

## **Loneliness and Solitude in Gifted Writers: The Legacies of Childhood**

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### **Abstract**

In this study, we attempt to provide insight into the complex interplay between loneliness/solitude and the writing gift from the early years of life. Theories and research on giftedness, loneliness/solitude, and on the links between them suggest that creative literary production and loneliness/solitude are associated. To further illustrate these associations, we briefly discuss loneliness and solitude in the childhood, adult life and work of four gifted writers: Hans Christian Andersen, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson and Beatrix Helen Potter. The theoretical framework of this study is twofold: various psychoanalytic formulations and Bruner's social constructivist and intersubjective conceptualisation of the narrative gift. The main conclusion of this study is that gifted writers have, paradoxically, an intense experience of both painful and beneficial aloneness, which is the inevitable outcome of the writing gift but also becomes the inspiration and motive force for *ars poetica*.

**Keywords:** loneliness, solitude, gift, creative writer, children, adolescents

### **Introduction**

The great narrative is an invitation to discover a problem, as Jerome Bruner (2002) stated. Loneliness and solitude may be regarded as fundamental human problems, therefore gifted writers<sup>1</sup> may offer us a better understanding of these experiences. With the aim to explore this issue, we focus on four gifted writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, namely Hans Christian Andersen, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson and Beatrix Helen Potter, in the lives and work of whom the experiences of loneliness and solitude were highly prominent. These writers are, of

course, only a small sample of those gifted narrators who have been preoccupied with loneliness and solitude in their lives and work. But, first, based on theories and research on giftedness, loneliness/solitude, and on the links between them, we attempt to provide insight into the complex associations of creative literary production with loneliness/solitude. The 'investigation' of loneliness and solitude is an endeavour of both scientists and artists; it results in original scientific and artistic creations that are shared within historical and cultural context (Stern, 2022). Thus, it becomes highly important to explore loneliness and solitude in creative writers from the viewpoint of psychological research and theory.

### **Loneliness and Solitude**

Brief definitions of the concepts of aloneness, loneliness and solitude are necessary to avoid linguistic confusion. *Aloneness* is the objective, neutral state of being physically alone. *Loneliness* is the painful subjective experience of feeling alone, either in the presence of other people or not. It emerges as the result of unfulfilled needs for intimacy and/or belonging and involves perceived deficits in relationships, according to cognitive perspectives (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). Within the psychoanalytic framework, loneliness has been described, for example, by Melanie Klein (1963/1975) as resulting from the schizoid-paranoid and depressive anxieties and as manifesting the yearning for an unattainable perfect internal state. *Solitude* is defined as desired or unwanted aloneness, occurring usually in the absence of others, and having positive or negative functions (Storr, 1988; Coplan et al, 2021a). In some cases, solitude is regarded as identical to loneliness, but in some other cases, it represents active and constructive use of time alone, which leads to personality development and creative activity. The *capacity to be alone* is a major developmental

achievement, according to Winnicott (1958/1965a). The paradox to be alone in the presence of the mother, that is, being alone with an introjected good-enough mother figure, accounts for individuals' ability not only to endure aloneness but to thrive in it, as they are never truly alone. Creativity flourishes in this inhabited solitude.

Beginning in early childhood, individuals experience loneliness and are able to provide rich and valid definitions of this experience (Asher and Paquette, 2003).

Children's perceptions of loneliness consist of four dimensions (Hymel et al, 1999; Galanaki, 2008): the *emotional dimension*, that is, the perception that loneliness includes aloneness *and* sadness; the *cognitive dimension*, that is, the perception that loneliness stems from deficits in the satisfaction of basic interpersonal and social needs (for example, companionship, inclusion, sense of personal worth); the *interpersonal contexts dimension*, that is, the perception that loneliness includes physical separation (for example, absence, loss) and/or psychological distancing (for example, rejection, conflict); and the *motivational dimension*, that is, the perception that seeking contact reduces loneliness. Loneliness, if chronic and intense, constitutes a risk factor for psychopathological symptoms, for example, depression, low self-worth and general health problems in childhood and adolescence, both concurrently and longitudinally (Qualter et al, 2010; 2013).

Solitude in children is a relatively neglected research issue (for a review, see Coplan et al, 2021b). Children can make the conceptual distinction between being alone and feeling lonely. Young children find it difficult to understand that solitude can be beneficial and actively searched for, but this ability gradually increases from early to late childhood (Galanaki, 2004). It has been found (Galanaki et al, 2015) that children are able to articulate various motivations or reasons explaining why they want to be alone: self-reflection (that is, daydreaming, problem-solving, planning ahead),

autonomy/privacy (that is, independence, freedom from adults' criticism, protection of secrecy), activities (that is, various indoor and outdoor solitary activities, such as hobbies) and concentration (that is, concentrating on an important task).

In adolescence, loneliness and solitude are related to the *separation-individuation process* (Blos, 1962). The resurgence of oedipal wishes (sexual and aggressive ones) typically leads adolescents to *psychological separation* from their parents. Although usually in fantasy, this separation entails *loss* of the love objects and, thus, mourning reactions and a poignant sense of loneliness. Adolescents experience estrangement from the outer (that is, significant others) and the inner reality (that is, introjected parental objects). This estrangement is further aggravated by the uncontrollable physiological metamorphosis of puberty. One typical result of this loss is the rise of *narcissism*, as a heightened focus on the self, which is evident in adolescents' search for individuation and in the uncompromising attitude towards adults (Freud, 1958). An increased desire for solitude is a typical adolescent reaction to these developmental challenges.

Philosophers and psychoanalysts (for example, Storr, 1988; Koch, 1995) have conceptualised solitude as a necessary condition for personality development, creativity and contribution to art and science. We argue that this condition is enabled by what Freud viewed as 'the *periodic non-excitability of the perceptual system*' (Freud, 1925/1961a: 231). The system perception-consciousness (Pcpt.-Cs.) functions in a discontinuous method as the psychic apparatus, by means of the *protective shield against stimuli* (Freud, 1920/1955), and filtrates excessive excitation coming from the outer world. This periodic cathexis and de-cathexis of the Pcpt.-Cs. or, in other words, the complex and dynamic barrier between the inside and the outside, creates optimal conditions for artistic productivity.

Other psychoanalysts have argued that *impersonal pursuits* (inanimate objects) can be as important in life as personal relationships (animate objects). For example, Eagle (1981) stated that *inanimate interests* (regarded as cognitive and affective engagement to the world) have an object relational quality and protect the subject's integrity, especially in extreme circumstances, or prevent severe (that is, psychotic) disorganisation if the subject who engages in them is gifted or highly creative. Modell (1993) regarded *self-generated passionate interests* as an expression of the *private self*, of our innermost being, and as an indication of self-holding. He also argued that a talented person may create a *muse*, that is, a maternal presence, either actual or imaginary, who knows this person's private self, contributes to the cohesiveness of the self and sustains them in solitude. These formulations provide a perspective to creativity different than *sublimation*, which was described by Freud (1914/1957) as the process in which sexual and aggressive drives are neutralised as they are directed towards non-sexual aims, for example, artistic and scientific endeavours. Taken together, these psychoanalytic formulations point out that, although solitude is empty of noise, turmoil and distraction, it is not devoid of objects. From the early years of life, solitude can be a populated, companionable state.

### **Loneliness and Solitude in Gifted Children and Adolescents: Theoretical Perspectives**

A theory that has been used as a framework for understanding giftedness is Dąbrowski's *theory of positive disintegration* (Dąbrowski, 1972; Dąbrowski and Piechowski, 1977a; 1977b). According to this theory, personality development occurs in a series of stages during which positive disintegration takes place, that is, the individual experiences internal and external conflict and suffering – mainly anxiety

and depression – manages to recover from this breakdown and develops a higher personality structure than before, that is, a unique, authentic and autonomous personality. In this framework, gift has been associated with *psychic overexcitability*, that is, ‘higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested either by psychomotor, sensual, emotional (affective), imaginal, or intellectual excitability, or the combination thereof’ (Dąbrowski, 1972: 303).

Based on this theoretical model, we suggest that a gifted writer is expected to be prone to – at least – imaginal and emotional overexcitability, already from childhood (Piechowski, 2006; Ackerman, 2009). *Imaginal overexcitability* manifests itself as private worlds of fantasy, vivid imagery, visualisation, illusion, animism, imaginary companions, rich associations, metaphor, mixing truth and fiction, predilection for fairy and magic tales, and dramatisation, and is expressed in poems, stories, drawings, and so on. Further, *emotional overexcitability* is evident in intense somatic emotional experiences, especially regarding fear, anxiety, guilt, depression, suicidal thoughts and death, in acute awareness of others’ feelings, as well as in concern and compassion, intensive attachments (to people, places and things), deep relationships and strong affective memory. Indeed, research evidence indicates that various forms of overexcitability are high among gifted people of all ages and with various forms of gift (for a meta-analysis, see Steenbergen-Hu, 2017; for reviews, see Mendaglio and Tillier, 2006; Winkler and Voight, 2016; Wood and Laycraft, 2020; Mendaglio, 2022). This overexcitability is at the root of *asynchronous development*, which is experienced by the gifted child as a sense of inner tension and conflict, in other words, as a state of *chaos* (Wood and Laycraft, 2020). This experience of self-fragmentation and self-alienation is likely to result in acute feelings of loneliness.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, the child's play is the precursor of the *fantasies* of the creative writer, as Freud (1908/1959a) argued. By creating a world of their own, both the child and the writer correct an unsatisfying reality and derive pleasure. Every fantasy or daydream is *wish fulfillment*. Freud's (1908/1959a: 148) conception that 'past, present and future are strung together ... on the thread of the wish that runs through them' suggests that *diachrony* is at the root of creativity. We argue that, already from their childhood years, writers build 'castles in the air' and invent 'airy creations of fantasy' (Freud, 1908/1959a: 145, 148) in an attempt, among other things, to alleviate their loneliness. When a childhood memory of such satisfaction is awakened due to present conditions of loneliness, the writer, unlike nongifted individuals, can create a fantasy or a daydream in the form of narrative. This narrative not only reflects the working through of both the childhood loneliness memory and the present painful experience but also points to future possibilities of wish fulfilment – in this sense, the narrative nourishes *hope*.

Regarding the early capacities of gifted people, Phyllis Greenacre (1957) argued that they have an early awareness of form and rhythm. They construct *collective alternates*, which are cosmic emotional conceptions (for example, contact/unity with nature or God) or idealised images and abstractions, which may substitute parental figures, especially when these are absent or inappropriate. *Family romance*, which has been described by Freud (1909/1959b) as children's unconscious fantasy that they are foster children and that their real parents are kinder, nobler and richer than the ones they live with, is expected to be more intense in the gifted child (Greenacre, 1958). The reason is that this child can easily perceive the difference between oneself and parents and this perception increases the child's feeling of being alone in the world. However, the perception of uniqueness is also likely to increase the child's feelings of



*omnipotence* (Roeper, 1982). This heightened narcissism, as a denial of the need to relate to others (especially adults) and be taught by them, may act as a defence against loneliness.

Winnicott (1971) defined creativity as life in the *potential space*, a third, intermediate area of experiencing, between inner (psychic) and outer (shared) reality, where, from the beginning of life, individuals play with symbols, experience an unintegrated state of *going-on-being* and unfold their *true self*. The potential space, this 'infinite area of separation' (Winnicott, 1971: 108), which paradoxically unites us, is the domain of creative activity. Moments of revelation, awe, ecstasy and boundless union with the outer world are peak experiences in this intermediate area and often appear in the childhood of gifted individuals. By use of symbols and metaphors, many creative writers have succeeded in sharing with their readers these highly private and unique states of being. Freud (1930/1961b) gave them the name *oceanic feeling* and regarded them as a regression to the infantile state of merger and omnipotence.

However, this interpretation seems to lead to a limited understanding of ecstatic moments. According to more recent views (for example, Chirban, 2000), oneness experiences have a progressive rather than a regressive character and may lead to self-transformation. In these epiphanic moments, a cohesive self can suspend its boundaries, become immersed in an amorphous state, experience the open and free space that separates it from the other and finally emerge from it with a higher level of integration. Using Bollas' terms, we can hypothesise that gifted individuals have a strong desire for *transformational objects* and a heightened tendency to exercise their 'inalienable human right to ecstasy' (Bollas, 1989: 19). In childhood, such states of being are experienced mainly in the process of play. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) introduced the concept of *flow* to describe the state of mind in which creative activity

takes place: the individual is highly concentrated on the activity and absorbed by it; self-consciousness and anxiety are minimal. In our research, we found that concentration on an activity is one of the main motives for solitude in childhood (Galanaki et al, 2015). We have also found that beneficial solitude, which has been called *enlightenment* (Averill and Sundararajan, 2014), is an experience characterised by creativity, problem-solving, self-discovery, emotional refinement, self-enrichment, harmony, sensory awareness and self-transcendence, and is related to existential wellbeing, that is, more authentic living and meaningfulness and less existential loneliness in young people (Galanaki et al, 2023). Thus, we suggest that all these experiences of union with something broader than the individual and of harmony with the surrounding world, which are most common in gifted people, are high-quality solitude experiences that enable them to transcend loneliness.

It has been argued that childhood imagination is linked to art (Cobb, 1977). As Helen Dissanayke (2000) has stated, we have a natural predisposition for art; we are genetically programmed for and culturally directed to artistic appreciation and expression. The origins of art are in the first intimate relationships in the beginning of life. Consequently, art can be conceptualised as the result of intimacy, a medium for attaining intimacy, and a means of dealing with lack of intimacy, that is, loneliness. *'Being-with' experiences*, such as being at the moment, feeling wonder and awe, exploring possibilities, non-verbal expression, embodiment, acceptance of ignorance, tolerance of doubt, freedom from criticism and self-criticism, are the *resonant legacies of childhood*, as Custodero (2005) has named them. Those who later become artists have succeeded in preserving and materialising in adulthood these childhood promises. *Resonance* implies being with the other, feeling connected, not isolated.

## **Loneliness and Solitude in Gifted Children and Adolescents: Research Evidence**

Research examining loneliness in gifted children and adolescents is rather limited and beneficial solitude in this portion of youth has hardly attracted any research attention. There is evidence supporting the view that loneliness is high in gifted children and adolescents, when giftedness is mainly conceptualised as high intelligence (Kaiser and Berndt, 1985; Woodward and Kalyan-Masih, 1990; Cash and Lin, 2022). It has also been found that gifted children and adolescents have a sense of being different from other children (Janos et al, 1985a), they feel that they do not have enough friends, have difficulties in making friends (Janos et al, 1985b) and are rejected more frequently than nongifted children (Luftig and Nichols, 1990). However, other studies have shown no differences between gifted and nongifted youth with respect to loneliness (Shechtman and Silektor, 2012; Godor and Szymanski, 2017) or even a negative correlation between loneliness and creativity (Mahon et al, 1996). Similar mixed findings have emerged for other mental health indices, such as depression or suicidal tendencies, in gifted children and adolescents (for example, Neihart, 1999; Peterson et al, 2009; Martin et al, 2010; Cook et al, 2020). These mixed findings may be attributed, on one part, to the different conceptualisations and measurement of giftedness and mental health problems, the different gifts that are the focus of these studies, and the lack of comparison groups; and, on another part, to the fact that giftedness may be both a risk and a protective factor regarding wellbeing and mental health – the so-called *asset-burden paradox* (Peterson, 2012; 2014).

As far as loneliness is concerned, its associations with giftedness may be highly complex. It has been found that loneliness is evident in gifted children when they feel rejected, alienated, isolated and not in control of a situation (Woodward and Kalyan-Masih, 1990), that loneliness can make gifted children more vulnerable to

psychopathology such as depression and anxiety (Ogurlu et al, 2018) and that positive development is accompanied by less loneliness, depression and stress (Baudson and Ziemes, 2016). Even when gifted adolescents are regarded by their teachers as equally or more adjusted than their nongifted peers, they feel sad and misunderstood and perceive less social support from peers – a fact that may aggravate their loneliness over the years (Vialle et al, 2007). Also, while feeling different from peers and being excluded by peers, gifted adolescents may transform imposed isolation to self-chosen solitude which will be used for creative activities (Unal and Sak, 2023). In general, not only for loneliness but for a host of other wellbeing and mental health variables, both the *harmony hypothesis* (that is, gifted children and adolescents are well adjusted and successful) and the *disharmony hypothesis* (that is, giftedness is a risk factor for maladjustment) have received empirical support (for example, Garland and Zigler, 1999; Cross et al, 2008; Robinson, 2008; Peterson, 2012; 2014; Baudson, 2016; Baudson and Ziemes, 2016; Godor and Szymanski, 2017).

### **Narrative and Metaphor**

In this study, we focus on creative writers or gifted narrators. *Narrative* is a fundamental element of human nature, a *gift*. All humans have a predisposition or readiness for it and enter the world of narrative, from early infancy, within close relationships with caregivers (Bruner, 2002). Narratives reflect our innate *intersubjectivity*, that is, our ability and intention to read the minds of others and of ourselves and share our experiences within a culture. Through narrative, we co-create and share meaning, a process that enhances connections, thus, alleviates painful aloneness. According to Bruner (2002), ‘stories are a culture’s coin and currency’ (15), as ‘the left hand of intuition offers riches to the right hand of reason’ (101).

From the social constructivist and intersubjective perspective, the narrative expresses the constant interplay between idiosyncratic worlds of wishes, beliefs and hopes on the one hand and the cultural norms on the other. Its content and form reflect the dialectic between the common and the uncanny, the conventional and the novice. The uncanny subjunctivises reality and, at the same time, is tamed by it. Negotiation of meaning is inherent in narrative and provides the flexibility which is necessary for the coherence of a culture. Bruner (2002) argued that, by focusing on expectations and plans that have gone off course and by recounting the human plights – the Aristotelian ‘peripeteia’ (that is, the reversal of a situation) – the narratives, invented either by lay people or by gifted storytellers, domesticate error and surprise. Yet, the great narrative (in every literary genre), while offering consolation and enjoyment, is potentially subversive and dangerous because it dwells in the realm of open possibilities. In this realm, only those who can *withdraw* from what is commonplace and endure a degree of *alienation* from self and other can enter. In other words, originality is inextricably linked to the creator’s capacity to elaborate on both beneficial and painful aloneness. In the continuous construction and reconstruction of the self through the work of art, the gifted narrator engages in an *act of balance* between differentiating this self from others (that is, being unique, agentic and solitary) and placing it in the world of people (that is, being cooperative and committed while combating loneliness). Within the intersubjective paradigm, *socionoesis* is the word coined by Trevarthen (2013) to denote the collective storytelling, in which *pride in meaning* emerges as the seemingly solo products of human creative imagination are shared with others and valued by them. Although this co-creation of narratives facilitates cultural membership and moderates loneliness, the danger of rejection, ostracism and exclusion from meaning is

always present and may result in the *loneliness of shame* (Trevarthen, 2022; see also Galanaki, 2023).

*Metaphor*, as a transference of meaning from one context to another, holds a prominent position in narrative; it has a haunting power, as Bruner (2002) stated. Human thought, especially concepts, are fundamentally metaphoric. Metaphor provides our experience with coherence (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and ‘is often the only way of communicating precisely and efficiently what one means’ (Winner and Gardner, 1993: 429). The ability to understand and use metaphor is a developmental task (Vosniadou, 1987) which gifted people are likely to achieve earlier than other people. Metaphor and giftedness are related because metaphor can be regarded as original and innovative connection. Creative writers can bring together seemingly different, yet profoundly related or as yet unrelated experiences, and achieve both insight and delight (Fraser, 2003). Their sensitivity and gift are the sources of various novel combinations that they invent in their pursuit of beauty, harmony and perfection. We argue that gifted writers may be regarded to continually construct and reconstruct their own personal metaphor, their unique *metaphorical self*.

The connections produced by metaphors stand as opposites to loneliness and may serve a cathartic function. Therefore, although creative writers may have an acute sense of loneliness, especially as existential aloneness, they have nevertheless the capacity to use their metaphorical abilities to work through their intrapsychic conflicts and pain. The novel and creative use of symbols (that is, language) means that they are capable of introjecting and representing what is absent. By this introjection, they enrich themselves, extend their psychic space and share their representations to enrich others as well. As psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok (1978/1994: 128, our emphasis) aptly stated: ‘Since language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by *giving*

*figurative shape to presence*, it can only be comprehended or shared in a ‘community of empty mouths’.”

### **Early Solitary Years of Gifted Writers**

#### ***Hans Christian Andersen: Loneliness and narcissistic trauma***

Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) experienced severe early loss and various forms of adversity as a child and adolescent. His father’s premature death, family members’ mental disorders, alcoholism, and moral digressions, family poverty, forced labour, abuse by his employer, rejection by peers in school and abuse by his headmaster were some of the traumatic events of his childhood and adolescence according to his autobiographies (for example, Andersen, 1868/1975) and his biographies (for example, Wullschläger, 2000; Andersen, 2005). These events arguably laid the ground for his narcissistic vulnerability and his object hunger as well as his loneliness and melancholia. As a child, he frequently engaged in solitary play (with dolls and puppets). As an adolescent, he was a misfit in school because he began his high-school education at the age of 17. As an adult, he travelled a lot and behaved like a nomad, living, for long periods, in the houses of others. He seemed to crave relationships with women and men, although probably he lacked sexual fulfilment. His sexual identity and orientation remain enigmatic. He strived for admiration and fame by writing novels, poetry, drama, librettos, essays, travel logs and fairy tales. In his three autobiographies, his portraits and photos, he systematically constructed and presented an idealised self-image, carefully concealing the misery of his family and social background (Zipes, 2005).

There is no surprise, then, that the despair of loneliness is one of the central themes of Andersen’s fairy tales, for example, *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Little Match*

*Girl, The Steadfast Tin Soldier, Thumbelina, The Little Mermaid, The Snowman* and *The Wild Swans*. Following are some lines from *The Ugly Duckling*, first published in 1843 (Andersen, 1983):

The poor duckling did not know where he dared stand or where he dared walk. He was so sad because he was so desperately ugly, and because he was the laughing stock of the whole barnyard. ... 'That's because I'm so ugly', he thought, and closed his eyes, but he ran on just the same until he reached the great marsh where the wild ducks lived. There he lay all night long, weary and disheartened.

Rejection, humiliation, marginalisation, smallness, helplessness, loss, separation and abandonment, sometimes leading to extinction and death and sometimes to reunion and (re)finding of love objects, are prevalent in Andersen's fairy tales as they were prevalent in the early years of his life. The narrative gift may have been for him a way of articulating and working through his deep narcissistic injuries and the accompanying sense of loneliness and despair throughout his life.

### ***Edgar Allan Poe: Loneliness in the crypt***

American author, poet, editor and literary critic Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) experienced serious early deprivation, loss and trauma: abandonment by his father, disease and loss of his mother, separation from siblings, and adoption by the Allan family. He was in constant conflict with his foster father for financial matters, mainly Edgar's gambling debts and demands for educational funds. He experienced the death of his foster mother and had affairs with fragile women, most of whom died. His young wife died too, leaving him in despair. He became an alcoholic and drug addict. These abuses must have caused his death at the age of 40 (Quinn, 1941/1998).



Poe's work is profoundly melancholic and gloomy. Marie Bonaparte (1949) associated the marasmus and death of his mother, which he experienced when he was three years old, with the latent necrophilia which characterised his life and work. Throughout his life, as evidenced in his writings, Poe remained loyal to the image of the moribund and finally dead mother.

In his poem *Alone* (Poe, 2000), which he wrote in 1829, when he was 20 years old, soon after the death of his foster mother, he reviews his childhood, and openly expresses his belief in his mysterious diversity, which may be considered to have aggravated his loneliness:

*Alone*

From childhood's hour I have not been

As others were – I have not seen

As others saw – I could not bring

My passions from a common spring.

From the same source I have not taken

My sorrow; I could not awaken

My heart to joy at the same tone;

And all I lov'd, I loved alone.

Then– in my childhood, in the dawn

Of a most stormy life– was drawn

From every depth of good and ill

The mystery which binds me still:

From the torrent, or the fountain,

From the red cliff of the mountain,

From the sun that round me rolled

In its autumn tint of gold,  
 From the lightning in the sky  
 As it passed me flying by,  
 From the thunder and the storm,  
 And the cloud that took the form  
 (When the rest of Heaven was blue)  
 Of a demon in my view.

This poem indicates that, although highly dysphoric (almost demonic), this kind of loneliness was also a source of creativity, perhaps, at times, a source of ‘love’ and ‘joy’. We may argue that Poe’s loneliness was related to narcissistic trauma, unresolved grief and a life-long struggle for narcissistic gratification and catharsis through art. Early, severe and pervasive loss is likely to have resulted in ‘disintegrative’ loneliness, as Fromm- Reichmann (1990) has named a nonconstructive, almost psychotic, state of emotional paralysis and helplessness. The poet seemed to have incorporated the dead objects and preserved them in a crypt, an intrapsychic tomb – this indicated an incapacity to mourn. The incorporation of lost objects acts as an *antimetaphor* because the absent objects are not represented but literally taken into the self (Abraham and Torok, 1994). In Poe’s case, death drives seemed to have prevailed over the life-giving power of poetry to such extent that, eventually, his cryptophoria caused psychic disorganisation and death.

### ***Robert Louis Stevenson: Playful aloneness***

Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) was an only child. He had poor health all throughout his life. As a child, he was mainly taught by private tutors at home. He dictated stories to his mother and nurse, and, although he learnt to read and

write rather late (about eight years old), he wrote numerous stories during his childhood. When he was a young adult, he argued with his parents over his strict upbringing and for some time he broke his ties with them. Both before and after his marriage, he was in a constant search of place of residence, due to his ill health. He ended up with his family in the Samoan Islands, where he died prematurely at the age of 44 (Robert Louis Stevenson Website, nd).

Stevenson is famous for works such as *The Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. He also wrote an excellent collection of children's poems – *A Child's Garden of Verses* – in which he beautifully captured great issues of childhood.

In this collection (*The Child Alone*) and in the poem *The Little Land*, Stevenson (1895) regards solitary play and fantasy as the content of children's time alone at home, much as Freud (1908/1959a) did:

*The Little Land*

When at home alone I sit  
 And am very tired of it,  
 I have just to shut my eyes  
 To go sailing through the skies –  
 To go sailing far away  
 To the pleasant Land of Play.

In the poem *The Unseen Playmate*, Stevenson (1895) seems to have a deep understanding of the child's *imaginary companion*, who usually makes its appearance in solitude:

*The Unseen Playmate*

When children are playing alone on the green,

In comes the playmate that never was seen.  
 When children are happy and lonely and good,  
 The Friend of the Children comes out of the wood.  
 Nobody heard him, and nobody saw,  
 His is a picture you never could draw,  
 But he's sure to be present, abroad or at home,  
 When children are happy and playing alone.

The imaginary companion may be regarded as a manifestation of intersubjectivity and the innate dialogicity of the human mind (Papastathopoulos and Kugiumutzakis, 2007), thus, reinforcing the view that this 'airy nothing' can stem from loneliness and at the same time be a remedy for it. The imaginary companion is also a narcissistic guardian, who helps the child maintain omnipotence in the face of serious trauma (Benson, 1980), and a transitional self, who helps the child deal with separation (Klein, 1985).

In the poem *My Kingdom* (Stevenson, 1895: 85), the child finds refuge in nature. Not only he or she feels part of a natural microcosm but he or she owns it and reigns over it. 'His Majesty the Child' (to paraphrase Freud's quote 'His Majesty the Baby') derives pleasure from narcissistic grandeur:

*My Kingdom*

Down by a shining water well  
 I found a very little dell,  
 No higher than my head.  
 The heather and the gorse about  
 In summer bloom were coming out,  
 Some yellow and some red.

I called the little pool a sea;  
 The little hills were big to me;  
 For I am very small.  
 I made a boat, I made a town,  
 I searched the caverns up and down,  
 And named them one and all.

Play and fantasy, imaginary friends and being united with nature, were some of the ways Stevenson may have used to deal with solitude which his poor health had imposed on him on several occasions.

In his adult life, Stevenson cherished the bliss of solitude while acknowledging its limits. In his travel log *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), written in his late twenties, Stevenson described beneficial solitude experiences in nature. However, it was exactly that solitude that led to the awareness of a lack and a need:

And yet even while I was exulting in my solitude I became aware of a strange lack. I wished a companion to lie near me in the starlight, silent and not moving, but ever within touch. For there is a fellowship more quiet even than solitude, and which, rightly understood, is solitude made perfect. And to live out of doors with the woman a man loves is of all lives the most complete and free.

The author's need was to share his solitude with his love object. He seemed to long for an absolute narcissistic union with an alive, present and close, yet silent, other.

### ***Beatrix Helen Potter: Inhabited solitude***

Beatrix Helen Potter (1866–1943) was an English author and illustrator. An only child until she was five, she was deprived of her brother when he was placed in a

boarding school. Her wealthy parents provided private tutoring at home for her, and for many years she knew no other place than her house and its natural surroundings. Suffering by late Victorian mores, from early on, this isolated girl turned to little animals, which she observed as a naturalist and cared for, and to painting. Her biographer Margaret Lane (1946/1986) wrote: ‘Quiet, solitary and observant children create their own world and live in it, nourishing their imaginations on the material at hand; and she was not at all unhappy’ (12); and ‘she had made friends with rabbits and hedgehogs, mice and minnows, as a prisoner in solitary confinement will befriend a mouse’ (36).

Until Beatrix Potter was 30, she kept a diary with a secret code, which was decoded in the 1950s. For this, Lane (1946/1986) also reported: “‘I cannot rest,” she wrote in the secret-code journal which she kept from her fourteenth to her thirtieth year, “I must draw, however poor the result ... I will do something sooner or later”” (7). Beatrix Potter got engaged at a young age, but her fiancé died one month after the engagement. She married in middle age and had a life-long relationship with her husband. In her later years, she cultivated her interest in natural science, and became a social activist and a benefactress, with a remarkable ecological sensitivity (Lear, 2007).

In his book on the value of solitude as a return to the self, Storr (1988) argued that Beatrix Potter put an end to her narratives when she got married, because this emotional investment meant that she no longer needed the comfort of narrative. However, this comment may not do justice to Beatrix Potter’s literary production, because not only she had formed some emotional ties when she was young (for example, betrothal) but she had also written many books before her marriage in middle age.

Indeed, Beatrix Potter (1989) wrote more than 23 books with animal heroes, including brilliant illustrations of her own. A solitary childhood was inhabited by numerous imaginary creatures. A colourful and lively world of animals, such as Peter Rabbit, Tom Kitten, Benjamin Bunny, Jemima Puddle-Duck, and many others, seems to have alleviated Potter's transient lonely and melancholic feelings and to have prepared a later life of inner peace and creative contribution to society.

### **Gifted Writers and the Paradox of Painful and Beneficial Aloneness**

The cases we briefly presented illustrated the central position that loneliness and solitude hold in the lives and work of many creative writers. In these cases, chronic and intense loneliness may be attributed to early deprivation, loss of the object or loss of the love of the object. Those gifted writers were deprived of their parents or lived with inadequate parents or were deprived of siblings or peers. Such conditions are usually at the root of a (more or less) serious narcissistic trauma and a predisposition for melancholy, which may be evident already in early childhood.

Loneliness and melancholy may exhibit continuity in time and reach a peak during adolescence in gifted individuals (Jackson and Peterson, 2003). These experiences do not necessarily impede artistic creation; on the contrary, they may force these individuals to resort to fantasy. From the early years of life, personal unconscious fantasies, which are the products of the individual's creativity, lead to drive discharge and drive gratification in passive and socially approved ways (Sarnoff, 1976). When these personal fantasies meet linguistic talent and become poems and stories, they are likely to enhance the child's resilience in the face of vicissitudes, change the life course and alleviate psychic pain. The gifted writers' ability to invent figures and whole worlds – companions in solitude – through literature may protect

them from disintegrative loneliness and severe melancholy. For example, research has shown that anthropomorphism, which is highly prevalent in Anderson's and Potter's tales (albeit in different forms) and is a manifestation of these writers' rich fantasy life, is an indication of the individual's pursuit for connectedness with the surrounding world (Epley et al, 2008). Life and narrative or life and art become one (Bruner, 2002). The gifted narrators find consolation in narrative and share this consolation with their readers.

Is aloneness more painful *and* beneficial in gifted individuals, in this case, creative writers? Although the rather limited research findings on these experiences in gifted individuals are contradictory, as we saw previously, it is likely that this may be the case. At first, creative writers typically have an acute awareness of their *uniqueness*. They feel different from others. They are aware that they have facets of self that cannot be shared and/or understood by others. They do not fit in or belong. The awareness of singularity is expected to aggravate loneliness. This is especially so if the reception of their work by their contemporaries is characterised by tepidity, misunderstanding, contempt or rejection. Freud (1914/1957) revealed that *splendid isolation* was the niche he had created in the face of the polemic he experienced for his innovative ideas. It is a sanctuary that may imply a *regression to secondary narcissism*, a retreat in front of the greatest pain, that which stems from disruptions of human relations (Freud, 1930/1961b; see also Galanaki, 2021). Moreover, withdrawal in a cherished realm of one's own is a defensive reaction in front of a perceived threat: that one's true self is threatened to be altered, and the *incommunicado element*, as Winnicott (1963/1965b) named the private, non-communicating core of self, which must remain unshareable, is in danger of being revealed. In other words, creative



writers may crave to escape solitude while trying to protect it, so that their experience is likely to be an ambivalent sense of involuntary and voluntary isolation.

In addition, as described earlier, various *overexcitabilities* often characterise gifted individuals. The capacity for heightened sensitivity, awareness and response is expected to predispose creative writers as well to experience greater connection both with the inner (for example, introspection, enlightenment, self-transcendence) and the outer world (for example, empathy, sympathy, concern for others). Here lies a seeming paradox: this connection by default alleviates loneliness but may also reveal various imperfections, deficiencies and limitations of individuals and societies.

Overexcitability may lead to a degree of awareness of the human subject's *intrapsychic division*, that is, our alienation from the *terra incognita* of the unconscious. Thus, overexcitabilities may give rise to meaninglessness, fears, depressive affect, existential anxiety and preoccupation with death, in other words, an estrangement from self and others, which may make creative writers vulnerable to loneliness. Loneliness is mainly a feeling of incompleteness, of something missing and longed for, and, if we consider the fact that the gifted are perfectionists (for example, Speirs Neumeister, 2017; Rice and Ray, 2018), feeling lonely may be a common and acute experience for them.

Furthermore, connections are what the creative writers are constantly searching for (for example, by use of metaphor), whereas loneliness is by definition a breach in connection. If, additionally, trauma, and especially early trauma occurs, as was the case with the creative writers we discussed previously, loneliness can become even more painful. Trauma induces an inner fragmentation, as a way of dealing with pain. In his extensive work on trauma, Ferenczi (1933/1955) argued that split-off parts of the self emerge that do not recognise one another. This state is associated with an

experience of *traumatic aloneness*, which means that the child feels as being left alone not only with those responsible for the traumatisation but also with those indifferent to the child's suffering (Ferenczi, 1932/1988). Moreover, as the same psychoanalyst acknowledged, *precocious maturity* – the 'wise baby' – may be one of the typical outcomes of early trauma. We argue that although this maturity is fragile, it may manifest itself in early creative endeavours, such as the early works of the writers we chose to focus on.

Another explanation for the intense experience of both painful and beneficial aloneness in creative writers is that in order to discover, elaborate on and express an innovative idea, an original technique or a novel meaning, the gifted person must *withdraw* from society, even from one's own self or parts of one's self. This requires, as we discussed earlier, the *protective shield against stimuli* (Freud, 1920/1955), that is, self-regulation with the aim of preserving optimal excitation, which is needed for originality to emerge. Engagement presupposes disengagement. 'Whoever reflects recognises that there are empty and lonely spaces between one's experiences. Perhaps these gaps are the products of reflection or at least its fruits', Bruner (1962: 60) acknowledged. To forget oneself in a formless, unintegrated state, without psychic disorganisation and loss of connection with the world, is a prerequisite for the emergence of new forms. If one yearns to hear the music of the spheres, as Winnicott (1963/1965b) aptly stated, *non-communication* is needed, that is, silent or secret communication with the subjectively perceived objects – and this is attained only in solitary states.

Finally, creative writers may also have, compared to other people, a more poignant experience of *silence*, which is closely related to loneliness and solitude. According to André Green (1990), the silent function is the shadow of the speech, its

negativity; it can erase the manifest and unveil the latent and is a means which allows the psychic representation of the drive. In creative writers, thus, silence, with its fluidity, enables the expansion of psychic space and the emergence of originality through language. In the timelessness of silent moments, separateness is diminished, and oneness or union experiences are likely to occur. However, by definition, the silent function has to do with gaps, discontinuities and lacks. In silence lies the writers' struggle with their limits – with what they cannot conceive or cannot put into words. Boredom, inertia, meaninglessness, void, rejection, utter aloneness, and so on – all silent acts of the death drive – may emerge in front of a blank page or when inspiration cannot tame the symbols.

The theoretical approaches (presented in this section) on the intensity of painful and beneficial aloneness in gifted writers need empirical support. Because most of the evidence reviewed in this study has focused on highly intelligent people, future research should focus more, perhaps through in-depth case studies (which are as yet very rare; for example, Peterson, 2012), on loneliness and solitude experiences of this specific category of gifted people, that is, children, adolescents and adults with the writing gift.

## **Conclusion**

Solitude is a *paradox* of human nature (Galanaki, 2015). This paradox, which entails a tension between painful and beneficial aspects of aloneness, may be intensely experienced by gifted writers. This is expected to happen especially when loneliness and solitude have played an important role in their childhood and/or adult life due to temperamental, familial, interpersonal and social factors – and a complex interplay between them in the specific historical context they live in – as was the case with the

creative writers we chose to focus on. We argue that loneliness is likely to be the inevitable outcome of the writing gift but also becomes the inspiration and motive force for *ars poetica*. At the same time, creative writers seek the multitude and plenitude of solitude and use their *solitude skills* (Galanaki, 2005) for autopoiesis, autonomous self-transformation and innovative production.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the terms ‘gifted writers’, ‘gifted narrators’ and ‘creative writers’ interchangeably, for authors with a significant contribution in any literary genre.

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