

The Nine Muses: Where Writers Get Their Ideas

To the commonplace question writers are asked, ‘where do you get your ideas from’, this website gives a comprehensive answer. In their own words, the authors of literary history describe how a particular phrase, paragraph or hundreds of pages appear to have come, not from them but through them. A catalogue of ‘divine inspiration’, it lists such reliable witnessing as to prove the phenomenon really exists.

‘Calliope’ begins with a biography of the Muses, nine goddesses of creativity from Greek mythology, to whom the earliest poets and philosophers attributed their brilliant ideas. Charting the Muses’ fortunes along the literary timeline, the changing fashions of their invocation, she pores over evidence written by Homer and Horace, Shakespeare and Sidney, Lewis Carroll and C.S. Lewis; and finds storytellers from Caedmon to Yeats, Rudyard Kipling to Anne Rice, Ben Jonson to Liz Lochhead mentioning that moment when the words seem to flow, faster than normal thought; as surprising to the writer as the reader.

Not just professionals; in many recorded episodes of channelled writing, where words come without any conscious creative urge or literary intention, the same supernatural voice(s) can be heard. In famous instances, such as Edgar Cayce’s, non-writers who get ideas and information they had no other way of knowing confirm the case for divine inspiration. There may be a spectrum, from the poet’s flash to the plebeian’s flood, of available material somehow poured from a higher source.

This story springs from my own experience of that sudden influence of unplanned sentences; as a published novelist, I wonder where I get my ideas from too. Sometimes dialogue seems to come from nowhere, characters pop into my head fully formed, and narrative problems are ingeniously solved; streaming more easily than ordinary writing when I must consciously choose one word at time.

My task is to map some empirical evidence onto the testimony of the literary canon. In nine clicks, each named and themed for a Muse (from comedy and tragedy, to erotica and science-fiction), I propose a theory of divine inspiration and a history of its application. I will also invoke a tenth muse to announce the publication of my new novel, *The True Picture*.

Each of the Helicon Muses has her own button, so you can invoke her personally. These link to creative writing games and workshop exercises inspired by that particular muses' area of expertise.

The Muses' Special Skills

Calliope is the eldest and most distinguished of the Muses, patroness of philosophy and epic poetry, mother of Orpheus. Serving as an introduction to the whole site, and a proposal of my outrageous thesis, it sets up a timeline of poetry's relationship to the divine; expressed by the earliest writers as a real connection with inspiring goddesses. This bookshelf begins with Hesiod, who tells how the nine Muses of Mount Helicon appeared to him and effectively dictated his *Theogony*, the classical world's oldest testament.

Every writer since can be held against this account on the 'divine inspiration' scale; to discover whether that heavenly broadcast is still loud and clear, or if those celestial voices are only heard faintly in literature today. If a muse is dictating the best bits she will show up in my close reading of the words scrawled across the pages of ages.

Metrical or mystical, the process of inspiration is described by famous poets over the millennia. Magical or mechanical, it is debated in the prose accounts of great names along the literary timeline. Even unknown writers say 'the muse is with me' at moments when those words seem to come from nowhere, fast and flowing.

Music and madness have been the accompaniments to creativity since Mount Helicon days, when the nine Muses ruled over the Hippocrene spring, where poets and philosophers alike would drink for inspiration. My starting point intersects with creation mythology: when Hermes first invented the lyre from a tortoiseshell, it had nine strings in honour of the Muses. The strings were made of gut from a cow Hermes had stolen from his brother, so he gave the fine instrument back to Apollo who became the muse leader; a chorus master for the goddesses of art and dance, writing and chanting. (He also sobered the high priestesses up; Apollo's followers just wore the hallucinogenic laurel leaves, instead of imbibing them.)

The Hippocrene water features as everything from tea to beer, drunk everywhere from Kent to Xanadu, in the establishment of a mytheme muse. This

richly detailed and fully referenced list of their mentions is my invocation to the mythical misses, authoresses of creativity, who might still sing in the ears of writers today.

Erato is Muse of the lyrical, of love and erotic poetry, of romantic fiction. For the ancient Greeks, she was also goddess of mimicry; so perhaps even divinities sometimes fake their pleasure. Her name means 'The Lovely', and she is often depicted with a lyre. Traditionally she turns men who follow her into heartthrobs; whether actors, singers or poets, they become worthy objects of women's desire.

We hear her voice in the modern 'Interval with Erato' by Scott Cairns, a rare twenty-first century name check for the ancient archetype: 'That's what I like best about you, Erato sighed in bed, that's why/ you've become one of my favourites and why you will always be so.... I feel like singing when you do that, she said with more than a hint/ of music already in her voice. So sing, I said... ' (2002)

My own interval with Erato considers the sexual dynamics in this poet/muse relationship. Does the Jungian marriage of animus and anima mean that the writer always has to be a man, or that all female poets must be lesbians?

The erotic subtexts of creativity are probed more deeply. It seems Apollo was promiscuous and some of the Muses were single mothers, so my thesis may not be 'politically correct'. Famous literary sex scenes can be analysed for traces of the mythical chemistry between man and muse. Famous instances of woman as her own muse are recorded. And famous literary relationships have many sightings of real-life muses.

Clio is the Muse of historical and heroic poetry. 'The Proclaimer' is credited with introducing the Phoenician alphabet into Greece, and her attribute is usually a parchment scroll. Like Calliope pictured with quills and pens, slates and books that she predates, Clio becomes a cheerleader for literacy.

However, 'Women, Writing and the Original Web' explores the Muses' sister subjects of sirens and sibyls, sphinxes and spinsters; the weavers of stories from when we used needles instead of pens. All the spinning princesses of fairy tale, the embroidering heroines of Greek myth; Arachne, Procne, Penelope, Pamela, the girl from Rumpelstiltskin and of course Sleeping Beauty: all trace back to Spiderwoman, who spun the world in aboriginal creation myths.

Challenging the male chronology of famous names with a web of anonymous women's storytelling, I invoke a sorority of the muse. In this mesh of references is an alternative plot; pagan inspiration as feminine and plural is ousted by the phallus, the logos, the pen, for the timeline's long fall into literacy. Yet Clio cheers it on.

Polyhymnia is goddess of the sublime and sacred hymn. Ancient art shows her in a pensive pose without any props. Her name means 'Many Songs of Praise'.

My Polyhymnia sings a history of channelled writing in the Christian tradition. I compare and contrast three tellings of the Jesus story: Kahlil Gibran's *Jesus, The Son of Man* (1928); Patience Worth's *The Sorry Tale* (1917) and Ann Rice's *Christ the Lord, Out of Egypt* (2005); written in states of inspiration by a visionary poet, dictated by a dead one, or perspired over by the modern author.

From words dreamed by Piers Plowman and Caedmon the Cowman to those of a modern 'madman', this writing still attests to the immortal muse. But for a voice not easily assimilated to a heavenly chorus, I use Nietzsche. His book *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) has the same prophetic tone as Gibran's *Almustafa*, and the same ominous style as Moses and Elijah, though his message is contrary to the Old Testament hymn sheet: God is dead.

So this muse goes from her pagan embodiment into the Christian tradition, where she is superimposed by Saint Mary; and on to a New Age formulation, where instances of 'automatic' writing may support the claim for divine authorship. Here is my theory's critical core: starting with words chiselled on a stone cross, continuing on the stone slabs of prophesy, and concluding in a biblical stoning.

Urania is Muse of astronomy and astrology. Her symbolic object is a globe, her costume is a cloak embroidered with stars. 'The Heavenly' always looks skyward.

But Oliver Wendell Holmes, the American Tennyson, pinpoints her location, in 'A Rhymed Lesson', as precisely as Warwickshire, England: '...She filled young William's fiery fancy full,/While old John Shakespeare talked of beeves and wool!...' (1837)

The ultimate starry-eyed fantasy, Urania has a particular affinity with writers of a scientific bent. As a professor of anatomy and physiology, though, Wendell Holmes' experiments in divine inspiration were shaky. Recorded in his essay, 'Working of the Unconscious', he woke from an ether-induced sleep with the answer

to the meaning of life and all the mysteries of the universe on the tip of his tongue, grabbed a pen and wrote it down. When his head cleared he re-read the charmed lines, to find ‘a strong smell of turpentine prevails throughout’ (2005). (But the creative writer has to wonder; what if this were the atmosphere of another planet, visited while he slumbered?)

As a logging of man’s inexplicable quests, a diary of unlikely characters met in dreams and visions, all literature was fantastic; until realism started to draw a clear line between publishing genres. Then fantasy had to separate from truth, and imagination from fact. Later, another sub-division, between fantasy and science fiction was drawn; now possibility splits from probability, as sci-fi suggests things that could technically happen, but not yet.

Muse Urania oversees a timeline of the future, as key texts from the fantasy canon are searched for the place that ideas come from. After the swashbuckling action of this mostly male genre, a feminist meditation concludes the chapter. Poetesses, from 17th century Amelia Lanyer and Margaret Cavendish, to contemporary Lavinia Greenlaw and Alice Oswald, write on scientific themes, instead of the musings on marriage and motherhood that can characterise women’s writing; and they never mention the Muses at all.

Euterpe’s name means ‘The Giver of Pleasure’; and music is her main concern. She is often pictured playing a double flute, an instrument that she invented; perhaps making her the muse of multi-taskers, too.

Her story is subtitled ‘The Voices and the Voice’. First, my devotion to the goddess considers a range of musical imagery found at the crescendos of poetry. The lute, the lyre, even bamboo reeds blown by the breath of the divine, are mentioned by many writers who see themselves as instruments.

I follow the music from Milton’s invocation to ‘Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well/ That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring;/ Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string’ in *Lycidas* (Fowler, 1991, p. 420). The Aeolian Harp, with strings played by ‘the god of winds’ is the perfect metaphor for divine inspiration and is used by many Romantic writers, including Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. It is taken up by Coleridge, who overblows it;

‘And what if all of animated nature

Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweep
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze...'
(1960, p. 102)

As the music swells, madness is stirred. The twin flute of Euterpe sounds her double theme. A list of authors with mental illness will confirm that genius can be heard in auditory hallucinations. Against these voices, 'the voices in the head', we must set the notion of 'the voice'; that singular, unique tone advocated by teachers and theorists of Creative Writing in the field's most famous handbooks. Gurus like Dorothea Brande, Natalie Goldberg and Diane Doubtfire never mention the Muses either.

Thalia rules over comedy and pastoral, merry and idyllic poetry. She favours rural pursuits and is traditionally seen holding a comic mask and a shepherd's staff. 'The Flourishing', she may also have a tickling stick.

In 'The Golden Banana Skin' I dig for the etymological roots of the subject and try to discover if Komos, the Greek god of komedy, and Thalia, Muse of comedy are alive and giggling. I trace their individual histories in fertility practices to find if they originally met in any funny stories. The closest Comus and Thalia come to sharing a plotline is in their Mayday roles as Robin Hood and Maid Marion; but the echoes of spring rites through the trees can still be heard in comedy sketches today.

Serious theory comes from Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1961) towards an ontology of writers' inspiration. For slapstick with a leafy branch, though, John Cleese and Felicity Kendal wear the crowns (and the codpiece) of the comedy king and queen. This article brings the mythological discourses of J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1987) to bear on popular and alternative TV comedy references.

Melpomene is the Muse of tragedy. 'The Songstress' wears a tragic mask and *cothurnus*, the heavy boots of Greek tragic actors. Her sorrowful chanting leads some sources to say she was mother of the Sirens; half woman, half bird, who lured sailors to their deaths by singing.

Click for Melpomene to find out all about mourning and melancholy in writers who lived in (my home city of) Portsmouth, as well as some other sad storys.

‘The Literary Leyline’ positions four famous nineteenth century authors along one straight road in Southsea, and follows a melancholic thread in the fiction that Charles Dickens, H.G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle and Rudyard Kipling wrote, either while living there or looking back later. Freud and the French feminists provide a moody chorus to this argument for the muse as lost mother.

Terpsichore is the Muse of dance. Surprisingly she is often shown seated, which suggests she is a dance teacher, not primarily a performer. Like all the Muses, Terpsichore’s pet artistes are those who pay homage to her; the human dancers and choreographers who worship the spirit of dance itself. She is invoked in ‘An After Dinner Poem’ of 1843:

‘In narrowest girdle, O reluctant Muse,
In closest frock and Cinderella shoes,
Bound to the foot-lights for thy brief display,
One zephyr step, and then dissolve away!’ (Wendell Holmes)

Terpsichore grew bigger in the USA than Europe during the nineteenth century; taken up as muse of the mass entertainment industry. Ethel Barrymore helped to immortalize the goddess of show business, putting her name in lights with this line: ‘For an actress to be a success, she must have the face of Venus, the brains of a Minerva, the grace of Terpsichore, the memory of a Macaulay, the figure of Juno, and the hide of a rhinoceros’ (Belling, 2009). The modern American mix of mythology and biology pitched here, pitch up again later in the seminal work on postmodern dance, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Banes, 1987).

In this bit, I describe my own encounter with the all-singing all-dancing muses. It’s confessional, partly because it reveals how much of my novels’ psychedelic plots are true; but partly because it acknowledges, with the possibility of divine inspiration, that I am not the sole author of these works.

She is called ‘The Whirler’; evoking my contemporary dance training and the spinning meditations I used in preparation for creative writing. Her name also conjures, for me, the daily challenge of meeting family and literary commitments alongside a busy academic career.

‘Terpsichore’ reflects in detail on the development of my novels, piecing together a patchwork of personal inspiration, from subconscious to what seems

‘supernatural’. Much of the material is autobiographical, based on real people, places and feelings; but my books are the antithesis of true life. Moreover, though most events and incidents used in the fiction happened in my past; over the long, slow process of drafting and crafting it sometimes seems that the plot can predict the future.

Thus ‘The Muse of Dance, Seated’ offers empirical evidence for my argument that God or goddesses are the real storytellers and we are just their pens.

There have been many claims made for a ‘Tenth Muse’. The term was first applied to Sappho, but now, in my local library alone, there are three different books with this title, in three different subject areas. Lately, Saint Veronica has been my inspiration, for ‘The True Picture’.

But sometimes, I could even fancy myself as the tenth muse (lower case!) Every button on my website brings some tips and tricks from the creative writing classroom to wherever on Olympus or in Hades you’re sitting (nice wallpaper, anyway.). It will include the workshop exercises I’ve developed over twenty years of university lecturing, parlour games that you can play at home: meet the muses, invoke your own muse. A generation of undergraduates have been inspired by these techniques.

I’ve never seen the M word discussed more seriously than this, in the best handbooks, the biggest textbooks. Contemporary theories of creativity do not mention divine inspiration. It’s old-fashioned to suggest the best stories are given to a few fated writers by God, that great plots and characters are bestowed on favoured authors by goddesses; that famous poems are already realised in a perfect form in some heavenly setting before a human hand puts pen to paper. But in this website, I will draw close to the omniscient narrator whose voice every novelist must master; whose phrasing every poet must catch; whose genius every philosopher must account for.

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