

Psychological Tests as Writing Exercises



Psychological tests are very weird and typically rely on verbal interpretation, two attributes that comprise a good writing exercise.

Rarely do products of writing exercises become anything substantial. Perhaps a line, an idea that can be expanded, but on the whole they are what they are: exercises. Practice. Necessary when you're not performing, creating, inspiring yourself. At their best, these psychological tests as writing exercises get your brain going crazy, which allows you to do something new, which is what you want, isn't it?

The image above is a Rorschach "ink blot." How it works: ink is dripped onto a sheet and reflected when the sheet is folded. These are all symmetrical images, and the patient is to interpret what the abstract ink blots are. So if you say, It looks like a butterfly, then you're free to go. If you say, It reminds of the twisted monster in my demented heart, then you're likely not free to go. To use this as a writing exercise, simply list everything the image could be; then everywhere the "thing" could be; then everything the thing could be doing; then all the inner feelings of the thing. This creates possibilities. Just possibilities. And you created all of them. If none of these possibilities is truly striking, at least your brain is being creative out of thin air. It jumpstarts the creative half. This is a good thing.

A psychological test that seems designed for writers is the Thematic Apperception Test or TAT. Here is one of the test's prompts:



Pretty creepy, right? Yeah. This psych test is a series of suggestive drawings, from which the patient writes a paragraph detailing what has happened just before the moment captured in the image; a paragraph detailing what is happening currently in the image; and lastly, what happens next. Great writing exercise. To make it more exerciseish, simply write out what happened before, what's happening presently, and what will happen, then rewrite the same scenes as comedic, then horrific, then romantic, then baroque, then minimal, then maximal, and on and on.

I do these with the writing classes, but I don't tell the students the origin of these prompts. This makes reading and hearing their interpretations a sort of sick game of discovering the hidden psychology of the group. Then I tell them where the images are from. Then we all eye each other. Then we laugh.