

Two Sides of a Coin:

Analysis of An Unquiet Mind

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In the memoir, *An Unquiet Mind*, Kay Redfield Jamison (2015) shares how her manic-depressive illness has brought insights as well as challenges throughout her life. She narrates the story from a dual perspective of psychiatrist-patient and, therefore, offers a broader and deeper understanding of the seriousness of manic depression. Trying to raise awareness among the general public, especially those with a bias against mental health disorders as well as those who are suffering from manic depression, Jamison uses her personal experiences as both material and evidence. In doing so, she invites readers to experience both the best and worst consequences of manic depression. Though Jamison (2015) expresses, perhaps jokingly, in the prologue that “being professors of psychiatry explained everything”, the following pages use her clinical knowledge as a psychiatrist and her personal encounters as a patient to engage the readers and build both empathy and respect for those suffering from mental health disorders (p.4).

In order to make an audience more receptive to an idea, a writer may choose to tell a good story to hook readers and garner empathy. Jamison employs this technique effectively. For instance, one of her most interesting stories involves a conversation with a physician, who tells her to not have children for the benefit of the next generation (Jamison, 2015, p. 190). Although the physician presents a rational, clinical perspective, Jamison is strongly offended. By providing detailed descriptions of her interactions with the physician as well as her strong, emotional investment in having a child, Jamison successfully shapes her readers’ view on this controversial issue. As a result, her personal story seems far more reasonable than the doctor’s recommendation. Jamison humanizes an otherwise clinical decision, making her experience a universal one and provides the opportunity for readers with differing opinions to see the whole matter from a different angle: the patient’s perspective.

Moreover, Jamison's (2015) reflection about her own experience also appeals to the reader's empathy when she states: "Even in my blackest depressions, I never regretted having been born" (p. 191). This statement may make readers wonder whether we should deprive Jamison of her right to have children and her children's right to be born. Jamison thus presents herself as an antagonist fighting the doctor's advice and the social bias to show that she is capable of achieving her goal and providing a happy life for her children in spite of having a mental health disorder. As a result, there is no question about whether she can take on the responsibility of caring for her children; rather, one question that does arise is whether we should deprive the rights of people with mental health disorders for the "good" of themselves and society—and thereby disregard their will. By implying this question in her memoir, Jamison strives to point out that those suffering from mental health disorders deserve equal rights, treatment, and respect.

As shown in her reflection, Jamison indeed has gratitude in life and in the midst of her manic depression. By offering numerous examples of her happiest moments, she creates a positive theme for an illness as severe as manic depression. She presents her life as a rich and fulfilling one to provide another possibility to those with biases: by showing that not all who have mental health disorders are miserable, Jamison illustrates that people are capable of making the best of life regardless of their misfortunes. Jamison herself is a perfect example of this statement: with her manic-depressive illness, she still strived to achieve her ambition and acquired expertise in her field. Such feats suggest that people with severe mental health disorders are capable of being successful, well-respected figures. In addition, Jamison's positive attitude proves to those in similar circumstances that there are always light and positivity in life. Jamison shows that with her manic depression, she experiences more than most "ordinary" people and

has actually had more opportunities to embrace life. This is indeed supported by Jamison's successful career as a psychiatrist and all her stories about people who loved her regardless of her mental health disorder: for instance, David, who loves her and cares for her through many bad times and the chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Hopkins, who trusts her expertise and employs her regardless of her manic depression.

Despite all of her positivity, however, Jamison never stops addressing the seriousness of manic depression throughout the memoir. In order to raise a fuller awareness of manic depression, Jamison describes the darkness she experiences, including both external encounters and internal emotions, through the most straightforward expressions. Jamison (2015) also constantly uses powerful metaphors to deepen her expressions: she describes the company of the disease as "deadly" (p. 5), claims that what the disorder has brought her were "quite terrible wounds to both her mind and heart" (p. 39), and expresses the experience with manic depression as an "experience of how it must be to be old and sick; to be slow of mind; to be lacking of grace; to be ugly..." (p. 217). Moreover, Jamison uses her own, actual experiences in life as evidence to reinforce this idea: she struggles whether to inform the people surrounding her about the disease for the sake of both her private and professional life and worries about performing well as an "abnormal" person in a crowd of "normal" people. In fact, manic depression was the cause of her divorce with her ex-husband; the reason she would have to lie to the patients in order to be treated with more authority; and also the source of unfair treatment, such as the physician who told her to not have children. Jamison's words are rather candid, just as the nature of the illness—it brings ugliness to people and forces people to face and accept it. No matter how manic depression may amplify the greatness of life, from an opposite side, it still makes people suffer; this fact needs to be understood and acknowledged.

While admitting all of the downsides of manic depression, Jamison's ultimate intention is not to scare off her readers. As a matter of fact, Jamison (2015) makes clear that she would choose to have manic depression if given a choice (p. 217). This statement, one seemingly made without deliberation, is, however, made reasonable by Jamison's (2015) later explanation of how manic depression has given her the opportunity to "have felt more things, more deeply...seen the finest and the most terrible in people, and slowly learned the values of caring, loyalty, and seeing things through" (p. 218). Yet, with all due respect to Jamison, the positivity she stresses throughout the memoir appears to be doubtful, especially with all the detailed sharing of her emotional pain and daily struggles. By pointing this out, this paper is not accusing Jamison of contradicting her claim; instead, by exaggerating the merits of manic depression, Jamison may convince readers to treat those with mental health disorders in a much more positive way. With her continuous achievements, braveness in overcoming pain, and positive attitude, Jamison shows that her life, as well as all the others with mental health disorders, is capable of being joyful and graceful. The technique Jamison uses is interesting, but the sense of helplessness underlying it is thought-provoking. With prevailing prejudices toward people with mental health disorders, Jamison must prove her decency through extreme means. When those with physical disabilities are shown respect through accommodations such as handicapped parking, it seems rather unfair that those with mental health disorders are still looked down upon by society and demeaned by social media—i.e., TV shows from time to time. People with mental disorders shouldn't be forced to disguise their lives just to be treated normally; rather, they deserve to be valued for their true selves. Jamison has proved that with all of the possible means available.

Overall, Jamison succeeds in raising awareness through her engaging stories. Her simple yet explicit expressions about the ugliness of the illness itself may increase people's

understanding of the seriousness of manic depression. Her positivity and rather unique view of manic depression may bring hope and courage to those who are suffering to make the “monster” beautiful. In fact, occupying the unique position of both an expert in the field of psychiatry and a long-term patient of manic depression, Jamison has the advantage of providing more comprehensive information about the illness from both perspectives. Jamison uses this advantage effectively and tells the story with sincerity.

References

Jamison, K. R. (2015). *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*. London, Picador.