

Verbal Creativity, Depression and Alcoholism An Investigation of One Hundred American and British Writers

FELIX POST

Background. An earlier study of 291 world famous men had shown that only visual artists and creative writers were characterised, in comparison with the general population, by a much higher prevalence of pathological personality traits and alcoholism. Depressive disorders, but not any other psychiatric conditions, had afflicted writers almost twice as often as men with other high creative achievements. The present investigation was undertaken to confirm these findings in a larger and more comprehensive series of writers, and to discover causal factors for confirmed high prevalences of affective conditions and alcoholism in writers.

Method. Data were collected from post-mortem biographies and, where applicable, translated into DSM diagnoses. The frequencies of various abnormalities and deviations were compared between poets, prose fiction writers, and playwrights.

Results. A high prevalence in writers of affective conditions and of alcoholism was confirmed. That of bipolar affective psychoses exceeded population norms in poets, who in spite of this had a lower prevalence of all kinds of affective disorders, of alcoholism, of personality deviations, and related to this, of psychosexual and marital problems, than prose fiction and play writers.

Conclusions. A hypothesis is developed, which links the greater frequency of affective illnesses and alcoholism in playwrights and prose writers, in comparison with poets, to differences in the nature and intensity of their emotional imagination. This hypothesis could be tested by clinical psychologists collaborating with experts in literature on random samples of different kinds of writers.

The previous biographical study (Post, 1994) had demonstrated that in contradiction to traditional views detrimental personality deviations and mental disorders were not excessively frequent in geniuses or, as we would now say, in men with highest creative achievements. There were only two exceptions: visual artists and creative writers were much more often afflicted by disabling personality traits as well as alcoholism, and writers suffered around twice more often than all other high achievers from affective disorders. Almost identical findings have been reported by investigators of female and male artists, among them by Andreasen (1987), Jamison (1989, 1993), and Ludwig (1992, 1995). On account of the small number of adequate biographies available, women writers have been excluded from this and the earlier study, but Ludwig (1994) reported that 75% of attenders at a women writers' conference gave histories of clinical affective illnesses, more than four times as many as matched control subjects; other conditions, especially substance misuse and accounts of sexual abuse were also far more common than in the controls.

Thus, it may be regarded as established that, in contrast to people with other kinds of creative achievement, creative writers are excessively prone to depressive and perhaps also to manic disorders, as well as to alcoholism. There is a strong suspicion of a link between creative verbal ability and affective as well as related psychopathology, which calls for investigation.

Method

The first step was to investigate whether this excess of psychopathology was related to any specific type of creative writing, for example whether, it has been generally thought, poets were more often mentally abnormal than other writers. For various reasons, among them my ignorance of other than English and German poetry, famous poets had been omitted from the previous study. Anthologies of English (Gardner, 1972) and American (Ellmann, 1976) verse supplied the names of poets selected by experts. Again, living poets and those who had died before the 1840s were excluded, and there was a

Table 1
100 writers of poetry, prose fiction, and plays, ranked for severity of psychopathology

	Penalty points for psychopathology						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Poets	Bridges, R. S. Bryant, W. C. Douglas, K. Hood, T. Ransom, J. C.	Barnes, W. Hunt, L.	Blunden, E. C. Browning, R. Clough, A. H. Fitzgerald, E. Housman, A. E. Longfellow, H. W. Lowell, J. Owen, W. Stevens, W. Whitman, W. Wordsworth, W.	Arnold, M. Brooke, R. Frost, R. Hopkins, G. M. Tennyson, A. Thomas, E. Thoreau, H. D. Whittier, J. G.	Lindsay, V. O'Hara, T. Pound, E.	Clare, J. Olson, C. Robinson, E. A. Roethke, T.	Berryman, J. Crane, H. H.
Poets, also prose writers	Holmes, O. W. Lanier, S.	de la Mare, W. Peacock, T. L.	Hardy, T. Kipling, R. Landor, W. S.	Davidson, J. Graves, R. Jarrell, R. Sandburg, C. Williams, C. W.	Swinburne, A. C.	Poe, E. A.	
Poets, also play writers			Yeats, W. B.		Auden, W. H. Eliot, T. S.	Lowell, R. T. S.	
Prose writers		Orwell, G.	Bennett, A. Conrad, J. Dickens, C. James, H. Trollope, A. Walpole, H.	Cooper, J. F. Wells, H. G.	London, J. Thackeray, W. M. Wolfe, T.	Hemingway, E. Joyce, J.	Fitzgerald, S. F. Waugh, E.
Prose writers, also poets		Buchan, J.	Crane, S. Huxley, A. Melville, H. Piner, A. W. Shaw, G. B. Williams, E. Galsworthy, J.	Chesterton, G. K. Lawrence, D. H. Stevenson, R. L.	Anderson, S. Hawthorne, N.		Faulkner, W.
Play writers					Boucicault, D.	O'Neill, E.	
Play, also also prose writers				Barrie, J. M. Collins, W. Maugham, S. Priestley, J. B. Wilder, T.			
Play and prose and poetry writers			Synge, O. N.	Cummings, E. E. Hughes, L. O'Casey, S. Wilde, O.		Lewis, S. Thomas, D.	Williams, T.

Penalty points were given on a scale of one point each for potentially handicapping personality traits, mild functional disorders, and substance dependence, and two points each for seriously dysfunctional personality deviations, disabling functional illness, and substance abuse.

small number of men for whom adequate biographies could not be traced. British and American prose fiction and play writers of the previous study were re-examined, and in order to bring numbers up to the convenient figure of 100 some well-known American and British prose and play writers were included.

The method of extracting and analysing the facts in the biographies was the same as in the 1994 study, and the classifications of DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) were again applied.

Results

Total psychopathology in poets, prose writers, and playwrights

Table 1 gives the names of 100 men ranging from those who had been poets alone, to men who had written plays, but in most instances like those above them in the table had also published short-stories, novels, or poems. The subjects are ranked for amounts of psychopathology expressed as the sum of 'penalty points'. One or two points were given respectively, for only potentially handicapping

personality traits or for seriously dysfunctional personality deviations, for mild functional disorders or for disabling functional illnesses, and for substance dependence or for substance abuse.

Thirty-five men had been solely successful as poets; 16 as prose writers, and five as playwrights, alone. Several of these 56 men, e.g. Shaw and Henry James, had tried their hands unsuccessfully at novels or plays. The other 46 subjects had achieved recognition for two or three different kinds of writing. The small number of purely stage writers was due to several biographies having to be rejected because they were largely journalistic efforts concerned with goings-on in front and behind the scenery, and not sufficiently informative or searching in matters of personality and mental health.

In keeping with this heterogeneity, the writers were distributed among three subgroups: first, a homogeneous group of 35 poets; second, 41 labelled novelists/poets because they had published either only prose fiction or also poetry; third, there resulted an even more heterogeneous group of 24 playwrights, consisting of five men who had been solely dramatists, and 19 writers who, apart from prose fiction and/or poetry, had also created performable plays. In this way prevalences of affective and other conditions could be examined in relation to high achievement in poetry, in prose fiction, and in play writing. Inspection of Table 1 suggests that, in terms of scoring no or only one penalty point, success in poetry might, against expectation, be associated with less psychopathology than prose fiction or play writing. In confirmation, the average scores for psychopathology came to 2.68 points in poets, 2.71 points in novelists/poets, but to 3.29 points in playwrights.

Personality deviations

In the previous study difficulties had arisen from the absence in the DSM of depressive and cyclothymic personality disorders. Since then Hirschfeld (1994) put forward convincing evidence for the existence of a depressive personality disorder distinct from proneness to mild and brief depressions. Therefore, a category of depressive personality and, without benefit of recent literature, one of cyclothymic personality have been employed. Deviant personality traits were assembled in clusters, as suggested in DSM-III-R: Cluster A, comprising paranoid, schizoid, and schizotypal traits, will be referred to as the schizoid cluster (Reich *et al.*, 1988); Cluster B (anti-social, borderline, histrionic, and narcissistic traits) as the dramatic cluster; and Cluster C (depressive,

cyclothymic, avoidant, obsessive-compulsive, and dependent traits) as the anxious-depressive cluster. In spite of the low validity of a single investigator assessing personality deviations from biographies the present findings for writers were very similar to the 1994 ones.

Complete absence of any DSM traits was recorded in only nine writers (five poets, three novelists/poets, but in only one of the playwrights); in all three categories mild traits were about as frequent as disabling ones. The overall prevalence of dysfunctional traits (30%) was somewhat higher than in the writers of the international (1994) series (20%), but much higher than the 13% prevalence reported by Tyrer *et al.* (1991) in a general population. As in the earlier series, the frequency of traits of the anxious-depressive cluster exceeded by 60% that of 8% of schizoid cluster traits, and of 23% of dramatic cluster traits, which are most frequently encountered in the general population. Antisocial traits were registered in only two poets (Robert Lowell and Olson), three novelists/poets (Faulkner, London, and Wolfe), and three playwrights (Boucicault, Flecker, and Dylan Thomas), and were only relatively minor ones like financial irresponsibility, physical recklessness or aggressivity, with only single instances of habitual lying or petty thieving. Dramatic cluster traits were the leading personality characteristics in 29% of playwrights and in 27% of novelists/poets, but in only 14% of poets, 66% of whom exhibited predominantly anxious-depressive traits.

Affective conditions

Table 2 gives the distribution of various kinds of affective psychopathology, which was registered in 82 of 100 writers. Only the most severe form it had taken has been entered. Affective psychoses had been suffered by seven writers, and in poets (9%) and novelists/poets (7%) the life time prevalences exceeded those found in Western populations. Additionally, 48% of writers had passed through major depressive episodes without delusions or other psychotic symptoms. All the psychotic writers had required repeated stays in mental hospitals, five on account of manic attacks. The remaining 27 writers have been included in Table 2 on account of less well defined affective conditions. Brief reactions comprised DSM adjustment disorders like situational and bereavement reactions, as well as war neuroses (more dubiously because of anxiety-hysterical features). Finally, 17 subjects feature in Table 1 although they only had depressive or cyclothymic personality problems, but were not

Table 2
All affective abnormalities found in the sample of 100 writers

	<i>n</i>	Bipolar psychoses	Unipolar psychoses	Severely disabling depressions	Milder depressions	Brief reactions only	Depressive traits only	Cyclothymic traits only	Totals
Poets	35	2	1	4	11	4	5	1	28
Poets/novelists	41	2	1	8	13	2	7	0	33
Playwrights	24	1	0	4	8	4	3	1	21
Total	100	5	2	16	32	10	15	2	82

classified as mild cases of depression or of hypomania.

Thus, psychopathology within the affective spectrum was found in 80.0% of poets, 80.5% of novelists/poets, and somewhat more frequently in 87.5% of playwrights.

Suicidal behaviour

Eight writers committed suicide (Berryman, Hart Crane, Davidson, Hemingway, Jarrell, Lindsay, London, and O'Hare), and this 8% rate exceeds the 1980 rates of 0.73–0.84% for England and Wales as well as the 1.89–2.17 for Austria (World Health Organization, 1983). Only one of the writers in the earlier series, Ernest Hemingway, had killed himself; the writer Jack London was added in the present series. The others were all primarily or secondarily poets.

Only one playwright, Eugene O'Neill, attempted suicide, as did the three novelists Conrad, Scott Fitzgerald, and Evelyn Waugh, and also three poets, who were also notable prose writers (Graves, Landor, and Poe). In all except two of the seven the suicidal attempts or gestures occurred in clearly depressive settings.

Other episodic disorders (Table 3)

Not included in Table 3 are 29 writers whose only episodic conditions had been in the affective spectrum. One of them deserves further comment.

The hyperthymic poet Ezra Pound embraced before, and even more so during World War II, militant antisemitic and fascist convictions, leading him to broadcast from Rome anti-American propaganda. After his arrest in Italy, he was arraigned for treason and escaped likely execution only by having been declared insane. He had continued to voice grandiose fanatical ideas, with which he bombarded by letter Roosevelt, Churchill, and others. However, friends who visited him in St Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington found him "no more insane than usual", and the chief physician

seems to have been the only psychiatrist there who regarded Pound's ideas as truly delusional. After many prominent literati had obtained a presidential pardon, Pound returned to Italy, where a few years before his death he became severely and persistently depressed, regretted his earlier beliefs, and declared that most of his poetry had been "bosh" (Carpenter, 1988). He was, therefore, classified as severely (almost psychotically) depressed, and his earlier overvalued ideas were looked upon as part of his dysfunctional, paranoid personality.

The numbers in Table 3 refer to the writers who had without or with affective spectrum conditions passed through episodes of other disorders, often with differing diagnoses at different times. The life time prevalences of 12% for phobic and anxiety disorders and of 24% for somatoform conditions are similar to those found in all subjects of the previous study and in population studies. Again, there were no cases of obsessional neurosis, though 25% of playwrights, 20% of poets, and 15% of novelists/poets did have marked obsessive-compulsive personality traits. Arguably, a diagnosis of obsessional neurosis was not registered even if (for example as in the case of Dickens) there had been some compulsive habits. The two instances of conversion disorder refer to two men: after his brother's death of tetanus, the poet Thoreau

Table 3
Number of writers in the sample with various non-affective disorders

	With depressive spectrum conditions	Without depressive spectrum conditions	Totals
Anxiety and phobic disorders	9	3	12
Conversion disorders	2	0	2
Somatoform disorders	19	5	24
Alcohol dependence	13	3	16
Alcohol abuse	18	6	24
Other substance dependence	4	2	6
Other substance abuse	1	2	3

imitated his brother's condition convincingly for several days in a setting of depression; the novelist Sherwood Anderson, a very successful but increasingly reluctant businessman, used to disappear whenever conflicts over his choice of vocation became too severe. On one single occasion, he did so for several days with partial amnesia of his fugue and personal identity.

Not apparent in Table 3, but of interest, seven poets had never suffered from either depressive or any other episodic disorders. Only two of them had exhibited abnormal personality traits: William Barnes, a somewhat eccentric, autodidactic rural poet had been penalised (Table 1) with one point of psychopathology, on account of excessive dependency, but Walt Whitman had been very much impaired throughout life by many traits of borderline, narcissistic, and passive-aggressive personality disorders. By contrast, eight novelists/poets without depressions had suffered from nine other episodic disorders between them, and these had been registered 12 times in four of the playwrights without depressions.

Exceeding the rate in artists, alcoholism was at its lowest in poets (31%) and highest in playwrights (54%). Other substance dependency and abuse, mostly concurrent with alcoholism, were more difficult to identify from biographical material, and with opiates freely available during much of the period covered, the prevalence of 9% is certainly unrealistically low. In spite of 23 subjects having been alcohol abusers, only three poets (Berryman, Hart Crane, and Poe) as well as one novelist/poet (Sinclair Lewis) experienced alcoholic psychoses. Another novelist/poet, William Faulkner, had alcoholic psychoses with fits, but also several hospital admissions and ECT for bipolar psychoses. Tennessee Williams experienced an amphetamine paranoid episode, and both Conrad and Evelyn Waugh had hallucinoses due to abuse of prescribed drugs. The deaths of Scott Fitzgerald, Poe, and Dylan Thomas were clearly related to alcohol abuse, and Tennessee Williams choked to death on the cap of the container from which he had taken only two Seconal tablets.

Surprisingly, in view of a high rate of casual sexual activities and many instances of VD, there were no cases of general paralysis of the insane in this series of British and American writers. Graves, Landor, Maugham, and Sandburg developed Alzheimer's dementia over the age of 80, and more doubtfully, Blunden, multi-infarct dementia. This supports the view that high education and intelligence, continued in employment, postpone the onset of Alzheimer's dementia.

Causes of death were not reported in only seven very aged writers. Forty-three per cent of poets died over the age of 74, as against only 24% of novelists/poets and 38% of playwrights; on the other hand, slightly more poets (29%) had failed to reach the age of 50 (22% and 17%, respectively, of the others). The main natural causes of death (in 37%) were related to coronary or cerebral atherosclerosis. Only 12 writers had died of cancer, none clearly from bronchial carcinoma, although, evenly distributed over the three subgroups, 49% of writers had been described as heavy smokers by their biographers. The prevalence of tuberculosis was not unduly high, and only 11%, all of them primarily poets or novelists, had probably died of it. Explaining the somewhat higher death rate of younger poets, 12% of writers died in relation to war service or in accidents.

Sex and marriage

Complete sexual union was probably never achieved by 14 men, half of them poets, and only two playwrights, 42% of whom had been notorious for their promiscuity after experimentations of youth. Promiscuity, defined as more than six partners throughout maturity, was recorded in only 14% of poets and 20% of novelists/poets. The 'never married' rate for poets was 31%, 10% for novelists/poets, and 17% for playwrights, who had, however, a 71% rate of problematic or broken marriages, as against a rate of 54% of novelists/poets, and only 26% in poets.

In other words, only one-third of writers had enjoyed lastingly satisfactory married lives, most often the poets and least so the playwrights. Psychosexual problems seemed to have been the main causes of this unhappy record. Sexual inhibition, which unlike promiscuity did not necessarily prevent or disrupt marriages, were strongly suspected in 21 writers. Latent homosexuality was assumed in at least six instances, but there was clear evidence for active homosexuality in only 12 writers, with some bisexuality in all except two. The prevalence of bi- and homosexuality exceeded the population norm of 11.9% (Johnson *et al*, 1992) only in playwrights with 29%. Two men, both mainly poets and one homo- and the other heterosexual, were practicing sado-masochists.

Social and family background

Confirming earlier findings, the small professional class produced the largest number of creative achievers. The fathers of 56% of writers had been teachers, doctor, lawyers, civil servants or

practitioners of the arts; the fathers of 24% had been artisans, farmers, or small business people; and 18% had come from big landholding, manufacturing or business families. Only two writers had a working class background: John Clare's grandfather had, however, been an itinerant Scottish schoolmaster, who begot an illegitimate son onto a town clerk's daughter, and then promptly disappeared. Thus, Clare's father only became an agricultural labourer; D. H. Lawrence's father was a coal miner, but his mother was a village schoolmistress. Playwrights tended to come more often than other writers from professional (71%) rather than wealthy (8%) backgrounds.

Three writers initially earned their living in labouring and similar jobs, but only one (Clare) failed to rise into a higher income group through their writings. Altogether, only 46 men succeeded in living on, or even in growing wealthy by their vocation alone: 21 of the 24 playwrights, 18 of the 41 novelists/poets, and seven of the 35 poets. The remainder obtained their incomes mainly from higher journalism, or as *littérateurs* or in the publishing business. Less often they taught at colleges or universities, occasionally there were some civil servants or even diplomats, practising doctors, musicians, or painters.

Information about childhoods was largely coloured by the subjects' own reminiscences. Factually, 24 writers lost a parent through death and less frequently desertion before the age of 15. Only five of the 15 who attempted or committed suicide had suffered this trauma. Only 10 writers expatiated upon an unhappy childhood, and only three of them blamed this on the loss of a parent. Poverty was usually given as the main cause of early unhappiness, as well as improvidence, alcoholism or other addictions in parents.

Heredity

Using all the information given by the biographers and including second degree relatives, 75% of the writers had positive psychiatric family histories, playwrights (83%) slightly more frequently than the others. Instabilities of mood or conduct, as well as a few recognisable instances of psychopathy or psychoneurosis were registered in 28, but had been quite often also present, in addition to definitely diagnosable disorders, in 60 of a total of 132 abnormal relatives. Alcoholism had occurred in the families of 29% of writers, and affective illnesses in 23%. Thirteen first and second degree relatives had needed hospital care for psychotic illnesses. A diagnosis of schizophrenia was definite in the case

of Joyce's daughter and of Tennessee William's sister, but apart from three instances of bipolar psychoses, the differentiation between affective and schizophrenic psychoses was not possible.

Only 25% of the 82 writers with depressive spectrum conditions had affective family histories, a low proportion, which is not much increased when only writers with disabling, including psychotic, illnesses were considered. Family histories of both depression and alcoholism were more frequent in playwrights, especially in comparison with the poets, but only by a margin of 9%, and the eight suicides among relatives were evenly distributed.

A high frequency of other talented men and women in the families of prominent people in general (Ludwig, 1995), and specifically of writers (Andreasen, 1987), was confirmed for 67% of the writers in the present series. Some literary gifts were noted in relatives of 50%, and 24% of writers had in addition or instead artistically or musically gifted blood relations, including five actors. As might perhaps be expected, artistic gifts were somewhat more frequent in the families of playwrights (visual display), musical ones (rhythm and harmony) in those of poets, and intellectual ones in the case of novelists/poets. As against mere giftedness, creative achievement could be attributed in literature to 12 relatives of writers (eight of them novelists/poets), in painting to three, and in the intellectual field to four, who were also outstanding expository writers.

A further analysis of the biographical data

This far, the analysis has confirmed that of all men with highest creative achievements writers had the highest (93%) prevalence of global psychopathology. However, 12 of the authors who had published solely, or in addition to other work, poetry had scored nil or only one point on the psychopathology scale (Table 1). This had been the case in only one of the novelists/poets, and in none of the playwrights. A suspicion that contrary to Lord Byron's dictum "All poets are mad" (quoted by Jamison, 1993) poets might be somewhat more stable than other writers becomes hardened into an impression, when no traits of DSM personality disorders were found in 14% of poets, 7% of novelists/poets, and in only 4% of playwrights. As in the international 1994 series (Post, 1994), the writers in the English language did not have any unduly high life time prevalences of psychiatric conditions other than affective disorders and misuse of substances. Alcoholism in poets was, at 31%, slightly higher than in the visual artists of the previous study, but this was markedly exceeded by

a rate of 54% in playwrights. To judge by duration of life, poets had been more often physically robust than other writers. In spite of a higher rate of celibacy, far fewer poets had disharmonious or broken marriages than novelist/poets, and especially playwrights, who were moreover the only category of writers to exceed population norms of bisexuality. By a small margin, psychiatric family histories, especially of depression and alcoholism were less frequent in poets than in others.

A growing suspicion that the writing of plays might be associated more than other kinds of literary work with mental instability was somewhat strengthened by the finding that in 87.5% of playwrights affective spectrum disorders had been ascertained as against in 80.5% of novelists/poets and 80.0% of poets. However, novelists/poets had suffered more frequently from major depressive episodes than, not only playwrights, but also poets. Furthermore, only one of the writers of performable plays, Jarrell, had committed suicide, and he was much more important as a poet. Five men who had killed themselves had been solely or mainly poets (Berryman, Hart Crane, O'Hara, Lindsay, and Davidson), and only two were entirely novelists: Hemingway shot himself soon after hospital treatment and ECT had been abandoned (according to what the treating psychiatrist told me) due to family pressure; Jack London took a deliberate overdose of morphine and codeine tablets to escape from increasingly severe renal colics; however, he had previous severe depressions with suicidal thoughts. Thus six of the eight suicides had occurred in poets, and all in relation to severe, mostly psychotic depressions. In fact, of the seven writers with affective psychoses, five had been poets: Clare (unipolar, but by some classified as bipolar), Jarrell (bipolar, also playwright), Lindsay (bipolar), Robert Lowell (bipolar), and Roethke (mainly manic). Only two had been novelists: apart from Hemingway (unipolar depression), Faulkner (bipolar), who had also been a notable poet.

It may be recalled that the classification of subjects as poets, novelists/poets, and playwrights was adopted because it resulted in three subgroups of roughly comparable size, which at the same time were meaningful in presenting a progression of abilities from creating poetry alone, to writing also or only prose fiction, and in the third subgroup additionally, or solely, performable plays. The strikingly greater frequency of suicides and of affective psychoses in men who, although classified as novelists/poets or playwrights, had essentially been poets suggested that the slightly greater mental, physical, and social stability of the

subgroup of poets might have been an artefact arising from the chosen classification.

Therefore, a second analysis of the data was undertaken with importance and fame for poetry, prose fiction, or playwriting as the criteria. The regrouping of names in Table 1 was relatively straightforward in the case of the poets, especially when in some doubtful instances the writers themselves (e.g. Hardy) had stated that they were primarily poets. A decision proved impossible in the case of men who had been both successful novelists and dramatists (e.g. Galsworthy, Maugham, and Priestley). As a result of this new classification a subgroup of 57 poets emerged clearly, but one of playwrights with anything between 12 and eight members had become too small for any tri-partite comparison.

The results of the second analysis are given in Table 4. Traits of personality disorders were evenly distributed with only one exception: cyclothymic traits were found in 25% of poets (who also had a strikingly high prevalence of bipolar psychoses) as against in only 7% of the others. On the other hand, poets in comparison with other writers had suffered less often from non-psychotic, but disabling, depressions, and similarly, less frequently from all kinds of major depressive episodes, even including psychoses. Poets had also been less prone to alcoholism, and had on the average had longer lives. Sexual and marital problems had been less frequent in poets, and they also had fewer psychiatric family histories in general, and specifically of depression or alcoholism. This second

Table 4
Variables of poets and prose or play writers (percentages of frequencies)

	Poetry (n=57)	Prose or plays (n=43)
Disabling traits of personality disorders	28	28
Any traits of personality disorder	88	93
Cyclothymic traits	25	7
Any affective traits	63	65
Disabling major depressive episodes	19	28
Any major depressive episodes	42	59
Alcohol abuse	21	26
Alcohol abuse or dependence	33	47
Alive beyond the age of 74	42	23
Psychosexual problems	47	65
Stable marriages	40	26
Families with depressions and/or alcoholism	37	63
Family histories of any disorder	68	86
Generally gifted families	63	60
Families with literary giftedness	49	47

analysis thus supported and strengthened the earlier finding of the greater stability of poets. Owing to the scarcity of adequate biographies of men who had been exclusively playwrights, it was not possible to confirm that they tended to be mentally and socially more unstable, not only than poets, but also than prose fiction writers.

Like the frequencies of anxious-depressive personality traits, those of general and literary giftedness in other family members were almost identical in poets and other writers. Andreasen (1987) had found that, in contrast to her control subjects, there had been a considerable aggregation of siblings and parents who had been creative, not only in literature, but also in other artistic fields. She suggested that whatever was transmitted in families was a general factor that predisposed to creativity rather than a specific giftedness in verbal areas. Furthermore, she hinted that this inherited creativity was somewhat connected with mental instability. Although the numbers in her table 4 are too small to be translated into percentages these will, all the same, be employed for ease of comparison with the present findings.

From the data in Andreasen's table, 14 of 30 writers had creative parents or siblings, and 13 of these 14 (93%) also had cases of mental illness and/or alcoholism among family members. This had been the case in only five of the 16 (31%) families without other creative men or women. Information on family disorders and number of creative members had been obtained from the writers themselves, whose mean age (\pm s.d.) was given as 37.47 (11.49) years, so that children were not included. The present investigation was based on similarly patchy biographical accounts and included first and second degree relatives. It used the concept of giftedness rather than creativity, and keeping all these differences in mind failed to confirm Andreasen's suggestions; while in the present series family psychiatric morbidity concurred with giftedness in various fields in 74% of families, psychiatric conditions were registered slightly more often (79%) in ungifted families. When literary giftedness, alone, was considered, it was coupled with psychiatric ill health in 69% of families, while 83% of families without creative writing abilities contained psychiatric (including alcoholic) cases. This difference was even greater in the case of the 57 writers whose main achievements had been in poetry: mental ill health in only 50% of families with literary gifts, but in 86% of families without them. In the case of the 43 prose and play writers Andreasen's findings were to some extent supported: literary giftedness did indeed concur

with psychiatric morbidity in 96% of families, while the prevalence of mental problems in families without literary gifts was only 78%. Thus, fewer poets had not only psychiatric family histories, but these were also less often coupled with literary heredity.

Conclusions and speculations

The differences between poets, prose fiction writers, and playwrights were obtained from mostly soft biographical data, which had been interpreted as facts by a single investigator. Also, if the three groups of writers had been randomly selected and a more stringent statistical analysis had been permissible, many of the differences found might have turned out insignificant. However, with one exception all the differences were in the same direction, and bigger in the second than in the first analysis: while evidence of psychopathology was found in the biographies of 93 writers, against expectation, poets were somewhat less burdened than prose fiction, and especially play writers, by personality deviance, minor and major depressive disorders, alcoholism, psychosexual and marital problems, as well as by heredity of depression and/or alcoholism, which in poets was much less often coupled with literary giftedness in their families.

Not fitting into this pattern of slightly greater stability of poets was the high frequency in them of cyclothymic personalities, bipolar affective psychoses, and suicides, all exceeding frequencies in other writers, other high achievers, and the general population. Psychoses, all requiring hospital treatment, and suicides amount to hard facts, as does the finding that except for Roethke, entirely of German extraction, and the Englishman Clare, all the writers with affective psychoses had been White Anglo-Saxon Americans, but no explanation for a possible relationship of these variables to high achievement in poetry comes to mind.

My speculations will be limited to possible causal connections between outstanding literary creativity and proneness to depressions and alcoholism, as well as underlying personality characteristics. Eysenck (1993) had wondered why certain abnormal personality traits might be related to what he called the "fuzzy" concept of creativity. He noted (Eysenck, 1994) that creative subjects presented the unusual combination in personality tests of high scores on both psychopathology and ego strength. This is a concept which originated with Barron (1953), and which characterises persons who, on the Minnesota Personality Inventory, showed among other traits, feelings of personal adequacy,

initiative, resourcefulness, persistency, emotional outgoingness and spontaneity, as well as intelligence. If we add to intelligence high special abilities we have many of the positive character traits, with occasional exceptions, of world famous men in the previous, and also of the writers in the present study, men to all of whom the much more precise concept of creative achievement can be applied. Ego strength, however, as had been found by Eysenck, was associated with DSM traits of personality disorders in 42% of scientists, rising through composers and politicians to 74% in intellectuals, to 75% in visual artists, and to 90% in writers. The findings in the present series of 100 writers were almost identical: 91% had some pathological personality deviations; there was again an absence of schizophrenia, and with the exception of a few American poets the life time prevalence of affective psychoses was if anything below population norms. Again, non-psychotic episodic disorders were not above expectation, except that once more depressions were twice as frequent than in other high achievers as well as the general population; alcoholism was more frequent in writers than in others, including to a much smaller extent visual artists.

In developing a hypothesis which links high literary creativity to proneness to depression I am following Dennett (1991), who reduced consciousness and the self to richness and complexity of neural networks, reaching their culmination in the human brain. Within this framework affective illnesses can be conceptualised as the result of a sequence of neural events: the perception of adverse life events, especially bereavements and other losses or threatened losses, results in hyperactivity of neural networks. This is experienced as inner turmoil and anguish, which in the case of most subjects calms down with the passage of time. In a few, and perhaps most often in those with inherited or acquired anxious-depressive personality traits, this neural hyperactivity continues and causes the changes in quantity and distribution of neuronal transmitter substances, which (a flaw in the hypothesis) have so far only been found in cases of manic and depressive psychoses. Some research findings, most recently perhaps regional cerebral bloodflow studies by Delvenne *et al* (1990), have given evidence for the proximity of localised functional changes in depressions to language areas in the dominant hemisphere, but I shall explore possible links between literary creativity and depression from a different angle. In brief, I shall suggest that the neural hyperactivity, which can lead to affective disorders is produced, not only by

the perception of external events, but can also be caused by creative efforts, and that this neural hyperactivity is strongest in high level verbal creativity.

This idea is far from new. Art historians (Panofsky, 1955; Woelfflin, 1971) in discussing Albrecht Dürer's 1514 engraving 'Melencolia I' have pointed out that Dürer was familiar with the writings of Marsilio Ficino. This humanist described melancholia from personal experience, and following Aristotle regarded it as a frequent affliction among people who became excessively preoccupied with intellectual topics. Since antiquity, people of this kind have been regarded as possessing a melancholic temperament, which with excessive efforts frequently turned into melancholic illness. Dürer advised young artists how to avoid this. Obviously these ancient concepts of melancholic temperament and of melancholia only partly overlap our depressive personality and illness, but support for my tentative ideas has very recently come from Ludwig (1995).

He developed a measure of creative achievement and applied it to the biographical data of 1004 men and women, who had been eminent in a large number of fields. He found that subjects scoring on his measure in the highest quartile exhibited the characteristics which have been commonly found by other researchers and himself in people famed for original achievements. Relevant to my speculations, Ludwig discovered an additional personality factor in highest creative achievers, and called it Psychological "Unease". Psychic ill health, provided it was not so severe as to prevent work, was regarded by Ludwig as the chief driving force towards highest creative achievement when other factors such as outstanding special abilities, favourable parentage, and efforts to foster them were also operating. Ludwig further suggested that high achievers without any mental troubles had the natural capacity to create their own Psychological "Unease", which he defined as lack of emotional contentment, a tendency to be restless, dissatisfied, impatient, and to be driven from one project to the next. I would go further, and suggest that the deeper cause of the psychological unease lies in the vivid mental imagery and inner struggle which are needed for gaining new points of view, for inventing novel subjects, tradition-breaking ways of thinking and feeling, and of new means of communicating the results of these creative labours. I go on to propose that this highly intensive intellectual and emotional work of what, in short, shall be called 'the imagination' is associated with excessively high activity in neural networks, and thus an important

causal factor rather than the result of the mental disturbances so often observed in creative people.

Ability for imagination would seem to vary in different types of personality: in the presence of paranoid, schizoid, or schizotypal traits, imagination tends to be restricted to personality related matters; the dramatic (antisocial, narcissistic, and histrionic) temperament leaves, apart from grandiose fantasies, little scope for inner life. By contrast, people with predominantly anxious and depressive traits are given to pondering and fretting about their own and others' future and past, as well as about the world in general, and to picturing it all. I noted in the course of my investigations that most creative men had unusual personalities, and that many had abnormal traits, which unlike in the general population were anxious-depressive deviations far more commonly than dramatic temperaments.

The extent to which the frequency of anxious-depressive personalities and with it the powers of imagination, increase from scientists to creative writers is shown in Table 5. Imagination is certainly needed for original scientific work and for shaping national futures. Far more imagination is involved in the solving of intricate intellectual problems. In music and the visual arts, the much more emotional imagination tended, at any rate until towards the end of the last century, to be held in check by the demands and rules of craft and, even in modern times, remains tied to the world of sound and sight. However, both the intellectual and emotional components of the imagination of creative writers embrace all aspects of human joys and sufferings. The results of my analysis of the data also show that in addition to highest levels of the imagination writers also register the greatest frequency of depressive and cyclothymic personality traits, which is only approximated by intellectuals whose intensive employment of their imaginative faculties is associated more often with depressive personality characteristics than is the case with scientists, politicians, and artists.

Table 5 once again demonstrates that clinical depressions occurred no more often in high achievers than (by consensus, Paykel & Priest, 1992) in the general population with the exception, however, of prose fiction and play writers. Poets occupy an intermediate position: although they share with other writers a similar high prevalence of affective personality deviations, they have a lower incidence of depressive illnesses, which would be lower still if it were not for the relatively higher and unexplained frequency of manic and depressive psychoses in some American poets. Lyric poetry

transforms into rhythmic, harmonious, and evocative language imaginations restricted to love, the beloved, the beauties and terrors of nature, as well as meditations on philosophical or religious matters. Epic poetry has in modern times been largely taken over by prose writing which, it is contended, requires far more intensive emotional imagination and empathy than lyric poetry for the inventing of human lives, characters, relationships, triumphs, and disasters. The even greater inner turmoil and neural hyperactivity would explain the greater frequency of depressions in prose and playwrights than in poets. Original thinkers registered in spite of a relatively high prevalence of depressive personalities a low rate of depressions because, in accordance with the proposed theoretical model, their neural hyperactivity was mainly associated with intellectual, and not emotional, creative efforts.

Self-reports of composers, painters, and writers about their emotional states while at work vary considerably (Post, 1994), often claiming "highs", but Dickens cried while writing the death-scenes of some of his heroines. Storr (1990), in addition to stressing the role of imagination, discussed the numerous writers who had indicated that through writing, often compulsively, they disposed of their inner turmoil, and that they believed that in this way they warded off depression, or quoting from Graham Greene's autobiography, even madness. Unfortunately, alcohol is another remedy used by artists, and even more so by writers. More controversially, it may be suggested that too vivid an imagination may be at the root of the abnormally frequent sexual and marital problems of playwrights and novelists, but their frequent alcoholism and marital breakdown must also be related to the social circles in which these writers tend to move.

In conclusion, then, I put forward the following hypothesis. The high levels of emotional imagination

Table 5
Scientists, politicians, visual artists, composers, and intellectuals compared with writers of the present study

	Depressive/cyclothymic traits (%)	Major affective illnesses (%)
Scientists	20	29
Politicians	28	30
Visual artists	29	31
Composers	38	31
Intellectuals	40	26
Poets	63	42
Prose and play writers	65	59

and the associated excessive activity in neural networks needed for their creative work, as well as the frequency of depressive personality traits, set writers apart from other men with high creative achievements, and makes them twice as prone to affective disorders. This hypothesis could be medically tested by succeeding or failing to demonstrate that the recurrence of affective attacks can be prevented by psychiatric treatments without damaging the flow of imagination. Apart from the effects of lithium prophylaxis (Schou, 1979) on creativity reported by artist and writer patients, evidence on the benefits produced by Prozac has only been anecdotal (*The Observer*, 23/4/95), and cognitive therapy should be more suitable for creative writers and other artists. From a theoretical angle, the claim that depressive personality traits, as well as the related proneness to depression and alcoholism, are significantly more common in writers whose work involves higher levels of imagination and empathy than the creation of other kinds of literature could be tested by experts in literary analysis, in cooperation with clinically trained psychologists, in random samples of different kinds of writers.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Dr Anthony Storr for letting me read his unpublished lecture, and to Art Historian Clare Ford-Wille for drawing my attention to Dürer's engraving and for providing the relevant literature.

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(First received 11 December 1995, final revision 12 January 1996, accepted 18 January 1996)

BJPpsych

The British Journal of Psychiatry

Verbal creativity, depression and alcoholism. An investigation of one hundred American and British writers.

F Post

BJP 1996, 168:545-555.

Access the most recent version at DOI: [10.1192/bjp.168.5.545](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.168.5.545)

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