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ARE WRITERS MADE OR BORN?

BY Jack Kerouac

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Paragraph 1

Writers are made, for anybody who isn't illiterate can write. But geniuses of the writing art like Melville, Whitman or Thoreau are born. Let's examine the word "genius."

It doesn't mean screwiness or eccentricity or excessive talent. It is derived from the word *gignere*, (to beget.) And a genius is simply a person who *originates* something never known before. Nobody but Melville could have written *Moby Dick*. Not even Whitman or Shakespeare.

Nobody but Whitman could have conceived, originated and written *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was born to write a *Leaves of Grass* and Melville was born to write a *Moby Dick*. "It ain't what you do.," Sy Oliver and James Young said. "It's the way atcha do it."

Five thousand writing class students who study "required reading" can put their hand to the legend of Faustus but only one, Marlowe, was born to do it the way he did.

Paragraph 2

I always get a laugh to hear Broadway wise guys talk about "talent and genius." Some perfect virtuoso also who can interpret Brahms on the violin is called a "genius," but the genius, the originating force, really belongs to Brahms; the violin virtuoso is simply a talented interpreter – in other words, a "Talent."

Or you'll hear people say that so and so is a major writer because of his "large talent." There can be no major writer without original genius. Artists of genius like Jackson Pollock, have painted things that have never been seen before.

Anybody who's seen his immense Samapattis of color has no right to criticize his "crazy method" of splashing and throwing and dancing around.

Take the case of James Joyce. People said he wasted his talent on the stream of consciousness style when in fact, he was simply *born* to originate it. How would you like to spend your old age reading books about contemporary life written in the pre-Joycean style of, say, Ruskin or William Dean Howells, or Taine?

Some geniuses come with heavy feet and march solemnly forward like Dreiser. Yet no one ever wrote about that America of his as well as he. Geniuses can be scintillating and geniuses can be somber, but it's that inescapable sorrowful depth that shines through – *originality*.

Paragraph 3

Joyce was insulted all his life by practically all of Ireland and the world for being a genius. Some Celtic Twilight idiots even conceded he had *some* talent. What else could they say, since they were all going to start imitating him? But five thousand university trained writers could put their hand to a day in June in Dublin in 1904 or one night's dreams, and never do with it what Joyce did with it: he was simply born to do it.

On the other hand, if the five thousand "trained writers" plus Joyce, all put their hands to a READER'S DIGEST-type article about "Vacation Hints" or "Homemaker's Tips" even then I think Joyce would stand out because of his inborn originality of language insight.

Bear well in mind what Sinclair Lewis told Thomas Wolf: "If Thomas Hardy had been given a contract to write stories for the SATURDAY EVENING POST, do you think he would have written like Zane Gray or like Thomas Hardy? I can tell you the answer to that one.

He would have written like Thomas Hardy. He couldn't have written like anyone else but Thomas Hardy. He would have kept on writing like Thomas Hardy. Whether he wrote for the SATURDAY EVENING POST or CAPTAIN BILLY'S WHIZBANG."

Paragraph 4

When the question is therefore asked, "Are writers made or born?" one should first ask, "Do you mean writers with talent or writers with originality?"

Because anybody can write, but not everybody invents new forms of writing. Gertrude Stein invented a new form of writing, and her imitators are just talents. Hemingway later invented his own form also.

The criterion for judging talent or genius is ephemeral speaking rationally in this world of graphs, but one gets the feeling definitely, when a writer of geniuses amazes him by strokes of force never seen before and yet hauntingly familiar (Wilson's famous "shock of recognition").

I got that feeling from *Swan's Way* as well as from *Sons and Lovers*. I do not get it from Colette, but I do get it from Dickinson. I get it from Celine, but I do not get it from Camus. I get it from Hemingway, but not from Raymond Chandler, except when he's dead serious. I get it from the (sic) Balzac or *Cousin Bette*, but not from Pierre Loti. And so on.

Paragraph 5

The main thing to remember is that talent imitates genius, because there's nothing else to imitate. Since talent can't originate it has to imitate or interpret. The poetry on page 22 of the *New York Times*, with all its "silent wings of urgency in a dark and seldom wood" and other lapidary trillings, is but a poor imitation of previous poets of genius like Yates, Dickinson, Apollinaire, Donne, Suckling

Genius gives birth. Talent delivers. What Rambrandt, Brandt or Van Gogh saw in the night can ne

ver be seen again. No frog can jump in a pond like Basho's frog. *Born* writers of the future are amazed already at what they're seeing now, what we'll all see in time for the first time, and then see imitated many times by *made* writers.

Paragraph 6

So in the case of a born writer, genius involves the original formation of a new style. Though the language of Kyd is Elizabethan as far as period goes, the language of Shakespeare can truly be called only *Shakespearean*. Oftentimes an originator of a new language forms is called "pretentious by jealous talents." But it ain't whatcha write. It's the way atcha write it.

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Notes: Edmund "Wilson's famous shock of recognition"? More fully, Melville, "Genius all over the world stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round".