

LSD

by Yee Jee Tso

LSD-25, or “acid” (d-lysergic acid diethylamide) is a psychedelic drug that induces hallucination, and is the most potent known hallucinogen. It is also a legacy. Its far-reaching effects on humankind have been sewn into the fabric of our history, and have ultimately changed the face of psychology and psychiatry, providing interesting insights into certain psychological and psychopathological aspects of art and religion.

During medieval times, a rash of paganism had forced authorities into a drastic “War On Witches” regiment. Those believed to be involved with witchcraft and like activities were subject to severe punishment. One such story is that of Mary McMeekan, daughter to Bill, a successful grain farmer and devout Catholic.

At first, everything seemed normal at the McMeekan household, but mysterious events began to unfold. Every evening, shortly after dinner, strange noises could be heard in different parts of the house. The colours and textures of their walls would seem to move and melt together, very subtly. No one would speak of the phenomena for fear of being shunned. So each member of the family harboured feelings of anxiety and alienation, and in turn the unexplained events began to happen more frequently.

These events occurred gradually over the course of more than a year. Then after a particularly heavy dinner on Christmas Eve, things suddenly turned for the worse. Out of nowhere Mary uttered a deafening cry of pain and terror, and then started to dance uncontrollably. Her body moved frantically in random jolts and spasms, and although there was no music there was an odd sense of rhythm in her freakish movements. She cried out again, begging for salvation from the colours that were everywhere, trying to eat her alive! This left no question in the minds of the rest of the family – Mary was a witch! She was responsible for the mysterious occurrences in their home and now she was possessed by the devil. With a tear in his eye, Bill sent one of his sons to summon the judge and his guards, while the rest of them hogtied Mary on the kitchen floor. Later that night she was tried and burned at the stake in the town square. Bill spent the rest of his life torn with guilt and stricken with grief.

It is widely believed that the witch-hunts of the Middle Ages were not so much caused by religious influences as by pharmacology. At least different alkaloids can be found in a fungus called ergot that attacks rye and other grasses. These

alkaloids can include d-lysergic acid amide and d-lysergic acid-1-2-propanolamide, which are backbones of the LSD-25 molecule. Those who ate bread baked with the ergot-tainted rye were unknowingly consuming acid, in what could have been massive overdoses. This was the source of the victims’ bizarre behaviour, the misunderstanding of which led to thousands of such persecutions.

Hundreds of years later in the late 20th century, LSD has been described as a tool in the training of mental health professionals for its ability to provide otherwise unattainable insights into the minds of the mentally ill. It was once proposed as an aid in psychotherapy, and as treatment in alcoholism and opioid addictions. However, because controlled studies failed to confirm its therapeutic value and because of excessive psychological reactions in some cases, those therapeutic uses of LSD were rendered impractical.

According to Dr. Stanislav Grof, author of *LSD Psychotherapy*, “...microscopic doses in the range of 25 to 100 micrograms were sufficient to produce changes in perception, emotions, ideation, and behaviour...sometimes a single [dose] could have a deep influence on the personality structure of the subject, his or her hierarchy of values, basic attitudes, and entire lifestyle.”

Some of the indications of an LSD experience have been likened to those of schizophrenia: visual and auditory hallucinations, erratic behaviour, disorganization of goal-oriented activity and, occasionally, paranoia and distress.

In fact the most common adverse effect of LSD is a temporary episode of panic – a “bad trip,” as in Mary’s case. Other phenomena include: “flashbacks” – the recurrence of drug effects long after it is metabolized, as experienced by some 15 percent of users. These anomalies in human experience indicate a potential not only for greater knowledge and hence the need for more research, but also for volatile dangers in dealing with drugs such as LSD.

References:

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The Street Sense column addresses issues involving substance abuse. Yee Jee Tso is a Vancouver-based actor, musician, and freelance writer.