

ABSTRACT: The practice of creative writing has historically been conceived of as cathartic or curative, and has become commonplace in therapeutic settings as a result. This conception of writing has been further legitimised by the psychological paradigm of ‘expressive writing’ that has developed in recent decades, demonstrating the assorted emotional and physical health benefits of writing about traumatic experiences. Yet, does writing do more than heal, and need we always begin with trauma and deficit in the broad field of writing and wellbeing? Or, might we think of writing as, equally, a manner of flourishing? This essay critically examines what it might mean to be a flourishing writer, presenting a range of rationale for such a hypothesis, and calling on the contemporary field of positive psychology as a theoretical framework within which to explore this hypothesis.

KEY WORDS: Creative writing, expressive writing, positive psychology, positive humanities, arts therapy, counselling

ARTICLE TITLE: The Flourishing Writer

“Writing is my anchor and my purpose.” — *Sue Grafton*

“One thing I love about writing is that in that moment, I am most completely myself, and yet totally relieved of myself... When you write, endless possibility exists before you.” — *Kathryn Harrison*

“In the end, [writing is] about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well. It’s about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy.” — *Stephen King*

In sharing the quotations above—and given the title of this essay—it will be clear that the ideas I present here coalesce around a central question: what might it mean to be a *flourishing writer*? To begin in earnest to answer such a large—and charged—question, in the following discussion I will explore creative writing in the context of a specific, contemporary field of psychological thought and research: positive psychology. My hope is that such a discussion might incite a novel—though not strictly brand new—conversation in our field. This conversation will ask, among other things, what goes *right* when we write? What is promoted, not only healed, in a writing practice? How might we seek interdisciplinary support in order to rigorously

explore such research questions within our own field? And, finally, why is asking such questions important?

In this endeavour, I will begin by offering some rationale for my hypothesis of ‘the flourishing writer,’ followed by a brief history of happiness and flourishing that traverses ancient philosophy and contemporary psychology. I will then delve further into the topic of ‘writing and flourishing’—and, importantly, I will explore this beyond psychoanalytic/psychodynamic therapy, challenging the prevalence of psychoanalysis as the prototypical model for studies into writing and wellbeing. Finally I will look to the model of Psychological Well-being (PWB) by research psychologist, Carol D. Ryff, as a viable starting point for researching writing and flourishing.

An empirical basis for flourishing through writing

Whilst it might at first appear as something of a conceptual leap to suggest that writing—demonstrated to be effective in coping with trauma as in the ‘expressive writing’ paradigm (Pennebaker 1997)—could help us to flourish, here I hope to briefly outline some empirical findings that support this hypothesis. My hope is that a brief review these studies will serve to give a flavour of how we might understand creative writing in connection with flourishing.

In a constructivist, qualitative series of interviews with seven Australian writers, Chris Stevens (2006: 51) begins with a typical description of the struggling writer:

The creative writer’s lot can be a lonely, arduous one. The genesis of a major work can take years, with little or no guarantee of success. Writers may struggle with creative insecurities, despite records of acclaim.

He adds, however, that:

Nonetheless, [writers] report various experiences in writing that validate them deeply and that compensate for this suffering and effort and that keep them inspired to write.

If, indeed, the writing life is so “arduous,” we might question why writers continually, even compulsively, write. In the study, Stevens notes that, “a cluster of themes, concerning validation, participatory knowing, being oneself, the community of self and self-transformation became broadly evident” whereby “dissolution of self was simultaneously experienced as personal enhancement.”

Another major field of study that similarly deals with ‘dissolution of self as personal enhancement’ in creativity, is research psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of *flow*. Csikszentmihalyi’s writings on creativity are widely known, and he is also considered one of the ‘fathers’ of positive psychology, along with Martin Seligman. His theory of flow is foundational in many models of wellbeing. In his seminal work, *Flow: The classic work on how to achieve happiness* (2002: 65–66), he writes:

There is one very important and at first apparently paradoxical relationship between losing the sense of self in a flow experience, and having it emerge stronger afterward. It almost seems that occasionally giving up self-consciousness is necessary for building a strong self-concept.

He further contends that:

Why this should be so is fairly clear. In flow a person is challenged to do her best, and must constantly improve her skills. At the time, she doesn’t have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self—if she did allow herself to become self-conscious, the experience could not have been very deep. But afterward, when the activity is over and self-consciousness has a chance to resume, the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience: it is now enriched by new skills and fresh achievements.

Csikszentmihalyi argues for “eight major components” to the enjoyment of an activity, including clear goals, immediate feedback, altered sense of time and, of course, the disappearance of “concern for the self.” He concludes that “the combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it” (2002: 49). Indeed, creative writing has been demonstrated to improve mood (Kohanyi 2009), and we might reasonably put this down to it being an

enjoyable activity for the writer. Yet, the meta-theory of flow—of the autotelic enjoyment of an activity—is not the only empirical grounding for why creative writing might contribute to our flourishing. Other studies would suggest that writing might involve many unique processes that pertain to psychological wellbeing.

In the field of expressive writing, several studies have countered the ‘disinhibition’ hypothesis, which I will elaborate on shortly—namely that writing acts as a kind of purging of previously unaddressed, challenging feelings and emotions—and have instead posed that *self-affirmation* is “a viable psychological mechanism underlying the beneficial effects of expressive writing” (Creswell et al. 2007: 249). David K. Sherman (2013: 834) writes that:

Self-affirmations boost self-resources, broaden the perspective with which people view information and events in their lives, and lead to an uncoupling of the self and the threat, reducing the threat’s impact in affecting the self. This model helps explain what occurs when individuals affirm values in the context of threats, and how self-affirmations may instantiate lasting effects through changing the nature of ongoing experience.

Writing about one’s values—which, I would contend, one often does to some extent or another as a creative writer—has itself been specifically noted as a form self-affirmation (Crocker, Niiya, and Mischkowski 2008). Sherman and colleague Kimberly A. Hartson (2011: 130) contend that self-affirmation is a process that functions “as part of a psychological immune system” that, we might argue, would be necessary to any form of individual flourishing. Perhaps creative writing, then, offers a method of affirming one’s values, boosting one’s ‘self-resources’ and broadening one’s perspective.

Another recent, quantitative study posits that expressive writing might facilitate ‘resource activation’—which has been identified as a primary ‘mechanism of change’ in psychotherapy (Grawe 1997) and which, Toepfer et al. (2016: 125) argue, “serves to strengthen the healthy aspects of patients’ functioning (i.e. their resources) through enabling them to experience their positive motivational goals, abilities and feelings of self-efficacy.” These researchers propose countering the “deficit-compensating” hypotheses in expressive writing research, in place of those with a “stronger resource

orientation.” The intervention in the study by Toepfer et al. is very specific, with guided prompts such as, “What gave you strength today? How did this become apparent to you? Please describe your thoughts and feelings.” Yet, perhaps more creative forms of writing might similarly help us to focus on the resources at our disposal.

It appears, then, that there is varied yet substantial empirical evidence for flourishing through writing. I would now like to be specific in my use of the term ‘flourishing’ by providing a brief background to this concept, as well as a critical discussion of one of its most recent and comprehensive iterations: positive psychology.

A brief background to ‘flourishing’

In his 350 B.C. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle declared *eudaimonia*—etymologically interpreted as ‘good spirit’—to be “the best of all human goods” (1869: 22). *Eudaimonia* is commonly translated today simply as ‘happiness’ yet, some critics argue, “in light of what Aristotle says, we might offer ‘worthwhile life’ as the most appropriate translation of his word” (Kenny and Kenny 2006: 14). Others offer ‘human flourishing’ as the most accurate translation (Robinson 1989). Critic Claire Colebrook calls “human happiness... the final vestige of theologism in Western thought” (Colebrook 2007: 89) and indeed, as critics point out, “for many centuries the dominant account was that supreme happiness was a gift of God, obtainable only through divine grace” (Kenny and Kenny 2006: 21) epitomised in the writings of St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

At the end of the eighteenth century, philosopher Jeremy Bentham, like Aristotle, married human happiness with morality in his utilitarian maxim of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ yet, “for Bentham what should guide choices is not the individual’s own happiness,” as was the case for Aristotle, “but the general happiness” (Kenny and Kenny 2006: 26). Indeed, as Colebrook (2007: 86) contends:

...the problem of the human has always been a problem of the relation between happiness and joy: the relation between a life as a well-formed and bounded whole and a broader life that exceeds and transcends any single organism.

To this day, happiness both for the individual and the collective—though arguably in recent decades skewed toward the former—has endured as a major preoccupation of Western culture. A search for ‘happiness’ on Google today yields some 352,000,000 results.¹ Interestingly, as Colebrook writes, this “happiness industry” at once appeals to: “the traditional Aristotelian model of a life that is happy only if it is lived as a well-formed and self-maintaining narrative whole, *and* to the counter tradition that happiness is at odds with self-consciousness” (2007: 85–86 Emphasis original).

Now somewhat synonymous with this ‘happiness industry’ is the contemporary field of positive psychology—which, from its conception, has explicitly aligned itself with an Aristotelian, moralistic brand of happiness (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). It is within this field that, for the purposes of this essay, I settle on my ‘operationalization’ of the term *flourishing*. I will now offer a brief critical background to the field.

Historically, psychology has made human psychopathology or ‘neurosis’ its primary focus—exemplified in the writings of Sigmund Freud who, of course, continues to be heralded by many as the ‘father’ of psychology. This pervasive focus on pathology is in many ways quite understandable; the century within which the field developed was tainted with some of the worst atrocities of our species, including two world wars and the threat of nuclear war. However, as Western life has become—at least in terms of our short-term survival—considerably less precarious, and our basic needs ever more comfortably attended to, so too has psychology begun to further investigate what Abraham Maslow (1971/1993) termed ‘the farther reaches of human nature.’

Several decades after the founding of a ‘humanistic psychology’ of which Maslow was a key figure, came the shift toward a decidedly more rigorous and empirical study of psychological wellbeing, at the turn of the millennium. This movement, dubbed ‘The Happiness Turn’ (Ahmed 2007) by some, and collected in the cognitive sciences under the umbrella term of Positive Psychology, has followed in the footsteps of those such as Maslow, yet has largely rejected this field for a lack of empirical basis (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). This has not been without contention, to make a considerable understatement. Positive psychology has been criticised as promoting a ‘tyranny’ of positive attitude (Held 2002). Moreover, the concept of ‘flourishing’—

specifically as it is conceived of by ‘father’ of positive psychology, Martin Seligman—and its consolidation of happiness and health, has been criticised as a form of Foucault’s ‘biopolitics’ and a neoliberal version of utilitarianism (Wright 2013). In another biting critique of the field, Robert L. Woolfolk (2002: 19) argues that positive psychology “fails to emphasize important aspects of human existence” such as melancholy and the tragic sense of life. This is just a small selection of what are, on the most part, highly valid arguments. Yet, it is my feeling that they each on some level generalise and misconstrue this young—but nevertheless maturing—field. Neither, I argue, do they altogether undermine the import of an empirical study of human flourishing. Positive psychology as a field of research spreads its net far wider than the promotion of positive affect, and is made up of a diverse range of researchers. What’s more, positive psychology is, after all, a field of science, which for all its positivist trappings, implies that its theories—even its fundamental theories—are falsifiable. Subsequently, there are those within the field itself who criticise the over-emphasis of the ostensibly ‘positive’ and are consciously exploring the ‘darker side’ of human experience—perhaps unsurprisingly based in Britain (Ivtzan et al. 2015). Further, there are researchers drawing heavily on positive psychology’s predecessor, the humanistic movement, rather than eschewing it, as I will demonstrate shortly in the example of Carol D. Ryff.

What these widespread contentions against a ‘positive psychology’ do suggest to me, however, is that now more than ever a ‘positive humanities’, as proposed by James Pawelski (2015), may be required to counter the potential misuse of such an ideologically saturated science, with a corresponding, hermeneutic approach. Scholar Jules Evans (2013: 226) cites the widespread lack of philosophical criticality in the positive psychology movement, and stresses our duty to “empower people to consider the multiple approaches to the good life, and then to experiment, innovate, and decide for themselves.” It is my belief that a greater emphasis on human wellbeing in the humanities might offer one such form of empowerment, as well as the criticality necessary for research in this context. Indeed, as John V. Knapp argues in his work, *Striking at the Joints: Contemporary Psychology and Literary Criticism* (1996: Preface):

...whenever two relatively alien human systems interact, each cannot help but change, modify, and perhaps even improve the other; they certainly make each less ethnocentric and more open to radical examination of their respective and most time-honored and self-evident processes.

In marrying positive psychology with the humanities, and with creative writing more specifically, I believe an inevitable spanning of horizon in each field will occur. My approach here might be termed a ‘positive psychology of creative writing’—a truly inter-disciplinary, on-going investigation into how a writing practice pertains to flourishing. Thus, I will now move to a discussion of how, specifically, we might begin to link writing with this, very ancient, human preoccupation with flourishing. What, precisely, goes *right* when we write?

‘The brightest rays of human nature’: Writing and flourishing

“The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of their elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.”

— Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (2013: 75–76)

Creative writing, and literature more broadly, have been both directly and indirectly referred to in relation to human wellbeing for many centuries. Just as the modern, Western conception of human flourishing finds its roots in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and his concept of *eudaimonia*, the *katharsis* inherent to the arts, of course, finds roots in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. However, Sir Anthony Kenny writes, in the introduction to his translation of *Poetics*, that:

Aristotle nowhere defines *katharsis*... The Greek word is a verbal noun related to the adjective *katharsos*, which means pure and undefiled. ‘Purification’ is therefore the most obvious translation, and having considered several others—‘purging’, ‘cleansing’, ‘refining’—I concluded that it is also the most appropriate (Aristotle 2013: xxv).

Kenny warns that, “the word needs careful elucidation if it is not to be misunderstood.” The concept of *katharsis* is most readily applied in *Poetics* to tragedy

and the emotions of pity and fear. This, Kenny argues, is because Aristotle “focused on tragedy as the paradigm form of drama.” Yet, Kenny adds:

...there is no reason why Aristotle’s theory of *katharsis* should not be extended to other emotions when considering other forms of drama or fiction... a reading of *Anna Karenina* may teach us to love wisely rather than too well (Aristotle 2013: xxv).

This point is pertinent to my discussion of writing and psychological wellbeing. Over and above the modern usage of the term *catharsis* as a process of releasing, and thus feeling relief from, repressed emotions, the literary arts could be said, rather, to ‘purify’ or ‘refine’ one’s emotions, across a continuum—including, therefore, our more *positive* emotions. The arts, in some sense, do “teach us to love” and to live—beyond simply offering a way to ‘purge’ our most distressing emotions. It is in this vein, therefore, that I will argue against what I interpret as a prevailing theory of writing as primarily cathartic, particularly in the contemporary paradigm of ‘expressive writing’ (Pennebaker 1997), contending that this does not do full justice to the many ways in which we also *flourish* through writing.

In recent decades, writing has been extensively explored in therapeutic contexts, as well as researched by empirical scientists seeking to quantify its effects (for a review of these numerous studies see Frattaroli 2006). These two broad areas of ‘writing and wellbeing’—whilst it is ill-advised to “polarise or oversimplify the body of literature” (Wright and Chung 2001: 279)—can be roughly divided as falling either within the humanities as ‘therapeutic writing’ or the sciences in the form of ‘expressive writing’ (Pennebaker and Beall 1986; Pennebaker 1997). Of interest here is that each of these two ‘sides’ is remarkably related in its approximation of writing as cathartic, or *curative*. To both the scientist and those with more literary sensibilities, writing is widely conceived of as a way to purge our hidden thoughts and distressing emotions, and to heal. Notably, this is often in terms of what has gone *wrong*—a way of quelling one’s ‘neurosis.’ Particularly in the quantitative literature, writing is offered primarily as an intervention to cope with one’s traumatic experiences. Alongside this, understandably, writing has come to be allied with the psychoanalytic process, as I will shortly illustrate.

Rarely is this preoccupation with writing as a primarily curative process addressed directly, yet I would like to broach it here by asking: what, precisely, are we talking about when we say ‘wellbeing’ in the field of ‘writing and wellbeing’? In the quantitative literature, many of the most noted studies of writing operationalize increased wellbeing as less visits to one’s GP. This seems somewhat reductive. Within what has been called “the ‘humanities’ paradigm” (Wright and Chung 2001: 279), increased wellbeing for those engaging with writing is often conceptualised as the individual having established “a closer contact with their inner world”; that writing “helps them to develop a stronger sense of themselves” (Hunt 2008, 40). Rather than reductive, this appears somewhat broad and ambiguous.

Writing is often spoken of in the context of the humanities in terms of ‘personal development’—as in Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson’s admirable 2002 summation of thinking in this field, *The Self on the Page: Theory and Practice of Creative Writing in Personal Development*. Yet the term ‘personal development’ is used here somewhat indistinctly, which Hunt (2008: 12–13) later reflected on when bracketing her succeeding research under the moniker of the ‘therapeutic dimensions’ of writing:

I have experimented at different times with various terms, such as ‘personal development’ or ‘therapeutic benefit’, to describe the positive effects of engaging with autobiographical creative writing, but for the present work have settled on the latter... It is a rather more focussed term than ‘personal development.’

Yet, Hunt and Sampson’s earlier use of the term ‘personal development’ remains noteworthy because, despite evolving terminology, I feel it demonstrates somewhat of a prototype-approach still evident in the broad field of writing and psychological wellbeing. In the introduction to *The Self on the Page*, the editors offer a quotation from Virginia Woolf, apparently as representative of how writing operates as a form of ‘personal development.’ Woolf, referring to a long-held obsession with her mother that eventually informed the narrative of her work, *To the Lighthouse*, states:

I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest (Woolf 1989: 90).

This faintly echoes the contemporary paradigm of expressive writing. Whilst it has been found that, “no single theory appears to account for the effectiveness of the writing paradigm”(Pennebaker 2004: 138) a common explanation is that of disclosure, or ‘disinhibition’ despite the fact that a major meta-analysis found “‘very little support for the disinhibition theory” (Frattaroli 2006: 859).

If we consider this in positive psychological terms, we might argue that a psychoanalytic ‘laying to rest’ of one’s demons does not necessarily fully denote all that might be achieved through writing and how it relates to ‘personal development.’ In reducing obsessive or ruminative thoughts about one’s past, as many concede writing facilitates, are we left with a fulfilled, resilient and thriving individual? Not necessarily. Moreover, we might question what precisely it means, in relation to empirical psychology, to have a ‘closer contact’ with or ‘stronger sense of’ oneself. Hunt and Sampson (1998: 14) assert, and quite rightly, that no one theoretical framework “whether borrowed, appropriated or constructed” can “account for the diversity” of the way writing is currently used in personal development contexts. Yet, is it possible that we might be more explicit and extensive in our definition of ‘personal development’ or ‘wellbeing’ in relation to writing, and might the contemporary field of positive psychology offer us a robust theoretical framework through which to achieve this? Abraham Maslow wrote that:

The pressure toward health makes therapy possible. It is an absolute *sine qua non*. If there were no such trend, therapy would be inexplicable to the extent that it goes beyond the building of defenses against pain and anxiety (1968: 23).

Indeed, therapy should, and does, go further than “building defences against pain and anxiety,” and equally it should go further than only ‘unburdening’ ourselves from trauma. Thus, if we are to talk about *writing therapy*, it is my proposal that we be more explicit about what the version of health towards which we are striving looks like, and indeed how writing might also facilitate ‘peak’ experiences of health.

Few to date have explored writing and our more ‘positive’ emotions: writing and *eudaimonia*, or flourishing. Some recent empirical explorations into ‘positive writing’ exist, but these, too, are rather one-dimensional in their approach: principally

measuring the outcomes of writing about purely ‘positive experiences’ (Burton and King 2004) or a ‘best possible self’ (King 2001). My own previous research has explored the impact of positive emotions on the expressive writing paradigm from a qualitative perspective, without limiting the subject matter of the writing for participants (Hayes and Hefferon 2015). This previous study indicated that when we are prompted to write within the context of our more positive emotions, rather than solely to purge negative feelings, we might be less likely to ruminate or maintain habitual, often unhelpful, perspectives. This, I suggest, offers some rationale for investigating whether *creative writing* could facilitate similar outcomes—and, moreover, be said to broadly enhance our psychological wellbeing, beyond offering a cathartic release of repressed emotion.

Possible selves in possible worlds: Writing beyond psychoanalysis

“Fiction is about possible selves in possible worlds.”
— Keith Oatley

As I have stated, there remains within literary criticism, and so therefore in the allied field of creative writing, a reliance on Freudian psychoanalytic and related ‘psychodynamic’ meta-theories, despite much of Freudian theory now being widely disregarded in mainstream, contemporary psychology.² As a result of this rather stunted psychological approach to literature, we run the risk of disregarding profound and intriguing contemporary theories in psychology in favour of readings that stress unconscious drives, repression and Oedipal complexes. As John V. Knapp (1996: Preface) argues, it is necessary to “broaden the scope of literary studies” so that this might:

...help theoreticians in the humanities open up new questions concerning the representation of human beings in ways hitherto quite difficult given the hegemony that Freud’s and Lacan’s clinical systems now make claim on the literary imagination.

It is not my argument that Freudian or Lacanian readings have no value, but I do contest the lack of focus on empirical psychology in contemporary literary theory, and, subsequently, that readings of humanity ‘at its best’ continue to be dismissed,

despite a surge of studies taking this approach within psychology. This is possibly because they are viewed as naïvely optimistic by ‘serious’ literary theorists, or perhaps that they are simply pervasively ignored altogether.

Concerning rationale for a positive psychology of the humanities, Norman N. Holland’s 1990 description of what he calls ‘Literature-and-Psychology,’ whilst somewhat out-dated, is still particularly telling:

By Literature-and-Psychology I mean the application of psychology to explore literary problems and behaviour... and the psychology that literary critics most commonly use is psychoanalytic psychology (Holland 1990: 29).

Whilst I’m sure Holland uses the term ‘literary problems’ in a most neutral, pragmatic sense—it does beg the question, in our search for *literary problems* are we also seeking only *psychological-problems-in-literature*, rather than evidence of flourishing—of either characters in the text, or the text’s author? There have, of course, been significant developments in this arena since 1990, one need only look to the field of cognitive poetics and works such as David Lodge’s *Consciousness and the Novel* (2004). Yet, in terms of taking a fundamentally appreciative look at the psychology of literature and writing, I believe there is still some way to go.

Notably, even in the context of so-called ‘writing and personal development,’ truly appreciative psychological readings in the literature are rare. Turning again to Hunt (1998), a common feature of her work is an invitation to ponder the ‘problems of identity’ that can be addressed in the writing process. Again, whilst this is vitally important research, there is distinctly less emphasis here on the positive aspects of human identity that writing might enhance. Given the seemingly unanimous agreement regarding the cathartic, curative nature of the arts, this slant towards deficiency is understandable. Yet, this bias is rarely, if ever, explicitly addressed, resulting in what I would argue is a subtly pervasive, somewhat one-dimensional view of the individual identity as *only* a problem to be solved in studies of ‘writing and wellbeing.’³

In my opinion, as a field, what we might call Literature-and-Psychology, or Writing-and-Psychology, has thus far done itself something of a disservice in this approach, given that, as Oatley (2003: 173) argues, “books and characters in books contribute to making us who we are” as individuals and as a collective. It follows, then, that *how* we read, and write, ‘books and characters in books’ should be a concern in the perpetual ‘making’ of ‘who we are’ as a field and as people. Perhaps we do not only have problems, and thus should explore alternatives to this deficit-based approach. Again, I contend that the current turn towards a ‘positive humanities’ offers us the chance to do just this, and for creative writing to unite with a burgeoning, contemporary field of psychological research—positive psychology. I propose that one robust theory through which we might begin to flesh out such a fusion is Carol D. Ryff’s model of Psychological Well-being (PWB) which aims “to show the various forms that well-being can take, while simultaneously to make clear the full scope of prior thinking” in the field (Ryff and Singer 2013: 14).

In 1989, significantly preceding the formal introduction of a ‘positive psychology’ by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) Ryff (1989: 1069) contended that “the field of psychology, since its inception, has devoted much more attention to human unhappiness and suffering than to the causes and consequences of positive functioning.” In years to follow, Ryff and Keyes (1995: 719) argued that, although some research within the behavioural and social sciences had begun to accumulate on wellbeing in the preceding decades, “prior endeavors” had “grappled minimally with the core underlying question: What does it mean to be well psychologically?”

More recently, Ryff (2014: 10–11) has proposed that, “Although considerable empirical research in the 1980s was concerned with well-being” it was the case that, “minimal attention was given to the deeper question, namely, what constitutes essential features of well-being.” She adds:

The neglect was puzzling, given the deep philosophical roots of happiness dating back to the ancient Greeks along with the pervasive interest shown in humanistic, existential, developmental and clinical psychology in distilling positive human functioning. These differing conceptions revealed overlapping themes in articulating what it means

to be self-actualized, individuated, fully functioning or optimally developed.

These ‘overlapping themes’ form Ryff’s model of PWB. This model offers, to my knowledge, the broadest and most robust—yet nuanced—model for human flourishing available in contemporary psychology. By this I do not mean to say that I think it offers a perfect model for psychological flourishing. Rather, I feel it offers fertile soil for an evolving theory of humans ‘at their best.’

Whilst, as I have demonstrated, positive psychology has traditionally dismissed much preceding theory of psychological wellbeing, such as the humanistic movement, for lacking a sound empirical base (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), Ryff conversely draws on and synthesizes nine major psychological theories of wellbeing from the twentieth century. These are: Carl Rogers’ ‘fully functioning person’ (1963), Gordon W. Allport’s ‘maturity’ (1961), Bernice Neugarten’s ‘executive processes of personality’ (1973), Charlotte Bühler’s ‘basic life tendencies’ (1935), Erik Erikson’s ‘personal development’ (1959), Viktor Frankl’s ‘will to meaning’ (1959), Marie Jahoda’s ‘mental health’ (1958), Carl Jung’s ‘individuation’ (2001) and Abraham Maslow’s ‘self-actualisation’ (1968). Ryff distils from these seminal theories a model that includes six key components to individual wellbeing: *autonomy*, *self-acceptance*, *purpose in life*, *environmental mastery*, *positive relationships* and *personal growth*.

Whilst Ryff’s model might be considered a decidedly Western, individualistic model, I believe it offers a first foothold for beginning our investigation into ‘what goes right when we write.’ Perhaps creative writing is an act of asserting one’s autonomy, or of increasing self-acceptance. Perhaps writing provides us with a sense of purpose in life, as well as a method by which to master our environment. Perhaps we develop our positive relationships and a sense of personal growth through our writing practice. I believe that Ryff’s model offers us a clear, useful framework through which we can begin to explore, and of course to answer, such hypotheses.

Ryff (2014: 10) has demonstrated an “interest across diverse scientific disciplines in understanding adults as striving, meaning-making, proactive organisms who are actively negotiating the challenges of life.” I contend that creative writing may be one

such form of this ‘active negotiation’ and that there is much scope for further exploration of this within our field, and within the humanities more broadly.

Through attempting to answer such questions as I have proposed, based on Ryff’s model, we may begin to build a tentative model of ‘flourishing through writing’—actively specifying the broad and varied ways that the creative writing process contributes to psychological wellbeing. I say ‘tentative’ model, because such a model would necessarily continue to evolve, but—importantly—at a pace closer to that of contemporary psychology.

Corey M. Keyes (2002: 208–9) offers a definition of flourishing, or mental health, as “a syndrome of symptoms of positive feelings and positive functioning in life.”

Therefore, for Keyes:

...individuals are functioning well when they like most parts of themselves, have warm and trusting relationships, see themselves developing into better people, have a direction in life, are able to shape their environments to satisfy their needs, and have a degree of self-determination.

My theory of ‘flourishing through writing’ is an attempt to capture how the writing process might provoke such functioning. To preempt criticism of the ‘medicalisation’ of human experience, Keyes (2002: 219) adds that, “although it may medicalize the domain of mental health, the use of terms such as “syndrome” and “symptoms” was viewed as germane and was an attempt to place the domain of mental health on equal footing with mental illness.” Flourishing, furthermore, is a pertinent goal because, as Keyes adds (2002: 220), “there appears to be a Pandora’s box of economic and social burdens associated with the absence (i.e. languishing) of mental health.” The Mental Health Foundation writes that, “mental health problems are one of the main causes of the overall disease burden worldwide” and that “major depression is thought to be the second leading cause of disability worldwide.”⁴ This is interesting when viewed in light of recent research within positive psychology, which posits that lack of “positive emotion engagement and meaning” may not be just by-products or symptoms of depression, but rather its cause:

The symptoms of depression often involve lack of positive emotion, lack of engagement, and lack of felt meaning, but these are typically viewed as consequences or mere correlates of depression. We suggest that these may be causal of depression and therefore that building positive emotion, engagement, and meaning will alleviate depression (Seligman, Rashid, and Parks 2006: 775).

I propose that creative writing may be one way of facilitating flourishing—of “building positive emotion, engagement and meaning,” amongst other elements of psychological wellbeing, rather than only alleviating our mental suffering. In turn I propose that creative writing might serve—in some cases, for some individuals—to prevent or bolster against such suffering. At the very least, I argue that strong rationale exists for a great deal more research in this area.

To conclude, in this essay I have argued that much contemporary empirical research in psychology exists to support an emerging theory of flourishing through writing. I have put forth an introductory theoretical framework for this theory, drawn from the field of positive psychology and centred upon Carol D. Ryff’s model of Psychological Well-being, in order to emphasise and clarify what my use of the term ‘flourishing’ implies in relation to creative writing.

I believe that future research in this area could potentially come in many forms, to include quantitative, qualitative and practice-based approaches. Evidence, too, may be sought from a range of sources, including, but by no means limited to, written texts, interviews, case studies and autoethnographic accounts. What I would stress, however, is the need for rigor in such studies, as well as the utilisation of contemporary psychological models, hence my inter-disciplinary approach drawing on positive psychology. In conducting such research, we might begin to question and refine those populations that flourish most readily through writing, as well as query the boundaries of flourishing through writing. Indeed, we might also address the boundaries of what constitutes ‘creative writing’ in the context of flourishing—perhaps, for example, we might find major distinctions between the wellbeing-related effects of poetry and more prosaic, critical writing. Finally, the thread I have followed in my discussion here is one evidently rooted in Western philosophy, yet there are certainly other approaches—perhaps, for example, Eastern philosophy—that may

indeed yield fruitful further discussion, and offer an intriguing avenue for further research.

The ideas I have shared within this essay are very much evolving. My major aim has been to incite a conversation within the field of creative writing around how we flourish as writers and, further, how we might be guided in this discussion by contemporary psychological research. With this in mind, I will end as I began, with a question: what might it mean *to you* to be a flourishing writer? This conversation, I feel, is one long overdue, and so I anticipate your answers.

¹ Google search [12 January 2016].

² See Eagleton 2011 specifically the section, *Psychoanalysis*, which includes little-to-no discussion of contemporary psychological study. See Westen 1998 for a summary (and defence) of the wide disregard of Freudian theory.

³ I should note that I have a great admiration for the work of Hunt and others, and merely hope to advance, in new and evolving directions, the seminal work already achieved by these scholars.

⁴ Mental Health Foundation (2016) Mental health statistics: UK and worldwide [Online]. Available from: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-uk-and-worldwide> [21 October 2016].

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