehension, the world of mental illness and madness. In doing so, she also explores the possible causes of her illness, which she traces back to her childhood.⁵

In her work *Weibliches Textbegehren* bei Ingeborg Bachmann, Marlen Haushofer und Unica Zürn (1996), Rita Morrien analyses this dream of the female protagonist in detail. The choice of medium, the literary dream, already signalled that it was about the representation of a repressed, inexpressible experience, namely the failed attempt to find entry into the symbolic order (Morrien, 1996, pp. 181-182). To interpret the dream, Morrien draws on Jacques Lacan's remarks on the mirror stage (see Morrien, 1996, p. 182).

Morrien interprets the passage behind the mirror as a return to the time before the mirror phase, i.e. to the pre-oedipal phase in which the ego is still to be constituted. She reads the passage through the poplar avenue towards an open house as a metaphor for the path into the symbolic order already marked by representatives of the paternal law. The ascent of the stairs corresponds to the further development of an ego that is still unsure of itself into an autonomous, self-confident subject.

Morrien understands the fact that the girl does not meet anyone on her way as an indication that the necessary guidance from an outsider is not forthcoming. The awakening before deciphering the name on the map lying on the table indicates that the girl has no access to her father's order. According to Morrien, the card proves to be a representative of the paternal law in two respects: on the one hand, the writing is to be seen as a representative of the symbolic order; on the other hand, it could be a kind of calling card that reveals not only the name but also the status within the order. The wall that the girl encounters behind the mirror after waking up can be understood as a metaphor for a psychological blockade (Morrien, 1996, pp. 182-183). In its symbolic imagery, the dream thus expresses the failure to enter the paternal order. The ego cannot develop, so that the girl has no name and therefore no identity.

The work is dedicated to madness from the perspective of a patient who has succeeded in writing down her experiences of psychotic illness and her stays in various psychiatric institutions in a poignant eyewitness account. In doing so, art acts primarily as a mediator of

⁵ <https://actaphilologia.umfst.ro/Philo-06/Philo%20all%2006%20b.pdf>, Olaru-Poșiar, S., p.150, [20.12.2025]

unspeakable suffering. Unica Zürn describes in her notes *Der Mann im Jasmin. Impressions from a Mental Illness*, both the unique experiences of happiness that come to her through her hallucinations during her schizophrenic episodes, as well as the drug treatments in the various psychiatric institutions, which bring her back down to earth and thus also plunge her into a deep depression that lasts for months. The mental illness also proves to be an escape room for the female character from reality, whose demands she cannot fulfil.

The question of the justification of female productivity is central to this text, which was written in the context of surrealism. In her madness, the nameless protagonist stages herself as the medium of the man in the jasmine, the white man who articulates himself artistically through her. She draws under his dictation and writes down anagrams that he speaks out of her body. Female productivity thus proves to be nothing other than the reproduction of male creative power.

She draws under his dictation and writes down anagrams that he speaks out of her body. Female productivity thus proves to be nothing other than the reproduction of male creative power. Zürn thus also reinterprets the surrealist process of 'Écriture automatique', in the context of which consciousness was to be switched off through dreams, sleep or intoxicants in order to allow the unconscious to express itself in an automatic, uncontrolled creative process. Madness provides the female protagonist with poetic images, the recording of which leads to a literary text.

Through the choice of topic, this work inscribes itself in the comprehensive research field of literature and medicine. The relationship between literature and medicine has numerous dimensions and can be traced back to antiquity.

In the foreword to the *Lexikon Literatur und Medizin* (2005), Prof. em Dr phil. Dietrich von Engelhardt, whose research specialises in the field of literature and medicine, points out several aspects of this multifaceted area of interference. Literature particularly favours the themes of illness and pain, birth and death, the relationship between doctor and patient, therapy and the medical institution. A second aspect relates to the fact that writers are doctors or, conversely, doctors act as writers. Thirdly, it is about the illness of artists and the fact that illness also has the ability to produce art.

Engelhardt emphasises three functions that are of particular importance for the relationship between medicine and literature: the fictional function of medicine, the scientific function of literature and, finally, the genuine function of literalized medicine. The fictional function of medicine means that medical knowledge can contribute to the understanding of the literary text.

Furthermore, the usual separation of 'healthy' and 'sick', of norm and abnormality is questioned and relativised in the literature; the sick person can appear as the actually healthy one, illnesses can be understood as a signature of their time, the hospital as a reflection of the world (Jagow & Steger, 2005, p. 2)⁶.

⁶ <https://www.google.com/search?q=google+images+zurn>, accessed [12.12.2024].



Figure 4. **Hexentexte, 1954** (translation Witch texts) - representations on paper of Zürn's vision on the inner world

Conversely, he understands the significance of literature for medicine as a scientific function of literature. The literary depictions of the doctor, the therapy and the medical institution, the illness and above all the patient in his subjectivity and individual life situation remind and remind medicine anew of the unity of somatic, psychological, social and spiritual areas in the sick person, which, according to Engelhardt, usually receives too little attention in scientific research, therapeutic activity and medical training.

Thus literature admittedly only in the case of doctors, who take the time to engage with literature, encourages a review of therapeutic methods and goals and makes us reflect on the doctor-patient relationship. Finally, literature generally promotes what can be understood as a genuine function of literalized medicine, namely an understanding of the patient and the illness, of the doctor and the therapy, both in public and in politics.

Within this function, literature has the task of drawing attention to the dangers and risks of medicine, to mechanisation and anonymisation, to the loss of humanity. Similarly, literary works with their ideas, metaphors and symbols fulfil the need for interpretations of illness that go beyond all scientific and socio-psychological explanations.

The first and last functions to which Engelhardt refers play a special role in the present work. The work is based on the fictional function of medicine in that it proposes a new, interdisciplinary approach to literary texts based on the medical definitions of the terms madness, psychosis and schizophrenia. The genuine function of literalized medicine is brought to bear in the work through the interpretations attributed to madness in literary texts. For example, madness can stand as a metaphor for a world gone mad or point to the general alienation of people in the modern world. In modern literature, the valorisation of madness or craziness, which is understood as a demarcation from banal normality, is clearly evident.

In the theatre of the absurd, madness characterises the state of the world itself, which seems to be devoid of any rational meaning. For the protagonists, this can also mean recognising the absurdity of giving meaning to their existence. The drama *Le balcon* (The Balcony) (1956) by the French writer and outsider Jean Genet (1910-1986) could serve as an example of this. So can most theatre plays written by Eugene Ionesco, such as *The Chairs*, *The Rhinoceros* etc.

However, madness is also used for the purpose of social criticism. The American poet and main representative of the Beat Generation and the American counterculture Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) became famous with the poetry collection *Howl and other poems* (1956), in which he expressed his protest against the mechanised mass society in strongly metaphorical language.

The poem *Howl* is dedicated to Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg had met in a psychiatric clinic. The title of the poem comes from the fact that the first part of the poem sounds like a long howl or lament in a corresponding speech. It is a bitter indictment of American society, which brings about madness, in Ginsberg's view primarily through the big city, money and capitalism.

As the Lexikon *Literatur und Medizin* notes, the 1970s saw probably the closest contact between literary depictions of schizophrenic psychoses and medical theorising, which was in crisis, at least in German-language literature. In the course of the resulting anti-psychiatry movement, the frequent literary function of the portrayal of psychotics, namely to act as a critical authority vis-à-vis the only supposedly healthy normality, found multifaceted theoretical counterparts.

At the beginning of the 20th century, psychotic phenomena were regarded as experiences of the modern subject par excellence; madness now becomes an enriching borderline experience, is brought together with metaphors from the field of travel and adventure stories and set against normal life.

In *Raumlicht: Der Fall Evelyne B.* (1976), the German writer and psychiatrist Ernst Augustin, born in 1927, who completed his doctorate in 1952 with a dissertation on the subject of elementary drawing in schizophrenics, creates a journey into the interior of the soul, into the mental landscape of a person suffering from schizophrenia.

In *Kotilow oder Salto mortale nach innen* (1977), the German writer and visual artist Kurt Sigel, born in 1931, also paints the portrait of a schizophrenic for whom reality is gradually disintegrating. His protagonist is completely thrown back on his ego, autistically caught up in himself and only experiences the world as a fantastic possibility.

Marguerite Sechehaye (1887 - 1946) is a Swiss psychologist and psychoanalyst who, in her *Journal d'une schizophrène* (Journal of a schizophrenic) (1950), traces the subjective perceptions of the schizophrenic Renee, from the onset of the illness, the first signs of the loss of reality, through the complete deterioration to the first steps towards regaining reality and recovery. At the same time, this report mirrors the method of the psychoanalyst Sechehaye, who represents the only saving connection to reality for Renee.

3. Conclusions

From Georg Heym to Edward Munch, with each and every glimpse through the kaleidoscope of art and literature, of writers suffering from mental illness we rendered the influence of mental illness, illness in general on the artists' view on rendering life. The artist(s) that is/are impacted with the pathological will always have a unique and different view on art and pen. Special are the instances when the artist(s) on canvas is also an artist(s) on paper.

It is thus that we are given a complete and thorough analysis of the phenomena of brainmapping the whole process of illness and its manifestation. By these allegations we are far from saying that each successful artist must have a pathological trait in order to be remembered- Van Gogh, for example, who suffered from mental illness, did not get life achievement during his time, however was given acknowledgement long after his death. Of course his pathology was one of the multiple factors that influenced his success, but it was never the triggering factor.

We do not fall in love with a work of art because it comes from an illness of the soul, but fall in love with a work of art or a story because it comes from a unique soul that we can, at some level identify with:

Ich streue das weisse Nichts

Ich streue das weisse Nichts;
ach, Weiss ist nichts. Reue des
weissen Rauchs sticht Seide
der Nachsicht. Suesse ist wie
das Weisse. Schreie: Tu's nicht!
Sie ist ich! Werd' suesse Nacht!

Anagram, author: Unica Zürn, Berlin 1953-54⁷

Drawn from her *Hexentexte* anagrams, poems, literally believed to conjure words and read like surrealist spells.

(Translation: *South Bend 2018–19 (translator, Sade La Nay)*)

I broadcast white noise

I broadcast white noise;
Alas, white is not a thing. Regret
Whitewashes hindsight.
Smoke stings silk. Sweetness is like
Whiteness. Screams: Don't do it!
It is I! Be sweet dark dear!

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⁷Zürn, Unica (1954). *Hexentexte. Zeichnungen und zehn Anagramm- Texte mit einem Nachwort von Hans Bellmer*. Berlin: Springer

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