

Émile Nelligan's Homosexuality and Schizophrenia

Robert Dole

Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada

Émile Nelligan, Quebec's most famous poet, was hospitalized for schizophrenia in 1899 at the age of nineteen. He remained confined to mental hospitals until his death in 1941. This article proposes a new hypothesis for the etiology of his schizophrenia by suggesting that it was caused by the repression of his homosexuality.

Keywords: Émile Nelligan, homosexuality, schizophrenia

Introduction

Sigmund Freud, in his comments on Daniel Paul Schreber's account of his schizophrenia entitled *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, promulgated the theory that schizophrenia was "perhaps invariably" caused by the repression of homosexual wishes, desires and drives, according to Michael Mahoney in his brilliant book *Schizophrenia: The Bearded Lady Disease* (Mahoney, 2003, p. iii). It is thus reasonable to assume that the origin of Emile Nelligan's schizophrenia was the repression of his homosexuality. This subject may seem taboo to some, since Nelligan has enjoyed having the title of Quebec's "national poet," but times have changed and no one has any problem with recognizing that Quebec's most famous writer of the present moment, Michel Tremblay, is openly homosexual.

Nelligan's Schizophrenia

Although certain writers have made the mistake of calling Nelligan's mental illness a "neurosis" (Brissette, 1998, p. 68), there can be no doubt that it was not a neurosis at all, but rather a very severe psychosis. The diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia for Nelligan's illness is now undisputed. A neurosis does not require hospitalization. Nelligan was hospitalized for forty years and suffered from a dreadful, debilitating form of madness whose horrors most normal people cannot begin to imagine.

Until now, three suggestions have been made as to the cause of Nelligan's dementia. The first is his "bisanguinité" or mixed parentage (Brissette, 1998, p. 68). The second is his isolation (*Ibid.*, p. 68). The third is the books that he read (*Ibid.*, p. 70). All three of these hypotheses are totally ridiculous. The majority of people on this planet Earth speak more than one language or dialect, because they have grown up in a bilingual or polyglot environment, and yet they are not schizophrenic.

It is true that Nelligan as a child constantly faced the challenges of having an English-speaking father of Irish origin and a French-speaking mother of Canadian origin. From his earliest childhood, Nelligan showed a

Robert Dole, Ph.D., Retired Professor of English, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada. He also taught English at the Universities of Metz, Bonn and Lodz. He is the author of four books: *Le Cauchemar américain*, *Comment réussir sa schizophrénie*, *Mon Allemagne*, and *What Rough Beast*.

preference for his mother as opposed to his father and for the French language as opposed to the English language. The frequent conflicts that this situation provoked were certainly a strain for the young Nelligan, but hardly dreadful enough to engender a debilitating schizophrenic psychosis that would lead to forty years of confinement in mental hospitals.

Nelligan's Homosexuality

The major writers who have studied Nelligan have never raised the question of his sexual orientation, as though it were simply unthinkable that it could be anything other than heterosexual. One hundred years ago, it would have been taboo even to suggest that a brilliant poet could be a homosexual. We now know better.

There are three main reasons to believe that Nelligan had a homosexual orientation, even if there is no evidence that he actually had homosexual experiences. The first is the total absence of any obvious heterosexual relationship. He writes about romances with beautiful young women in his poetry, but his poems are works of fiction and do not reflect his real nature or his actual experience.

The second reason is the feminine atmosphere in which he was raised. One writer says: "Nelligan grew up in a world ruled by nourishing women, his mother, his sisters, and angels" (Brissette, 1998, p. 123, my translation). According to Paul Wyczynski, the author of the definitive biography of Nelligan, Nelligan's sister Eva told their aunt Victoria that Emile was their mother's "*chouchou*" ("darling") (Wyczynski, 1999, p. 43). The fact that Nelligan chose his mother's language, French, as the medium of his poetry, despite the protestations of his English-speaking father, shows that he identified more with his mother than with his father. The complicity and solidarity with the mother as opposed to the father is typical of homosexual boys. The young homosexual sees the world through his mother's eyes and adopts feminine attributes and attitudes.

The third reason to assume that Nelligan had a homosexual orientation is simply Freud's hypothesis that the most common cause of schizophrenia in young men is the repression of their homosexuality. Having homosexual desires, phantasies, longings and urges while being convinced that one has to do everything possible to repress them drives one insane. It is a permanent battle with oneself, which one is destined to lose by becoming psychotic. When Nelligan was a boy and adolescent, homosexual activities were totally taboo. They were condemned by the church and society as a whole, which considered them to be a sin, a crime and a mental illness. Indeed, the very word "homosexual" was not coined until 1892, thirteen years after Nelligan's birth. The first published account of homosexual activity occurred in 1926 when André Gide's book *Si le grain ne meurt* came out. Nelligan simply could not accept the nature of his libido, and this is what drove him insane. This made him very similar to Friedrich Nietzsche, who was confined to a mental hospital at the same time for the same reason.

Conclusion

I am an expert on the relationship between the repression of homosexuality and schizophrenia because I was driven insane by a psychiatrist whose conversion therapy I was forced to undergo at the age of sixteen, in the United States. At the time, homosexuality was considered to be a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association, although just north of the border the Canadian Psychiatric Association said that it was not a mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental illness on December 15, 1973. I would like it to apologize for psychiatrists' destroying the lives of young homosexuals before that date.

The American Psychoanalytic Association has already apologized. Now it is time for the American Psychiatric Association to do the same. You can read my sad story in my book *What Rough Beast*.

If Sigmund Freud, Michael Mahoney and I are correct in saying that the principal cause of schizophrenia is sexual repression, psychiatrists who claim that it results from a biochemical disequilibrium in the brain are sadly mistaken. It has not occurred to most psychiatrists that confinement in mental hospitals is the worst treatment possible for schizophrenics, since it deprives them of the possibility of having an active sexual life.

References

- Brissette, P. (1998). *Nelligan dans tous ses états: Un mythe national*. Montréal: Fides.
- Dole, R. (2017). *What rough beast*. London: Austin Macauley.
- Gide, A. (1926). *Si le grain ne meurt*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Mahoney, M. (2003). *Schizophrenia: The Bearded Lady Disease*. Bloomington, Indiana: First Books Library.
- Schreber, D. (2000). *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. New York: The New York Review of Books. (First published in 1903 in Leipzig)
- Wyczynski, P. (1999). *Émile Nelligan*. Montréal: Bibliothèque québécoise.