

THE COST OF THE MUSE: POETS DIE YOUNG

JAMES C. KAUFMAN

Learning Research Institute, California State University at San Bernardino,  
San Bernardino, California, USA

*Although several investigations have found that poets tend to die younger than other types of writers, these studies often do not take into account variables of gender and culture. This study examines 1,987 deceased writers from four different cultures: American, Chinese, Turkish, and Eastern European. Both male and female poets had the shortest life spans of all four types of writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers), and poets had the shortest life spans in three of the four cultures (and the second shortest life span among Eastern European writers). Possible reasons for the poet's shorter life span are then discussed.*

*She is the Gaelic muse, for she gives inspiration to those she persecutes. The Gaelic poets die young, for she is restless, and will not let them remain long on earth - this malignant phantom. —William Butler Yeats*

There are many ways in which popular perceptions about writers are not reinforced by scientific findings. There has been no proof that a writer isolated in a lonely hotel for months on end will go mad and try to kill his family, as in *The Shining*. Studies have not found that romance novelists are more likely to go on wild adventures (such as in *Romancing the Stone*), nor are mystery-loving playwrights or novelists, such as those found in *Deathtrap* and *Sleuth*, more likely to commit murder. Yet the

Received 2 December 2002; accepted 16 April 2003.

I thank John Baer and Allison B. Kaufman for their helpful comments and suggestions and Weihua Niu and Gunseli Oral for the use of data on Chinese and Turkish writers, respectively.

Address correspondence to James C. Kaufman, Learning Research Institute, California State University at San Bernardino, Department of Psychology, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407. E-mail: jkaufman@csusb.edu

image of the writer as a doomed and sometimes tragic figure, bound to die young, can be backed up by research.

Writers die young. This research finding has been consistently replicated in a variety of studies. Writers have a shorter life span than people in other occupations, including other artistic-related occupations (Cassandro, 1998; Kaun, 1991; Ludwig, 1995; Simonton, 1975). Yet although most studies of writers include many different kinds of writers, these differences are rarely explored.

These differences are not trivial. Those who write fiction and those who write poetry often consider their tasks to be quite different. “The poet gives us his essence, but prose takes the mould of the body and mind entire,” wrote Virginia Woolf, a prose-writer. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a poet, argued that “Prose is words in their best order. Poetry is the best words in the best order.” Meanwhile, both poets and fiction writers can denigrate other types of writing: “Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism what will be grasped at once,” said the novelist Cyril Connolly.

Lumping the poet, the novelist, the playwright, and the essayist into one category is convenient—and for large analyses, it is often necessary. Yet it ignores some fundamental differences between types of writers. Male and female writers may be different in unique ways. Different cultures may have their own patterns of differences between poets, novelists, playwrights, and non-fiction writers (Kaufman, 2002).

One of the few studies to look at mortality in different types of writers was conducted by Simonton (1975), who found that poets tended to die younger than fiction writers. His study included writers from all cultures, without examining specific differences in cultures. Ludwig (1995) found that poets died younger than fiction writers, non-fiction writers, and people in the theater, although his study was skewed toward modern writers (he used as his sample the subjects of biographies written between 1960 and 1990). He also did not examine differences by gender or culture.

Other studies have examined differences in the mental and physical health of different types of writers. For example, although Ludwig (1995) did not directly compare the two groups of writers, an examination of his overall data on eminent individuals reveals higher rates of psychopathy in fiction writers and poets than non-fiction writers. Ludwig also found the poets had higher rates of depression. Female poets have been found to be more likely to be mentally ill than female novelists and

all male writers, whereas male non-fiction writers were less likely to have experienced a personal tragedy (Kaufman, 2001). Post (1996) found that American and British prose writers and playwrights had higher levels of affective disorders, alcoholism, and personality deviations than poets. Preti and Miotto (1999) found higher suicide rates among fiction writers and poets than playwrights, architects, painters, and sculptors.

Fewer studies examine writers in different cultures. Lester (1994) studied writers from the United Kingdom, Russia, Japan, and the United States, and found higher rates of suicide than in the general population. In a study of Chinese writers, both female poets and female fiction writers were more likely to have suffered a personal tragedy than male writers (Niu & Kaufman, 2003). Simonton (1997) found that Japanese writers were more likely to die young than other eminent Japanese. Koski (1985) found that some Finnish writers used alcohol to stimulate writing.

In this investigation, the sole focus is on exploring mortality in different types of writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers) across different cultures. Four distinct cultures are examined: North America, China, Turkey, and Eastern Europe. A total of 1,987 writers from these four cultures were examined using the historiometric method as outlined and demonstrated by Simonton (1990, 1994).

## Methods and Materials

Different reference works were used for each culture. For writers from North America (primarily writers from the United States, but Canadian and Mexican writers were also included), the biographical source was the *Webster's Dictionary of American Authors* (1996). The earliest inclusion was a writer born in 1612. For Chinese writers, three sources were used: the *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Writers* (in English; Yang, 1994), *Biography of Modern Chinese Eminent Writers* (in Chinese; He, 1990), and *Biography of Modern Chinese Female Writers* (in Chinese; Lu, Gan, & Lu, 1990). Repetitive entries were deleted. The earliest inclusion was a writer born in 1852. For Turkish writers, two sources were used, the *Dictionary of Names in Turkish Literature* (Necatigil, 1999) and *Poets and Writers in Turkish Literature* (Ceyhan & Kurdakul, 1999). Again, repetitive entries were deleted. The earliest inclusion was a writer born in 1344. For Eastern European writers, the biographical source was the

*Reader's Encyclopedia of Eastern European Literature* (Pynsent & Kanikova, 1993). The earliest inclusion was a writer born in 390. Writers from the following countries (some of which are no longer unique countries) were considered to be Eastern European, as per the source's standards: Albania, Bulgaria, Byelorussia, Croatia, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sorbia, and the Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

A total of 1,987 writers were included in this study. For each writer in all cultures, both birth year and age at death were recorded. For all analyses, because of the great variation in birth year, this variable was controlled.

The historical periods studied in this sample are quite diverse. Most American writers were from the 19th and 20th century and, in general, lived in an advanced civilization without fear of political persecution. Many of the Chinese writers studied lived through the Cultural Revolution that occurred between 1966–1976, as well as different, earlier anti-Rightist campaigns. Several authors were imprisoned or sent to forced labor. Some of the Turkish authors also endured political persecution, particularly those who wrote during the Ottoman Empire from the late 15th century until 1920. Ataturk established modern Turkey in 1920 and brought new freedom to artists. There is not as much one coherent story for the Eastern European sample; each country has its own timeline with eras of prosperity and eras of war and persecution.

## Results

Life spans are presented for fiction writers/novelists, poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers across all four cultures in Table 1. Life spans are presented for all four writer types by gender in Table 2.

An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted first using the age at death as the dependent variable, culture (coded as being either American, Chinese, Turkish, or Eastern European) and type of writer (fiction writer/novelist, poet, playwright, or non-fiction writer) as the independent variables, and the year of birth as a covariate. Year of birth was covaried to control for effects not related to type of writing or

<sup>1</sup>Data were collected as part of other investigations (Kaufman, 2001; Niu & Kaufman, 2003; and Oral & Kaufman, 2003). Issues of mortality and life span, however, were never addressed in these studies, and the samples have never been studied or compared.

**TABLE 1** Life Spans for Four Types of Writers Across Four Cultures (Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

Writer type	American	Chinese	Turkish	Eastern European	Total
Novelists	68.9 (13.8) ( <i>n</i> = 274)	62.0 (19.0) ( <i>n</i> = 116)	64.9 (14.5) ( <i>n</i> = 145)	64.8 (13.5) ( <i>n</i> = 182)	66.0 (15.0) ( <i>n</i> = 717)
Poets	66.2 (16.6) ( <i>n</i> = 164)	58.9 (17.6) ( <i>n</i> = 74)	62.1 (14.4) ( <i>n</i> = 201)	61.1 (17.5) ( <i>n</i> = 314)	62.2 (16.7) ( <i>n</i> = 753)
Playwrights	68.1 (12.8) ( <i>n</i> = 48)	67.9 (12.5) ( <i>n</i> = 15)	60.7 (15.0) ( <i>n</i> = 18)	59.7 (17.0) ( <i>n</i> = 49)	63.4 (15.2) ( <i>n</i> = 130)
Non-fiction	72.7 (14.2) ( <i>n</i> = 123)	68.3 (13.9) ( <i>n</i> = 62)	67.4 (13.7) ( <i>n</i> = 99)	62.4 (13.7) ( <i>n</i> = 103)	67.9 (14.4) ( <i>n</i> = 387)
Total	68.9 (14.7) ( <i>n</i> = 609)	62.9 (17.5) ( <i>n</i> = 267)	64.0 (14.4) ( <i>n</i> = 463)	62.2 (15.9) ( <i>n</i> = 648)	64.8 (15.7) ( <i>n</i> = 1,987)

culture—that is, life span has increased over the years, and writers who lived many years ago may have died younger for other reasons.

There was a significant main effect for type of writer,  $F(3, 1970) = 10.47$ ,  $p < .0001$ , and a significant main effect for culture,  $F(3, 1970) = 14.67$ ,  $p < .0001$ . The interaction,  $F(9, 1970) = 1.59$ , was not significant.

A second ANCOVA was conducted using the age at death as the dependent variable, gender (male or female) and type of writer (fiction writer/novelist, poet, playwright, or non-fiction writer) as the independent variables, and the year of birth as a covariate. There was a significant main effect for type of writer,  $F(3, 1978) = 7.66$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,

**TABLE 2** Gender Differences in Life Span Across Four Types of Writers (Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

Writer type	Male	Female	Total
Novelists	65.3 (15.0) ( <i>n</i> = 611)	69.6 (14.9) ( <i>n</i> = 106)	66.0 (15.0) ( <i>n</i> = 717)
Poets	62.1 (16.5) ( <i>n</i> = 694)	63.7 (18.1) ( <i>n</i> = 59)	62.2 (16.7) ( <i>n</i> = 753)
Playwrights	63.5 (15.0) ( <i>n</i> = 114)	66.6 (16.9) ( <i>n</i> = 16)	63.9 (15.2) ( <i>n</i> = 130)
Non-fiction	67.3 (14.3) ( <i>n</i> = 356)	74.4 (14.1) ( <i>n</i> = 31)	67.9 (14.4) ( <i>n</i> = 387)
Overall	64.3 (15.6) ( <i>n</i> = 1,776)	68.4 (16.2) ( <i>n</i> = 212)	64.8 (15.7) ( <i>n</i> = 1,987)

and a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 1978) = 7.50$ ,  $p < .01$ . The interaction,  $F(3, 1978) = 0.85$ , was not significant.

Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference test was conducted to determine which differences were significant in each culture, by gender, and overall (in all cases, controlling for year of birth). Among American, Chinese, and Turkish writers, poets died significantly younger ( $p < .01$ ) than non-fiction writers. Among Eastern European writers, poets died significantly younger ( $p = .05$ ) than fiction writers. Among male writers, poets died younger than both fiction writers ( $p < .01$ ) and non-fiction writers ( $p < .0001$ ). Among female writers, poets died younger than non-fiction writers ( $p < .05$ ). Among the entire sample, poets died younger than both fiction writers and non-fiction writers ( $p < .0001$ ). In addition, playwrights died younger than non-fiction writers ( $p = .05$ ).

To explore the possible confound of different types of writers being more prevalent in different eras, the average year of birth was calculated for each type of writer in each culture. These results are presented in Table 3.

## Discussion

Both male and female poets had the shortest life spans of all four types of writers, and poets had the shortest life spans in three of the four cultures (with the second shortest life span among Eastern European writers). Although the difference between poets and playwrights was not signifi-

**TABLE 3** Average Year of Birth for Each Type of Writer in Each Culture (Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

Writer type	American	Chinese	Turkish	Eastern European	Total
Novelists	1878 (39.8) ( $n = 274$ )	1906 (10.9) ( $n = 116$ )	1903 (23.5) ( $n = 145$ )	1874 (43.2) ( $n = 182$ )	1886 (37.2) ( $n = 717$ )
Poets	1874 (52.2) ( $n = 164$ )	1906 (11.5) ( $n = 74$ )	1847 (130.6) ( $n = 201$ )	1825 (122.4) ( $n = 314$ )	1849 (110.9) ( $n = 753$ )
Playwrights	1884 (34.8) ( $n = 48$ )	1903 (12.5) ( $n = 15$ )	1894 (34.7) ( $n = 18$ )	1849 (62.0) ( $n = 49$ )	1874 (49.7) ( $n = 130$ )
Non-fiction	1860 (51.2) ( $n = 123$ )	1902 (13.3) ( $n = 62$ )	1894 (43.9) ( $n = 99$ )	1631 (342.4) ( $n = 103$ )	1814 (211.6) ( $n = 387$ )
Total	1873 (46.1) ( $n = 609$ )	1905 (11.8) ( $n = 267$ )	1877 (93.2) ( $n = 463$ )	1810 (181.6) ( $n = 648$ )	1858 (121.0) ( $n = 1,987$ )

cant (in part, perhaps, because of a comparatively small sample of playwrights), the differences between poets and fiction and non-fiction writers was often significant. Why might this be the case?

Kaufman and Baer (2002) examine some of the reasons why poets have found to be more likely to suffer from mental illness. Some of these reasons may also be applicable to why poets are more likely to die young. Poetry may appeal to people who are more likely to be self-destructive. Poetry tends to be more introspective, expressive and emotional than fiction and non-fiction (e.g., Gardner, 1993; Whalen, 2000). Being in a subjective and emotive field is also associated with mental instability (Ludwig, 1998).

There are also strong associations between rumination and depression; individuals who suffer from depression more likely to ruminate (and, perhaps, turn these ruminations into poetry), and such rumination can also have a deleterious effect on depression (Kuehner & Weber, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999). Stack's (1996) investigation of suicide among artists suggested that working alone may be a risk factor. Certainly, two of the four types of writing often specifically involve social interaction: playwrights and non-fiction writers. Playwrights tend to work with the director and actors to get their works produced, while non-fiction writers and journalists usually need to interview or interact with experts, noteworthy individuals, or other people who may provide a good story. Fiction and poetry, however, can be written alone, with (if desired), little input from the outside world.

The higher occurrences of mental illness among poets (Kaufman, 2001, 2002; Ludwig, 1995) is undoubtedly related to their higher mortality rate. Cassandro (1998) pinpoints psychopathology as one of three reasons for shorter life spans in writers as a whole, along with vocational choice and personality characteristics. Indeed, depression is linked with a greater risk of mortality (Anstey & Luszcz, 2002).

Another reason why eminent poets are found to die younger than other writers may be because they achieve eminence at an early age. Simonton has done extensive research on productivity, creativity, and age. He has found that people in the arts peak earlier than people in the sciences (Simonton, 1990). More specifically, poets peak markedly earlier than novelists (Simonton, 1975, 1989); indeed, poets produce twice as much of their lifetime output in their twenties as novelists do (Simonton, 1984). In a study of eminent writers, only those writers who have produced great works are included in the sample. A poet is more likely than a different type of writer to produce work at an earlier age;

this earlier productivity may be one reason why poets can produce great work yet still die younger than other writers—a great novelist or non-fiction writer who dies at 28 may not have yet produced her or his magnum opus. Clearly, producing great work at a young age does not cause an earlier death. But a poet who dies young is more likely to have made his or her mark as opposed to a different type of writer.

It is worth noting the different average birth years as noted in Table 3. Poets tended to be from a later generation than other writers in the American and Chinese populations but from an earlier generation in the Turkish and Eastern European cultures. Non-fiction writers were from an earlier generation in both the American and Eastern European cultures. These differences may well have provided confounding variables for the results in this study.

Certainly these findings focus on eminent writers—or, at least writers well-known enough to be in a reference book. The fact that a Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton may die young does not necessarily mean an Introduction to Poetry class should carry a warning that poems may be hazardous to one's health. Yet this study may reinforce the idea of poets being surrounded by an aura of doom, even compared with others who may pick up a pen and paper for other purposes. It is hoped that the data presented here will help poets and mental health professionals find ways to lessen what appears to be a sometimes negative impact of writing poetry on mortality and mental health.

## References

- Anstey, K. J., & Luszcz, M. A. (2002). Mortality risk varies according to gender and change in depressive status in very old adults. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, *64*, 880–888.
- Cassandro, V. J. (1998). Explaining premature mortality across fields of creative endeavor. *Journal of Personality*, *66*, 805–833.
- Ceyhan, A., & Kurdakul, S. (1999). *Türk Edebiyatında Şairler ve Yazarlar*. [Poets and Writers in Turkish Literature]. Turkey: Gendas Press.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind* (rev. ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- He, H. (1990). *Biography of modern Chinese eminent writers*. Beijing, China: Art and Literature Press.
- Kaufman, J. C. (2001). The Sylvia Plath effect: Mental illness in eminent creative writers. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, *35*, 37–50.
- Kaufman, J. C. (2002). Dissecting the golden goose: Components of studying creative writers. *Creativity Research Journal*, *14*, 27–40.
- Kaufman, J. C., & Baer, J. (2002). I bask in dreams of suicide: Mental illness and poetry. *Review of General Psychology*, *6*, 271–286.



- Kaun, D. E. (1991). Writers die young: The impact of work and leisure on longevity. *Journal of Economic Psychology, 12*, 381–399.
- Koski, J. A. (1985). Alcohol and literary creativity: The Finnish experience. *Journal of Creative Behavior, 19*, 120–136.
- Kuehner, C., & Weber, I. (1999). Responses to depression in unipolar depressed patients: An investigation of Nolen-Hoeksema's response styles theory. *Psychological Medicine, 29*, 1323–1333.
- Lester, D. (1994). Suicide in writers. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 78*, 698.
- Lu, Q., Gan, H., & Lu, Z. (1990). *Biography of modern Chinese female writers*. He Bei, China: Chinese Women Press.
- Ludwig, A. M. (1995). *The price of greatness*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Ludwig, A. M. (1998). Method and madness in the arts and sciences. *Creativity Research Journal, 11*, 93–101.
- Necatigil, B. (1999). *Edebiyatimizda Isimler Sozlugu*. [Dictionary of Names in Turkish Literature]. Turkey: Varlik Publishers.
- Niu, W., & Kaufman, J. C. (2003). *Creativity in troubled times: Individual differences in prominent Chinese writers*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Larson, J., & Grayson, C. (1999). Explaining the gender difference in depressive symptoms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 1061–1072.
- Oral, G., & Kaufman, J. C. (2003). *From empire to democracy: Effects of social progress on Turkish writers*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Post, F. (1996). Verbal creativity, depression and alcoholism: An investigation of one hundred American and British writers. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 168*, 545–555.
- Preti, A., & Miotto, P. (1999). Suicide among eminent artists. *Psychological Reports, 84*, 291–301.
- Pynsent, R. B., & Kanikova, S. I. (Eds.). (1993). *Reader's encyclopedia of Eastern European literature*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Simonton, D. K. (1975). Age and literary creativity: A cross-cultural and transhistorical survey. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 6*, 259–277.
- Simonton, D. K. (1984). *Genius, creativity, and leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Simonton, D. K. (1989). Age and creative productivity: Nonlinear estimation of an information-processing model. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 29*, 23–37.
- Simonton, D. K. (1990). *Psychology, science, and history*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Simonton, D. K. (1994). *Greatness: Who makes history and why*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Simonton, D. K. (1997). Achievement domain and life expectancies in Japanese civilization. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 44*, 103–114.
- Stack, S. (1996). Gender and suicide risk among artists: A multivariate analysis. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 26*, 374–379.
- Webster's dictionary of American authors*. (1996). New York: Smithmark Publishers.
- Whalen, S. (2000). Expressing attitudes and emotions through poetry. *Journal of Student Health, 70*, 301–302.
- Yang, L. (1994). *A biographical dictionary of modern Chinese writers*. Beijing, China: New World Press.

