

CREATIVITY

We use the term “creative writing” throughout this book, but while we examine various writing processes in some detail, we spend less time

discussing creativity itself. Yet the adjective modifying the noun is thought by many of our academic colleagues to make us a discipline apart. (Some of them suspect we are practicing a form of black magic in our classrooms.) Even other English teachers claim they're not capable of responding to an original student poem or story—although those same teachers may have spent their entire careers writing and talking about canonical poems and stories. What makes *creative* writing so different from the expository writing done in other classes across the curriculum? And what exactly is creativity?

Readers of the authors' earlier articles and books will know that our response to the first question is that, in many ways, creative writing isn't so different from any other kind of writing. We believe all writing—even the one-minute, uncorrected e-mail—involves some creativity, some thinking, some *imagination*. In this belief, we have not always been in accord with some of our academic colleagues. Most significantly, a sharp distinction is often drawn between creative and critical thinking. Definitions of “critical thinking” vary, but they generally point to a complex, advanced, and organized cognitive activity that includes the willingness to question one's own beliefs and to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. Teaching students to think critically is a focus of many educators in the more “serious” disciplines, but for creative writers such as Katherine Haake, this focus on metacognitive reflection (thinking about thinking) is an essential part of the creative writing process as well. Indeed, book-length studies such as Haake's *What Our Speech Disrupts* (2000) insist that intense and persistent self-assessment are crucial to a writer's development.

Granted, beliefs about the origin of creativity have changed over time. Dean Simonton notes that “creativity was originally viewed as something mysterious. According to the ancient Greeks, creativity was literally the gift of the Muses, the goddesses who presided over all major forms of human creativity. This basic idea persisted in various forms well into the Italian Renaissance.” Gradually, however, those studying creativity came to acknowledge that it involved a strong element of conscious thought, that creativity was at least as much a rational as a natural phenomenon: “the creative person was someone who applied a logic, method, or set of techniques to a given domain of expertise” (Simonton 2004, 83). And this application of logic and method does not occur in a vacuum. Without education and socialization, “sophisticated inborn capabilities simply cannot exist. Outside mythology, nobody begins life having proclivities that can guarantee the emergence of high abilities” (Howe 1999, 188).

In other words, highly creative people are *made* at least as much as they are *born*. Shakespeare could never have displayed his creative genius if he hadn't learned how to write and been given at least a modicum of schooling; Mozart could never have composed his music if his father hadn't taught him how to read the notes on the staff and play the pianoforte.

Consequently, most current explanations of creativity see it resulting from both nature and nurturing. Creativity studies is now an active and interdisciplinary field, drawing on biology, psychology, medicine, literature, sociology, and, indeed, any area of inquiry that attempts to explain why and how humans do what they do. Nearly all theorists differentiate between creativity and simple novelty: "A merely novel idea is one which can be described and/or produced by the same set of generative rules as are other, familiar, ideas. A radically original, or creative, idea is one which cannot" (Boden 2004, 51). (The disparity between creativity and novelty is not dissimilar to the distinction Coleridge draws between imagination and fancy in his *Biographia Literaria*.) To demonstrate true creativity, "the task as presented [to the creator] must have been somehow open-ended, with no clear and straightforward path to a single solution." Moreover, the expression of creativity must be valued by people other than its creator: "the [creative] product or response cannot merely be different for the sake of difference; it must also be appropriate, correct, useful, valuable or expressive of meaning" (Amabile and Tighe 1993, 9). In other words, "Creativity is the interplay between ability and process by which an individual or group produces an outcome or product that is both novel *and* useful as defined within some social context" (Plucker and Beghetto 2004, 156).

Indeed, the social reception of a work determines whether its creator is classified as a genius or a crackpot. The following comment about visual artists can be applied—with slight modifications—to creative writers: "One does not become an artist simply by making art. To earn a living and develop a self-concept as a bona fide artist distinct from a dilettante, one must be legitimated by the appropriate art institutions. Only when the artist's work has been recognized by the *field* of art—the critics, historians, dealers, collectors, curators, and fellow artists—can the artist continue to focus his or her energies on creating art. . . . If an artist creates artwork that does not fulfill the needs of the field, that artist will be dismissed or ignored" (Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi 2004, 37).

Admittedly, many creative writers make a living from their teaching salaries rather than from selling their writing, but even if their publications

don't earn sufficient money to pay for rent and food, those publications are nevertheless essential: without them, creative writing professors at colleges and universities lose their jobs. And someone who claims to be a creative writer but has no validation from recognized professionals in the field will very likely be "dismissed or ignored."

Ironically, while creativity must ultimately be endorsed by the larger world, highly creative people are often snubbed or scorned for their eccentricity. And since creativity involves disruptions of routine ways of thinking, it's not surprising it has long been associated with mental illness (see also "Therapy and Therapeutic"). In the *Ion*, Plato has Socrates chastise the title character because he passes on the madness that inspires poets to the listeners of their poems. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus says: "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact." Shakespeare goes on to show how "strong imagination" leads to a kind of hallucinatory power:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (V.i)

Any student of literature will quickly be able to bring to mind another half-dozen literary examples equating madness with creativity, but creativity theorists tend to be skeptical of received ideas about their subject and insist on compiling documentary evidence to support conventional wisdom. In *Strong Imagination*, his book-length examination of creativity and mental illness, Daniel Nettle does just that. Among the studies he cites is one by Kay Jamison analyzing the lives of all the major British and Irish poets born between 1705 and 1805. Jamison learned "that to be a poet in Britain in the eighteenth century was to run a risk of bipolar disorder 10–30 times the national average, suicide 5 times the national average, and incarceration in the madhouse at least 20 times the national average" (2001, 142). In a more recent study Nettle cites, Arnold Ludwig scrutinized the biographies of more than a 1,000 people who achieved eminence in their fields from 1960 to 1990. Ludwig found a strikingly high 59 percent incidence of psychiatric disorder among the people he studied, although this percentage "pale[s] into insignificance when compared with those observed

in creative pursuits: 87 percent for poets, 77 percent for fiction writers, 74 percent in the theatre” (144). In standardized diagnostic interviews with students enrolled in the Iowa Writers Workshop, Nancy Andreason “found a staggering 80 percent of the writers qualified for a diagnosis of affective disorder” (143). Yet another study, published in *Science* magazine, found “[a]bout twice as many writers as nonwriters had some form of mental disorder” (Holden 1994, 1483). For Nettle, at least, the results are “very clear”: “There is an increased risk of psychosis and related disorder among those who become eminent in the creative arts” (147).

Not everyone, however, is entirely persuaded that there is a definitive correlation between mental illness and creativity. Holden commented on another study—this one focusing on women writers—“[T]he variety of problems in the writers . . . studied suggests that a state of general ‘unease’ and ‘tension’ is conducive to creative activity. But being weird doesn’t make you creative . . . it only acts as a spur in those with a creative bent” (1994, 1483).

If madness has traditionally been considered one avenue to inspiration, drinking and drugs are another time-honored way to spark creativity, especially among novices. Yet the majority of serious writers find they cannot write as well when they are impaired as when they are sober. And, of course, sustained abuse of any stimulant may lead to addiction and debilitation—the opposite of creativity. A number of writers have moved from intoxicants to spiritual pursuits in order to achieve their creative moments. They pray, meditate, go on retreats, sit zazen. Jane Hirshfield finds “the willing embrace of pain” in the search for creativity and enlightenment a “mystical paradox”: “Fasting, sleeplessness, and exposure to the elements are part of many rites of passage. Just as Whitman allied himself with the most difficult human circumstances, Dickinson too acknowledges the necessity of pain in the enduring transformation of the threshold” (1997, 219). (Of course the latter poet famously reminds us, “Much Madness is divinest Sense.”)

Whether it is following a regimen of mindfulness or drinking oneself to the point of oblivion, writers engaged in these pursuits clearly believe they can achieve creativity through conscious effort. However, even if we no longer quite believe in the Muses, creativity is still often thought to come unbidden, when the writer is least expecting it. Some writers believe that true creativity is largely spontaneous and ruined by later attempts to gussy it up. “First thought, best thought,” Allen Ginsberg often said,

echoing Zen artists and poets from the past. The romantic poets, too, “promoted spontaneity with varying fervor . . . for Wordsworth, poetry is *emotion recollected in tranquility*—so a first draft’s passionate outpourings could presumably be revised. But a Shelley would likely leave them untouched, since the moment of frenzied inspiration for him provided truthful revelation supreme” (Abra 1988, 428). While most experienced contemporary writers would side with Wordsworth, believing that revision is an essential and creative part of the writing process, many beginning writers sympathize with Shelley, holding fast to the belief that the first thing that comes from their pens or keyboards should be cherished—immaculate and uncorrected.

Creativity appears to be an intrinsically human trait, though some researchers have tried to transfer this quality to sophisticated computer programs. Super computers may be able to defeat chess champions, but so far there have been no budding writers in the bunch. Story writing programs are unable to overcome several apparently insurmountable obstacles. Most importantly, it is currently impossible to program the complex psychological processes of human beings—the heart and bone of creative writing—into a machine. Computers that can predict hurricanes and economic trends cannot arrange the vast and idiosyncratic background knowledge of human experience, which every writer brings when she sits down to her desk, into anything with much aesthetic value. Moreover, when research is necessary to aid a plotline, computer programs are unable to discern what information is valuable to the story and what should be discarded. Granted, random word generators have managed to produce some interesting Language poetry, but for the time being, “Emily Bronte . . . is not in the picture. Occasionally, however, today’s computers can *seem* to do almost as well as Aesop” (Boden 2004, 177).

Ultimately, literary creation is an act of human will. It signifies the creator’s belief that something does not exist that should exist, that the world needs redefinition or redirection or reconstruction. “A creative contribution represents an attempt to propel a field from wherever it is . . . to wherever the creator believes it should go” (Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2002, 10). Even if a writer’s goals are more modest, he is likely to agree with Jean Baker Miller that “[p]ersonal creativity is a continuous process of bringing forth a changing vision of oneself, and of oneself in relation to the world” (1976, 24).