

FATHER'S ABSENCE, PSYCHOPATHOLOGY, AND POETIC EMINENCE

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Summary.—Ratings of degree of psychopathology and of probability of cross-sexual identification were made on temporally stratified samples of 42 eminent English and French poets. 55% of Ss had life histories indicating some possibility of cross-sexual identification; of these, 30% came from father-absent homes. 48% exhibited some symptoms of psychopathology; of these, 15% were rated as psychotic. Psychopathology and cross-sexual identification were highly related. Reasons why temporally stratified samples should yield high incidence rates on the variables were explored.

Martindale (1969), following a review of the literature, argues that one of the central traits characterizing the creative personality is cognitive and behavioral disinhibition. From a psychoanalytic point of view a possible explanation for both this disinhibition and the tendency toward femininity of interests found in male creative Ss (Barron, 1953) would be presence of forces in the early histories of such Ss (e.g., father's absence) which interfered with normal resolution of the Oedipal conflict. Normal resolution of this conflict hypothetically leads to correct-sex role identification and to internalization of social norms in the form of the superego. The latter can be seen as an inhibiting device on cognition (since it mediates use of the mechanism of repression) as well as on behavior. There is evidence (e.g., Burton & Whiting, 1961) linking father's absence with tendencies toward feminine identification and interest patterns. There is also evidence linking father's absence with disinhibition. Mischel (1961) reports that father's absence is related to children's poor ability to delay gratification. Biller (1970) reviews a number of other studies linking father's absence with impulsivity.

Besdine (1968) argues for a connection between genius and a strong mother and weak or absent-father syndrome and presents a number of examples. Several studies suggest that the occurrence of parental loss in eminent Ss is very high. Brown (1968) reports that 55% of a sample of distinguished writers lost a parent before the age of 15 yr. Albert (1971), reanalyzing Cox' (1926) sample of eminent Ss, reports rates of parental loss from 22% to 31% before S entered the field in which he attained fame. In contrast, Gregory (1965) reports that only 6% of college students have lost a parent and Schlesinger (1966) reports about 10% of United States children as living in father-absent homes.

There is a large body of literature showing that early father-absence and/or aberrant sex-role identification are associated with various types of psychopathology (e.g., Ingham, 1949; Da Silva, 1963; McClelland & Watt, 1968). Thus, if father's absence and trends toward cross-sexual identification are prominent in eminent Ss we might expect to find them co-occurring with evidence of psychopathology. Barron (1963) found that highly creative writers reported more

pathology on the MMPI than did a control group of less creative writers. Such findings have led to a trend toward reviving the notion that high level creativity may be associated with mental disturbances (e.g., Martindale, 1971; Lichtenstein, 1971).

METHOD

As part of a content analytic study of literary change (Martindale, 1969), ratings were made on life-history variables of 21 English poets born between 1670 and 1809 and 21 French poets born between 1770 and 1909. In each case the timespans were broken down into successive 20-yr. periods and the three male poets born during the period who were assigned the largest number of pages in the appropriate Oxford Anthology of Verse (Lucas & Jones, 1964; Smith, 1965; Hayward, 1964) were selected.¹ Thus, a temporally stratified sample of eminent poets was selected.

Ratings of possibility of cross-sexual identification and of degree of psychopathology were made based upon a series of sources consulted in a predetermined manner. First, the life history generally appearing with the poet's collected works was consulted. Next, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and, finally, a biography, if one existed, were consulted. The sources were searched until mention (defined as at least a one paragraph discussion) of childhood (for cross-sexuality ratings) or of behavior or personality (for psychopathology ratings) was found.

The ratings must, of course, be interpreted with a good deal of caution since biographers have often exaggerated minor foibles or eccentricities into major symptoms or have reported folklore rather than fact. In an attempt to circumvent such problems, the method used in this study was to make a rating as soon as a discussion as brief as one paragraph was located. The rationale for this was that more certain and more salient traits should be discussed earlier in the sequence of sources.

Criteria for ratings of psychopathology were as follows:

0. No rating: inadequate information.
1. Normal: no mention of abnormal behavior in an adequate discussion.
2. Symptomatic: mention of deviations or symptoms of less than psychotic intensity, e.g., alcoholism, mental "crises" or "breakdowns," suicide, phobias, homosexuality.
3. Psychotic: definite labelling of the poet as psychotic or insane; mention of commitment to an asylum; reference to recurring and unmistakable psychotic symptoms, e.g., hallucinations.

Criteria for ratings of cross-sexual identification were as follows:

0. No rating: inadequate information.
1. Normal: no mention of criteria in an adequate discussion.

¹Because of exigencies of the content analytic study, three deviations from this procedure occurred (see Martindale, 1969). In all cases substitution was based upon the eminence criterion.

2. Father absence: father dead at or before age 8, father absent at least one year before age 8.

3. Possibility of cross-sexual identification: friction with father and over-closeness to female figures; more than one explicit reference to feminine behavior or traits; father weak or passive. (If *S* can be rated as either 2 or 3, rate as 2.)

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the ratings of cross-sexual identification and of degree of psychopathology.² It is seen that 50% of the English and 59% of the French poets for whom ratings could be made show some evidence of the possibility of cross-sexual identification (ratings of 2 or 3). Thirty percent of *Ss* received ratings of 2 (father-absence). In regard to psychopathology, 55% of the English and 40% of the French poets for whom ratings could be made show some symptomatology (ratings of 2 or 3). Fifteen percent of the sample is seen as probably psychotic.

If we cross-tabulate psychopathology (1 vs 2 and 3) with cross-sexual identification (1 vs 2 and 3), $\chi^2 = 6.97$ ($p < .01$). Of those poets for whom ratings could be made on both variables, 44% of the poets rated as exhibiting signs of

TABLE 1
RATINGS OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND CROSS-SEXUAL IDENTIFICATION

| Cross-sexual identification | Psychopathology | | | | N |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|------------|----|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | |
| 0 | Dyer | Gay | Laforgue | Corbière | 9 |
| | Char | Byron | Eluard | Collins | |
| 1 | | Watts | Chénier | Coleridge | 15 |
| | | Pope | Béranger | Valéry | |
| 2 | | Thomson | Millevoye | | 10 |
| | | Mickle | Musset | | |
| 3 | | Burns | Gautier | | 8 |
| | | Wordsworth | Supervielle | | |
| | | Lamartine | | Beattie | |
| | | Hugo | | Chatterton | |
| | | Apollinaire | | Byron | |
| | | | | Keats | |
| | | | | Baudelaire | |
| | | | | Rimbaud | |
| | | Gray | | Shelley | |
| | | Michaux | | Mallarmé | |
| | N | 2 | 21 | 13 | 42 |
| | | | | 6 | |

²A list of all *Ss* giving the basis for each rating is available upon request from the author or from ASIS in Document NAPS-01934. Order from ASIS National Auxiliary Publications Service, c/o CCM Information Corp., 866 Third Ave., New York, N. Y. 10022. Remit \$2.00 for microfiche or \$7.00 for photocopy.

psychopathology (ratings of 2 and 3) had absent fathers. If we include cross-sex ratings of 3 as well as 2, the figure rises to 81%.

Although obviously the present study includes no control group, it seems clear that the incidence of both variables studied must be far above what could be expected in any reasonable comparison group of poets. Further, the two variables are probably more closely related for this sample than is the case in the general population. The incidence figures for father's absence are comparable with those reported for early parental loss by other investigators. It is somewhat surprising that the notion of a relationship between psychopathology and high-level creativity has fallen into such disrepute when simple counts of the sort employed show high incidence rates for these poets.

There may be reasons why our sampling method has led to high percentages of eminent Ss being labelled pathological while other studies (e.g., Anastasi & Foley, 1941) have not reported this effect. Martindale (1969) contends that the need for novelty which is built into the role of poet leads at certain points in literary history to a pressure toward regression in the search for original material. It is argued that, when deep regression is needed in order to produce the degree and sort of novelty demanded by a poetic system, pathological individuals should be unusually successful as poets. In a content analytic study of texts by poets reported on in the present paper, Martindale (1969) found biserial correlations of $-.55$ ($p < .01$) and $.53$ ($p < .01$) between secondary process imagery and primary process imagery, respectively, and presence vs absence of psychopathology. [See Martindale (in press) for content analytic criteria used in measuring primary and secondary process imagery.] Further, it was found that the poets showing signs of psychopathology were significantly over-represented during periods calling for deep regression. Martindale (1969) found that most eminence was assigned to poets whose texts exhibited medium levels of regressive imagery. Thus, if one does not use a temporally stratified method in selecting eminent Ss, precisely those periods during which pathological individuals tend to be recruited will be under-represented in one's sample.

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Accepted September 1, 1972.