



ARTICLE

Manic and depressed mood-swing in age-old literature

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ABSTRACT

“Himmelhoch jauchzend, zum Tode betrübt” is a well-known phrase associated with bipolar disorder. It fits into this anthology of literary quotes taken from various times and cultures; from the psalms of David, via Seneca and Dante to two 20th century female writers, who both committed suicide. I do not attempt to prove anything or to diagnose persons long dead. This anthology is simply to be read as a set of colourful, emotional illustrations of the criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for bipolar disorder. It should be recognisable both for medical doctors and for those suffering from the disorder. These literary phrases can be used in a clinical setting to bridge the language gap between therapists and their patients, giving them a sense of belonging to an eminent family, thus enhancing their self-esteem.

1. Introduction

The debate about a possible link between bipolar (disorder/melancholy) and creativity has surfaced time and again. Nearly two and a half millennia ago the Greek philosopher Aristotle, son of a medical doctor, wrote:

“It is possible for an abnormal mixture of bodily fluids to be well tempered and in a favourable condition. This is why outstanding persons are all melancholics.” [Aristotle On Melancholy](#).

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5, (abbreviated as DSM) we read: **“There may be heightened levels of creativity in some individuals with a bipolar disorder. Greater lifetime creative accomplishments have been associated with milder forms of bipolar disorder.** (APA 2013, p. 138)

Both sources include the view that milder or tempered forms of the disorder are more beneficial for creativity, and urge the avoidance of extremes of both of destructive mania and suicidal depression with therapy and medication.

This article, written for a medical journal, looks at this issue from the ‘other side, from the ‘inside’ as it were. It presents quotes from great writers through the ages on aspects of what is now known as the bipolar mood cycle. The verses come from the Western literary tradition, from Jewish/Biblical and Classical Greece and Rome, up to twentieth century Europe and America. (see for precise sources Ter Borg [Bipolar Creativity through the Ages](#))

The selection is made from the viewpoint of the swing between (deep)depression and (hypo)mania. The verses are arranged, not according to century or culture, but according to the cyclical rhythm of bipolar disorder. Each paragraph describes a phase in the mood swing. In § 2 the fluctuation between the two poles as such is described. In § 3 mood descends into depression. In § 4 the lift out of depression into hypomania is celebrated. § 5 gives expression to (hypo) mania § 6 shows how mood can fall back into depression. § 7 is about the wise acceptance of bipolarity. § 8 lists the persons quoted in this article with country, birth and death dates, showing the broad scope of this anthology. § 9 Gives some suggestions for clinical application.

Literary quotes themselves are recognisable by “quotation marks.” To make the literary expressions from other ages and cultures recognisable for the present medical debate, they are introduced by **DSM terms in bold italics**. This small anthology of verse can be read as an emotional and colourful illustration – himmelhoch jauchzend - or - zum Tode betrübt - of the ‘cool calm and collected’ APA terminology, a connection which is interesting for patients and medical doctors alike.

2. Fluctuation between two poles

DSM Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder involving extreme mood swings between depressive and elevated moods (American Psychiatric Association APA 2013)

Virginia Woolf “Indeed, there has never been any explanation of the ebb and flow in our veins, of happiness and unhappiness.”

Sylvia Plath “God, is this all it is, the ricocheting down the corridor of laughter and tears? Of self-worship and self-loathing? Of glory and disgust? It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous and positive and despairing negative; whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it.”

Emily Dickinson “For each ecstatic instant we must an anguish pay, in keen and quivering ratio to the ecstasy.

Goethe “Alas, two souls are living in my breast. My mood swings from sadness into uninhibited joy and from sweet melancholy into disastrous passion.”

Goethe’s famous saying “Himmelhoch jauchzend zum Tode betrübt.” ‘Rejoicing high with heaven, Mournful unto death’ comes from his play Egmont. It is sung by Clärchen who commits suicide at the end of the play.

3. (Major) Depression

DSM - Depressed mood

Goethe: “Why is this vague sorrow able to block all feeling, inspiration or movement? Sometimes I tell myself; your fate is unique, never has anyone suffered so deeply. Then I read the poets from ages past, and it seems as if I am looking into my own heart. Alas, have people been so unbearably miserable before?”

Winston Churchill “When I was young, for two or three years, the light faded out, I did my work barely, sat in the House of Commons, but black depression settled on me. I don’t want to go out in the world at all at such moments”

The words above the gate to Dante’s Hell: “I am the way to eternal sorrow. Relinquish all hope, you who enter here! The mere weeping will not let them weep, for grief, which finds no outlet at the eyes, turns inward to make anguish drive more deep.”

DSM Loss of interest or pleasure in almost all activities

I take this criterion in a broader sense, as the disappearance of meaning, however culturally filled. For instance in the cry of David: “My God my God why hast Thou forsaken me.”

Even a mild depression includes loss of meaning. Everything that was once valued, with which one was involved, has gradually become pointless, useless, in vain.

Solomon “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. I made me great works, I builded me houses, I planted me vineyards, I made me gardens and orchards. I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings. I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem.

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do, and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit.”

Pushkin “I have outgrown every desire. My dreams became hurtful to me. Only misery has been able to hang on, the fruit of an empty heart.”

Goethe "O that emptiness, the terrible emptiness I feel here in my breast."

Virginia mentions a pane of glass sliding between the person and the once valued outside world, to which it can no longer connect.

"But beauty was behind a pane of glass. He could not taste, he could not feel."

This has consequences for relations. "She felt cut off from other people. She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it. How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal."

The fading of meaning implies the flagging of involvement and responsibility. Seneca relates how the hero Hercules went through hell alive, a classical metaphor for deep depression.

The Lethe, the mythical river of oblivion flowing at the entrance of the underworld, relieves men of their 'curas': robs them of everything they had ever felt for, everything they had been involved in, with, everything they worried about, took care of, cared for.

"In the immense abyss within, the River Lethe glides quietly with waters calm, and takes away all cares, (curas)"

When meaning is lost, the emptiness is quickly filled with negativity. The flagging of sense, of meaning goes beyond nonchalance or neutrality, it leads to a loathing of life itself. The distance between 'worth-less' to 'hate-full', from 'monotonous' to 'disgusting', is short.

Solomon "Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous to me. I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun."

The black dog

A metaphor used to express the negativity of deep depression is the black dog of hell.

Dante "Cerberus, (the hellhound) the cruel misshapen monster there bays from his triple throats his doglike growls, his bearded jowls are black and greasy."

Seneca: "Here the fierce hound keeps the shades in fear, tossing his triple heads with clamouring noise."

Goethe "Do you see that black dog? Have you noticed how the swift creature comes nearer in ever smaller circles as if he is secretly trying to constrict us. So that was the essence of the poodle: the devil. I (the devil) am the spirit of eternal undermining.

Churchill "If my black dog returns." letter to his wife 1911

1. Churchill with his black dog



DSM Diminished ability to think or concentrate or indecisiveness

Seneca: "It entwines its sluggish stream in many winding turns, just as the wandering Meander plays with its puzzled waters, bends back on itself and presses forward, uncertain whether to head for the seacoast or its source."
Baudelaire "like a Drum-kept beating-beating-till I thought my mind was going numb."

DSM Fatigue insomnia hypersomnia

Pushkin "I can't sleep, the light is out, chasing senseless dreams in gloom."

David "I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed to swim I water my coach with tears I am feeble and sore broken."

DSM Reduction of physical movement (including speech)

Virginia "He was too weak; he could scarcely raise his hand."

David "My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws: "

DSM Loss of weight, decreased appetite

Sophocles "Overwhelmed by his misfortune, Ajax takes no food, no drink."

David "I may count all my bones."

DSM Feelings of worthlessness

Churchill just before his death. "I have achieved a great deal- in the end to achieve nothing."

David "But I am a worm, and no man; reproached by men, and despised of the people. All they that see me laugh me to scorn."

DSM Feelings of inappropriate guilt

David "I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head."

Van Gogh "One has a feeling of guilt, of falling short, of not keeping promises, one isn't honest. One would like to call out to people from a distance like one of the old lepers: Don't come too close, for contact with me will bring you sorrow and harm."

Seneca "Shame too late, covers its guilty face."

Virginia "Nothing whatever was the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. And (he) was so pocked and marked with vice that women shuddered when they saw him on the street."

DSM Thoughts of Death

David "And thou hast brought me into the dust of death."

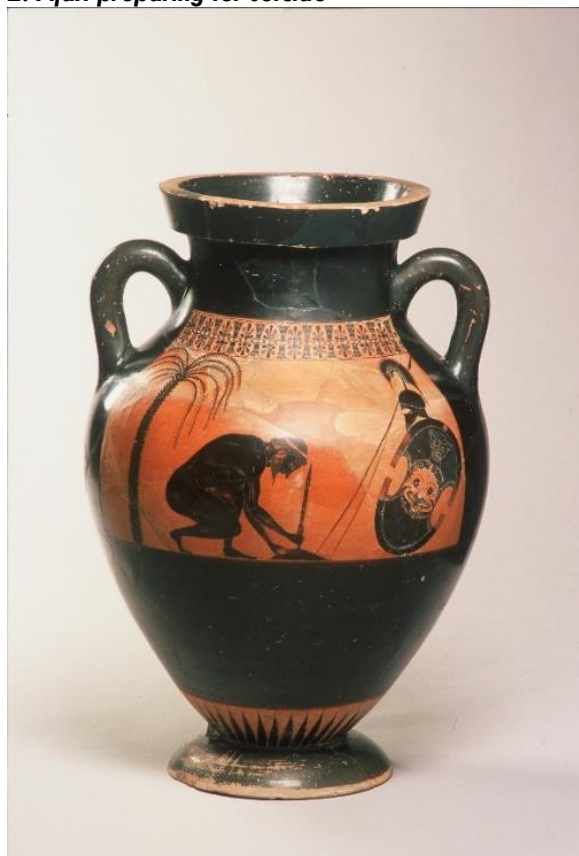
Pushkin "Corpse-like I lay upon the sand."

Emily "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain, and Mourners to and fro."

Baudelaire: "And Hearses, without drum or instrument, file slowly through my Soul."

DSM Thoughts of Suicide

2. Ajax preparing for suicide



This suicide, famous in the antique world, is described by Sophocles. "New-sharpened on the iron-biting whet.

Heedfully have I planted it, so that with a swift death it prove to me most kind. The act must now be done, and that with speed. O Death, Death come now and look upon me."

Virginia Woolf: "The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes. And this killing oneself, how does one set about it, with a table knife, ugly, with floods of blood, - by sucking a gas pipe?"

"No-one had seen her step off her strip of board, into the waters of annihilation."

Virginia ended her life in a river.

Sylvia Plath: "Oh God, if ever I was close to suicide it is now, with that heavy sleepless blood dragging through my veins, and the sky heavy and grey with rain."

Sylvia ended her life through gas.

4. Rising out of depression

And then, out of deepest despair, comes the reversal.

Dante, clinging to his guide, (Virgil, his therapist?), climbs slowly but surely out of the pitch black starless hell. "Hold fast to me,' my master said, 'needs must we quit this realm of all despair.' We toiled upward, He first, I following, and finally we came forth and looked once more upon the stars."

David "O Lord, Thou hast brought my soul up from the grave. Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing."

Nietzsche "What happened to me? What liberated me from my disgust? Who rejuvenated my eyes?"

Pushkin "My spirit parched with thirst, I crossed an endless desert sunk in gloom. Where I stood lost a six-winged seraph came. Fingers light as dreams he laid upon my lids. I opened wide my eagle eyes, and gazed around. He laid his fingers on my ear, and they were filled with roaring sounds. I heard the music of the spheres, the flight of angels through the skies. There in the desert I lay dead and God called out to me and said : 'Arise, prophet, arise'"

5. (Hypo)Mania

DSM - Elevated mood

David "Praise ye the Lord from the heavens. Praise him in the heights. Praise him ye heavens of heavens."

Goethe "Himmelhoch Jauchzend. The soul powerfully lifts itself out of the mud to the blissful meadows of higher feelings."

Nietzsche "How did I fly to such heights? Was it my own disgust giving me wings and the energy to find the sources of life? Truly, I was lifted up in flight to rediscover the springs of delight. Sing me a new song; the world has been explained, for God is on earth. Don't you see how all the heavens rejoice?"

DSM - Expansive mood

Emily "The brain is wider than the Sky. For put them side by side, the one the other will contain, with ease. Tis little I could care for Pearls, who own the ample sea. Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy, and I am richer then than all my Fellow Men."

DSM - Racing thoughts

Aristotle "Melancholics have a myriad of associations and ideas."

Baudelaire "He in whom ideas take a free flight, as larks in the morning."

Kierkegaard: "I needed God every day to protect me from that wealth of ideas."

Virginia "Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind."

Churchill: "His stream of original ideas was comparable to the bullets of a machine gun."

Pushkin "Thoughts whirl audaciously in the mind. Airy rhymes are running forth to meet them, fingers cry out for pen, the pen for paper. A moment – lines and verses freely flow."

DSM- Increase in goal-directed activity

Churchill 1940 "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs,"

Aristotle: "Through their intensity melancholics can hit their target from a great distance."

Decreased need for sleep

Vincent "These last few weeks I work almost without stopping from morning till night, day after day."

DSM - Talkative

When he was high Winston talked almost ceaselessly.

Solomon "A time to speak."

Pushkin "The angel rooted out this tongue of mine. He tore my fainting lips apart. And with his right hand steeped in blood, He armed me with a serpents' tongue. And God called out to me and said: By all who turn aside from me, burn them with my fiery word."

DSM - Irritable

Pushkin in his poem "To my friends - But be aware, for now my eye is turned to you, my friends, And my choice will fall on one of you, whoever. My attack, cruel, sudden, will grant him no chance to escape the sharpness of my claws."

DSM Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity

Pushkin about his verse as monument to himself. "A monument I've raised not built with hands. And common folk shall keep the path well-trodden, to where it towering stands higher than Alexander's Column."

Sylvia is the creator "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; I lift my lids and all is born again."

Nietzsche "In the end I would have much preferred to stay in Basel as professor to being God: but I didn't dare to pursue my own selfish interests to such a degree that because of them I would abandon the project of creating the World."

Seneca on the grandiosity of manic Hercules.

"Earth is subdued, the swollen seas have yielded, the infernal realm has felt my onslaught: heaven is as yet untouched, a worthy labour. I must travel on high to the lofty expanses of the cosmos, and make for the heavens: My father promised me the stars! The earth cannot contain Hercules, and at last yields him to the higher spheres. Look, how the whole company of gods welcomes me and opens the doors."

DSM - Increased psychomotor agitation

Kierkegaard "My gait was floating, as the corn waving in the wind, as the waves of the sea, drunk with longing, as the dreamy gliding of the clouds'

Dante "Renewed with new-sprung foliage through and through, pure and prepared to leap up to the stars."

Goethe "The wild mountain with all its chasm's cannot stem my godlike gait."

DSM Engaging in activities that hold the potential for painful consequences.

Sophocles describes how manic psychosis overcame Ajax: "Last night madness seized our glorious Ajax. Could you find anyone more sensible than Ajax, a man with more ability to carry out in every situation the most appropriate action? I (Mania) threw down into his eyes an overwhelming sense of murderous joy and turned his rage against the sheep and cattle, and those protecting them. He had conversation with a shadow, and thought he was butchering both (Greek leaders) in his sick frenzy, with manic laughter. When he was still so ill, he enjoyed himself while savage fantasies held him in their grip."

Euripides shows how Madness (manic psychosis) overcomes Heracles.

"Nor shall ocean with its moaning waves, nor the earthquake, be half so furious as the headlong rush I will make into the breast of Heracles; through his roof will I burst my way and swoop upon his house, after first slaying his children; nor shall their murderer know that he is killing his own-begotten babes, till he is released from my madness."

Pushkin "Madness, no worse punishment. I'd rather be in beggars rags. Rather hungry, or in pain. People shun the madman as the pest. He gets locked in, chained to a block. The screaming of a comrade. The clanking of the chains. The mind might not be worth much. And if I lost it, I would not be sad. As long as non-one interfered, I would be joyful, free. Singing nonsense, full of fire."

Virginia "As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at."

6. Dive into depression

The bipolar disorder often shows a circular, repetitive pattern. In the 19th and early 20th century this was called 'folie ciculaire' in French and 'Circuläres Irresein' in German.

Nietzsche: "Recently so proud. On the high stilts of your pride! Now Bent between two Nothings. A question mark. A tired riddle."

Kierkegaard "At one o'clock precisely I was at my best and had reached the maximum of happiness, Suddenly I felt my left eye itch. At that precise moment, I plunged into an abyss of despair."

7. Acceptance of moodswing

DSM Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder involving extreme mood swings between depressive and elevated moods

David "Weeping may endure for a night. But joy cometh in the morning." quoted by van Gogh.

Nietzsche "What if delight and frustration are tied so closely together, that whoever WANTS as much as possible of the one, must accept as much of the other. The eternal hourglass of existence which is turned again and again. One should not only accept it, one should love it; Amor Fati' (Love of your fate).

Solomon "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to keep silent and a time to speak. A time to break down, a time to build up. A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. He has made everything beautiful in his time."

8. The melancholy club

"Didn't you know, that there exists here on earth, a secret society, called 'the melancholy club'?"

It is not possible to determine whether the authors quoted above suffered from mood swing, -known for centuries under different names, especially 'melancholy'. To 'diagnose' these authors is neither possible, nor relevant. Important is that their lines have survived the troubled souls who wrote them, and still inspire us today. To show that the writers quoted cover a broad range, both in time and geography, their names country and dates of birth/death are noted below. Van Gogh, Churchill, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard became famous for other activities but were also talented writers.

David, King, Jerusalem first half of the tenth century BC.
Solomon, King, Jerusalem, middle of the Tenth century BC
Sophocles Greece, 496 – 406 BC
Euripides, Greece 480 - 406 BC
Aristotle Greece 384-322 BC
Seneca, Rome, 4 BC-65 AD
Alighieri Dante. Italy 1265-1321
Goethe, Germany, 1749-1832
Sjörn Kierkegaard, Denmark, 1813-1855
Charles Baudelaire, France, 1821-1867
Emily Dickinson, United States of America, 1830-1886
Friedrich Nietzsche, Germany 1844-1900
Vincent van Gogh, France 1853-1890
Winston Churchill, United Kingdom 1874-1965
Virginia Woolf, United Kingdom, 1882-1941
 Sylvia Plath, United States of America, 1932-1963

9. Suggestions for clinical application

This article shows that - in spite of cultural differences - there is a surprising similarity between DSM criteria and quotes from age-old literature. On the other hand, it shows up a clear difference between the clinical language of

DSM and its literary counterparts. The first is, - and should be - cool, calm and collected and a little bit aloof.

Patients however might feel more connected to the dramatic literary language. He or she might not be impressed by the expression: an 'elevated or depressed mood,' as being far too flat to describe their spiritual upheavals and severe turmoil. A more dramatic phrase: rejoicing in high heaven or despairing unto death - might touch and inspire the patient with a sense of being recognised. The dramatic suicide or indeed the destructive mania overcoming the great heroes of ancient tragedy can cause alarm, - I don't want anything like that happening to ME! This might motivate the acceptance of preventive, stabilizing medication. Indeed, the wise words of Solomon and Nietzsches 'amor fati' can cultivate a positive acceptance of their disorder, and encourage patients to make the most of the ups and downs which remain after medication.

Thus, literary phrases can be used to build a bridge between the cool scientific world of the clinician and the dramatic world of the patient.

The texts can encourage a talented patient to identify with the great men and women who expressed mood swing, and stimulate his or her creativity. The sense of belonging to a very special family, that spans the countries and the ages, could serve to enhance the patient's self-esteem.

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