In his essay “Art and Neurosis,” Lionel Trilling discusses the connection between madness and artistic creation as “one of the characteristic notions of our culture” (Trilling 152-3). He focuses on the idea that art and mental illness have a special affinity, and that an artist’s mental illness can play a crucial role in enabling him to achieve creatively. Indeed, this “myth of the sick artist” (Trilling 155) pervades popular portrayals of art-makers. Many of the Western tradition’s greatest artists, from Lord Byron and Virginia Woolf to Vincent Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock, have suffered from forms of madness.

Stephen Daldry’s film The Hours, released in 2002, marks a significant and problematic addition to this cultural discourse on the relationship between madness and the artist. The film,
adapted from Michael Cunningham’s 1998 novel of the same name, interweaves moments in Virginia Woolf’s life with those of two women, Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan. This woven storyline thus echoes Woolf’s novel Mrs. Dalloway, a novel that plays an important role in The Hours. Throughout the film, the viewer is confronted with several visions of madness and of the artist. Its two major artistic figures, Virginia and Clarissa’s close friend Richard, are afflicted with mental illnesses. Daldry shows both artists’ madness as inextricably linked to their creative process. Troublingly, The Hours implies that mental illness is necessary for the artistic achievements of Virginia and Richard, and that the comparatively normal mental health of the other characters is the reason they are unable to achieve creatively. In doing so, The Hours’ portrait of madness reduces artistic creation to a refined form of lunatic raving.

Daldry asserts the connection between mental illness and artistic creation from the start of The Hours. The film’s opening sequence enacts Virginia Woolf’s suicide paired with a voiceover reading of her suicide note, a masterpiece of literary prose (despite her protest that “[she] can’t even write this properly”). The film’s first dialogue, which returns us to earlier in Woolf’s life, sees Leonard and Virginia’s interaction simultaneously establishing both her mentally illness and her artistry. Their discussion of her psychological treatment is broken off by her interjection: “I believe I may have a first
sentence.” Leonard’s response, “Work, then,” implies that her art excuses Virginia from being chastised for not following her doctor’s orders. This early scene suggests that madness matters so much to Virginia’s creative process that Leonard would rather she make art than follow her curative regimen. In a later scene, Daldry shows Virginia on a walk, manic and muttering to herself, looking, to the entire world, like a seriously ill woman. But Daldry then moves closer to her, letting the viewer know that she is trying out phrases for Mrs. Dalloway. This scene clearly connects Virginia’s mental illness to her creativity: though she may draw on everyday life for the content of her stories and spend much sane time writing, Daldry asserts that Virginia’s mad wanderings form an indispensible element of her creative process.

The film’s portrayal of a 21st century artist, the poet Richard, reinforces The Hours’ understanding of the role of madness in achieving artistic greatness; although he and Virginia differ in many narrative ways (their gender, their marital status, and their afflictions, to name just three), they function as similarly representative mad artists. While discussing the prestigious award he has won, Richard’s mental instability seems palpable; he raves, “I got the prize for my performance! I got the prize for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it.” Clarissa disagrees in order to calm him down, but the film offers no other convincing way to understand the artistic recognition that Richard receives.
There is, then, no other persuasive understanding of the role mental illness plays in Virginia and Richard’s creative success; in doing so, The Hours implies that madness is a necessary component of artistic achievement. The film’s two portraits of artists become portraits of madness, and the viewer is constantly reminded of just how ill Virginia and Richard are. Daldry devotes many minutes of screen time to Richard raving, Virginia having visions of her novelistic world during the visit of her sister’s family, and Leonard Woolf’s almost unbelievably direct description of Virginia’s illness during their train station fight. This final interaction deserves closer attention. The Hours shows us Woolf’s behavior as congruent with a version of what Leonard describes, a kind of hypomania to the intense manic-depression that he characterizes (her “history” of “fits, moods, blackouts, hearing voices” and two suicide attempts). The film’s depiction of Virginia’s “moods” and the “voices,” taken with Leonard’s obvious fear about her behavior, signals to the viewer that as she is writing Mrs. Dalloway she is never far from the insanity that she has succumbed to before. Contrastingly, with the characters of Clarissa and Leonard, Daldry presents to the viewer figures who, despite their sadness and stress, are sane. Suggestively, Clarissa is an editor, and Leonard (who was, historically, a writer) is shown working at the Woolfs’ home printing press: jobs both quite close to that of the writer, but ones that do not require artistic inspiration or creativity to the same degree. Sane
people make perfectly good editors, The Hours seems to say, but one must be mad to create.

To be sure, other ways of understanding the film exist. In a review, Woolf scholar Lorraine Sim contends that the film seeks to “dramatise [Woolf’s] status as invalid at the expense of her identity of artist” (Sim 63). This claim comes on the heels of Sim’s interpretation of Woolf’s art as aiming to “celebrate the nobility of the domestic quotidian” (62). Sim thus suggests that the film’s focus on Woolf’s madness leads the viewer to misunderstand her art. But Sim’s argument goes astray because she conflates the process of artistic creation with artistic creation itself: Woolf was mad, but Mrs. Dalloway is not. The mental state of the artist and the goals of her art do not need to concur. Here, the work of psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison can help remedy Sim’s conflation. In Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament, Jamison shows just how many writers and artists have been affected by mental illness. In one study she cites, artists were shown to have twice or even three times the rate of mental illness found in the general population (Jamison 61). Of course, these artists’ subjects ranged from madness itself to everyday events; madness may be a main source of artistic creativity, but such creativity can be applied to any subject or topic. Indeed, The Hours stresses this difference early on, connecting the fictional Clarissa Dalloway to several sane characters in the film (including Clarissa Vaughn) through
a montage centered on buying flowers. Sim’s insights can be nuanced by making a distinction between artist and creation.

Despite the problems inherent in *The Hours* – namely, the implication that madness is a necessary component to transform a banal existence into a life of artistic greatness – it would be unfair to blame Daldry alone for holding this view. As both Trilling’s essay and Jamison’s book note, a connection between artistic creation and madness appears frequently in Western culture. Even if *The Hours* stands out as an extreme example of an argument for this connectivity, it does not stand alone, and must be understood in context of other influential depictions of mental illness and creativity. Several major artistic movements, in particular Romanticism and Surrealism, have taken an embrace of the irrational and the mad as their credo. Romantic poets and surrealist artists stand out in the Western tradition for their proud proclamations of madness’s role as wellspring in their artistry; as Trilling put it, “Some of the ‘blame’ [for this view] must rest with the poets themselves” (154-5). But it would seem that there is more than simply “some” responsibility here from the works and writings of prominent artists. These views not only illuminate aspects of *The Hours*’s portraits of mad artists, but also offer an opportunity to examine in greater detail the place of this identity in Western culture.

“[T]he common view of the artistic temperament,” writes Jamison, is “mercurial, intemperate, volatile, brooding, troubled,
or stormy” (Jamison 2), and no figure in English literature could have done more to contribute to this image of the artist than the great Romantic poet Lord Byron. Jerome J. McGann, a prominent scholar of Romanticism, describes Byron’s early style as “grandiose self-dramatizing” (16) of “all of life’s contraries which so madden and exhaust the spirit” (92). Although McGann avoids using words like “mad” or “mentally ill” to describe Byron, one need go no further than Byron’s early masterpiece, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, to find the poet “self-dramatizing” madness:

Yet must I think less wildly: —I *have* thought
   Too long and darkly, till my brain became,
   In its own eddy boiling and o’erwrought,
   A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame . . . (Byron 44)

This vivid description of madness, of the “boiling” brain, becomes equated with the capacity “to create, and in creating live / A being more intense” (44). The reader of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* leaves the poem with the idea that its creator’s madness is the source of his incredible creativity; it is also a madness that Jamison devotes a great deal of her book to proving (149-191). But Byron’s role in the creation of this understanding of the artist extends beyond the worldview expressed in his poetry. His letters reveal an equally self-conscious connection between madness and artistic creation.

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Writing to his friend Thomas Moore in 1817 after the publication of this third canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron says, “I was half mad during the time of its composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies” (Byron 653-4). Both poem and prose show that the Byronic hero is the Byronic artist, that Byron envisions the artist as a kind of heroic madman. The crucial fact about Byron’s place in defining the idea of the mad artist in Western culture, then, is not just that he was mad, but – as with both Virginia and Richard in *The Hours* – that he called himself mad, and characterized this madness so explicitly in his poetry.

Other Romantic poets expressed similar visions in their poetry. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another figure Jamison identifies as likely suffering from manic-depressive disorder (219-224), articulated a vision of the relationship between art and madness that, as with Byron, informs *The Hours*’ portrayal of the artist. Coleridge vividly describes his conception of the poet at the end of “Kubla Khan,” first published in 1816. After a rich description of Kubla Khan’s palace at Xanadu, Coleridge speaks directly about his creative goals: “That with music loud and long, / I would build that dome in air” (183). Most importantly, though, Coleridge portrays the poet as crazed, with the “flashing eyes” and “floating hair” of a madman, evoking feelings of “holy dread” in “all” (183). That is, the poet both defines himself and is defined by others as fearsome and mad.
And Coleridge goes further, explaining the poet’s decision to “[drink] the milk of Paradise” (183): an act of the poet that enables creativity, separates him from the ordinary, and fills the average person with “holy dread.” Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” then, stands as another prominent example of the Romantic idea of madness as the source of poetic inspiration and of the poet’s necessary role as crazed but creative outsider; *The Hours’* depiction of its artists comes out of this Romantic framework.

More than a century later, a year before the 1925 publication of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, André Breton issued the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, proclaiming the start of a new kind of art. Surrealism, even more purposefully than Romanticism before it, engaged with the irrational mind and found its ideal of imaginative expression in madness. Breton wrote of the need for “Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations” (Waldberg 72). However, scholars of surrealism have argued that Breton’s own understanding of insanity changed later in his life, moving toward a more nuanced, less rosy view, and one that aligns with the perspective presented in *The Hours*. J. H. Matthews, a leading interpreter of surrealism, writes in *Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry* that early in the movement’s life, “Breton identifies madness with the unrestricted exercise of illuminating imagination” (35). The progenitors of surrealism “concentrated on the positive aspects of mental instability, seeing (or at least presenting) it exclusively as a source of poetic inspiration of
enviable richness . . . Considered this way, insanity appears a positively productive state with no deleterious effects” (40). But Matthews contends that surrealists never let go of “a fundamental need to remain always in control, to be able to identify one’s voice as one’s own, and to be aware of what it is doing” (80). He argues that this was where the limitations of their positive understanding of madness were most deeply felt. Matthews’ scholarship reveals that even for these artists who seemed to embrace the idea that madness was the ideal source of artistic creation, a desire for artistic “control” complicated their relationship with mental illness’s creative benefits. One cannot but think of Virginia in *The Hours* here, and that core tension with which Daldry shows her living: her madness gives her access to “enviable richness,” but she still feels deeply that “fundamental need” for “control.” That control allows her to carefully consider which character should die in *Mrs. Dalloway* and to produce sophisticated works instead of mere ravings. The relationship with mental illness that Matthews shows surrealists moved toward resonates powerfully with Woolf’s portrayal in the film.

His complex perspective on the connection between madness and artistic achievement in surrealist work echoes Lionel Trilling’s most penetrating claims in “Art and Neurosis,” and moves toward a richer and truer understanding than what *The Hours* presents. Trilling admits, “[W]e can say that there is
no doubt that what we call mental illness may be the source of psychic knowledge . . . Yet when we have said all this, it is still wrong, I believe, to find the root of the artist’s power and the source of his genius in neurosis” (160). Instead, Trilling makes a crucial distinction, one that recalls the limitations of The Hours’ characterization of the mad artist as well as the errors in Lorraine Sim’s reasoning about the film. He writes, “Still granting that the poet is uniquely neurotic, what is surely not neurotic, what indeed suggests nothing but health, is his power of using his neuroticism” (Trilling 165) – which is to say, “He is what he is by virtue of his successful objectification of his neurosis” (Trilling 170). This “objectification” appears in The Hours at the moments when Woolf discusses her work quite sanely with Leonard; though her madness is inextricable from her creativity, the film hints that she might also need her sanity. Unfortunately, Leonard’s high-decibel declaration of her madness stays longer in the memory than these quieter rational moments, and the caricature of Richard overrides all nuance. Trilling’s insight here, lost in the film, is that even if the sources of artistic inspiration can come from mental illness, the process of art-making requires a rationality and sanity that “suggests nothing but health.”

This claim also connects to the different vision of artistic creation that Jamison presents in Touched with Fire. Although she does not waver in her commitment to the idea that “it is manic-depressive illness and its related temperaments that are
most closely allied to creativity in the arts” (48, emphasis added), she gladly acknowledges that “while many ideas may be generated during mildly manic states, much of the structuring, editing, and fine-tuning of artistic work is carried out during normal or mildly depressed periods” (98). This understanding of artistic creation as a composite process contrasts with The Hours, which almost exclusively depicts Virginia’s inspired haze. Leonard Woolf and others occasionally push Virginia to work more soberly and to revise; Leonard even stresses that he built a printing press for her benefit. The film thus suggests that sane people around Virginia are the voices instructing her in the necessity of structure, a striking difference from the mood-governed patterns of art-making that Jamison describes. Jamison’s perspective extends beyond the film’s simplifications in arguing that madness may inspire the creation of art, but the act of crafting a finished “artistic work” requires a moment or measure of sanity.

These understandings, different as they may be, agree that the connection between madness and artistic creation is more complex and sophisticated than dominant cultural discourses on the topic. In a way, The Hours seems to be struggling to make the point that, as Trilling writes, “What marks the artist is his power to shape the material of pain we all have” (166). Unfortunately, this beautiful, nuanced thought gets lost in the film’s eagerness to give its viewers opportunities to goggle at
how crazy artists can be, thereby diminishing artistic achievement by positioning it almost as symptom of insanity. Even so, all of these reflections on the interplay between art and mental illness agree that an artist’s madness can provide inspiration for his creations. In a way, then, Daldry, Byron, Coleridge, and Breton (as artists), and Trilling, Jamison, and Matthews (as critics) are all in implicit dialogue with one of the English language’s most famous utterance on “madness”: in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Claudius declares, “Madness in great ones must not unwatched go” (3.1.187). With our investigation of *The Hours* behind us, Shakespeare’s sentence takes on a new meaning. The great artist will not allow his madness to fester “unwatched,” and we, the viewers and readers, “must not” let it “unwatched go.”
I wish to thank my classmates Nicole Paulet Piedra and Kiyomi Lepon for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

The fact that Richard has AIDS suggests a range of interesting modernizations for the idea of the mad artist. This cultural place of the AIDS-afflicted artist (including figures like Robert Mapplethorpe, Rudolf Nureyev, and James Merrill) deserves closer study than it has received. However, an examination of the role of AIDS in *The Hours* falls outside the purview of this essay.

Of course, this characterization also fits Virginia Woolf, as recorded both in *The Hours* and in real life.

Breton’s personal experiences informed his understanding of “consciousness” and “reason.” In a 1952 interview, Breton recounted the “great impression” that working in a psychiatric hospital during World War I made on him: “There’s no doubt that for me a certain temptation originated there, which would see the light of day several years later” in the early Surrealist writings (Breton 21).


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