
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Creativity and its Psychological Traits in Emily Dickinson's and Anne Sexton's Selected Poems

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| ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze and explain two significant poems written by two female poets: Emily Dickinson and Ann Sexton, to disclose the relationship between creativity and unstable psychological state of mind. This study will examine Dickinson's poem "I felt a funeral in My Brain" and Sexton's poem "Wanting to Die" to reveal their themes of death, madness, and suicide to detect the mental depression and bipolar disorder they suffered from. Moreover, it is proven that there is a direct connection between creativity and mental disorder, according to some modern studies by psychologists like Kay Redfield Jamison and psychiatrist Nancy Andreason. The study will answer the following two questions: do the female poets: Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton suffer from a mental disorder in their lives? And what is the impact of their poetic creativity on their fate?

| KEYWORDS

Creativity, death, poetry, psychology, suicide

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Many poets during the 19th and 20th centuries showed a highly elevated style of writing poetry, like Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Ann Sexton, etc. These poets have something unique in their minds that distinguishes them from others. They are human beings like us, but then what is the characteristic that makes them distinguish them from us? The secret behind their innovation in the field of poetry is what we call "Creativity", so what is creativity? And can this concept be taught? The answers to these questions can be understood if we know the definition of creativity and its origin. The word creativity does not carry the divine meaning of creation. Plato did not believe in the art of creativity; in his article "*Creativity in Plato's state*", Arthur Wheeler explains that according to Plato, "poets are merely imitators, not creators" (Plato; apud Wheeler, 2007:249).

Creativity is not a field of science that can be studied; it is like a blessing from God. So, Creativity can result from searching for information in books to understand things from different points of view. In every society, there are some people who have "virtues of creativity"; these virtues enable them to be different from others (Rothman 2014). In poetry, creativity is a "dominant aspect" through the various themes that relate to thoughts, feelings, and emotions. This aspect appears in the late 18th and early 19th centuries through the "creative imagination of the romantic poets" (Rothman 2014). The creativity of such talented poets has three elements of imagination: "thought, creativity, and expression" (Grover, 2009:3). Their poetic thought is characterized by deep sensitivity that relates to their hearts. According to Psychology, creativity has a link with unstable behaviors and actions, as many theories assert that deviation of thoughts and frequencies of abnormalities can be the outcome of creativity in the human brain. Accordingly, we should insist on the linking of ideas and the outcome of these ideas. "Depression, madness, insanity, and death" are themes that run through the history of poetry (Hudson, 2011:23). The usage of these themes is the result of what we call in Psychology Bipolar Depressive or manic disorder. Many studies have investigated this disease and explain that it causes depression, loneliness, un-sufficiency, suicide, and death like the psychologist Kay Jamison explains that "the result of mood disorder, suicide, insanity, and death were twenty times higher in literary writers between 1600-1800" (Hudson 2011:4). In addition, those writers

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suffer from mental illness or depression that controls their behaviors. She adds that "mental depression is the result of intelligence or creativity, and it is different from one society to another" (McNally 2007:4). Jamison also suffered from this depression during her youth; she dealt with bipolar depressive or manic disorder through two points of view: "healer and healed" (McNally 2007:20). She concludes that the psychological state of a person sometimes limited by his or her intelligence or creativity, writers, novelist and poets who have this intelligence and creativity suffer from this mental disorder or depression (Jamison,1995). Creativity can increase the risk of depression, schizophrenia, and sometimes death. Several writers and poets who have suffered from these Symptoms embed their suffering in their works as an outcome of their literary creativity. American poets like Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, Sara Teasdale, Ezra Pound, Anne Sexton, and many others have influenced each other through their works apparently. This study will focus on two female poets: Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton. Emily Dickinson suffered from a mental disorder, and this is apparent through her usage of themes such as loneliness, death, insanity, and non-sufficiency in love which have embodied in her poems. Her failure in marriage enhanced her mental depression, which is one of the dominant themes in her poems. Anne Sexton also used the themes of suicide, death, and loneliness to indicate the mental illness that had infected her from her childhood. The two poems will be analyzed to reveal the agony and depression of the two poetesses, which relate to the theory of creativity.

The objective of this study is to prove the relationship between creativity as a positive concept and mental disorder as a negative one in poetry through the analysis of selected poems of Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton, along with the psychological theory of creativity.

2. Literature Review

According to the theory of creativity, there were so many studies that focused on the relationship between creativity and mental disorder. Accordingly, in her book *"Touched with Fire: Manic- depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament"* (1996), psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison discusses how mental disorders or illnesses run side by side with dark creativity. She implies that "most of the creative writers and poets know that they have something unique in their mind"(Jamison; apude MacNally 2007:3), which makes them different from others. On the other hand, Nancy Andreasen, another psychologist, explains that there is a relationship between creativity and mental illness. In her book *"The Creative Brain: The science of Genius"* (2006), she studies the relation between "the intellectual and the creative ability of the human mind" (Popova 2014). In his study *"Communities of Death: Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, and The Nineteenth-Century American Culture of Mourning and Memorializing"* (2010), Adam Cunliffe Bradford examined the use of themes like death and mourning in the poems of Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe. He explained that those writers made use of such themes to display their thoughts about how to read literature and understand its value. John Simon's study *"Connoisseur of madness, addict of suicide"* (1991) displayed some facts about Anne Sexton's life. Simon explained that Sexton suffered from a mental disorder because of some familial problems that made her finally commit suicide. Another study by Herbert Hendin (1993), entitled *"The Suicide of Anne Sexton"*, offered some facts about the suicide of Sexton. He explained that Sexton had "memory difficulties" and she could not overcome her fate. In addition, Hendin confirms in his book that Sexton is the victim of her genius and gifted affairs. In his book *"Toward Eternity: The Final Journey in Emily Dickinson's 'Because I could not stop for Death'"* (2009), Robert Evans exhibits that Emily Dickinson included the theme of death in her poetry for the search for everlasting life in poetry and she regarded death to the savor from the disorder of this life.

3. The "myth of Amherst,": Emily Dickinson's Mental Disorder in "I felt a funeral in My Brain" (1896)

Emily Dickinson is an American female poet of the nineteenth century. Her father was a puritanical man who thought that: "The place of a woman is home and not to invent or to be creative in society" (Kelly& Thomson 2001:132). She lived a genius life because of her seclusion from the outer world. In spite of all that, she composed and wrote many poems that show her creativity. On the other hand, her intelligence and creativity lead her to personal trouble: a disturbed mind. She fails to find completeness in marriage; she calls her husband "my earthly closest friend" (Dickinson; apud Bloom 2005:135).

She suffered from a mental disorder, and her illness grew through three points of view: "her fear that she once told her friend Thomas Higginson about, her period of creative poetic value, and her searching for a true lover whom she points out and calls him a master" (Thurman 2008:66). In most of her poems, she included themes of death, loneliness, and mourning to indicate her seclusion and the disorders of life. Here, the focus will be on one of the important poems of Dickinson that is *"Because I could not stop for Death"*. She hints in her poem *"Much madness is Divinest Sense"* (1890) that women have to live in a dominant world of males. She implied that the madness and insanity that many critics criticize her for are decided by "the majority of the society of her time"(Garlens& Kelly 2002:126). This poem was chosen by Robert Has to read in front of Mrs. Clinton at a celebration in the White House in 1998 (Garlens& Kelly 2002).

The 19th century was a remarkable age of inventions and creativity, and Dickinson is one of the creative poets as many critics praised her poetic creativity. In this respect, Frisbie Whicher, in his book *"This was a poet"* (1933), praises Dickinson's creativity and poetic style (Thomson, 1999:134). Thomas Higginson describes her poems as "[b]eautiful thoughts and words" (Dickinson; apud

Johnson 1960:6). She showed a great intellectual understanding of the world around her. Her father is torn between recognizing "her curiosity and her thought" (Garlens& Kelly 2002). She has a private life that nobody knows about her poems during her seclusion, according to Harold Bloom: "when she dies her sister Lavinia discover more than 1000 poems in the drawers of Emily's dresser, Lavinia knows that she finds a treasure" (Bloom, 2005:135). These poems are published later with the help of Dickinson's sister-in-law Susan (Bloom, 2005:137). Dickinson knew that she was different from others and had a creative mind which helped her to see life from different points of view.

Most of these poems included the theme of death as the main issue Dickinson dealt with. She used the theme of death to indicate the horrible image of death in her life as "there are many scenes of death which could be the motivation or the factor that contributes to her preoccupation with death and her lack of romantic love"(Marcus 1982:84). She comprised the concept of death in order to imply her views of this subject. Marcus (1982) explains that :

She uses four categories of death in her poems: "Poems that focus on the inevitable end of death, those poems that focus on death as a possible extinction, those poems that deal with death as God's concern with the lives and fates of people and poems that raise the questions over the soul survives death" (Marcus 1982:86).

In her poem "*There is a certain Slant of Light*", she discussed the mental consciousness and nature of death as a result of depression which is visualized in the winter light (Ruby, 1999:77). In her other poem, "*My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close*", Dickinson portrayed death as an inevitable end and her loneliness is a mental one (Ruby,1999:79). Whereas in her poem "*Because I couldn't stop for death*", she represented her melancholy and depression that have a deep impact on her mind and social life. She symbolized the "coldness of death" and how the body is buried in a grave (Ruby, 1999:87). Many of her poems show her ability to use the poetic device to indicate her inner suffering and loneliness; in her poem "*I felt a funeral in My Brain*"(1896), she used a "metaphorical style to study the conscious mind of human being in a poetic form" (Thomason& Kelly 2001:35). She lives in loneliness, but despite of her seclusion from the outside world, she knows what is going on outside. Dickinson's scholars Peggy McIntosh and Ellen Louise Hart state that Dickinson used to read the daily newspaper to know what was going on outside the walls of her room. They said: "We know that Dickinson has a cosmopolitan and eclectic reader; her letters indicate that she read the newspaper and was aware of the world around her" (Thomson& Kelly1999:130).

Dickinson's poem "*I Felt a Funeral in My Brain*" was published in 1896 and reveals the psychological state of Dickinson and her inner struggle because of stress and the disorders of life. This poem includes many metaphors and similes to indicate the fall of the human mind and its collapse. The poem is in the form of the first person speaker, who represents the poet herself. The poem starts with the description of the human collapse in the form of the funeral by indicating that the poet experiences a state of numbness and lack of sensation (Thomason, 2001:135). The poet said:

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—"
(Johnson, 1960:128)

The phrase "felt funeral" here carries the meaning of the inability of the speaker to live in such a situation because of the difficulty of the outer world. In addition, this phrase also indicates that the process of being died gradually is being physically recognized. Here, Dickinson used the concrete image of the brain to indicate the absolute meaning of this organ and to indicate her slower death. This state of numbness of the speaker's brain will lead to its "laid to rest" with the close of the poem (Thomason, 2001:136). She has the poetic ability and creative style to display her imminent destruction.

The second stanza of the poem continues to convey a very complex process of mind to the readers through the use of repetition. The speaker repeats the word "beating" in this stanza; likewise, the repetition of the word "treading" in the first stanza indicates a reverberation that represents loneliness and paralysis. The poet said:

"And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb—"
(Johnson, 1960:128)

In the above stanza, Dickinson switches between the words "brain" and "mind". In the first stanza, she uses the word "brain" to indicate her agony and mental instability, while in this stanza, she uses the word "mind" to affirm that the pain becomes physically sensed and she is going to lose consciousness and die. This substituting in words also affirms that the funeral of the poem was bodily, but now it is an ideational one. The word "drum" in this stanza also assures the state of numbness and the mental chaos of the speaker (Thomason, 2001:137). The speaker of the poem used the word "And" at the beginning of some lines of the poem to indicate the "urgency and speed" of the poem (Priddy, 2008:91). In the third stanza, Dickinson allowed the reader to perceive and take part in this ceremonial figuratively along with the presence. Dickinson permitted the readers to observe the death of the speaker at the end of the poem (Deliklitaş, 2019: 1). The poet said:

"And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,"
(Johnson, 1960:128).

This stanza begins with reference to the process of lifting the coffin, and this action leads to the next stage of the speaker's soul breakdown. Dickinson used repetition in the second line of this stanza to make the reader sense and perceive the state of mind and the inner pain of the speaker (Deliklitaş, 2019: 2). The sound of crushing "creak" and "Boots of Lead" (Thomason, 2001:137) of the mourners torment the soul of the speaker who hated this sound because she recognized that she is going to be left alone in her grave.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker describes herself as being isolated from her body inside her coffin. This division, according to Anna Priddy (2008), conveys another important theme of the poem, which is "madness". The use of this theme also could be the result of Dickinson's creativity. The poet said:

"As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—"
(Johnson, 1960:128).

The noise of the poem becomes so loud that all heavens are like "a bell," and this big bell makes a loud sound that started earlier very slower in the previous stanzas through the use of words like "treading-treading" and "beating-beating" (Deliklitaş, 2019: 2). Then the speaker describes the new world to be "solitary" where there is nobody only herself in a piece of clothes (her coffin) (Thomason, 2001:138). In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker delivers the last stage toward his breakdown and the end of the funeral. The phrase "Plank in Reason" conveys this meaning, and the speaker seems to lose consciousness and sanity. Then the speaker of the poem repeats the word "down" to indicate the depth of the world of madness and insanity. The poet said:

"And then a Plank in Reason broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—"
(Johnson, 1960:128).

The last line of the poem indicates that the speaker acknowledged and recognized his fate and did not have the ability to talk and describe her experience with death. In addition, this line leaves the reader with confusion because she used a dash after the word "knowing" followed by the word "then" and dash. Here, this reference carries many interpretations, and one of them is that the speaker loses the power to overcome circumstances of life and becomes mad, or she understands the lesson and "will never again assume anything about her own brain, or mind" (Moran, 2001:145). According to Daniel Moran (2001):

"The speaker ends by stating that she "finished knowing—then—" a remark fraught with ambiguity. Either she "finished knowing" anything for sure and now lives as one who will never again assume anything about her own brain, or mind, to be certain or her breakdown has brought her to the point where she can no longer use conventional (or poetic) language to describe her experience". (Moran, 2001:145)

Thus, Dickinson has a creative poetic style that enables her to include such themes in her poems as well as handle such issues as a death in a brilliant way. She suffered from the psychological traits of creativity, which led to her seclusion and what Plato called

"Divine madness" (Carson, 2010:217). In addition, Dickinson has manic depression, which is one of the creative outcomes. She lived in seclusion, and it is difficult to find enough data about her familial life. Her father believed that women should stay at home and perform the role of a traditional wife. This could be the result in rising so many feminist movements in the twentieth century that call for the right of women in life. However, Dickinson was one of the enlisted poets who had a mental disorder because of their creative poetic style. The psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison explained in her book *"Touched With Fire: Manic-depressive Illness and the artistic temperament"* (1993) that artists like Emily Dickinson, Anne Sexton, and other artists have manic depression because of their creativity. According to Jamison, those artists have a link between madness and genius which is one of the "controversial" points of creativity (Jamison, 1993:50). Anne sexton, on the other hand, also suffered from manic depression and mental disorder because of her creativity, but her state was more severe than Dickinson. This is because she resorted to alcohol in order to overcome her destiny.

4. "A Prisoned Doll": Theme of suicide and death in Annex Sexton's "Wanting to Die."

Anne Sexton was one of the confessional poets of the twentieth century. She was born in 1928 in Massachusetts, her father was a salesman and alcoholic, and her mother was a writer (Constantakis & Kelly, 2011: 225). Since her childhood, she has been a different and clever child; she likes poetry and other literary fields. Her creativity appeared in her childhood when her mother was shocked to see Anne's first poem. Her mother believed that her daughter plagiarized the poem from other poets, so she took the poem to a professor to make sure that it was the original one, and the professor asserted that it was an original piece (Runco & Pritzker 2011).

From her childhood, she suffered from mental disease, so she went to the mental hospital, where her doctor encouraged her to write poetry in order to recover from her illness and mental depression (Constankis & Kelly 2011). This encouragement helps her to discover her creativity; she transfers from "a depressed woman to a successful poet" of her time, but she committed suicide in 1974 with carbon monoxide (Middlebrook 1992:4). She tries to show her experience with suicide and mental depression and learn how to include these themes in her poetry in order to find salvation from the difficulties of life and her familial problems. She decorates her poems with several important themes like death, depression, and suicide in a brilliant and highly elevated style of writing (Gonnet, 2014:68). In addition, professor Kathy Giuffre explains that there is a relation between the period of creativity and the period of little creation, this relation is the outcome behavior between person social relations and creative output (Sawyer 2012). This is also asserted by the psychiatrist Nancy Andreason in her article "Secrets of Creative Brain", when she explained that "mental disorder or illness and creativity went hand in hand" (Andreason; apud Popova 2014:1). Sexton writes about the themes of love, death, suicide alienation, and despair to reveal her agony and anguish that result from her mental disorder. She writes poetry not only to heal her soul but also to offer comfort to others who suffer like her from mental illness (Salvio 2007). She was influenced by the poetry of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, whom she met when she attended McLean hospital with these poets who also suffered from mental illness (Beam 2001). She wrote her famous poem "Wanting to Die" in 1964, "a year after the suicide of her fellow Sylvia Plath" (Spacy, 2022; 3).

The first three stanzas of the poem convey Sexton's inability to remember her childhood or the days when she began to think. She reveals her desire for death because she cannot continue to be alive because of the stress and woes of life (Spacy, 2022:3). These three stanzas also reveal Sexton's thoughts and lust for suicide and why the person should choose suicide.

The word "suicide" here assures Sexton's desire for death, and the desire becomes a prevalent feeling. Then she uses the metaphor of the carpenter to give the necessity for death that the person who wants to commit suicide should not be asked about the reason but about the means only (Mosconi, 2022:4). According to Andrew Spacy (2022), the word "carpenter" here can represent Jesus Christ and the poet chose to sacrifice herself for her beloved ones. Spacy said: "Choosing the word carpenter introduces the idea of Jesus Christ and the religious undertones are worthy of note" (Spacy, 2022:4). The poet said:

"Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then, I have nothing against life.
I know well the grass blades you mention,
the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters, they want to know *which tools*.
They never ask *why build*."
(Sexton, 2000:142)

The poem continues to deliver the poet's thoughts about death and her desire to finish her life because of the disturbances of life and the inability to continue with the existence of the drug and the mental disorder's attacks. Many critics like Diane Hume George and Kathleen Spivack asserted that Sexton has what we call a "lust" for suicide. She expanded the idea of death in this poem through the use of the word "suicide" (Muhammed, 2015:32). She was fascinated with her fellow Sylvia Plath's death that she confessed to her therapist Dr. Martin Orne that "I'm so fascinated with Sylvia's death: the idea of dying perfect" (Serline, 1993:327). In addition, this poem reflects Sexton's confessional thoughts that he is not fear of death, and she has free will to decide when and where to die (Muhammed, 2015:33).

In the last three stanzas, the poet gives the reasons why she wants to leave the world and commit suicide. She wants to escape from the dominant male world because it is like a "prison" for her (Spacy, 2022:5). The phrase "empty my breath from its bad prison" conveys the poet's will to commit suicide and leave this life because it becomes like a prison for her and she has not the ability to continue. As a woman, Sexton longs for love and her rights as a woman, but she fails to find them, just like Emily Dickinson, who also died, and she longs for true love and marriage. The poet said:

"and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,
leaving the bread, they mistook for a kiss,

leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
something unsaid, the phone off the hook
and the love, whatever it was, an infection."
(Sexton, 2000:142)

In one of her speeches, Sexton confessed, "Poetry led me by the hand out of the madness. I am hoping I can show others that route" (Middlebrook 309). Thus, she regarded death to be the savior of mental disorders and drugs. She repeated the word "leaving" more than one time, and this could be a reference for her suicide later on. Then, she uses the phrase "something unsaid" in the last stanza, which implies that there is something still hidden concerning her private life, and this may be a hint for the outcome of creativity that leads to her isolation and suicide. In his study "Excerpt From *The Lives and Voices of Anne Sexton: A Biographical and Cultural Explication of the Poem "Wanting To Die."* (2003), Joann Deiudicibus explained that "through the poem, something of life remains redeemed. Sexton once said the poem is the opposite of suicide, which explains her frequent jest to friends that she would not act on the lust; rather, she would write about it." (Deiudicibus, 2003:10). So, Sexton is like Dickinson has a dark side in her life that isolated her from the people around her. Sexton closed the poem with a reference that "love" is regarded to be one of the lovely things in life, but in reality, it is an "infection" that regarded to be a "vicious manifestations of life" that should get rid of it (Mosconi, 2022:4).

5. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to prove the relationship between creativity as a positive concept and mental disorder as a negative one in poetry through the analysis of selected poems of Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton, along with the psychological theory of creativity. The two female poets: Dickinson and Sexton, suffered from the stress and disorders of life as well as from the familial problems that made their life as a prison they attempted to flee from it. Dickinson has manic depression, which is one of the creativity outcomes. She lived in seclusion, and it is difficult to find enough data about her familial life. Her father believed that women should stay at home and perform the role of a traditional wife. This could be the result in rising so many feminist movements in the twentieth century that call for the right of women in life. However, Dickinson was one of the enlisted poets who had a mental disorder because of their creative poetic style. The paper finds that Dickinson suffered from the rigid rules of her father, who forced her to stay at home, and this seclusion from the outer world led her to read and write poetry that became her savior from mental illness. While Sexton resorted to alcohol just like her father and failed to overcome her mental illness, and finally committed suicide. This study proves that both two poets had a creative style of poetic writing that was apparent in their poems. Both poets had a dark side because of creativity, and they found in poetry the outlet for this dark side. The contribution of this paper was in the fields of poetry and psychology through its assertion that creativity has a direct link with mental disorders through the theories of so many psychologists like Kay Jamison, who links creativity with a mental disorder. In addition to this, the paper offers some suggestions for future studies that is to apply the theories of creativity and mental disorder to the American fiction of the 21st century and make a comparison between creative poets of the 19th and 21st centuries.

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