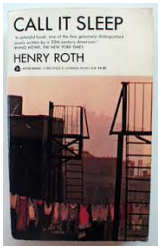
Writer's Block? Get Nacreous!

by Con Chapman

If you're a writer, or if you want to be a writer, you've probably suffered from writer's block. Consider Henry Roth, to take just one famous example.

Henry Roth

In 1934, when he was 28, Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* was published. It didn't do well, and after he abandoned a second novel, Roth gave up writing and worked as a firefighter, laborer and teacher, among other occupations.



Call It Sleep was re-published in the 1960s, and this time was a success. It sold over a million copies and was hailed as a masterpiece of Jewish-American literature. You would think, with that kind of wind at his back, a writer might be able to get in touch with an idle muse and crank out book number two; not Roth. He didn't start writing again until he was 73—a forty-five year layoff—at which point he wrote a six-novel cycle, four of which were published

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in the mid-90′s as *Mercy of a Rude Stream.* The final two books of the cycle remain unpublished.

I don't share the critics' enthusiasm for *Call It Sleep,* but I sympathize with Roth. How would you like to be stuck at your desk *for nearly half a century,* tearing page after page out of your typewriter, crumpling them up and starting over?

Of course, if you don't *want* to write, and you don't write, you don't have writer's block. You go on about your life, drinking beer, driving around, watching hockey, without the nagging sense that you should be—writing something. You're not a blocked writer—you're just a beer-drinking schlub.

But if you *want* to write and you can't, you have writer's block. For those who write to live—like newspaper reporters and others who tap at a keyboard all day for a paycheck—if you have writer's block you lose your job, and the threat of unemployment usually means you reach deep down within yourself and start writing. A guy I know who completed all the course work for his Ph. D. but couldn't finish his dissertation was ultimately cured of writer's block by law school, where he had to write, or fail.

Which brings us to those who live to write. You've got something to say, and you can't find enough time in the day to either write, or sit in a place where, if inspiration happens to strike you, you'll be in a position to get it down on paper. Like Virginia Woolf's “room of her own.”

Virginia Woolf: "Would you please leave me alone, please?"

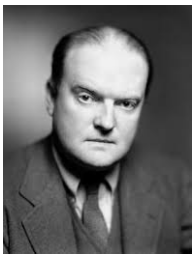
If, despite having your pencils lined up and a fresh piece of paper in your typewriter, or a cool white computer screen in front of you, you find yourself unable to write, it may be because you're not nacreous enough.

You take the pearl, I'll eat the oyster.

"Nacre" is the substance that forms the inner shell of an oyster. If an oyster gets an irritating object—a rock or your brother-in-law Lamar Gene—trapped within its mollusk mantle folds, it secretes nacre around it to make its existence more bearable. This reaction to an irritation produces a thing of beauty—a pearl. Once enough pearls have been formed in this fashion, a necklace is made that is strung across the bodice of a little black cocktail dress.

Elizabeth Taylor: And to think, not long ago it was just the pearls that were irritated.

One theory of artistic inspiration—and more importantly, production—is that writers and other artists create their aesthetic gems as a reaction to the sort of irritation that produces pearls. While this theory isn't true in all cases—I can't write when the two long-haired chihuahuas next door are yipping at my cats—it has enough basis in reality to have been the subject of a highly-regarded study by the eminent literary critic Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow.*



Edmund Wilson: "Why did you put me directly underneath Elizabeth Taylor? She's so irritating!"

The central figure of *The Wound and the Bow* is Philoctetes, the Greek warrior whose foot was bitten by a snake. The wound festered and his foot smelled awful, causing the Greeks to abandon him on an island. They later discovered that in order to win the Trojan War they needed Philoctetes' bow and poisoned arrows. They

go back and get him and the bow and arrows, and Philoctetes hides in the Trojan Horse and kills many Trojans when he gets out.

Philoctetes: "Has anybody got anything for Warrior's Foot?"

Wilson concluded that artists were like Philoctetes, because their feet stink and people avoid them.

I'm *kidding!* Wilson drew an analogy between Philoctetes and a number of writers, such as Dickens, who use a psychic wound in their lives as the spur, the inspiration and the source of their art.

So if you have writer's block, it may be because your childhood wasn't unhappy enough, but there's nothing you can do about that now, is there? There are other ways you can "get nacreous," however, and thereby jump start the creative process and become the world-famous writer you've always wanted to be. Here are a few suggestions from the Famous Pained Writer's School of Writing:

Bed of nails

Self-torture. Lying on a bed of nails hurts, but you've got to suffer to sing the blues or write the Great American Novel. Available in twin, Queen, King and Alexander Woolcott sizes.

Alexander Woolcott

Artificial stimulants and depressants. Alcohol is a time-tested method of getting your muse to cooperate, up to the point where you get the dry heaves. Experiments during the 1960s with lysergic acid di-whatchamacalit, or “LSD,” on the other hand, tended to produce works with opening lines such as the following: “It was a dark and stormy night, and as I looked out the win—OH MY GOD—THE CARPET IS EATING MY TOENAILS!”

“You writin' sumpin? Well kiss my ass and make it a love story.”

“Slumming It.” Many writers—Orwell and Steinbeck come to mind—deliberately expose themselves to substandard living conditions in an effort to experience life in its rawest form, facing hunger, bedbugs, and guys named “Mitch” who say it's your turn to buy the next bottle of high-alcohol ”bum wine.”

Night Train and Thunderbird: Not available wherever fine wines are sold.

Not exactly a pleasant existence, but on the other hand, it *is* irritating.