

Genius is not only quantitative in the sense that it represents more intelligence or talent than that possessed by ordinary people, even highly gifted people. It is not just that a genius is a lot better at something than others who are simply good at that thing. As their lives invariably demonstrate, genius is also a qualitative difference, a difference in essential nature as well as capability. We can be certain that the genius we call Shakespeare had an exceptional childhood. His achievement was too monumental in scope, his break with the past too thorough, to have been preceded by an ordinary childhood, an ordinary education (or, if we can trust what's known about William of Stratford, no education at all).

What kind of a childhood and education, then, would we expect from the genius who created the language we speak? Dr. Ellen Winner, Professor of Psychology at Boston College and Senior Research Associate at Harvard, offers some helpful guidelines. Winner is one of a group of innovative psychologists who, roughly twenty years ago, embarked upon a study they term the Psychology of Creativity, a study launched by the pioneering work of Dr. Dean Keith Simont on the University of California at Davis.

In her book, [Gifted Children; Myths and Realities \(1996\)](#), after examining the ways in which gifted children demonstrate capabilities far beyond the norm—so far beyond in some cases that it tests belief—Winner turns to the characteristics of “creators,” her term for individuals so powerfully creative that they “alter” their “domains”—meaning they will leave the arena of their endeavors forever changed by what they do, a definition that also fits the layman’s concept of “genius.” What then, in Winner’s terms, should we expect to find in the childhood of the genius we call Shakespeare? Rather than paraphrase and condense and so risk misinterpreting what she has taken pains to clarify, we must quote her at some length.

Gifted Children

Winner opens by describing the characteristics of gifted children. Atypical of ordinary children, gifted children are

precocious. They begin to take the first steps in the mastery of some domain at an earlier-than-average age. They also make more progress in this domain than do ordinary children, because learning in the domain comes easily to them. By domain, I refer to an organized area of knowledge such as language, mathematics, music . . . [etc. Second, they

insist on] marching to their own drummer. Gifted children not only learn faster than average or even bright children but also learn in a qualitatively different way. . . . they need minimum help or scaffolding from adults in order to master their domain, and much of the time they teach themselves. The discoveries they make about their domain are exciting and motivating and each leads the gifted child on to the next step. Often these children independently invent rules of the domain and devise novel, idiosyncratic ways of solving problems.

These children have what Winner terms a “rage to master.” They are intrinsically motivated to make sense of the domain in which they show precocity. They exhibit an intense and obsessive interest, an ability to focus sharply. . . . They experience states of “flow” when they are engaged in learning in their domain—optimal states in which they focus intently and lose sense of the outside world. The lucky combination of obsessive interest in a domain along with an ability to learn easily in that domain leads to high achievement (3-4).

Later she defines “the right personality structure for mastery.” She tells us that

gifted children are highly motivated to work to achieve mastery, they derive pleasure from challenge and, at least by adolescence, they have an unusually strong sense of who they are and what they want to do as adults. . . . [They are] fiercely independent and nonconforming . . . [and] they tend to be more introverted and lonelier than the average child, both because they have so little in common with others and because they need and want to be alone to develop their talent. Not surprisingly, [they] usually have older friends. They are searching for mental, rather than chronological, age equivalents. (2132-3, 227)

She addresses several common myths regarding giftedness, among them:

The commonsense “folk” psychology . . . that giftedness is entirely inborn: you either have it or you don’t. The abilities of Mozart, Picasso, Newton, or Einstein are so unfathomable to us that we explain them by saying that these individuals were just born geniuses. The environment has no interesting role to play if talents are inborn and fixed. . . . Psychologists like to attack folk psychologies in general . . . but psychologists have their own myth: that giftedness is entirely a product of the environment [and that] the right kind of training, begun at an early age, is sufficient to account for even the very highest levels of giftedness. (143)

She shows that both expectations are unrealistic, that in fact, both factors must be present for gifted children to excel in any domain. They must be born with talent, or, more important, a “rage to master,” and they must also have the support of caregivers that value their efforts, who can offer what she terms an “enriched environment” with “opportunities for reading, playing and talking,” one in which education is valued (185). Without these, no matter how great the inborn gifts, nothing can develop. “There are undoubtedly many children never identified as gifted because of their disadvantaged environments,” says Winner (186).

But giftedness in childhood can only go so far. Many prodigies lose interest in their passions in the teen years or their twenties and turn their backs on further achievement. Those who do go on to success usually become experts in their chosen fields. Only a handful, however, reach the level she terms “creator”—individuals whose creative powers are so intense that they end by revolutionizing their professions. These are the folks who change the world. In her words:

A few go from being a gifted child or prodigy in a domain to being an adult creator in that domain—a pattern exemplified by Mozart and Picasso. Those who traverse this route must make the profound transition from being an expert in an established domain to being someone who disrupts the domain and remakes it, leaving it forever altered. To follow this route requires not only extreme early ability but also a rebellious personality, a desire to shake up the status quo (281).

Moreover, as she informs us, only a few people will ever revolutionize a domain of knowledge. They must be born when the zeitgeist is right—when a domain is ready for the kind of change that the creator envisions. Moreover, a domain can change only so much and thus can accommodate only a very few creators. So the factors that predict who will become a creator include not only the traits of the individuals in question but also historical and cultural factors (281).

In her final pages Winner goes into detail on the characteristics of creators as they have been determined by numerous tests and studies, all of which she documents. Creators are:

hard driving, focused, dominant, independent risk takers. They have experienced stressful

childhoods and they often suffer from forms of psychopathology. . . . Creators must be willing to sacrifice . . . [They are] workaholics. The most creative people are also the most prolific. . . . [They] must be able to persist in the face of difficulty and overcome the many obstacles in the way of creative discovery. They must persist because of what has become known among creativity researchers as the “ten-year rule”—the dictum that it takes about ten years of hard work in a domain to make a breakthrough. (293)

In a footnote, Winner goes into detail on the many researchers whose studies have led to the formulation of this “ten-year rule.” She continues:

Even Mozart did not produce his first masterpiece until after about ten years of composing. A willingness to toil and to tolerate frustration and persist in the face of failure is crucial. . . . Creators are strong, dominant personalities with an unshakable belief in themselves. They must be able to believe in themselves, for otherwise they would be felled by the inevitable attacks that come when one goes against the established point of view. (293)

The only child syndrome

Several times in the course of the book Winner describes the need creators have to be alone. Prodigies are often “only” children, raised in the company of adults, allowed to go their own way to a much greater extent than ordinary children. Such children often suffer from being so different from their peers, feeling odd or out of place among them. Even so they prefer being alone to being bored in the company of children who don’t share their interests.

They set challenging goals for themselves and believe that they can achieve what they aspire to. Those who would be recognized must also be able to tolerate competition—some even thrive on it. And they must be thick-skinned enough to sell themselves. . . . Creators are independent and nonconforming. . . . Caring about pleasing everyone cannot be a priority for anyone who is going to challenge an established tradition. . . . Creators must be willing to sacrifice comfort, relaxation, and personal relationships for the sake of their work. They are often ruthless and destructive of personal ties. . . . Creators have to be willing to risk failure, since anything new is likely initially to be denounced. [Those] who produce the most works are most likely to produce a masterpiece, but they also produce the most failed works. Perhaps the most important of all is the desire to set things straight, to alter the status quo and shake up the established tradition. Creators do not accept the prevailing view; they are oppositional and

discontented. (292-298)

The typical family

Winner examines the typical family life of great creators:

The future creator seems to grow up in a family that is much less child-centered and supportive, and far more stress-filled than does the gifted child not destined to become a creator. Three-fourths of the eminent creators studied by [leading researchers] experienced some kinds of extreme stress in their early family life: poverty; death of a parent; divorced or estranged parents; rejecting, abusive or alcoholic parents; fathers who experienced professional failure or bankruptcy; and so on. They came from atypical families—irritable, explosive families, often prone to depression or to large-scale mood swings. . . . Particularly shocking is the frequency with which eminent individuals have lost a parent in childhood. . . . In [one] study of major creators, over a fifth had lost one or both parents in childhood[,] . . . the only other groups with such high levels of parental loss are delinquents and depressive or suicidal psychiatric patients. . . . Family trauma is more often characterized by those who became writers, artists, musicians and actors in comparison to those who became scientists, physicians and political leaders. . . . [In one study] of eminent twentieth-century figures, 89 percent of the novelists and playwrights, 83 percent of the poets and 70 percent of the artists had difficult family lives, while this was true for only 56 percent of the scientists. . . . The same distinction was found in a comparison between Nobel Prize winners in science v. literature; those in literature were more likely to come from unstable family environments. Literature winners were also eight times more likely to have lost a parent in childhood. (298-300)

Winner draws a number of conclusions from these studies, all pertinent to our subject. Though all are interesting, we'll quote only the most apposite. Regarding family trauma, she concludes:

Trauma could make a child feel different from the start and thus lead to a willingness to be different. The perception that one's environment is unpredictable may lead to the desire to achieve in order to gain control over one's destiny. . . . Loss of a parent may also lead to a kind of compensation—desire to replace the lost object by creating one's own object, whether a work of art or a scientific theory. A horror of the void left by death could stimulate a child to create an ideal world and to lose [him]self in its creation. The desire to replace emptiness and the lost object with an ideal created world may be so strong that [he] is not overly critica l. . . .

“Ideal created worlds” is a good description of the island of Ephesus where the shipwrecked family is finally reunited in *A Comedy of Errors*, or the magical isle of *The Tempest*, where father and daughter, Prospero and Miranda, are wafted to safety, out of the grasp of evil relatives, or Il leria in *Twelfth Night* where brother and sister, Sebastian and Viola, wash ashore following yet another Shakespearean family shipwreck.

“O let me not be mad”

Yet, what may be most pertinent of all to our inquiry, considering Hamlet’s alternating brilliance and despair or Lear’s heartfelt cry as his world dissolves into chaos is Winner’s examination of the high incidence of “mood disorder” among great literary artists:

A study of British artists and writers found that 38 percent had been treated for a mood disorder, a percentage that is very high considering the fact that only one in three people with mood disorder ever seeks treatment. . . . What underlies this association between creativity and mood disorders? First, the experience of mood disorder can lead a person to create as a therapeutic enterprise. And the experience of suffering can provide the subject for works of art. In addition, mood disorders, particularly mania of low intensity, called hypomania, can lead to unusual thought processes, associated with creative episodes: sharpened and focused thinking, novel associations, overinclusive categories (perceiving similarities between things normally seen as different) and speed of thought, as well as the kind of drive so often found in creative people. . . . (302)

These “unusual thought processes,” “novel associations” and “overinclusive categories (perceiving similarities between things normally seen as different)” work perfectly as descriptions of Shakespeare’s recognized gift for thinking in unusual metaphors.

Troubling as such results may be, Winner ends on a high note, since, despite these horrendous difficulties, “there must also be a high degree of ego strength and self-confidence. Creators’ unshakable belief in their own vision must keep them from disintegrating. (300-02) And finally there must also be luck:

The gifted child must have abilities that the domain is ready for. If the abilities are too out of sync with the domain, the gifts may never be recognized or may only be recognized centuries later” (303).