



Setting the Reader on Fire

A Review of

Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character

by Kay Redfield Jamison

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Reviewed by

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Who in the world could be more qualified than Kay Redfield Jamison to review the life and work of Robert Lowell from a psychological perspective? It is hard to imagine a more qualified biographer of a poet whose life and work publicly reflected his struggles with bipolar disorder. It is also hard not to draw parallels between the biographer and her subject, with Jamison herself having triumphed over repeated episodes of psychotic mania and depression to heroically write one of the most comprehensive textbooks on bipolar disorder (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007). This magnificent, breathtaking encyclopedic narrative of Robert Lowell's life and work tackles profound problems of identity, character, creativity, and illness with almost hypomanic energy, and the reader is taken through a relentless, passionate, and highly engaging account. Lowell, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, a man of profound contradictions born into a prominent, traditional Boston Brahmin family, went on to "break the mold" in terms of developing an intensely personal and confessional "modern" approach to his writing and poetry.

Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character is a compelling and demanding biography to read by any standards in terms of the complexity, intensity, depth, and emotional resonance of the narrative. The reader is likely to feel carried away and "set on fire" as the text itself carries a powerful sense of a pressured intense hypomanic rush of creativity and generativity unbridled (at times) by limits.

As Jamison indicates in her introduction, her biography of Lowell is at heart really an examination of the delicate interplay between madness, character, and creativity:

This book is about fire in the blood and darkness; it is about mania and the precarious, deranging altitude to which mania ascends. It is about the poetic imagination and how mania and imagination come together to create great art. But it is as much and more about the vital role of discipline and character in making art from inborn gift. (p. 4)

This quote captures both the main strength of the enterprise as well as its limitations. While Jamison does an admirable job illuminating Lowell's struggle with madness as revealed in his poetry, at times the storyline of Lowell's life veers off track to address Jamison's interests in exploring the link between madness and creativity. At its best, this is a story that elegantly captures heroic persistence and endurance against the relentless biological force of mania and depression; it is also a transformative account of a complex and often difficult person who consistently wrought great pain to significant others in his life. While Jamison provides an extremely compassionate account, we cannot help but be ambivalent about this man who has done rather unforgivable, regrettable things—this was a person who published poems including his wife's private letters to him without her permission. It is hard to disassemble the effects of personality and character versus the onslaught of the illness, and trying to untangle these gossamer threads offers perhaps the most compelling part of the biography. Jamison is at her best when she captures the intense pain and suffering of an individual with a severe form of bipolar disorder: the relentless onslaught of the illness matched against the Herculean effort and courage required to stand up again and remake the world of work and love. She illuminates the unspeakable remorse that succeeds from manic episodes in which personal moral values are abrogated, the unbearable depression that inevitably follows where every particle of vitality and creative ability feels dulled and voided.

Can Jamison be faulted for overlooking the moral failures of Robert Lowell and the harm caused to loved ones? Because transgressive behavior (romances and sexual affairs, excessive alcohol use, impulsivity, and rude, insulting aggressive imperious behavior toward others) was often tied to the onset of manic episodes, we are on delicate ground in terms of establishing culpability. To what extent were there problems inherent in Lowell's character versus the noxious impact of a mood disorder? What was the possibility for exercising free will and choice under the duress of the biological imperative of mania? This is one of the fascinating and profound existential dilemmas that the reader ponders through the pages of this book.

One of the unique and intriguing features of this biography is the fact that Jamison was given permission to access Lowell's medical records, and she gives us detailed accounts of his hospitalizations and treatment. This account of repeated hospitalizations typically for severe mania with psychotic features (more than 15 in his lifetime) and attempts at treatment will be of great interest to mental health practitioners. There are hard, important, and humbling lessons here in terms of recognizing the limitations of our knowledge and ability to predict the course of mental illness. Many of Lowell's hospitalizations occurred prior to when the choice of effective treatments (lithium, antipsychotic medicines) was restricted and Lowell underwent a number of efforts at intensive psychotherapy with very limited effect. While his psychiatrists were often overconfident in their treatment plan and prognosis, in retrospect we recognize that no scientifically sound evidence-based treatments (with the exception of electroconvulsive therapy) were available and that most psychosocial treatments were purely based on conjecture and personal opinion. This should serve as a strong warning and reminder about the limitations of our psychiatric knowledge, the need to look to scientifically tested treatments, and the importance of caution and humility when we aspire to promise a "cure."

If Jamison's purpose was to write a compelling, complex psychological account of Lowell, to interest the reader in "the entanglement of art, character, mood, and intellect" (p. 5), then she has succeeded brilliantly. We cannot help but be entranced by the interplay of

character, illness, and creativity illuminated in this volume, the intense struggle that comes from being “dealt a hand of cards high in privilege and poetic imagination but also . . . dark cards, impossible to play, that broke him time and again” (p. 6). We cannot help but be carried away by the pervasive sense of the powerful and relentless onslaught of highs and lows captured with such intensity and graphic detail and to hope against hope (standing alongside Lowell) that life can be remade again and again from the shattered pieces. This account of a complex, difficult, and brilliant man struggling with a severe form of bipolar disorder will be of great interest both to mental health professionals and to the general public.

Reference

Goodwin, F. K., & Jamison, K. R. (2007). *Manic-depressive illness: Bipolar disorders and recurrent depression* (Vol. 1). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.