

Looking through a glass comorbidly. Towards a stylometric estimate of vulnerability in writings by Sylvia Plath and Ingeborg Bachmann

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Recently, Dean & Boyd (2000) have claimed that stylometry can be used in order to shed new light on the longstanding controversy whether Edgar Allan Poe committed suicide or not. While stylometry has proven its validity with regard to a wide range of possible uses (most notably authorship verification, gender attribution...), the question whether it allows to sustain remote claims concerning an individual literary author's mental and psychological condition continues to be much more contentious.

In this paper, we aim to investigate and replicate the findings of recent advances in psychometry by applying them to the writings of Sylvia Plath and Ingeborg Bachmann. Both authors have been associated with mental health conditions that may or may not have led to death by suicide. A major area of discussion will be whether criteria for mental health can be modelled sufficiently in relation to the staged nature of literary communication and to socio-historically variable gender norms: this is particularly relevant in the cases of Plath and Bachmann, as their writing was overshadowed by the proximity to male literary 'geniuses' (e.g. Hughes, Frisch, Celan) whose 'eccentricity', however, was seen as pathological only to a far lesser extent.

Pennebaker and Seagal have researched the impact of narrative, and writing more specifically, on dealing with (traumatic) experiences and emotions and found that writing "serves the function of organizing complex emotional experiences". We will take our cue from theories of embodied cognition (Schneider et al. 2020) in order to draw attention to the physi(ologi)cal aspect of writing underpinning the mental one. We will argue that to some degree, Plath and Bachmann can be interpreted as neurodiverse and will look for semantic and formal correlatives to traces of excessive acuity of the senses, hypersensitivity, etc. These are increasingly seen as comorbid predictors of developmental and/or mental disorder, but bear a striking similarity to what literary studies consider to be traits of exceptional literary talent and creativity.

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