Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Modern Life (Part 2): Alcoholism and Writing

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, January 10th, 2018

In my previous post, I focused on the loneliness inherent in writing, the loneliness of modern life, and social media's role in the loneliness epidemic. Now it's time to talk about whether modern life leads the writer to drink.

"Modern life is often a mechanical oppression and liquor is the only mechanical relief."

- Ernest Hemingway

Okay, I can hear your argument. The writer as an alcoholic is just a stereotype. What's more, there's nothing about modern life that would make a writer an alcoholic anymore now than in the past. Even further, the history of literature is riddled with great alcoholic writers. Where are they now? Go ahead, name a famous modern writer (are there any?) who is also a famous alcoholic.

It's true, writers aren't *necessarily* alcoholics or alcohol abusers. "There is no proof of any consistent relationship between alcohol and creativity," says psychologist Albert Rothenberg. It's tough to name a famous contemporary writer who struggles with alcohol abuse. There is no modern Jack Kerouac, Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, John Cheever, or Raymond Carver, to name a few. There are no household names of literature whose mention also conjures a reputation for boozing.

This says something about writing and readership. I would argue that the act of writing has changed; the act of drinking has not. The internet has changed writing. If anything, the internet has democratized writing. Millions of people have blogs or publish through independent media outlets. Millions of people can look at anyone's blog post based purely on subject matter—this has very little to do with who the writer is. Yes, a person's credentials still have cachet, but the idea of the famous writer has receded beneath the roar of constant content. More writers can get their work in front of more eyes than the publishing world has ever allowed.

At the same time as a rising tide of writers is publishing work for online readers, the rate of alcohol abuse is on the rise. A recent study of 40,000 adults revealed 1 in 8 suffers from "alcohol use disorder." From 2002 to 2003, 8.5 percent had a drinking problem; from 2012-13, 12.7 percent were hitting the bottle too hard. That's an increase of about 50 percent. It's not out of the ordinary in the overall scope of things. People's drinking habits fluctuate, much like any trend on a graph will rise and fall. Larger societal issues feed into self-destructive patterns.

New research in epigenetics is shedding light on addiction. Animals pass down "genetic markers"

that predispose their offspring to addictive traits. In a study, researchers bred some rats to be "inquisitive" and adventurous. They bred the other group of rats "to avoid new stimuli and seek shelter." Then they gave both groups of rats cocaine. That's right—scientists scored a bunch of blow they could regularly give to rats (surely there was some left over for additional experimentation in the lab).

Both groups of rats were in an environment where they could get more cocaine. The inquisitive, adventurous group was more likely to go back for more. Scientists found that taking cocaine changed the rats' genetic expression. It marked their genes, making them open to substance abuse.

The same applies to alcohol. "Altered gene expression in brain reward regions after alcohol intake has been reported, which suggests that individual genes are differentially regulated following alcohol consumption," says Vanessa Nieratschker, co-author of the study "Genetics And Epigenetics Of Alcohol Dependence." In other words, certain genes become functional when you expose them to alcohol. These genes dispose you to seek out more alcohol, more stimulus, because stimulus activates reward regions in your brain.

Do writers have more of the inquisitive and adventurous genes, the type of genes that cause you to seek more alcohol when you drink alcohol? Perhaps not so much anymore. The widening pool of writers means a smaller percentage of the people who write would have genes prone to alcoholism.

Interestingly, in a Washington Post article from way back in 1989, Dr. Anita Stevens, a New York psychiatrist, suggests that the writer's life lends itself to drinking. "My writer patients work in isolation, and isolation leads to alcohol," she said. "Anybody can become addicted, but writing seems to lend itself to addiction." This is the older, less science-based view of addiction. Epigenetics is showing there are people marked for addiction. Those people also tend to be more inquisitive. If writers tend to be more inquisitive, they could also be more prone to addiction, and an isolated life, a life spent writing in one's room alone, makes it easier to grab a drink.

How many writers lead an isolated life drenched in alcohol? Your guess is as good as mine, but it seems like things have changed. *The New Yorker*'s Adam Gopnik provides an anecdote to this effect:

"Writers in this office used to drink," a grizzled veteran of these corridors once said sternly to a couple of pup reporters, whom he had discovered taking turns trying on a good-looking cashmere jacket in another cubicle. The moral, abashing if not shaming, was that in the halls where once real men had roamed, or drank in peaceable closets, now mere jacket-fanciers wandered.

Now, inquisitive writers at *The New Yorker* try on each other's jackets instead of trying out a new cocktail. The writers aren't by themselves, plunging through their work so they can head down to the bar and drink away their loneliness. They're together, enjoying the look and feel of luxury.

Is the drunken writer a cliche, a romantic image from bygone days? Depends on who you ask. For the writer who spends their time in an office, a coffee shop, or a shared workspace, the word "isolation" doesn't apply. And in our modern time, the writer is never "alone" in the truest sense of the word—a conversation with a friend, another writer, or millions of other writers is just a click and a tab away. No more bar tabs please; just browser tabs, thank you.

Although writers may not be alone like they used to be—in a room with a lamp and a pad of paper or a typewriter—I still contend that the internet increases loneliness, because it's an artificial form of social interaction. But this loneliness doesn't necessarily lead the writer to drink more than it leads her to, say, get some exercise. We're so aware of the horrors of addiction, and we have all the info on how to cure depression at our fingertips.

I would expect rates of alcohol abuse among writers to mirror those of the general populace. Do you feel the same?

Featured Image/The Blue Diamond Gallery