

One Pre-Raphaelite Legacy: An Analysis of the Personalities of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal as Seen Through Their Handwritings

Introduction: Handwriting Analysis as a Psychological Tool

The use of handwriting analysis to identify personality features began to take formal shape in the 1920s and 1930s, and over the succeeding years it has been refined into a scientific tool.¹ Although graphology is often dismissed as "pop psychology" we find it employed by court-appointed document examiners to determine the authenticity of handwritten papers, by bank officials to detect forgeries, and by personnel officers of many major corporations to gain a better understanding of job applicants and their skills.

Handwriting analysis owes much of its current status to two individuals: Milton Bunker, who initiated the first large-scale system of handwriting analysis, and psychologist Gordon Allport, who tested and confirmed the validity of graphology.

Bunker, a shorthand systems expert and teacher, observed that his students formed their shorthand strokes in highly individual ways. Although he had read several books on graphology, he was not convinced of the validity of existing theories.

In 1929, Bunker completed 14 years of studying, collecting, analyzing and finally organizing his findings. He determined that common strokes in different persons' writing indicated similar personality features, even if the writing was in different languages or from different cultures. Bunker further discovered that the same basic writing strokes appeared when a person held the pen between the teeth, the toes, or in the crook of an elbow. Such consistency suggested that the brain and not a habit of the hand was directing writing style.²

Allport, a professor at Harvard University for more than 40 years, is well remembered for his theories on expressive behavior. He was particularly interested in the consistency of expressive behavior and its significance, and he conducted numerous psychological studies to explore this theme.

He maintained that people expressed their meanings not just by what they said but how they said it, viz. by the speed of their speech. He was also convinced that consistent expressive behavior displayed itself through a person's gait, gestures and posture. Like most psychologists, he believed that a person's behavior was an intricate nexus, with even the most trivial acts reflecting elements of basic personality. Today, his idea that personality is expressed by or projected into an individual's responses to his environment has become a fundamental concept in clinical psychology.

In 1933, Allport wrote:

From our results, it appears that a man's gesture and handwriting both reflect an essentially stable and constant individual style. His expressive activities seem not to be dissociated and unrelated to one another, but rather to be organized and well-patterned. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that there is a congruence between expressive movement and the attitudes, traits, values, and other dispositions of the 'inner' personality.³

Nearly 30 years later, Allport was still fascinated by handwriting analysis. In 1961, he noted

There is a strong case to be made for handwriting analysis. It is, as proponents argue, not merely handwriting, but also "brain writing," influenced by all manner of expressive neural impulses giving individual flavor to the coping movements of the hand. As "crystallized gesture," it is by all odds the most accessible of expressive movements for study; all other movements are fugitive and more difficult to measure.⁴

By the 1970s, Allport's studies were both expanded and popularized by books instructing readers how to analyze "body language."