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**Drawing out the Darkness: Ellen Forney's *Marbles* as a Graphic  
Memoir on Depression**

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## Abstract:

Ellen Forney's graphic memoir *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* offers a profound exploration of the challenges associated with bipolar disorder, effectively humanizing and destigmatizing mental health issues. This research paper examines Forney's innovative narrative style and artistic techniques, emphasizing how her vivid illustrations and personal storytelling disrupt the romanticized notion of the "tortured artist." By visually depicting the complexities of mania and depression, *Marbles* enriches the discourse surrounding mental health and illustrates the unique capacity of graphic literature to convey lived experiences. This paper will also explore how Forney's work serves as a catalyst for discussions on identity and self-acceptance.

**Keywords:** Graphic memoir, bipolar disorder, mental health, Ellen Forney, art therapy, identity.

## Introduction:

In recent decades, graphic literature has gained a lot of attention as a medium for examining personal and social issues. This genre combines visual art with narrative storytelling to express complex themes, especially in relation to mental health. Among them, graphic memoirs have emerged as powerful tools through which authors can express their lived experiences, challenge the norms of society and evoke empathy in readers. This trend is elaborately represented in Ellen Forney's *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* through graphic expression to understand the intricacies of the bipolar disorder and how it might affect an individual (Chute)

The bipolar disorder is a central theme of Forney's memoir and by extension, reflects the broader cultural perceptions of mental illness. Mental health issues have been stigmatized for so long that they lead to misunderstanding and marginalization of those affected. Forney's work confronts such societal attitudes head-on, as she presents a candid portrayal of her struggles with bipolar disorder. By combining her personal story with others that are written by or referenced about artists and writers, Forney places her journey into a broader cultural context at the intersection of creativity and mental illness. (Forney) It does more than humanize the narrative but also encourages readers to challenge how they think about mental health and the stories of mental illness.



## Discussion:

The author takes on the challenge of changing the landscape of literary portrayals of depression and bipolar disorder with the use of graphic memoir format that allows her to speak the emotional complexities of her experience in a visceral manner. She uses imagery to describe her highs and lows. This close examination of strife in the artist's region of identity, creativity, and mental health challenges the traditional forms of literature and provides a new perspective on the lived experience of a mental illness. In doing so, Forney adds not only to the discourse on mental health in literature and art but also open up the discussion on a broader scale towards the role of creativity that can help cope with problems in the psychological realm.

Graphic memoirs are a distinctive form of literature that intertwines text and images into a multidimensional narrative experience. The genre gives authors opportunities to express complex emotional and psychological states that traditional prose cannot easily accomplish. The interplay of visuals and words enhances the storytelling, this format particularly works to deal with the issues in mental health as it might be able to encapsulate the fragmented, often chaotic nature of mental illness to make the abstract more tangible and relatable. (Waldman) Notable graphic memoirs include works that touch on themes of mental health, bringing the genre forward. For example, Aliie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* uses humor and stark visuals to talk about her experiences with depression and anxiety. Because of the candid and often comedic approach of Brosh, readers can relate and identify with her struggles (Leslie). In a similar vein, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* explores identity and family dynamics, focusing also on the relationship with her father and her experiences of obsessive compulsive disorder. Bechdel's work is a great example of how graphic memoir may not only explore complex emotional topography but also address some of the neglected border issues.

The visuals from Forney's graphic memoir are also very powerful to express what it is to experience the full range of her mental illness. Forney's art is not just there for decoration; it is central to understanding the subtleties of her emotional landscape. Forney's style during manic episodes is characterized by chaotic, vibrant, intricate illustrations. The visuals she uses to express the mood of mania, as often described in its symptomatology, encapsulate its energy, impulsivity, and euphoria. A lot of bright colors and dynamic lines are used to describe everything with exaggerated forms that reflect feelings of overwhelming excitement and creativity. Forney's frenetic pace during these episodes is mirrored in her art, giving readers a more primal



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experience of the high of her condition. This chaotic representation effectively communicates the euphoria and intensity of manic episodes, evoking feelings that the reader too could experience. In stark contrast, Forney's depiction of depression is minimalist, subdued, and heavy. The visuals during these episodes often feature muted colors and simpler forms, reflecting the inertia, despair, and disconnection that characterize her depressive states. Forney's use of negative space and less intricate designs conveys a sense of emptiness and allowing readers to grasp the weight of her emotional struggles. This jarring visual shift does not only underscore the difference between her manic and depressive states but also underscores the isolating nature of depression, in which even the act of creating can be a burden.

Thus, graphic memoir format is also one that allows an immediate connection to the reader, for the visual can bypass some of the barriers that text may present to the audience. It's this immediacy which deepens the emotional impact on these stories, rendering them further more relatable and accessible. Forney's work best explains what makes graphic literature such an essential tool for combating stigmatization regarding mental illnesses by allowing the reader intimate, often turbulent views through the lives of people battling with bipolar disorder.

Mental illness and creativity have been in an interesting and romantic relationship throughout history. Everyone talks about Vincent van Gogh, Sylvia Plath and a few others. However, their mental illness is hardly ever mentioned alongside their masterpieces. For instance, Van Gogh is remembered only for his colors and emotions but he fought many battles with mental illness such as depression and psychosis whole of his lifetime. The poetic and prose works by Plath are characterized by the vibrancy of her emotional world, to such an extent that her real emotional experience was quite closely linked to her sufferings of depression and ideations about suicide. This romanticized perception is that mental illness breeds artistic brilliance, which can be found in many aspects of cultural narratives and shapes popular expression. This stems from the cultural narrative surrounding mental illness that equates it with a heightened ability to be creative, leaving her wondering whether stabilizing her mood would cut down her artistic output. In Forney's reflection, there is a deep-seated anxiety that she will lose the very heart of her creativity, which she believes is linked to her manic episodes. But as her journey unfolds, she starts to reframe this relationship, understanding that her creativity is not defined by her mental state but that managing her mental health will enhance her artistic abilities and allow her to create from a place of stability rather than chaos.



Forney's memoir offers a nuanced critique on the romanticization of mental illness as a source of artistic brilliance. As if to recognize the historical context glorifying the connection between creativity and mental health struggles, she questions whether this really has to be suffering before one can succeed. Forney claims that this romanticized perspective is dangerous, as it perpetuate the stigma surrounding mental illness and makes people believe they have to suffer for art. She shares her experiences to emphasize that mental health treatment can go hand in hand with creativity and a stable mental state maybe more sustainable and fulfilling for an artistic practice. It acts as a call to balanced understanding of the relationship between mental illness and creativity in which the value of mental health is recognized without being diminished by the contributions of those who have struggled with these issues.

The beginning of Forney's story has a reluctance that is laced with fear and shame related to her mental health disorder. These feelings are heightened by societal stigma about mental illness. This hesitancy is not scarce in individuals who have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, the fear of being labeled or judged often runs them away. Such a situation is the kind of stigma that deters one from taking any steps to cure and embracing his/her condition. She thinks back over her early resistance to drug therapy and talk therapy, fearing that these interventions would take away her creativity and artistic identity. The impact of having bipolar disorder on Forney's self-perception is profound. Throughout her memoir, she struggles with the dual nature of her identity - that of an artist as well as a person dealing with a mental health condition. Forney's experiences underscore the tension between her artistic self and her battles with her mental illness. She often wonders if creativity runs in tandem with manic episodes, which leads her into identity crisis and confusion where she can't help but crave both diagnosis and to dread its impact on creativity. Such a battle exemplifies an even greater syndrome among patients suffering from mental diseases in that they sometimes identify with their disease rather than self. Which is followed by self-doubting or even feeling no competence.

Forney's process in accepting herself is central theme of Marbles. With respect to the difficulties of bipolar disorders that she faces, gradually accepting her condition and never being defined by the medical jargon is how she treats it. This reconciliation of how scary it is to lose creativity with the concept of possibly making her art greater as she finally manages (Velentzas) Forney's narrative focuses on the need to accept oneself in order to transcend stigma and have a healthier attitude toward her identity. At the end of her memoir, she expresses a newfound empowerment wherein she realizes that her bipolar disorder



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experiences add to her unique perspective as an artist rather than detracting from it.

The therapeutic value of visual storytelling extends to both creators and readers. Forney's process of creating Marbles can be seen as a form of self-therapy, allowing her to process her experiences and emotions. It provides individuals with a means to explore their feelings and experiences in a safe and constructive way. Engaging in doodling or sketching has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety levels. The act of drawing can be meditative, helping individuals to focus their thoughts and calm their minds. Research indicates that creative activities can lower cortisol levels, the hormone associated with stress,

The act of drawing can be meditative, helping individuals to focus their thoughts and calm their minds. Research indicates that creative activities can lower cortisol levels, the hormone associated with stress, thereby promoting a sense of well-being. (Shukla et al) The act of sketching can encourage self-reflection, allowing individuals to visualize their thoughts and feelings. This process can lead to greater self-awareness and understanding, which are essential components of mental health recovery. By externalizing their internal experiences, individuals can gain clarity and perspective on their challenges.

The primeval urge to draw and doodle is deeply rooted in human nature, reflecting a fundamental instinct for self-expression and communication. This innate drive can be traced back to early human history, where drawing served as a means to convey ideas, document experiences, and connect with others. Engaging in drawing and doodling allows individuals to explore their emotions, thoughts, and fears in a tangible form, fostering creativity and personal insight. Doodling, in particular, has been shown to enhance cognitive processes, aiding memory retention and focus. It acts as a subconscious outlet for thoughts and feelings that might be difficult to articulate verbally. (Malchiodi) The act of drawing can also evoke a sense of playfulness and freedom, encouraging exploration without the constraints of perfectionism. This connection between art and human experience highlights the universal need for creative expression as a way to navigate the complexities of life. Ultimately, the primeval urge to draw serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a vital tool for emotional processing and connection.

Additionally, readers of the graphic memoirs often find solace and validation in the stories of others, which can help them feel less isolated in their own struggles. The act of sharing and consuming these narratives foster a sense of community and understanding.



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## Conclusion:

The memoir invites empathy for those with bipolar disorder and emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and treatment. By visualizing the complexities of mania and depression, Forney enriches the discourse on mental health, demonstrating how graphic literature can convey lived experiences uniquely. Furthermore, Marbles opens avenues for future research on the therapeutic value of art in emotional processing and societal understanding. Ultimately, Forney's work exemplifies the transformative power of creativity, suggesting that even in darkness, art can illuminate paths toward connection and healing.



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