PART I

THE WRITER

1

The Personalities of Creative Writers

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Popular images of male novelists and poets show them professorially clad, in khakis or in tweed sport coats with leather patches on the arms, smoking pipes; or, as in the image of writers like Ernest Hemingway or Jim Harrison, cradling rifles or fly-fishing, wearing horn-rimmed glasses or swaggering beneath cowboy hats: They are writing from the ivory tower or writing from the field of battle. These two disparate images are, as we shall see, somewhat true. And what about the female writer? She is clad in mannish clothes, her hair cut in a butch, braless and strident, living with her male and female lovers in the Bohemian garrets of a large city; or she is whimsically virginal and intense, her long, tangled and flowing hair entwined with rosettes of wild flowers just picked, sitting in a meadow, her long delicate fingers slowly turning the pages of a leather-bound book with a ribbon for a marker. As we shall see, the personalities these images imply are also somewhat true.

Creative people are those who do creative acts. The creativity occurs in the becoming, the making. In the struggle to be creative, personality attributes are extremely important. Creative people seem to have certain core personality attributes. I have made personality attributes the base of my Piirto Piiramid of Talent Development (see Figure 1.1).

Many studies have emphasized that successful creators in all domains have certain personality attributes in common (cf. Feist, 1999). These attributes make up the base of the model and rest on the foundation of genes. Among these are the following: androgyny (Barron, 1968a; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Piirto & Fraas, 1995; Piirto & Johnson, 2004); creativity (Renzulli, 1978; Tannenbaum, 1983); imagination (Dewey, 1934; Langer, 1957; Plato, 1952; Prescott, 1920; Santayana, 1896); insight (Runco, 2006; Sternberg & Davidson, 1995); intuition (Barron, 1968a, 1968b, 1995; Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Piirto & Johnson, 2004); introversion (Cross, Speirs Neumeister, & Cassady, 2007; Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Piirto & Johnson, 2004; Simonton, 1999); naiveté, or openness to experience (Cattell, 1971, 1990; Ghiselin, 1952); overexcitabilities (Dabrowski, 1965; Piechowski, 2006, Piirto, Montgomery, &

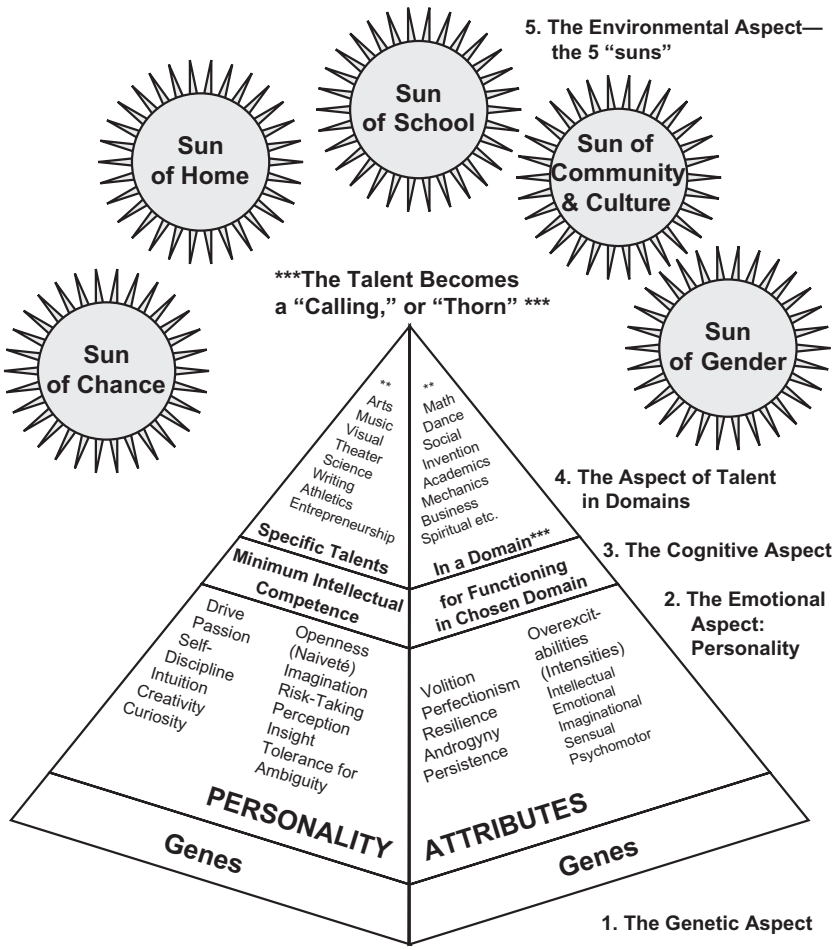

Figure 1.1. The Piirto Piiramid of Talent Development. ©Jane Piirto, 1993. All rights reserved.

May, 2008); motivation, or passion for work in a domain (Barron, 1968a, 1995; Bloom, 1985); perceptiveness (Myers & McCaulley 1985); persistence (Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2003; Renzulli, 1978); preference for complexity (Barron, 1995); resilience (Block & Kremen, 1996; Jenkins-Friedman, 1992; Renzulli 1978); risk taking (MacKinnon, 1978; Torrance, 1987); self-discipline (Piirto, 2004); self-efficacy (Sternberg & Lubart, 1992; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons 1992); tolerance for ambiguity (Barron, 1968a, 1995); and volition, or will (Corno & Kanfer, 1993; Simonton, 1999).

This list is by no means discrete or complete, but shows that creative adults achieve effectiveness partially by force of personality. Talented adults who achieve success possess many of these attributes.

Personality is an area in which there are many competing theories. Personality theory can be psychoanalytic (ego psychology, object relations,

transpersonalism); behavioral or cognitive (quantitative studies using factor analysis such as those of Cattell [1990] and Eysenck [1993]); or humanistic (using phenomenology, existentialism, Gestalt, humanistic, and transpersonal theories). Personality is sometimes equated with character and seen as directing how one lives one's life. The personality attributes mentioned here have been determined by empirical studies of creative producers, mostly adults, but in some cases, adolescents in special schools and programs were studied. Some research has indicated an evolutionary cause of personality preferences (Feist, 2007). Many studies of personality attributes have used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, based on the Jungian theory of personality. The Cattell 16 Personality Factors, the Eysenck Inventory, the Gough Creative Personality Inventory, the California Psychological Inventory, the Minnesota Multiphasic Psychological Inventory, and others have also been used in studies cited here.

The consolidation of personality traits into the Big Five through factor analysis (Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1999) is noted here, but earlier work on creative people has noted these other traits listed earlier, and so I include the others as well. These were analyzed through what is called the "lexical tradition" (Costa & McCrae, 1992, p. 14) by researchers such as Cattell (1971). The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) combines factors into facets and then into five domains: Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). It seems that the domain of openness to experience (O) includes creative attributes: Fantasy (O1), Aesthetics (O2), Feelings (O3), Actions (O4), Ideas (O5), and Values (O6). "Open individuals are unconventional, willing to question authority, and prepared to entertain new ethical, social, and political ideas" (Costa & McCrae, 1992, p. 15). However, other personality attributes on this instrument may also apply to writers; for example, Tender-Mindedness (A6), and, in the case of writers, Depression (N3). This is just speculation, and no known data exist on writers who have been assessed with this instrument; that is research yet to be conducted.

The creative writer can be considered to have these generic personality attributes found in creators, as well as others. This chapter discusses the personality attributes that writers seem to show. Those attributes on the base of the Piirto Piiramid of Talent Development referred to earlier, those that are generic, and those that also seem to appear in creative writers have been discussed in Chapter 2 of Piirto (2002) and are not discussed further here.

Numerous studies have come from the Institute for Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR), which was established after World War II at the University of California in Berkeley. MacKinnon (1978) directed IPAR, after serving on the assessment staff of the Office of Special Services, the forerunner of the CIA. In 1949 the Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and Ford Foundation granted funds to start IPAR for the purpose of determining which people were most highly effective and what made them that way (Barron, 1963). Among the people studied were writers, architects, engineering

students, women mathematicians, inventors, and research scientists. The people studied were chosen by peer nomination; that is, the nominators were college professors, professionals in the field, and respected experts or connoisseurs knowledgeable about the field. Among the researchers there were Frank Barron, Donald MacKinnon, Harrison Gough, Ravenna Helson, Donald Crutchfield, and Erik Erikson (Helson, 1999).

At IPAR, Frank Barron and his colleagues asked literature and drama professors at the University of California for the names of the most creative among outstanding creative writers then writing (Barron, 1968a, 1968b, 1969, 1972, 1995). They came up with a list of 56 writers, who were invited to come to the University of California to participate in extensive testing and interviewing. These studies pioneered some of the tests and interview techniques still used in studying human personality attributes and characteristics; for example, the Q-sort method of interviewing and the Barron-Welsh Art Scale for evaluating works of art. Some of the writers who came to campus were Truman Capote, Frank O'Connor, Muriel Rukeyser, William Carlos Williams, MacKinlay Kantor, Jessamyn West, A. B. Guthrie Jr., Andrew Lytle, Robert Duncan, Bill Mauldin, and Kenneth Rexroth. Tests and interviews were conducted off campus with such writers as Norman Mailer, W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Michael McClure, Arthur Koestler, and Sean O'Faolain. Also among these writers who came to be tested was Saul Bellow, who told George Garrett about being paid $10,000 to go to Berkeley and take psychological tests. Bellow said, "They had Capote there, too – and what they ended up with was the feeling that writers had more willpower. . . . And if that's all, it doesn't tell you anything, except maybe that discipline helps" (quoted in Neubauer, 1994, p. 120).

Barron (1995), in describing this testing, wrote, "It was a painful and taxing responsibility to ask these writers, many of whom had suffered much in their own creative lives, to probe deeply into themselves and to answer the questions . . . seemingly irrelevant and unworthy questions" (p. 183). The IPAR studies were seminal in the research on writers.

WHAT PERSONALITY TESTS SHOW

There also exists information on the personalities of creative writers from personality tests developed by psychologists and psychoanalysts. Two of my own small studies using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire (OEQ) are discussed here (Piirto, 1978, 1995, 1998b).

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) has been used to determine the Jungian-based type preferences of many occupational groups, including scientists, artists, laborers, writers, and counselors. Creativity studies done using

the MBTI were done in conjunction with the other studies done at IPAR. Many writers preferred the N (Intuitive) and the P (Perceptive).

I administered the MBTI to a group of 15 successful women writers and to a comparison group of 15 female elementary school teachers. Two strong patterns emerged. In agreement with the IPAR data, most of the writers preferred Intuition (N) and Perception (P). As Myers and McCaulley said, "Data from the world is received in ways that go beyond the senses and that they preferred to see patterns, relationships, and meaning in all they perceive" (1985, p. 135). Seventy-five percent of the women writers preferred the NF (Intuition Feeling or NT (Intuition Thinking) combination, in contrast to only 20% of the comparison group of elementary school teachers. Instead, like most elementary teachers, the comparison group of teachers preferred the SF combination (Sensing and Feeling; Piirto, 1998c). Women in the general population are more likely to prefer Feeling than Thinking, and that is why the instrument itself has separate templates for males and females when scoring those preferences (also see Myers & McCaulley, 1985); this was true for the comparison group as well as for the women writers.

My research confirms what was found by Barron (1968a), who indicated that the writers he studied also preferred Feeling and Intuition: The writers were "distinctly more introverted than extraverted, more feeling than thinking, and more intuitive than oriented to sense experience" (pp. 237, 245). Since the IPAR study included more men than women writers, the results here show that there seem to be no great gender differences in personality type preferences, indicating that the "sun" of gender may be environmental, as postulated in my Piiramid of Talent Development (see Figure 1.1).

Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ)

I also published (Piirto, 2002; Piirto, in press) the transcripts of the OEQ for three male writers: a poet, a prose writer, and a playwright. The scores on these questionnaires indicated they had the highest levels of imaginational, intellectual, and emotional overexcitability.

PERSONALITY ATTRIBUTES OF WRITERS

This section discusses the following personality attributes of writers that may or may not be present in other creative people who practice their creativity in other fields or domains: (1) ambition/envy, (2) concern with philosophical matters, (3) frankness often expressed in political or social activism, (4) psychopathology, (5) depression, (6) empathy, and (7) a sense of humor. Examples are taken from anecdotes from the lives of writers. The methodology was qualitative, and the material comes from published interviews, memoirs, and biographies. Much of this was first published in Piirto (2002). The criterion

for a writer being included as an example was that he or she would or does qualify for listing in the *Directory of American Poets and Writers* (www.pw.org/directory/), which has a very high standard for inclusion. A writer needs to earn 12 points to be listed, with the points given as follows: each book of poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction (personal essays or memoirs) = 12 points; each chapbook = 6 points; each work of fiction or creative nonfiction (personal essays or memoirs) published in a literary journal, anthology, or edited Web publication = 3 points; and each poem published in a literary journal, anthology, or edited Web publication = 2 points. Currently, only about 7,355 writers are listed, of whom about 4,000 are poets, 1,900 are fiction writers, 100 are performance writers, and the remainder (about 1,100) are listed as both poets and writers. Many studies of creative writers have not used such a standard, but may use self-description rather than peer review and literary publication record. I am a participant-observer in this regard, as I am listed as both a poet and a writer (e.g., see Piirto, 1985, 1995) in this *Directory*.

Ambition/Envy

Ambition and its doppelganger, envy, are not unknown among writers. For example, the writer T. Coraghessan Boyle said he wanted to be "the most famous writer alive and the greatest writer ever" (Friend, 1990, pp. 60–68). Other writers who, like Boyle, have studied at the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop have also asserted this ambition. The writer Jane Smiley, then a recent graduate of the University of Iowa with a PhD in medieval literature, told me the same thing late one August night in a darkened van on our way to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in 1977 when we were confessing our dreams and hopes. She has since gone on to win both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, steadily increasing her fame and writing with extreme discipline and passion.

Writers need ambition, as do other creative producers, but that ambition often produces horrible feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. This may be because of the intimate subject matter of the creative writer – the self or the self, coded. The high rate of rejection that creative writers experience when they try to publish their work may also contribute to the intense feelings of envy paired with intense ambition. Poet Molly Peacock made no apology for her ambition:

> From when I was a little girl I wanted to be an artist, and I said to myself, "Somehow I'm getting out of Buffalo, New York." I had a drive to get out of that house and that town. That takes ambition, and my ambition is located in that very early desire to succeed. Of course, you can't be published in *The New Yorker* without a drive to succeed. But also you can't be published in issue one, volume one, of a brand new, teeny-tiny

> literary enterprise without a similar hunger for success. . . . Ambition is a fact of anyone's life who aspires to anything. (Friman & Templin, 1994, p. 41)

Coleridge, in the 19th century, also experienced the envy of other writers, indicating that this is not a new phenomenon. In describing the reception of his poem, "Christabel," he said, "Three years ago I did not know or believe that I had no enemy in the world: and now even my strongest sensations of gratitude are mingled with fear, and I . . . ask – Have I one friend?" (Coleridge, 1872, p. 680). He described that he was begged to recite the work at many social gatherings and urged to publish it. "Since then, with very few exceptions, I have heard nothing but abuse, and this too in a spirit of bitterness."

The shadow side of the drive and resilience it takes to continue in the creative writing profession is the envy that one feels at the success of others. Envy can paralyze, but it can also serve to motivate. Friedman (1994) called envy "the writer's disease" (p. 5). She wrote, "It's desire that causes envy. Isn't desire the villain here? Yet how to be an artist without desire." Writers project that other writers are happy, successful, famous, and admired, and in so doing they give part of themselves away to the power of the extrinsic. How much praise and adulation is enough? Louis Simpson (1972) noted that friendships between writers do not seem to have longevity: "They become resentful of criticism and think that the other person is trying to do them in, or they become jealous of his success" (p. 175). Cynthia Ozick in her *Paris Review* interview described how she thought she would be Henry James by the age of 25, and then when that did not happen, she began to take note of those who were getting famous. Envy began to cut into her soul (Teicholz, 1989). She even wrote a short story called "Envy" (Ozick, 1971) in which a Yiddish writer is consumed by envy of the achievements of other writers who are able to write in English.

Other causes for envy exist. Many well-known writers teach at universities. Poet Jean Valentine described being so envious of her talented students that she quit teaching: "My students would come in with these wonderful poems, and I was jealous. I wasn't writing anything" (Bland, 2004, p. 51). Another cause of envy comes from wondering about one's legacy as a writer. Hemingway was famous for his jealousy of his contemporaries, but he also had a need to triumph over his predecessors: In Lynn's biography (1988), he is quoted as saying, "I started out very quiet and I beat Mr. Turgenev. Then I trained hard and I beat Mr. de Maupassant. I've fought two draws with Mr. Stendahl. . . . But nobody's going to get me in any ring with Mr. Tolstoy unless I'm crazy or I keep getting better" (p. 549). The rivalry and off-again, on-again friendship between poets James Dickey and Robert Bly during the 1960s led to a series of public statements about each other's patriotism during the protests about the

Vietnam War, but their friendship had always been fraught with envy as one and then the other ascended on the college reading circuit of the 1960s and 1970s (Hart, 2000). Both went on to popular success, Dickey with *Deliverance*, Bly with *Iron John*, but their differences remained.

Concern with Philosophical Issues: Aesthetics and Ethics

Ethically and morally, many writers seem to be concerned with the meaning of life and with the search for truth and beauty. They seem particularly concerned about behaving in an ethically consistent fashion. Supposedly this is the lofty purpose of literature, and that writers search for truth and beauty is not surprising. From Shelley's assertion of "beauty is truth, truth beauty," the purpose of literature has been put forth as a way to morally explicate and uphold human values.

Three examples follow. Poet Octavio Paz said, "Ever since I was an adolescent I've been intrigued with the mystery of freedom" (MacAdam, 1991, p. 103). This search for truth begins young. Yeats described himself at art school in London this way: "I was constantly troubled about philosophic questions" (Yeats, 1953, p. 53). He would tell his friends that the purpose of poetry and sculpture was to "keep our passions alive," and his friends would say that people would be better off without passions. He spent a week worrying about this problem: "Do the arts make us happier, or more sensitive and therefore more unhappy?" When he talked about these concerns to his friends, they would treat him with wry and paternalistic irony. Writer Joan Didion said, "I can recall disapproving of the golden mean, always thinking there was more to be learned from the dark journey. The dark journey engages me more" (Kuehl, 1978, p. 335).

In creative writing, the philosophical concern with the meaning of life is melded with the psychological concern with what makes human beings tick, and the two are explicated through dramatis personae in story or through the metaphors and images in verse. Material displaying the writer's concern with ethical, moral, and aesthetic matters is abundant. These were but a few examples.

Frankness that Is Often Expressed in Political or Social Activism

Writers attract the interest of others, probably because of their ability to say what they think. The Barron study (1968a, 1995) found through psychological testing and interviews that the writers were frank and needed to communicate their political views and were likely to take risks in doing so. Throughout history, the politics of writers seems to have been tended toward the pacifist, liberal, or left wing, no matter what era's issues they were reacting to. For example, 1991 National Book Award winner Norman Rush, a war resister to

the Korean War, spent time in jail in the early 1950s where he wrote a novel that he hoped would be the beginning of a new genre, the "nonviolent thriller" (Rush, 1995, p. 219).

The writer may value freedom of expression more than the feelings of others. Writers throughout the world have often been the first to be thrown into jail or sent into exile for what they have written and said. The Russian writers Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky were sent to Siberia for what they wrote. The British writer Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death by the Ayatollah of Iran for his novel *Satanic Verses* and had to go into hiding in 1989, not emerging until 1998 when the political situation in Iran changed. The writers' organization, PEN, has a Freedom to Write Committee, which has a subcommittee called Writers in Prison, a watchdog group concerned about writers throughout the world who are persecuted for expressing themselves. Many of the "prisoners of conscience" throughout the world are writers. Writers Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett, who were among those writers called before the House Un-American Activities Committee as suspected communist activists in the early 1950s, established grants administered through Human Rights Watch "to assist writers throughout the world who have been victims of political persecution." The organization publishes Action Alerts about writers who are detained. For example, the alert for June 2007 concerned the Russian journalist Vladimir Chugunov, who was captured by police and put into a psychiatric institution.

Most writers seem to be leftist or liberal. Nobel Prize winning Chilean poet and politician Pablo Neruda is an example of a writer exiled for his socialist convictions expressed in poems and essays. The award-winning movie *Il Postino* (1994) was a dramatic explication of the impact Neruda's poems and political beliefs had on a simple island man who delivered Neruda's mail while he was in exile in the early 1950s. Poets Robert Bly, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Ted Berrigan, and others were leaders of the Vietnam antiwar movement in the United States, and Ginsberg tried to levitate the Pentagon at one notable protest meeting. At a less lofty level, young creative writers often publish frank underground newspapers that are the bane of their teachers and school administrators. "I was just telling the truth," they often say, surprised at the reactions of the authorities to their writing.

There is, though, a little diversity among writers in political and class beliefs. For example, the National Book Award nominee Mark Helprin is a senior fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute and was a speechwriter for Bob Dole in the 1996 presidential campaign. Helprin suggested that his minority status among writers (as a conservative Republican) has led to some censorship by bookstores and reading groups: "I've heard reports of bookstores that won't sell my books" (Schapiro, 1999). Writer John Irving and poet James Dickey were also rumored to be conservatives. Poet Howard McCord is a card-carrying member of the National Rifle Association.