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# Completing the Construction: Art as Therapy in Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of A Funny Story*

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Cedarville University

Completing the Construction:

Art as Therapy in Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of A Funny Story*

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At the end of *It's Kind of A Funny Story*, Vizzini reveals the inspiration for Craig's "funny story" with a simple sentence explaining he wrote the novel after spending five days in an adult psychiatric floor in a Brooklyn Hospital after a suicide attempt (Vizzini 445). This tiny bit of biographical information leaves the reader with an entirely different perspective of Craig's experience, especially the final thoughts Craig shares before leaving the hospital. Craig has a newfound deep desire to live after leaving that hospital, just as Vizzini did. Craig's story contains something greatly needed for the 132,000 fifteen to nineteen year olds who attempt suicide each year (Wolff 10). Vizzini shares what he learned through Craig's humorous voice, as Craig finds hope. The end of Craig's story is what doctors, parents, teachers, and friends wish for each person behind the massive suicide statistics – healing for suicidal teenagers.

Throughout the novel, Craig awaits "the Shift," his term for when his mind will be conducive to life again, when hope will return to his life. At the end of the novel, the Shift does occur. Craig describes the change as his brain moving slightly to the left, now situated above his spine, all a metaphor for the fact that his thinking realigned with a desire to live. He decides to fight the depression, to do rather than think, to "live now for real" as he is discharged from the hospital (Vizzini 444). This shift he describes as he leaves the hospital is the elusive goal of therapy: a patient who finds the right tools to remain afloat in the sea of despair.

Before the Shift, Craig repeatedly asks his therapist, Dr. Minerva, to give him a precise and simple way to feel normal again (Vizzini 17). Dr. Minerva never gives him a clear-cut answer, because one definitive and universal answer to Craig's struggles does not exist. Vizzini suggests the recovery from such severe depression occurs with "the Shift," but no one could concretely explain to him how to produce the shift. Vizzini claims his own shift, which occurred December third 2004 as he sorted receipts at his kitchen table, inspired him to write this novel

(Strength of Us Blog). What exactly caused Craig's (and Vizzini's) shift? Does it work for other struggling teenagers? The answers to this question seem endless –multiple things contribute to Craig's healing. He begins taking Zoloft, a medication used to combat depression, he receives treatment from a therapist who helps him sort through his thoughts, he participates in a loving community with the other patients on Six North (the floor he is on), he forms a romantic relationship and lets go of harmful relationships, and he has a family who loves and supports him. All of these things contribute to his healing, but at the very end Craig points to making art above these things. He chooses to change his life so that he can solely focus on his art. Creative expression becomes his main “anchor,” a term he uses as something that eases stress and enables him to be himself. However, besides the fact that it distracts him from stressful responsibilities, Craig does not clearly describe why art can keep him centered.

Craig and Vizzini seem to believe they can heal themselves completely through art. But in placing their entire identity in one activity, they risk creating the same sets of problems that caused their depression. Art, while it helps relieve the pressure of modern life, can become a problem if the artist begins to see themselves as receiving worth solely from their identity as an artist. Even though art cannot completely heal in the way Craig and Vizzini believe it does, it somewhat mysteriously provides a sense of healing. Why does art provide Craig with healing and hope?

In order to accurately understand how art helps Craig, it is essential to understand Craig's particular experience with depression and suicide. This will involve analyzing Vizzini's history, relevant psychology and sociology studies, and finally Foucault's theories regarding modern society. Each aspect allows for a clearer picture of Craig's anxiety and depression as it presents the situation that contributes, and some argue creates, the suicidal ideation in Craig.

Vizzini bases Craig's depression on his own experience. In an interview, Vizzini explains story of how he called a suicide hotline and ended up admitted onto a psychiatric floor. For Vizzini, the journey of success, pressure, and depression began with his admission into a highly competitive high school in New York City (Dawson). At age fifteen he started writing a column for *New York Press*. At nineteen he published *Teen Angst? Naaah...* which is a "quasi-autobiography" drawn from his own columns. Vizzini then shifted to fiction and wrote *Be More Chill*. This popular young adult novel brought lots of success and a two-book contract. Unfortunately, the success had an adverse effect on Vizzini. He checked himself into a psychiatric ward after calling a suicide hotline in the winter of 2004, claiming the "the intense pressure he felt to emulate his previous success" caused the suicidal thoughts (Dawson). Vizzini returned to writing after his hospitalization, believing this kind of art provided valuable relief.

At one point in the interview, Dawson asks Vizzini if the practice of writing was "therapeutic – or even cathartic" during his experiences as a teenager and at the time of the interview. Before answering this question, Vizzini responds with George Orwell's claim that "the number one reason writers write is 'to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood'" (Dawson). While this comment seems to just be funny at first, especially after reading Vizzini's work, it reveals a lot about Vizzini's motivation to write. By citing this idea, Vizzini reveals his internal desire to talk back to and eventually remove the negative pressures the adult world placed upon him as a teenager. Writing became his response to the world and a way of asserting his own identity in an adult realm. By becoming a writer and embracing art over some of the more stereotypically successful careers, Vizzini refutes the expectations of the adult influences in his life. Beyond allowing him to express his internal angst, he seemed to believe

being a writer would create an identity outside of the performance and pressure filled expectations of adulthood.

Vizzini's perspective of the adult world and how it impacts his work naturally informs Craig's worldview. In the text, Vizzini's attitude is best exhibited in Craig's thoughts regarding his high school, Manhattan's Executive Pre-Professional High School. The high school represents the adult world's voice in persuading Craig to become a certain type of person. It is an elite public school, modeled after the one Vizzini attended, which focuses on training the students to become high-achievers. Only elite students who pass an extremely hard exam are admitted to this public school, but it boasts highly successful graduates (Vizzini 49). Craig believes in order to lead a successful life he must perfectly complete everything expected of him at this high school. Keep in mind Craig's definition of high school goes beyond classes and homework. Instead, he believes his entire future rests on every email he responds to, every club he joins, every homework assignment he finishes, essentially every single small decision made in a typical day (Vizzini 15, 385). All of these things Craig terms "tentacles," and they deeply impact his feelings of hopelessness. When first introducing the tentacles to the reader, Craig says, "the Tentacles are the evil tasks that invade my life" (Vizzini 14). A tentacle is an assignment, responsibility, or other duty that requires lots of small steps before completion. Dwelling on the tentacles, or everything he has to do in order to get a good job in the future, understandably causes intense anxiety.

Craig develops irrational thinking by placing his entire future on every decision. For example, by missing an email for extra credit in one class, Craig believes he will receive a ninety-six percent in the class instead of a ninety-eight point six percent, which will cause him to only be accepted to a second-rate college, which results in an insufficient job, which will not pay

him enough money, which will cause severe depression, which will lead to “the ultimate thing – homelessness” (Vizzini 15). While this conclusion is irrational, it represents the deep pressure he feels to excel in everything. Craig places unreal expectations on himself because of this high-pressure environment.

Vizzini does not write only to snub adult society’s expectations of him, he also writes because the art provides a deep sense of relief. Vizzini found writing therapeutic initially because it enabled him to express himself in the adult arena. But after his hospitalization, he found catharsis in fiction writing – a stronger experience than therapeutic writing (Dawson). For him, writing the end of *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* was cathartic, but writing is not always so healing. At times, Vizzini finds the writing process “maddening or workmanlike” (Dawson). In response to a question regarding his early success, Vizzini states; “I’ve always been less comfortable with success than failure. Failure has a simpler solution: try something else. Success requires that you *keep it up.*” (Dawson, original emphasis). The idea of the pressure to “keep it up” is exactly what Craig feels in regards to his high school experience. The initial success in passing the entrance exam meant he had to “keep it up” throughout the rest of his life – and the pressure was too high. Vizzini’s interview clarifies Craig’s initial struggle with success and failure.

Academic pressure is a large part of Craig’s suicide ideation, but multiple other factors influence his thinking. Many psychologists help in understanding Craig’s situation, as they study suicide in adolescents and especially adolescent males.

Eleftheria Wolff investigates the types of societal pressure adolescents face and how it relates to suicidal ideation. She found the attitude towards young men who commit or attempt suicide is vastly different from society’s reaction to young women. One of the main problems for young men is the pressure to “keep their feelings to themselves” (Wolff 10). This leads these

struggling men to sometimes use harsher methods that will “all but guarantee completion” (Wolff 10). Young men find themselves floundering under the pressure to “be a man,” assuming it entails complete success, absolute control over oneself (and often others), and an inappropriate level of stoicism. Craig expresses difficulty with these types of things throughout the novel, especially in regards to sharing his emotions within a support system. His family is supportive, but he refuses to share with them, or even admit he needs help (Vizzini 126). Craig compares himself with other teenagers consistently, especially his best friend Aaron. Aaron does not provide the support Craig needs; instead, he encourages Craig to express his masculinity through risky behavior like drugs and alcohol. The type of man Aaron encourages Craig to become places more pressure on his social performance and contributes to his feelings of failure. These feelings of being not enough end up influencing his suicidal ideation, as they convince Craig he needs to be someone he is not.

The community Craig enters after his acceptance to Executive Pre-Professional High School also negatively impacts his mental health. The majority of Craig’s life before junior high consisted of studying for the entrance exam to the highly competitive high school, so after he gets in he begins to develop a social life. Aaron invites him to a party, introduces him to marijuana and alcohol and Craig partakes in an effort to fit in with his peers. He immediately feels out of place, but then chooses to try and emulate the other partiers. The presence of the girl he is interested in, Nia, mainly contributes to his behavior. As the party goes on, it becomes obvious that Nia is not interested in Craig, but Aaron. The spurned affection upsets Craig, but he keeps his hurt to himself. His heartbreak grows and convinces him he is worthless in the eyes of his peers. According to Wolff, involvement in a community can be a major factor in suicidal thoughts. The concept of mattering involves being apart of a group of people, whether it be

friends or family, whose relationships provide meaning for the adolescent's life. Wolff claims adolescents who feel that they matter and are needed by other people will not consider suicide, and then explains "if one matters to others, then they are considered to have values; if they do not matter to anyone, they are then considered to have no value and are worthless" (Wolff 11). Dukhiem, a theorist Wolff uses for support in her study, claims suicide is unlikely once an individual feels apart of a group. The idea of belonging is important to understand Craig's development throughout the text. During this first year of high school, Craig convinces himself he is an outsider who will never belong.

Negative thoughts regarding oneself, the world, and the future often leads to suicidal thoughts and ideation. Craig suffers from a number of these negative thoughts; particularly the stress to achieve and belong. Strain resulting from psychological suffering due to competing pressures and conflicts between one's behaviors and social values may lead someone to consider suicide as the only option to stop the unbearable strain (Kim 426). Someone who feels pressured to achieve anything and everything possible while struggling to handle all their assignments might experience such strain. Zhang developed the Strain Theory of Suicide to explain the socio-psychological mechanisms prior to suicide ideation. "Strain resulting from psychological suffering due to competing pressures and conflicts between one's behaviors and social values" may lead someone to consider suicide as the only option to stop the unbearable strain (Kim 426). Craig believes ending his life is the only option to relieve his impending sense of failure.

There is one final psychologist to consider in understanding Craig's ideas of suicide in particular. Stephanie Galligan and her team of psychologists and sociologists studied the link between male gender-role conflict and suicide ideation. Galligan and her researchers linked the idea of resilience, or the ability to adapt to stress and adversity, with gender role conflict to see if

there was a correlation to suicide ideation. Because adolescence is a time of gender “intensification,” young men often experience social pressures from their peers and families to fit into certain roles. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Craig panics about not being successful and therefore being unable to provide for a family, therefore not fulfilling his expected role as a provider. Craig’s ideas regarding success are often “persistent worries about personal achievement, competence, failure, status, upward mobility, wealth, and career success” (Galligan). Galligan found men who believe success is a vital factor in their male identity were more resilient. Craig does not function well under this success as an ultimate standard; therefore he is not as resilient to the pressures of Manhattan’s Executive Pre-Professional High School. He needs something to give him resilience, support, and a positive view of himself. Again, this relates to the pressure teenagers face to be a certain person, to have certain characteristics, and form a positive identity because of other’s perceptions.

These psychologist and theories present ideas as to why Craig developed depression and suicidal thoughts. It developed out of a variety of situations -- his social life, his experience at school, and his attitude toward the future. But these scholars merely give us the fact that people experience these thoughts and feelings, along with occasional references to how social situations or certain experiences might factor into the thought development. Theorists, such as Foucault, explain why modern society instills this kind of thinking into so many people. By understanding what exactly is going on in Craig’s world, we can better comprehend why art can alleviate the pain.

Foucault’s ideas regarding the prison system act as a metaphor for society’s larger change towards controlling and limiting the individual. He explains the social change that occurred when prisons came to be standard in most communities in a book titled *Discipline and Punish*. When

society moved from an individually based punishment to a carceral or closed system a number of things changed. Instead of morally bad things being viewed as one act an entire identity became attached to one action. For example, the act of stealing branded someone a thief. One action becomes an entire identity and one's identity depends solely on their actions. Thus, prisons became an institution meant to correct behavior and identity; people could "by technical elaboration and rational reflection, be 'normalized'" (Foucault 1492). As society became more organized, people began to standardize behavior to supervise their fellow man. Foucault explains it this way; the prison system "was the emergence ore rather the institutional specification, the baptism as it were, of a new type of supervision – both knowledge and power – over individuals who resisted disciplinary normalization" (Foucault 1492). Everyone had to meet a certain standard of behavior, to adhere to their position in life, as various institutions such as the schools, prisons, churches, governments, and even families mandated.

Exercising the power of normalization exists in a number of different systems, but many people are unaware of the normalizing powers around them. Power translates through this closed system, as citizens are given an institution's standard and expected to live up to it. Foucault calls it a "new form of law: a mixture of legality and nature, prescription and constitution, the norm" (Foucault 1498). Men and women everywhere are evaluating if their neighbors, their friends, and even their family fit into what is considered acceptable. Essentially, this is a subconscious "keeping up with the Jones," except the Jones exist in every social, economic, and religious sphere. Foucault links the social eye watching and shaping behavior with the surveillance system in prisons – the panoptic or panopticon. The panopticon is the eyes of a community watching and influences an individual's behavior. Constantly being under surveillance, like people in a prison, means people act knowing they are being watched. Therefore, according to Foucault, people act

according to what society demands of them, not necessarily their true desires. Men and women shape their desires to fit the world's expectations. It is impossible to know oneself because "knowable man - soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called, is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination-observation" (Foucault 1499). Humans are often constructed by the power structures, not their own instincts.

Foucault uses the term "norms" to explore how the panopticon works in modern society. Foucault sees norms as being central to the modern idea of power. As modernity rose, traditional power could no longer control complex societies and people, thus "certain techniques of power which up to that point had been employed only within religious contexts were generalized to society more broadly" (Taylor 49). Norms were the way to do this; expect people to look, behave, and act a certain way in order for society to run. Later on, Foucault linked the normative with disciplinary power. But this disciplinary power does not seem harsh or cruel; rather, it is "always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation, to a sort of normative project" (Taylor 49). By deciding what is normal, and therefore how people should act, norms enable modern power. A norm perpetuates the power by seeming so natural and legitimate that the people are blind to the constant manipulation they are under (Taylor 52). Of course, this occurs when the norms do not function to distribute power, but to oppress people by solidifying power in certain places.

The norms created by the panopticon greatly influence each person's sense of identity. Behavior, occupation, expectations and other imposed labels become sources for identity. For instance, people who dance professionally tend to equate part of their identity to dancer. Undergraduate students find many ways to distinguish their identities, such as their major, the dorm they live in, or even where they were born. Often times they feel subconsciously pressured

to act in a certain way because of these identifying factors – perhaps in a way they would not normally or naturally act. A person from Chicago might like deep-dish pizza just because they are expected to and never stop to think about if they in fact enjoy it. Individuals can end up acting according to the labels given to them rather than their innate or preferred patterns of behavior. Society's institutions impose identities and expect certain behavior based on the labels they are given.

Unfortunately, the panopticon places the pressures of normalization on every individual. Craig feels this pressure – he wants to be successful in the business world because that is what his middle-upper-class white brooklynite society tells him he needs to be. Everyone around him is always watching, whether they realize it or not. The panopticon tells Craig to act as any other teenager would, to live up to the standard, to perform perfectly with little effort, all because it is normal. This pressure eventually overwhelms him.

Some might argue that Foucault's theory might only relate to Craig's overall experience, not specifically the situation that cause his suicide ideation. Craig feels the most pressure to perform from his school. Schools are a part of the normalization process, providing ways to make children believe their performance in school equates their individual value. School can be understood as society's way of creating children who will be active, but submissive, members of their class. Metka Čeplak's study examines the pressures placed on children to do well in school. The sociologists directly relate it to Foucault's ideas in *Discipline and Punish*, as they understand the panopticon as apart of the school system.

The attitude towards education is positive as long as the student is doing well or trying their best. Education is not only mandatory; it is considered “a crucial personal investment in the future, a condition for personal well-being, and a passport to a better and more secure future

(Čeplak 1093). Čeplak examines young people's experience with the school success and failure in the midst of "growing uncertainty and individualization of responsibility for social and personal welfare in the 1990s and 2000s in Slovenia" (Čeplak 1094). This study postulates that the pressure to do well in school is a result of normalization on a variety of levels. Academic standards, where people literally can be placed at, below, or above average are a part of normalization and a way of indicating the individual's place in society.

One of the main problems normalization causes in school is an emphasis on competition. Competition shifts the focus from student learning to student performance, forcing the students to out-perform each other in order to ensure their academic survival. Craig often mentions that his whole future rides on his grades as a freshman in high school. He sees life as a domino train, where each test is a domino that must be knocked over at the precisely right angle so that he will be successful by the adult world's terms. This is why he feels overwhelming pressure by each tentacle, as seemingly small tasks bear unbelievable weight and produce extreme anxiety.

Schools and Foucault's picture of prisons in *Discipline and Punish* are uncomfortably similar: constant examination and surveillance, both of which become an intellectual and physical panopticon (Čeplak 1096). Examination is often hierarchical and an example of the relationship between power and knowledge; "it deploys force and establishes truth, it provides criteria for categorization and correction" (1096). It is not merely the teachers watching the students, but the panoptic hovers over every aspect of the school. The administration, the parents, and even peers observe and influence the actions of the other students. The pressure from all of these things can cause an overwhelming fear of failure in letting down all the people looking for success in young faces. This panopticon also gives false promises. Young people, like Craig, can believe hard work in one's academics "ensures success and provides security, acceptance, even

love” (1109). Besides being false, this idea leads to a cycle of lost expectations and often a negative self-perception. Education can be apart of the negative normative powers, especially as young people transition to adulthood.

Craig, like many young people, ties his value as a person to his performance at school. He begins to equate his internal value to his academic success in middle school, as he intensely studied for the Executive Pre-Professional High School entrance exam. After starting at the high school, however, Craig’s definition of school and what he needed to succeed in expanded. For Craig, success in school meant joining the “right” clubs, participating in as many extracurricular activities as possible, volunteering consistently, playing multiple sports, all while earning a 4.0 grade point average (Vizzini 385). In Craig’s mind, “failing at school is failing at life” (385). Craig draws his identity, worth, and future from his performance in school and places high expectations on that performance. This is a major cause of his depression and what makes him want to commit suicide; he believes he is worthless because he is not performing perfectly in school. Craig believes suicide is the best escape from the pressure of the panopticon.

Vizzini experienced the result of the panopticon, the constant watching and expecting, when he explains the situation that caused him to consider suicide. He claims the expectation of future success he received after signing a book contract caused intense pressure and lead him to contemplate suicide (Dawson). Even though he began writing for newspapers at the age of fifteen, the book contract created a different type of pressure. Writing became a way to earn his value. He became a successful novelist who needed to stay successful to keep a central part of his identity – the exact problem Foucault outlines in his theory. He needed something to combat the powers of normalization. The question, for both Vizzini and Craig, is if their focus on art can adequately fend off the normative powers of the panopticon.

Art and the process of art making can help guide people resist the process of normalization, if approached in the correct way. Art Therapists and psychologists do not often link Foucault's theory to their practices and theories; instead, they explain how to help struggling people. The processes they provide, however, do teach people how to understand their true identities and realign their self-perception from harmful normative powers. This is particularly a part of the conversation for adolescent art therapy, as therapists and psychologists are attempting to understand why exactly art helps people who struggle under the weight of the panopticon. Now that the depths of Craig and Vizzini's problem have been examined, it is time to see how and why art provides relief, therapy, and even catharsis.

Bruce Moon, an art therapist who specializes in working with adolescents, believes "art making has a vital role in the successful psychotherapeutic treatment of adolescents" (5). Moon wrote a book on how art works as a therapy for young people, based off his experience as an art therapist. He organizes his thoughts into ten different factors to explain how the creative process helps teenagers. They are as follows: "art as the natural language of adolescence, art as engagement with stuff, art-making as existential expression, art-making as personal metaphor, art-making as relationship, art-making as structure and chaos, art-making as empowerment, art-making as reparative experience, art-making as self-transcendent hope and art-making as a way of being with adolescents" (174). Each of these curative aspects point to why people experience change through art and community, and thus, an aspect of why Craig experiences relief through art. While each aspect is quite intriguing, only the ones that directly relate to Craig and Vizzini's experience will be analyzed.

Moon notes that adolescents typically have a hard time expressing their deep feelings, a communication skill that does not emerge until early adulthood (Moon 175). Teenagers then face

the difficult task of expressing deep feelings before they have fully developed an adequate way to verbalize them. Moon answers this issue by claiming the adolescent naturally communicates through actions, metaphors, and image. Adolescents communicate the meanings of inexpressible things through behaviors (Moon 175). Art allows the teenagers to express themselves in a natural language and understand their own feelings and thoughts by engaging with something external. Craig, as previously noted, does not communicate his emotions well with anyone besides his therapist. He remains closed off from his friends and cannot express his feelings with his family. Craig does not do this out of spite or even apathy – he simply does not know how to express why killing himself seems to be his only option. He admits it openly; “So why am I depressed? That’s the million-dollar question, baby, the Tootsie Roll question; not even the owl knows the answer to that one. I don’t know either” (Vizzini 49). Once he starts making art, however, he is able to express his thoughts and experiences in order to adequately process them.

Craig’s typical drawings are what he calls “brain maps.” Eventually, Craig wants to explain to Noelle (the romantic interest) his feelings. He draws a couple with intricate brain maps, but he includes a bridge between the man and woman’s mind to symbolize the connection between the two of them (368). He never explains the meaning of the picture; he simply shows it to her and allows the art to speak for his mind.

Moon has found art allows adolescents a platform to engage with the “stuff” of the world. Creating a physical image allows the adolescent artist to understand their own psyche to an extent, but they grow after reflecting on their work. This process goes beyond catharsis – the “adolescent transforms powerful destructive inner forces into constructive, meaningful objects. The process of making art is a process of organizing chaotic emotional material into a coherent, restructured product” (Moon 177).

The next feature is art as existential expression. Adolescent artists are encountering the “ultimate concerns of existence” (freedom, aloneness, guilt, responsibility for one’s life, inevitability of suffering, longing for meaning) through their creations (Moon 178). All artists, according to Moon, approach this struggle through their art. Art-making as personal metaphor addresses the fact that while making art, adolescents are creating images that “articulate, express, free and define their maker” (Moon 180). The art sheds light on the internal world of the artist. Craig literally puts his mind on the page, as he draws maps of the brain. The idea for the brain maps originated in his love for copying maps as a child, something Vizzini says he did himself at age four (Dawson). But Craig uses it as a way of expressing his internal world, like in the example of his sketch between himself and Noelle, and his perceptions of other people. On his last day in the hospital, Craig begins to sketch brain maps to match the other patient’s personalities. In each one, he connects personality, history, and aspirations in the way he constructs each person’s mental highways.

The process of art making also empowers the artist by allowing them to face their own struggles. Moon claims art does not attempt to cure the patient’s problems or lessen the tension they live within, rather, it “enables them to live courageously” within their struggles and difficulties (Moon 184). Near the end of his hospital stay, Craig credits art as a viable “anchor” for his mind. Dr. Minerva asks about his anxiety and fear of failure, which still consumes his mind. After some thought, Craig brings her the brain maps he worked on during the group art activities and explains that art is a good anchor for his life (Vizzini 390). She asks him why drawing brings him relief, to which he replies, “it’s successful; it feels good; and I know it’s good. When I finish one of these up I feel like I’ve actually done something” (Vizzini 390). Art helps him feel joy despite the pressures of the panopticon. At the beginning of his story, suicide

is his anchor, his best way of grounding himself through escape. Art provides a different kind of escape, one that allows Craig to live within his struggles.

Moon continues to articulate art's restorative powers and thus the benefits Craig would experience as he continues to draw, paint, and create. Art gives the individual practice in changing their perspective. Generally, the artist begins to see the world differently after they first discover art. Art becomes an introduction to "free will and the power of choice and creation" (Moon 184). For Craig, the process of completing a piece of art allows them to feel functional because he is finally able to produce something instead of dwelling on all he is supposed to do. The freedom of choice during creation inspires confidence for adolescents who truly need it.

Moon also believes art making inspires self-transcendent hope. This idea of hope is essential to a therapeutic experience, as without genuine hope there is little progress. Moon notes that there is little hope without faith in the process and a desire, however small, to get better. Moon believes when anyone makes art, they are expressing hope, they are "giving to others beyond the self" and believing the other is worth the gift (Moon 185). Creating a piece of art encourages adolescents to move beyond themselves and to interact with the world around them. Art absorbs adolescents, moving them to a thing outside themselves. Craig uses art to interact with his community and create others-focused relationships, both of which help him heal and move him toward a healthy self-concept. On his last day, Craig starts to map out the other patient's brains. He wants to give something to the people who provided support and created the accepting community that helped him grow. The portraits are an expression of how Craig understands each one of the people he has grown to love. For example, he sketches a fellow patient, President Armelio's, brain with multiple six-lane highways running parallel through his mind, which "hardly even connect because Armelio doesn't mix up his thoughts" (Vizzini 400).

He does one for each one of the patients and, in exchange, requests a way to contact them after they are discharged. This desire to continue relationships and invest in their lives reveals how Craig has, in a sense, become unstuck in his mind. Instead of the impending doom of creating a successful future, he wants to do something valuable for other people in his sphere of influence.

Besides the brain maps for the other patients, Craig reveals the self-transcendent hope of art making in his desire to volunteer to lead group activities. He attends various activities including movie, games, music, and of course art, all of which are lead by a volunteer. Later on in his stay Neil, a musician, comes in to introduce the patients to different musical instruments. After the session, he asks Craig to come in and volunteer once he is better. As Craig leaves the hospital, he lists all of the things that inspire him to live. In the midst of this long list he thinks “Volunteer. Go back to Six North. Walk in as a volunteer and say hi to everyone who waited on you as a patient. Help people...Show them how to draw” (Vizzini 444). He wants to move beyond himself and give others hope through art.

Ultimately, art becomes Craig’s new place to derive value and identity. He begins to work for something outside his prior social group’s expectations for success. Instead of continuing at Executive Pre-Professional High School, he asks his parents if he can transfer to Manhattan Arts Academy (Vizzini 415). Craig no longer pursues perfect scores and a stellar resume, instead he focuses on making art. Art therapy often results in a new sense of identity and purpose for adolescents. According to Moon, art frees them to construct their reality and create their own “story, purpose, and destiny” (Moon 171). Moon observed the following changes of thought and attitude as a result of art therapy; “Making art can help to solidify identity, encourage acceptable risks, lessen suicidality, transform self-loathing, soothe anger and ease

abandonment fear. Hope is there for adolescents if they are willing to create it” (172). Craig’s hope exists because he found a new place for his identity and internal value – his artwork.

Art has the potential to become another normative power in Craig’s life. If Craig relies on success as an artist for his personal value and ultimate goal, he will fall into the same sort of problem he faced at Executive Pre-Professional High School. But if he uses art to continually break through societies expectations instead of it becoming a new expectation, it can function as an escape from the panopticon. Art provides an avenue for this because it is typically considered to be outside of the norm. Because the book finishes just as Craig begins the rest of his life, there is no way to conclusively know if the stability he achieves through art lasts for the rest of his life. But the important thing is to understand why Craig believes it will last and what exactly about art allows him to break away out of the normative powers of the panopticon.

At this point, it is important to distinguish between two philosophies in the art therapy world. Art therapy tends to be an umbrella term for two different therapeutic philosophies: art as therapy and art psychotherapy. David Edwards explains the history of art as therapy, focusing more on the therapeutic and cathartic effects of art than the act of decoding art in order to understand an individual. To begin, Edwards focuses on the differences between Adrian Hill’s idea of “art *as* therapy” and Margaret Naumberg’s use of “art *in* therapy.” (Edwards 1). Art as therapy focuses on the healing potential of art, while art psychotherapy stresses the therapeutic relationship between the art therapist, the client, and the art. The difference mostly lies in what people believe is most healing – the creative process itself or the presence of a therapeutic relationship. Most art therapists believe in a synthesis of both philosophies. Craig does not see an art therapist and his doctors do not attempt to understand his mind through his art. Therefore, the

relationship between an art therapist and patient does not apply to Craig's experience. Craig is most impacted by the creative process.

The aim of art as therapy is to help the artist better understand themselves, their situation, and hopefully lead to a positive change. Edwards refers to Storr's idea of creativity within life as art making "offers a means of 'coming to terms with, or finding symbolic solutions for, the internal tensions and dissociations from which all human beings suffer in varying degree'" (Edwards 4). This concurs with the prior research and makes sense in light of Craig's actions. According to this idea, art must be more than the recreation it is for the other psych patients in *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. Craig believes the tensions caused by society's expectations of him can be relieved by art; he can find stability in the art process because it provides peace in his mind. He allows it to mean more than most of the other patients do and leans into the healing powers by letting art greatly influence his life.

Because he starts to allow art to shape his understanding of reality, Craig reconfigures his negative view of life. The biggest and life-saving shift is in his self-perception. Instead of seeing himself as a failure, Craig begins to understand what type of work he excels in and enjoys doing. The symbols he creates provide the best clue to his actual progress. Edwards makes a clear statement about the benefit of art in therapy: "It is through symbols that we are able to give shape or form to our experience of the world. This may provide the basis for self-understanding and emotional growth" (Edwards 13). In his journey to heal his mind, the first thing that Craig creates is a brain map. The maps he made as a child inspired them, but in this new stage he is expressing an internal desire to map his own mind, to understand why his brain is out of alignment with the rest of his body. The maps express his internal need to find "the Shift" and make it happen. The maps are an attempt to organize and navigate his hurting mind.

The connection between image and mind is clearly apart of Craig's journey. This is why psychology and art studies work together so well. Studying the mind helps interpret art, just as studying art also helps psychologists understand an individual's mind. Art therapy arose from this combination in psychology and art studies (Edwards 30). Carl Jung is pointed to as the father of all types of creative or expressive therapies. Jung encouraged his patients to draw pictures as a part of their analysis for two reasons. First, Jung found the image acted as a mediator between the patient and their problem, as well as between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Secondly, the creative act allowed the patient an opportunity to "externalize and thus establish some psychological distance from their difficulties" (Edwards 30). Eventually, Jung termed the process "active imagination," and believed it provided access to the unconscious just as dreaming does. According to Edwards, Jung's main contribution to the development of art therapy was his promotion of art making as a path to psychological awareness (Edwards 32). Craig becomes more aware of his intellectual desires and what truly brings him satisfaction and joy through his artwork.

Jung offers a great deal of insight into why art provides therapeutic relief.. In the way that Freud is seen as the father of psychology, Jung is understood to be the father of creative therapies. Modern art therapists, such as Pat Allen, base their practices off of Jung's thoughts and writings, especially a book titled *The Red Book* (also called *Liber Novus*). Allen's thought is the idea that visual art allows for insight into what is going on in the inner world of a person. The art Craig makes provides insight into his internal world, even if Craig and his doctors do not take the time to decipher each and every symbol. At the very least, Craig's art allows the readers to understand his mind more than he might.

The history of *The Red Book* and Jung's practice reveals how art will allow Craig to experience relief while creating. Carl Jung began his career with Freud, but eventually broke off and began his own practice. As many know, the break began a period of depression for Jung, in which he began to perform some psychological experiments in *The Red Book*. Jung had to "find his way to a new line of psychological thought. The crisis that ensued from this rupture threw him back into himself and into the cauldron of transformation" (Stein 283). Jung especially struggled through his personal purpose and goals, as he struggled with self-doubt and uncertainty. Because of various dreams and other events recorded in *The Red Book*, scholars such as Murray Stein believe it was written in the midst of and "existential crisis that came upon Jung" and lasted for about sixteen years (Stein 285). This book is filled with images from Jung's mind along with written reflections that present a psychologist trying to perform therapy on his own self. At the end of the sixteen years, Jung believed he achieved the unity with his unconscious and a subsequent healing.

*The Red Book* changed Jung's mindset towards mental healing completely. Both his patient's experience and his personal healing lead him to believe he found a new way to provide complete healing. Jung believed Christ's position as savior should be "dismissed for modern times...he is now entitled to a decent retirement" (Stein 289). Men and women must rise up and take responsibility for their own dissatisfaction. Jung believed people could individually redeem themselves through an inner process called "individuation, a psycho-spiritual path to individual wholeness and person divinization" (Stein 289). Jung takes the mysteries of ancient myths and theology and places them in the psychological domain of the individual, believing the same mystery is within the modern person's consciousness (Stein 294). Furthermore, he believed he found a way for humans to make themselves whole and satisfied.

Craig's concept of how to fulfill himself and provide meaning is similar to Jung's ideas. Creation allows Craig to feel whole and to experience wisdom and salvation from a meaningless and painful life. These insights about *The Red Book* and Jung's theory of individuation provide a deeper lens of how to understand Craig's experience.

Jung needed to find "a method to heal himself from within" because of the fears and depression he faced (Chodorow 1). He decided to try to find a way to engage with the unconscious and to discover the impulses and images that characterize it. According to a seminar he gave in 1925, Jung remembered his time as 11-year-old boy who was deeply engrossed in building games. He remembered that creative time made him feel alive and developed lively spirit within him. In order to recreate this, Jung began to play the same games he did when he was a child. The "symbolic play" he participated in led him to remember dreams and interact more easily with his dreams and unconscious. Jung describes his process almost like descending stairs – he would step down, survey his internal landscape, and attempt to understand the symbols he saw. As he translated emotions and fears to images he became more calm and able to understand his emotions. The art he created was an attempt to understand the fears and feelings his unconscious created. As he began to use more expressive techniques like drawing, painting, and writing, he gave symbols to his experiences and therefore understood them more clearly. Eventually, Jung termed this process active imagination.

Just as Jung turned to building games in memory of the joy it brought him as a child, Craig spontaneously begins drawing a map, just as he did as a child. The first time Craig draws a map brain he notes something very specific about his mind and the image of a map. He starts to see how the map could be a brain, "if all roads were twisted neurons, pulling your emotions from one place to another, bringing the city to life" (Vizzini 292). But then he applies the symbol to

his own struggling brain: “A working brain is probably a lot like a map, where anybody can get from one place to another on the freeways. It’s the nonworking brains that get blocked, that have dead ends, that are under construction like mine” (Vizzini 292). He stops the analysis at that point and just focuses on drawing. Jung might have encouraged Craig to further understand the exact image and what it shares about his brain, but Craig finds relief in simply finishing the maps. Creating and the little bit of analysis did provide some sense of healing, as his roommate Muqtada immediately notices Craig is doing better. For the first time in a long time, Craig is able to sleep well without medication (Vizzini 294). The art provided a brief sense of relief, one that will grow as Craig continues his own journey.

Craig’s thought that his mind might be like a city under construction relates to a story Jung always told along with his lectures on active imagination. It is called “the story of the rainmaker” (Chodorow 19). The story explains the connection between internal and external disorder. A village in China experiences a drought and called for a rainmaker. This rainmaker lives far away, but comes to the village to help. Once he is there, he goes off into a hut by himself for three days. On the third day, there is rain. When asked, the rainmaker says he did not do anything. Instead, he comments on how when he came to that village, everything there was out of balance. The chaos and disorder disrupted his mental stability, so, he decided to go into “a little hut to be by myself, to meditate, to set myself straight. And then, when I am able to get myself in order, everything around is set right” (Chodorow 20). This story describes the aim of active imagination: to straighten the disordered psyche. Craig might consider it completing the construction.

In order to set oneself straight, as the rainmaker did, it is essential to understand Jung’s concept of the unconscious and conscious mind. In an essay titled “The Transcendent Function,”

Jung presents his ideas for how to unify the mind through creative expression. Before Jung settled on “active imagination” as the term to describe this method, he referred to it as “the transcendent function.”

Jung begins this essay with an explanation of the conscious and unconscious. He explains how and why they are separated, how they cause discord within the human mind, and thus how psychologists can help. Carefully, he includes the fact that rarely is one person healed completely by a change in their psychological attitude (Jung 46). Because psychiatrists cannot provide a single cure, Jung asks the question “what kind of mental and moral attitude is it necessary to have towards the disturbing influences of the unconscious, and how can it be conveyed to the patient?” (Jung 46). The answer, he believes, is to remove the separation between the conscious and the unconscious in order to create balance and communication between the two. This is the “transcendent function,” when one combines the tendencies of the conscious and the unconscious and can operate as a whole person (Jung 47). This is done through understanding the symbols of the unconscious. Jung explains that in order to produce the transcendent function, one must have the unconscious material (Jung 49). He believes dreams may point to the unconscious, but they are often too overwhelming for the individual to understand without the help of an analyst. Therefore, one must find another way to interact with the unconscious. Sometimes, it is through “ideas ‘out of the blue,’ deceptions and lapses of memory...spontaneous fantasies” (Jung 50). The random images or thoughts that pop into one’s head unannounced may be the best place to start deciphering the conscious. These are the things some people feel driven to paint or draw, which some art therapists use to understand what is going on in their internal world.

Jung stops himself before explaining the rest of the process to comment on why there is a need to unify the unconscious and conscious, rather than just render the unconscious empty or useless (Jung 50). He believes one must regulate the unconscious because it shares valuable information with the individual, even if they do not recognize it. For instance, he refers to Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the fourth chapter of Daniel. Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream to mean if he did not humble himself, he would become like an animal. After Nebuchadnezzar suppressed this influence, he eventually started to act like a cow. The unconscious must be examined, especially for people who are bothered by a disordered mind.

Jung believes if the unconscious does not make itself known the individual must actively search for a way to understand it. Usually this occurs in a "depressed or disturbed state of mind for which no adequate cause can be found" (Jung 53). It involves sinking into the mood and becoming "as conscious as possible" of the fantasies and other associations which come up and then trying to decipher those symbols. The conscious works to understand the unconscious and creates a picture that transcends the unconscious and the conscious mind. Once the conscious has the raw material of the unconscious, whether it is in images or dreams, it must properly assimilate the information into the individual's life (Jung 54). Jung does not have a clear process of how to perfectly merge the two, but in his experience, it generally goes one of two ways: creative formulation or understanding (Jung 55). These elements must regulate each other, so the analysis and the art both take equal roles in unifying the conscious and unconscious. Overall, transcendent function "is a way of attaining liberation by one's own efforts of finding the courage to be oneself" (Jung 60).

Craig is not actively searching out his unconscious in the same way Jung does, however, he uses art as a way to break away from society's negative expectations and follow his intuitions.

Before he makes his first brain map, his unconscious is in duress because it wants Craig to create, not to study finance. After he starts to draw his conscious mind realizes what the unconscious was trying to express: Executive Pre-Professional High School is leading him away from a life that will lead to actual fulfillment and joy. Craig's unconscious and conscious join when he creates, as in that action he found the courage and the avenue to act according to his actual identity.

The unconscious, according to Jung, causes problems for daily life because modern culture forces the conscious to develop faster than the unconscious. Science and technology created a tempo that leaves unconscious behind, "forcing it into a defensive position which expresses itself in a universal will to destruction" (Jung 349). Jung believes the political and social agendas of the day are responsible, as they "pursue the goal of lowering the level of our culture by restricting or altogether inhibiting the possibilities of individual development" (Jung 349). This ties back to Foucault's ideas about the panoptic: Jung sees how men and women are pushed into certain identities by the expectations of their surroundings. The panopticon leads people to section off their personalities and skills into useful and useless categories, ultimately persuading them to please the dominant culture and not live according to their true nature. Craig turns to his true self when he decides to pursue art. In this choice, he allows his true self determine his destiny, not the forces of society. By paying attention to innate instincts, like when Craig returns to the maps he loved to draw as a child, Craig creates unity between his conscious and unconscious and begins the healing process.

The impact of Foucault's panoptic and the negative impact of society's expectations are relieved through the transcendent function. Before Foucault put together his theory of the panopticon, Jung identified similar ideas as far as society's negative impact on individuals. Jung

believed all mental functioning sprang from an internal conflict, the pull between “opposing forces” (Storr 75). Foucault considers these “opposing forces” to be the expectations brought about by the panoptic versus the individual’s innate desires. The unconscious has better access to the individual’s true nature, while the conscious conforms quickly to society’s panoptic pressures. Those who have diverged too far from the unconscious, who act only out of their society-driven conscious mind, need individuation the most (Storr 76). Individuation refers to the unification of the conscious and unconscious and the process of truly one being able to live out of their actual self. As expected, Jung found most of the people he helped were considered successful according to society’s standard. For most of their lives, they submitted well to the panopticon, completing every expected behavior beneath the eye of the community. But at this point, most are in desperate need for individuation. Jung comments on why many people go through a mid-life crisis in the panoptic society; “it is just when success has been achieved, often, in Western civilization, at about the point of mid-life, that a man begins to ask whether there might not be more to life than success” (Storr 80). Questioning the meaning of their achievements produces a conscious level of discord within the person’s conscious and unconscious, as the individual realizes an internal longing for unity between their actions and desires.

Craig’s sense of internal discord comes after a period of worldly success even though he is not middle aged. Jung believes the person who realizes they are unbalanced must “rediscover those aspects of himself which have been neglected” in order to achieve wholeness (Storr 80). Those who have completed the process have, in Jung’s words, “an attitude that is beyond the reach of emotional entanglements and violent shocks – a consciousness detached from the

world” (Storr 81). Their conscious attitude is characterized by acceptance of who they are and all that they are.

Jung compares this process of coming to terms with one’s life and oneself as a religious experience. Jung found his own “myth” to ground his life in, which gave his life “purpose and value” and “brought about a reconciliation between the conflicting sides of his own nature” (Storr 83). His new purpose is to live according to one’s internal desires and motivations, not the ones pressured on them from society. Individuation, for Jung, is a religious search for wholeness and unity within one’s mind that leads to peace with their world. Craig’s long awaited “Shift” is when his internal desires are united with his external behavior, when his unconscious desire to create art is united with his plan for school, and when his mind chooses to sustain life because it is on the track to wholeness.

Art allows Craig to break through society’s preconstructed labels for him, the labels that caused intense anxiety and depression. It creates a habit of engaging his unconscious urges and fostering a healthier mindset. The great “Shift” he yearns for throughout the book occurs because his identity can now be found in something that fulfills his unconscious desires. Craig interacts with his unconscious when he is creating, which allows him to experience Jung’s idea of wholeness, Moon’s list of benefits, and ultimately have the courage to be himself over fitting into the negative norms created by the panopticon. Craig’s story reveals how the act and process of creation can alleviate the pressures of the panopticon and heal the psychological damage done by normalization, as it provides unity between the unconscious and conscious mind, enabling Craig to be himself.

Craig’s brain-map will probably always have areas under construction. Art provides him the tools – in this case a pencil and paper – to build his mind the way he wishes to create it. He

can build and shape his experiences to fit his actual desires and not base his life on what society tells him will lead to success.

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