

BIRTH ORDER OF CREATIVE WRITERS

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Not a great deal has been published on birth order and occupational choice or interest. A doctoral dissertation by E. L. Clarke (3) studied the background of 1000 men of letters born prior to 1851, including patrons of the arts and librarians as well as creative writers, and eminent persons as well as others. He found among his sample more first-borns and last-borns than one would expect. Roe (5) found an overabundance of first-borns among 64 eminent scientists, confirming earlier findings of Cattell and Brimhall (2) and Visser (8).

But the results of these studies are from the viewpoint occupation, contaminated by the factor of eminence which on its own has repeatedly been shown to be related to birth-order position, with first-borns and only children being overabundant (1). This finding was explained by Schachter (6) on the basis of a general overabundance of oldest children among the better educated.

When West (9) studied scientists without regard to eminence, he found them to be significantly more often than expected among the first, but also among the fifth, and sixth borns; and less often among the second, third, and fourth borns. This is of course in contrast with the results from eminent scientists mentioned above, where an overabundance of first-borns alone was noted.

The present study aims at comparing the birth order position of creative writers with that of scientists. In order to hold eminence constant, we selected creative writers of a certain eminence to make them comparable to the scientists studied by Roe (5) who also were eminent.

METHOD

From the American writers listed in *Literary History of the United States* (7) those were selected for whom biographies were available in the University library. Thus adequate birth order information was obtained for 39 prose writers and 25 poets, all men. This was compared with the data from 64 eminent scientists obtained by Roe (5).

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in Table 1. It shows, firstly, that the mean and median birth order positions of creative writers in general are lower than those of scientists, and that novel and short story writers are later born than poets.

TABLE 1. BIRTH ORDER DISTRIBUTION OF SCIENTISTS, PROSE WRITERS, AND POETS, AND WRITERS AND POETS COMBINED. PERCENTAGES REFER TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF THE RESPECTIVE GROUPS

Birth order	1 Scientists	2 Prose writers	3 Poets	4 2 and 3 combined
Only child	15	23%	3	3
1	24	38%	61%	5
2	13		4	11
3	3		12	5
4	3		4	0
5	2		4	0
6	2		0	1
7	2		1	0
8+	0		6	1
N	64		39	25
Birth order position: mean	1.9		4.0	2.4
median	1		3	2

Under-representation of prose writers and poets combined, compared to scientists, significant at: *.05 level; **.005 level; ***.0001 level.

Secondly, among the scientists 23% were only children and 38% first-borns (61% in all), against 9% only children and 14% first-borns (23% in all) among the writers. The differences between scientists and writers are all significant, to various degrees as shown in Table 1.

There is also a clear tendency (not shown in Table 1) for prose writers to be members of the younger half of the siblings (69%) rather than the older half (31%), a tendency which is significant at the .02 level, while no such tendency holds for the poets where 45% belong to the younger half and 55% to the older half.

The difference of our results from those of Clarke may be explained on the basis that his subjects, as mentioned initially, included eminent people who were not actually creative writers but in occupations only related to such activity. If Clarke found among his group an

overrepresentation of first-borns as well as last-borns this could be attributed to the non-creative eminent members of his groups. It would, however, be difficult to re-analyze Clarke's data to test this hypothesis.

On the other hand, our results are analogous to those of Eisenman (4) in the area of visual arts. He found first-born art students to be less creative than the later born, for which he gave the Adlerian explanation that the first-born is more conservative and conforming and might therefore be expected to be less original and artistically creative than the later-born. The advantage of the later-born over the first-born in creative pursuits would seem to derive from his greater ability to work independently and tolerate isolation—surely qualities required of the artistically creative person.

SUMMARY

A sample of 39 writers and 25 poets was drawn from a large listing of American writers, and their birth order distribution compared with that of Roe's sample of 64 eminent scientists. Among scientists a far greater proportion of only children and first-borns was found than among writers (61% vs. 23%). Further more, there was a significant tendency for novelists and short story writers to be members of the younger half of their families, while among poets the probability of belonging to the younger or older half of their families was approximately even.

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