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## ***Alcohol and the writing process***

### *Abstract*

*The relationship between alcohol and creativity has been the focus of research and publication since the mid-twentieth century. Experimental research has been undertaken in only a handful of medical and psychological studies; more numerous biographical accounts of alcoholic creative artists have been popular; and creative artists themselves have produced confessional autobiographical works. This paper surveys particularly the research on writers, and a range of biographies about writers who use alcohol. Then it looks at what writers themselves say about the involvement of alcohol in the creative process.*

### **Experimental research**

Studies that examine links between alcohol and creativity, published in medical and psychology journals, have findings which are contradictory and ambiguous (see e.g. Ludwig 1990, Rothenberg 1990, Norlander 1999). They do have catchy titles, however, considering the pages they occupy: ‘I drink therefore I am: alcohol and creativity’ in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (Beveridge & Yorston 1999), or ‘Inebriation and Inspiration? A Review of the Research on Alcohol and Creativity’ in the *Journal of Creative Behavior* (Norlander 1999). And so on.

In the 2012 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Creativity*, Steven Pritzker summarises the full range of experimentation regarding alcohol’s influence on creativity with:

Results of research using *noneminent* subjects indicates that the perception that alcohol influences creativity is greater than any real benefit to creativity that alcohol may give. (my italics, Pritzker 2012: 392)

In other words: alcohol’s enhancement of creativity is a myth. Pritzker also says:

While many [eminent] creative people have claimed that alcohol helped them, the truth of this statement in objective terms has not been determined. (Pritzker 2012: 393)

In other words: science has not yet experimented enough with *eminent* writers, musicians or artists using alcohol – and science won’t take *their* word for it – so the jury is still out. The *Encyclopedia* prints a list of 74 eminent creative people ‘thought to be alcoholic’. Half of them are writers (Pritzker 2012: 391).

The most extensive experimental research on alcohol and creative practice was done in the

1990s by psychologists Torsten Norlander and Roland Gustafson in Sweden (see Figure 1). In several experiments with Swedish creative practitioners (some of them writers) Norlander and Gustafson (1996, 1998, etc) used Graham Wallas's pioneering 1926 model which divided the creative process into four stages of thinking: (i) *preparation*; (ii) *incubation*; (iii) *illumination*; and (iv) *verification* (Wallas 1926: 80).

Wallas stages (Creative thinking)	Enhanced	No effect	Detrimental
1 Preparation			v
2 Incubation	v		
3 Illumination	v		
4 Verification		v	

Figure 1. Norlander and Gustafson (1993-9): Effect of alcohol on Wallas stages

The Wallas model attempted to cover a wide variety of creative and problem-solving situations, and was intended to apply to everyday behaviour as much as to scientific thinking. It was perhaps most suited to a creative process where a problem is identified (*preparation*), it is thought about without much progress seemingly being made (*incubation*), the thinker has a premonition that a solution is on the way, and then it surfaces (*illumination*), and finally the new idea is tested and found to apply (*verification*).

In their several experiments about the effects of alcohol on the Wallas stages in creative practitioners, Norlander and Gustafson found that:

Creativity is enhanced by alcohol during incubation and illumination phases, not affected during the verification phase, and hampered during the preparation phase. This suggests that alcohol *may not be universally detrimental to creativity if consumed during certain times*. (Smith, Smith & Do 2009: 147, italics added)

This is a useful point to start from. It suggests that creative thinking may indeed be enhanced by alcohol, provided that application of the stimulant is targeted at the *incubation* and *illumination* phases, and not at the *preparation* and *verification* stages.

But Norlander and Gustafson were not working solely with writers. Another researcher, Anja Koski-Jännes (1985), studied 60 Finnish authors (one-third of them female) and reported that their descriptions of their writing process 'generally fit th[e] pattern' (Koski-Jännes 1985: 121) of the Wallas model. Koski-Jännes refined the definitions of the Wallas stages for the writer, and described them as:

- *preparation*: 'gathering ...[and] organizing material for the subject in question' (123)

- *incubation*: reflecting on and planning for the project (125)
- *illumination*: gaining insights into the project (127); and
- *verification*: ‘the actual process of writing’ (127)...

and she adds

- *restitution*: the ‘relaxation’ phase (130)

– what we might call ‘having a wine after work’.

In the spirit of her ideas ‘generally fitting the [Wallas] pattern’, I have created Figure 2 to indicate how we might understand Koski-Jännes’s research.

Wallas stages + Koski-Jännes	Interpretation for writing process?	Enhanced	No effect	Detrimental
1 Preparation <i>Gathering &amp; organizing</i>	PRE-WRITING	v		
2 Incubation <i>Reflecting &amp; planning</i>	PLANNING	?	?	?
3 Illumination <i>Gaining insights</i>	DRAFTING	v		
4 Verification <i>Actual writing</i>	WRITING/EDITING			v
5 Restitution <i>Recovery &amp; relaxation</i>	Wine after work	v		

Figure 2. Koski-Jännes (1985): Effect of alcohol on Writing process stages

Koski-Jännes sought to assign Wallas stages specifically to a writing process model. Essentially she found writers saying that Pre-writing, Drafting and Relaxation are all able to be enhanced by alcohol, but alcohol is detrimental to ‘actual writing’. These results are different from those of Norlander and Gustafson. Koski-Jännes found writers indicating it is useful to drink in the *preparation* (or pre-writing) stage, but that alcohol in the *incubation* stage has no effect, while in the *verification* stage alcohol is detrimental.

In her system, however, Koski-Jännes does not distinguish between different levels of written drafts, nor between writing and editing. I have suggested above that the *illumination* stage is actually Drafting, because we are aware how much investigation of the project and insights into it are gained here. Also, I think *verification* is more like the later stages of writing, including editing.

Koski-Jännes sums up:

The essential question ... concerns the ability to fully exploit one’s mental powers. This involves the ability to use one’s conscious and unconscious processes in a fertile and productive way. The use of alcohol is relevant

to this process – and writers know it. At least on an intuitive level many of them seem to regulate their drinking behavior in relation to their periods of creativity. (Koski-Jännes 1985: 69)

Although Koski-Jännes and Norlander and Gustafson disagree with each other, and didn't get the creative stage equivalences quite right for writers, I think they (and especially those Finnish writers) were usefully close to the mark. Writers have indeed found ways to utilise alcohol in a targeted fashion as a stimulant for writing (see below). But there are other and darker dimensions to drinking as part of creative practice to be dealt with.

## **Biographical research**

Alongside the experimental research into alcohol and writing there is biographical research which dates back to Anne Roe's 1946 article 'Alcohol and Creative Work' (Roe 1946), the first among many accounts which sought to analyse, and very often sensationalise, the alcoholic creative artist (see e.g. Goodwin 1988, Dardis 1989, Ludwig 1990, Beveridge & Yorston 1999). In this kind of study, a biographer gives an account of the drinking capacity and its consequences for an eminent creative practitioner. Many studies focus on the life and inebriation of Cheever, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Joyce, Lowell, Lowry, Parker, Sexton and so forth. Among the biographical researchers, American psychiatrist and novelist Arnold Ludwig (1990) analysed 'the biographies of 34 well known, heavy drinking, 20th century writers, artists or composers/performers' and found that alcohol use

proved detrimental to productivity in over 75% of the sample, especially in the latter phases of their drinking careers. However, it appeared to provide direct benefit for about 9% of the sample, indirect benefit for 50% and no appreciable effect for 40% at different times in their lives. (Ludwig 1990: 953)

Biographical research has focused more on the life-long effects of alcohol use and less on the everyday effect of alcohol in the writing practice. Clearly there are addictive practices useful to the individual on a daily basis which accumulate into life-impairing syndromes.

Ludwig also investigated the relationship the other way around – how writing affects drinking: he averred that: 'Creative activity, conversely, can also affect drinking behavior, leading, for instance, to increased alcohol consumption in over 30% of the sample'. But he came to no conclusion, instead saying: 'Because of the complexities of [the relationship between alcohol and creativity], no simplistic conclusions are possible' (Ludwig 1990: 953).

The broader spectrum of biographical research beyond Ludwig has developed a wide range of theories – many more than the experimental research considered above. These include, as Pritzker summarises:

- more writers, artists and composers have parents who are alcoholics, so alcoholism is in the genes to begin with;
- more creatives have affective mental illness and therefore use alcohol as self-medication;
- creative work happens often in isolation so creatives have more opportunity to drink;
- the creative arts is a subculture where alcohol use is idealised and tolerated more than in other professions;
- creative work is difficult and plagued with rejections and blocks, so

- alcohol is used to ‘escape the pain’;
- pressures and stresses in the creative professions lead to anxieties about performance and inhibitions which encourage alcohol use; and
  - some creatives claim that alcohol assists them in their creative processes by widening their consciousness and gaining new perspectives.
- (adapted from Pritzker 2012: 395)

This list from the *Encyclopedia of Creativity* claims to summarise biographical research. It is negative, sensationalizing, and quite possibly correct. It indulges in myth-making while also focusing on apparent truth.

While Ludwig analysed the written biographies of 34 famous writers without actually talking to the subjects, Harvard psychiatrist Albert Rothenberg combined empirical findings with intensive personal interviews to delve deeper into the cases of a few accomplished writers. His research on American novelist John Cheever, for example, concluded that alcohol is used ‘to cope with the anxiety that is generated by the creative process itself’ which ‘involves a gradual unearthing of unconscious processes’ (Rothenberg 1990: 199, 196). Rothenberg’s theory is that the writing process provides writers ‘a means of attaining partial insight into their own unconscious contents’ (196), which in Cheever’s case ‘intensified his alcoholism and blocked his creativity’ (197).

Rothenberg opens up an enquiry related significantly to analysis of the writing process. He turns the writing process back on writers. He asserts that creative writers write out deep-seated aspects of self, which requires significant adaptation (e.g. utilizing alcohol) due to confrontation with ‘their own unconscious contents’. It’s an attractive theory for some creative writers – those who like the idea of having a deep-seated reason for writing and drinking at once.

There are many biographical accounts of alcoholic writers (see e.g. Goodwin 1988, Dardis 1989, Leonard 1989, Boler 2004, Millier 2009). They tend to pick up on occasional statements by writers and, like bad drunks, they tend to repeat each other. I think the most insightful are: Tom Dardis’s *The Thirsty Muse* (1989), mainly a study of American male novelists, and Brett C Millier’s *Flawed Light* (2009) focused on female American poets. Like all biographical studies they suffer from being based at times on myth and hearsay, on the image the subject may wish the biographer to portray, and the biographer’s own attitudes towards alcoholism. They are, of course, at least one degree of separation from the subjects they claim to represent.

## Autobiographical research

How, unless you drink as I do, could you hope to understand...?  
– Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (1947)

Autobiographical accounts of writerly alcoholism may or may not get closer to the mark. Writers have been reticent to speak about their addictions, but in conducting their own research and analysis, they have made autobiographical statements which, like the scholarly research, are contradictory. Famous drinking writers have said that alcohol facilitates *and* hinders the writing process. Contemporary Australian writers Frank Moorhouse, Peter Corris and Michael Wilding indicate they have suffered, and benefited, from their relationship with alcohol:

In his sensitive memoir built around the martini, Frank Moorhouse says:

I find that drinking and writing don't mix, except for proof-reading and revising at the end of the day's work when I find it changes my focus and gives me some good results, although I always test these revisions when sober the next day. (Moorhouse 2005: 31)

During sessions of writing, Peter Corris says he drinks 'a sizeable glass of wine, sometimes two':

I believe that alcohol releases certain inhibitions and helps me project myself into my characters, to imagine actions and scenes I've never experienced or to transmute actual experiences into the material of fiction. (Corris 2012)

Michael Wilding places drinking and writing in a larger landscape, where history, the real world, and the inebriated view of the world collide:

Alcohol was what they served in pubs, and pubs were where I liked to hang out and talk to people, other writers and filmmakers and editors and girls, as we used to call them then, and get involved in situations I later wrote about. And the same with the parties afterwards, more alcohol and things to write about. Alcohol fuelled the book launches where we used to try and promote our new books. So alcohol was and undoubtedly is a significant part of the literary life. But in itself I never found alcohol useful for the process of writing. Writing when drinking has never seemed to me the way to go. And if I ever got any good ideas for writing when drunk, I rarely remembered them. (Wilding 2012)

These Australian novelists, writing candidly, indicate that alcohol's positive relationship with writing is an issue to be considered and placed in context. They say alcohol 'changes my focus and gives me some good results', 'releases certain inhibitions and helps me project myself into my characters', and 'is a significant part of the literary life'. They also say that 'drinking and writing don't mix', and 'I never found alcohol useful for the process of writing'.

On another tack, if we accept that novels contain information about a writer's experience and understanding, then the classic works on writerly alcoholism are Jack London's *John Barleycorn* (1913) and Charles R Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* (1944). They present a negative picture of the writer under the influence. In my opinion, *The Lost Weekend* is the most exact, and most terrifying, account. The onslaught of its psychological detail is hard to read, and harder to deny. Other novels, like Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Graham Billing's *The Slipway* (1973), are clearly based on the writer's own experiences and nuance our understanding of the disaster and attraction of alcohol. Well-known autobiographical statements about alcohol and writing include the following:

*On the issue of widening consciousness*, of deepening engagement with the world, of enhanced seeing and feeling the working of things, Stephen King asserts:

'The main effect of the grain or the grape ... is that it provides the necessary sense of newness and freshness, without which creative writing does not occur.' (quoted in Goodwin 1988: 187)

And Scott Fitzgerald says:

‘Drink heightens feeling... When I drink, it heightens my emotions and I put it in a story... My stories written when sober are stupid ... all reasoned out, not felt.’ (quoted in Turnbull 2004: 264)

But John Irving insists:

‘You know what Lawrence said: “The novel is the highest example of subtle interrelatedness that man has discovered.” I agree! And just consider for one second what drinking does to “subtle interrelatedness”’. (quoted in Winokur 2000: 30)

So, there are those who say alcohol widens and freshens the writer’s perceptions, and those who say it dulls them. While seemingly contradictory, the above three *may* indicate the use of alcohol at different stages in the writing process – King at Pre-writing, Fitzgerald at Drafting, Irving at Editing – suggesting that blanket statements about alcohol’s use in writing may need to be examined more closely for evidence about targeting its effects.

*On the question of getting the writing going each day, of battling the block and finding momentum, Kingsley Amis says:*

...alcohol in moderate amounts and at a fairly leisurely speed is valuable to me – at least I think so. It could be that I could have written better without it ... but it could also be true that I’d have written far less without it. (Amis 1975)

But Ring Lardner is more assertive: ‘No one, ever, wrote anything as well after even one drink as he would have done without it’ (Lardner 1976: 165) and Anthony Burgess adds: “...writers drink when they are ‘blocked’ and drunkenness – being a kind of substitute for art – makes the block worse” (quoted in Winokur 2000: 30). So, writers disagree about the use of alcohol for getting started, as do the medical experimenters (see above). Perhaps there are individual differences here: some like to start hot with a shot, others like to start cold.

*On the matter of rewarding oneself after a good day’s writing by taking a well-earned drink, two famous writers disagree. Hemingway said in 1935:*

When you work hard all day with your head and know you must work again the next day what else can change your ideas and make them run on a different plane like whisky? ... Modern life is often a mechanical oppression and liquor is the only mechanical relief. (Hemingway 1935)

But Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1844 advice was: ‘Finish each day before you begin the next, and interpose a solid wall of sleep between the two. This you cannot do without temperance’ (Emerson 1982: 320).

These writers lived in different times and their statements reflect social attitudinal differences. Emerson was surrounded by the fervour of the Temperance movement, and Hemingway’s America had just emerged from the strictures of the Prohibition Era (which he and other writers escaped by living and writing in Europe). But while ‘modern life’ still drags us down, and we still find relief by celebrating a good day’s work with alcohol, too hard partying will always wipe out the next day’s productivity.

*On the idea that alcohol enhances confidence, dis-inhibits and empowers, Faulkner claimed: “When I have one martini, I feel bigger, wiser, taller. When I have the second, I feel superlative. When I have more, there’s no holding me” (quoted in Blotner 2005: 227).*

In his generally depressing autobiographical novel *The Lost Weekend* (1944), Charles Jackson asserted the uplifting aspect of pre-inebriation:

It seemed his perceptions could, at this moment, grasp any problem in the world... Whole sentences sprang to his mind in dazzling succession, perfectly formed, ready to be put down. Where was a pencil, paper?... his mind was working keenly and at the top of its bent, with that hyper-consciousness that lay just this side of intoxication... He felt reckless and elated, larger than life. (Jackson 1998: 21, 22, 34)

But Scott Fitzgerald is attributed with saying: 'First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you' (Fitzgerald 2011: back cover). So, the autobiographical evidence from writers suggests that confidence and dis-inhibition are matters to be dealt with at an individual level. One needs to know one's drinking capabilities, and work within them.

While there are matching contradictory reports by eminent writers on aspects of writing under the influence, some have put the opposites together in a single statement. These include Charles Bukowski's account of how alcohol lifts you as writer out of the 'standardism of everyday life, out of everything being the same' and then 'throws you against the wall ... [as] ...a form of suicide where you're allowed to return to life and begin all over the next day' (quoted in Wennersten 1974: 49). Succinctly, Bukowski expresses what a powerful friend, and what an enemy, alcohol is to the writer.

Kingsley Amis, elaborating on his daily process, suggested the contradictory effects of alcohol in any single day:

And then, quaking, you sit down at the typewriter. And that's when a glass of Scotch can be very useful as a sort of artistic icebreaker ... artificial infusion of a little bit of confidence which is necessary in order to begin at all... [But] there comes a fairly early point when the stimulating effect turns into an effect that produces disorder and incoherence. (Amis 1975)

And drawing together several aspects of writing under the influence, Robert Lowell said of his writing over a long period of time:

'I seemed to connect almost unstopping composition with drinking... [and] I have looked forward to whatever one gets from drinking, a stirring and blurring... [But] nothing was written drunk, at least nothing was perfected and finished'. (quoted in Hamilton 1982: 389)

Lowell distinguishes at least four aspects of writing here: *the 'stirring'*, which is about motivation as well as new perception; *the 'blurring'*, which is loss of focus but also the unshackling of conventional ideas, the making of new connections, the noticing of the peripheral; his '*unstopping composition*' is the impetus, the hyperactivity, and the lack of control that alcohol can promote; and finally his '*nothing perfected*' says that while booze may enhance your creative flow, it won't support your critical capacity: it's a good exciter but a bad editor. Lowell covers many bases here: alcohol can be an effective tool for writers, but like any powerful tool, it must be controlled. What's good about it, is also bad about it.

## Personal research

In my personal research while writing with and without alcohol, I examined my own writing process and observed that, put simply, my brain seems to work in two ways: sometimes alcohol helps; sometimes it doesn't. I was relieved to find, upon further investigation, that psychologists in the area of Creativity have two key concepts: divergent and convergent thinking. Divergent thinking is 'the ability to generate a variety of associations, ideas, and problem solutions' (Russ & Christian 2012: 238). It is 'the kind of thinking that results in numerous ideas ... as opposed to convergent thinking, which leads to one correct solution' (Sánchez-Ruiz 2012: 384). Convergent thinking homes in on the answer to a problem (such as how to make this sentence work best) and divergent thinking vistas out to contemplation of the possibilities in the territory surrounding the problem (such as what other ideas might I include in my work).

Analysing my own writing process, I would say I use both techniques at different times (see Figure 3): I use *divergent* thinking when I am searching around for material, making connections, considering fiction options, imagining plot traces or character traits, and applying the fiction writer's 'what if' scenarios to the world of my experience. But I use *convergent* thinking when I make decisions to go ahead with choices among the options, and especially I use the pointed reasoning of convergent thinking while editing.

Writing stages	Enhanced	No effect	Detrimental
Pre-writing (Divergent)	v		
Planning (Divergent/convergent)	v		v
Drafting (Divergent/convergent)	v		v
Editing (Convergent)			v
Wine after work		v	

Figure 3. Krauth (2012): Effect of moderate alcohol on Writing process stages

Figure 3 expresses my analysis of my writing process while responding to the terms set up by Norlander and Gustafson, Koski-Jännes, and others mentioned above. I have found that alcohol is definitely helpful in pre-writing, definitely disastrous when finally editing, and useful in targeted ways at other times when planning and drafting. And what do I mean by 'helpful' or 'useful'? When I come back to the manuscript later while sober, I know the project has been advanced by the work I did while drinking.

It seems to me that alcohol is not necessarily a hindrance for divergent thought. Alcohol's dis-inhibiting effect can free you from walking the straight line of conventional understanding; it can loosen you and liberate you, which is useful at times in the inspiration, planning and drafting stages. And for this (as writers have said) you need to know how to reach and maintain a particular cruising speed of inebriation; you need to stay in control. I have experienced this cruising. I value it as much as I suspect it.

Alcohol is good, and partially good, it seems, all the way up to editing. But when the time comes to nail the writing down, sobriety has the last word. Editing overlaps into aspects of the later stages of planning and drafting, and there alcohol is suspect. Clearly it's unwise to send off a manuscript finally completed while drunk. I have found Alcohol good to dance with in the Tavern of Intense Creative Production, but I wouldn't take her to the Office of Final Editing.

### **Conclusion: on drinking in a targeted fashion**

There are times in the writing process which don't matter as much as other times do; there are negotiable times. You know you will come back to this idea and change it, you will return to this bit and that bit and edit them. But in the meantime, you want the flow to keep going, you want to produce, you want that outline, that draft, those words on the page, almost anything, it doesn't matter what turns up ... you want to see what might be there, you want the investigation to continue. You will come back later and decide whether that session of planning or drafting was worthwhile or not. Alcohol may assist here, experienced writers say, for those who want to use it

Writers who lost control under alcohol seemingly lost the capacity to bring a sober editing eye to their alcohol-fueled creativity. They lost the ability to see the difference between the divergent and convergent thinking stages in their writing process. It must be devastating to lose access to the sober you. There needs always to be an operational control room in the alcoholic writer's brain in charge of strategy – in charge of targeting alcohol use towards the parts of the process where it is useful. As one-time drunkard Stephen King said: “A writer who drinks carefully is probably a better writer...” (quoted in Goodwin 187).

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