


1920

## Dual Personality in Handwriting

Webster A. Melcher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Webster A. Melcher, Dual Personality in Handwriting, 11 J. Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology 209 (May 1920 to February 1921)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

## DUAL PERSONALITY IN HANDWRITING

WEBSTER A. MELCHER<sup>1</sup>

*"Tooba bears the name, but the deeds belong to Emshyr."*  
—FROM THE ARABIC.

The making of any mark upon any surface by direct human agency, as a means of communicating information to a fellow-man, is (in a broad sense) handwriting; this may include engrossing and drawing, and even painting. Nevertheless, in its popular acceptation, the term "handwriting" is limited to that form of freely written characters usually adopted by one person in sending messages to another person.

In its restricted sense, therefore, handwriting may be considered as the written speech of the individual; like his oral efforts—and, indeed, like his every act—it soon becomes impressed with characteristics peculiar to himself, and tending to differentiate him from all other individuals. This establishes for him a customary and distinctive style, in writing, which may be more or less varied, from time to time, by accidental causes, such as haste, carelessness, position in writing, excitement, weakness, or disease.

A writer's style gradually becomes so much a part of his nature that the physical act of writing is then scarcely a conscious effort on his part, but is rather an automatic production, resulting from his mere mental determination to write. This almost unconscious production includes (*inter alia*) two distinct parts, viz.: the physical method of performing the act, and the pictorial forms resulting from such performance; of these two divisions, ordinarily but few of the details of the first are (or can be) known to the person using them, and many of the details of the second are also unknown to him.

The physical methods of accomplishing the act—even though the one using them may be cognizant of them—are very slightly (if at all) changed from time to time, because they are due to the physical *limitations* of the hand doing the writing; and these limitations are subject to but little alteration by the accidental causes of variance in style hereinbefore mentioned. Attempted *voluntary* changes—as for purposes of disguise—would not produce any marked effects, especially in those details which were not known to the writer; furthermore, 30 years' experience shows the author that practically the only changes

---

<sup>1</sup>Member of the Bar of Pennsylvania, Examiner of Questioned Documents, Author of "Questioned Ink Marks," etc.

ever tried, are crude ones, consisting of shifting the pen (a) from between the thumb and first finger to between the first and second fingers, or vice versa; or (b) from the right hand to the left hand, or vice versa.

The pictorial forms are, of course, much more liable to changes by the accidental causes mentioned; but changes will not be likely to affect any of the details that are unknown to the writer thereof, and many other connecting links will also remain. If a disguise be attempted here, the unknown factors will continue unaltered; it will also be found that the disguise will not be kept up consistently throughout, so that other traces will appear, binding the two efforts together, and there will be a lack of naturalness about the disguised writing as a whole.

It results that the identity of the maker of a given writing will, in most cases, be revealed to the eyes of a competent examiner, if he but use the laborious scientific methods in his examination instead of depending on the now discredited "flash" of "intuitive observation" that is generally guided more by information *aliunde* than by the writing itself. But even a skilled investigator will fall far short of the mark, unless he delves deeply into the pool, and reaches to its bottom for clues. This is true in many of the cases of *voluntary disguise* alluded to, and it is particularly applicable in *all* cases of another class, involving what are really *dual personalities*, and lacking altogether the feature of voluntary disguise.

In these most difficult cases, it is necessary to go beyond mere physical and pictorial details, and to search the writing for the involuntary and uncontrollable *indicia* of neurological, pathological, and psychopathic symptoms shown by the writer. In other words, we must observe not only the ordinary physical powers and habits of the writer, but also his nervous action, and the evidences of physical, nervous, and mental weakness or disease affecting him.

Mere voluntary disguise is rather an ordinary incident among the experiences of most of us—even in handwriting matters—and for that reason is not here to be particularly considered. That condition best described as "dual personality," however, is supposedly one that is rare, and a sort of monstrosity not worth much thought; and yet—were the facts but known and recognized—the public would be surprised to learn that it is in active existence in such a large percentage of the population as to be an ever-present source of misfortune and danger not only to the persons so affected but to all of us. Its recognition would explain many unsolved "mysteries," assist materially in

the administration of justice, secure the punishment of the really guilty, save the really innocent from punishment, point out proper correctives, and be a protection to the rest of the people.

Now what do we mean by "dual personality"? Simply that a single person is, at one time or series of times, possessed of one set of mental and nervous attributes, causing his physical acts to run along a certain course, while, at other times, he unconsciously has an essentially different set of attributes, resulting in a characteristically different course of physical acts. In *each* of his personalities his thoughts, words and deeds are perfectly natural to him for the time being, and are in no sense a voluntary disguise; but there is still a more or less absolute inconsistency between his *two* conditions.

Of course, if the variance is sufficiently marked, and results, at times, in acts which are generally considered dangerous to the community, the person is at once branded as subject to attacks of temporary insanity. But, after all, insanity is only the state of being unlike what the *majority* of people consider as normal; and among even the 51% who, by their own judgment, are classified as normal, there will be found all gradations of *minor* abnormalities, causing them to act, from time to time, as different persons. They may not be recognized as actually dangerous to the welfare of society, and yet they may—and frequently do—commit acts that (if conscious and voluntary) might be classed as dishonorable, immoral, dishonest, or even criminal; and all just because they are the unfortunate victims of double personality.

Are such unfortunates to be blamed for their abnormal acts? Decidedly not. Should they be punished for them? Emphatically not. Should the rest of the world be left unprotected from them? Assuredly not. And yet, the author's observation and experience satisfies him that, in most instances, such unfortunates have been blamed, and, wherever possible, punished also; at the same time the rest of us have been still left helpless and at their mercy. Instead of such mistaken and unjust course, the affliction should be recognized and sought to be relieved, and the danger ended; in some cases, perhaps, restraint of the individual might be necessary—but not as a criminal—while, in most cases, it is more than likely that some slight corrective aid would be sufficient to relieve the victims, and end the pestiferous situation.

The thoughts and acts of most people are, at times, evidenced by *writings* done by themselves, and the nervous and mental states of such persons will be disclosed by their writings, when properly examined for that purpose; these writings will usually reflect—*not* necessarily

their general characters for (say) honesty, intelligence, ability, etc.—but, quite plainly, the strength and vagaries of their physical, nervous, and mental conditions, thus supplying us with not only a means of identification of the individual writers, but also with a diagnosis of the conditions resulting in their actions. This is not in any sense a graphological determination, but is one based on the scientific principles of neurology, psychology, psychopathy, and pathology, as taught in our colleges.

In a general sense, the double personalities are distinguished by *different* courses of conduct *naturally* pursued in the two conditions. When only the *handwriting* is to be considered, the difference is in the characteristic appearance of the writing done in the different states; the variation is such that one who is actually well acquainted with a person's style of writing of the one state, would utterly fail to recognize, as his, the same person's writing of the other state—both seeming to be done quite naturally, and the natures of their subject matters being left out of consideration.

In this connection it would therefore appear that two conditions must concurrently exist in the several separate writings, viz.: First—The *general style* of writing in one set must appear radically different from that in the other set; and, Second—The writing in each set must appear to be *naturally executed*—that is to say, there must be no appearance of voluntary simulation or disguise, or of abnormal hesitation, in either writing.

Given these two conditions, and you are at once brought up sharply against a seeming paradox, yet, in fact, a most serious truth: The two sets of writings are as likely to be the product of one individual, written in different personalities, as they are to be the result of the efforts of two different individuals! How important then it is to learn which is the true situation, before judging—much less condemning or punishing—anyone for writing that set which had better been left unwritten!

Of course, under the two prerequisite conditions named, every disinterested layman would at once declare the writings were by two different persons. Under the same conditions, the *disinterested* expert, who failed to avail himself fully of scientific methods, or used them only superficially, would probably come to a similar conclusion; the *interested* expert, who gave less consideration to the writing than to the extraneous history of the case, might give an enthusiastic contrary opinion, based on an alleged disguise claimed to exist in the one set of writings, the claim for which would be riddled with holes

by a brief but intelligent cross-examination, or he might coincide with the layman's opinion, according to the side on which he was engaged.

The *disinterested* expert, who considered nothing but the writings themselves; and who went to the limit of scientific examination, would, alone, be able to determine correctly whether or not there were two individual writers; and if he found there was but one, he alone could disclose the actuating reasons for the writing, and learn whether the writer was to be held responsible for the act, or was rather to be pitied for his misfortune and assisted in being rid of his infirmity. The throwing of such light on the transactions of life would certainly help our tribunals to administer actual justice, instead of the travesties upon, and miscarriage of, justice, that we so often encounter.

The subject of double personalities was forcibly borne in upon the author many years ago, in connection with some documents being then examined by him, and he has since studied the subject in its varied phases, in many other cases, and from many points of view. His conclusions have been sustained by many physicians before whom the propositions have been placed; and discussions of the problem with open-minded judges has shown to them a satisfactory solution for seemingly unsolvable questions that have come before them in their judicial capacities, and reconciled evidence that had before seemed entirely irreconcilable.

In the case referred to a very prominent religious organization was almost disrupted by a series of anonymous letters, received by nearly every active worker therein, and containing the vilest charges against their leaders and co-workers. Matters became so serious that something had to be done, and the governing body quietly obtained samples of the writing of everyone connected with the organization, and began a process of elimination. This ended in about a dozen specimens being left, as possibly including the writer—which brought the authorities to an *impasse*; so these remaining samples were submitted for examination and comparison with the anonymous letters. Here all of the remaining specimen writers were eliminated except one—a *lady* who was of irreproachable character, so far as known, and one of the most active workers in the church. The report that she had written the offensive letters was met with a unanimous cry of "Impossible" on the part of the authorities. It was then explained to them that she was not really responsible for the things she had written, because of her abnormal mental and nervous condition at the times of writing—probably due to the recurrence of her *menses*. After much deliberation, the church authorities decided, with fear and trembling, to call

the lady before them, and to submit the report and explanation to her and ask her what, if anything, she had to say about the matter. To their unbounded surprise, she admitted having written the letters under the circumstances as explained. The shock to the lady, caused by her detection, and the quiet help of the authorities, ended in her cure, and terminated the entire difficulty.

In this case the standard writing of the lady was of a well-defined general style, while the writing in all of the anonymous letters was in an entirely different general style, although they were like each other. Both sets of writings were executed freely, and showed no hesitation or disguise; the anonymous letters were all of good length, and (in dates) extended over more than a year, but their dates arranged themselves *in periods of about four weeks each*. The limitations and powers of the hands and arms in both sets of writings, the actual methods of operating the hands in both, the general nervous features in both, and the dynamic action of the writer's system in both, were alike; so, if *two* persons were thought to be involved, there was no sufficient explanation of this unanimity, while if but *one* person did all, then something operated upon that person, *at monthly intervals*, absolutely to change the writer's *natural style* of writing. Hence it was concluded to be a case of dual personality, due to the *menses*, and not a voluntary act for which the writer was responsible.

There followed other cases strongly resembling the foregoing in all essential details; also cases where women, under similar conditions, were charged with obtaining, under false pretenses, jewelry and gew-gaws, with the aid of which to shine more brightly before the eyes of their male admirers; also others, where the element of jealousy entered into the matter. Many curious phases of female passions and feelings have cropped out in the form of a different personality, at times coincident with the establishment, recurrence, or cessation, of their *menses*; so that whenever a woman—young or old—is suspected of, or charged with, some abnormal act, it is well to inquire at the start as to her menstrual development, dates, and conditions. These are by no means the *only* causes for female changes of personality, but they are mentioned simply as being such as are most readily traceable, outside of mere handwriting.

That there might be some untoward results of the menstrual efforts and periods of a woman has long been recognized, to an indefinite extent, but it has not (so far as the author is aware) been considered especially with reference to its effects on a woman's handwriting. In the earlier times the female organism was credited in a

general way with all the things included in the term "nervous, hysterical woman," but particular details of cause and of effects were notoriously lacking, and, therefore, presumably but little understood. It may now be safely averred, however, that whenever there is "a woman in the case" under investigation, it is the duty of the investigators to look particularly into the question of the possible existence of a dual personality for the woman, and to avail themselves of the help to be gained from an examination of her handwriting.

From the author's studies and investigations there is no reason to suppose that such a duplex individuality is confined to women; on the contrary, he is convinced that the same conditions may be found in the case of the opposite sex. The only real difference between the sexes probably lies in the fact that men do not have the regularly recurring menstrual periods, wherefore the causes are harder to trace; they often do have, however, various strong cravings, at regular or irregular intervals, which are quite equal to those of females in serving to prompt similar untoward results; in fact, men have been found subject to the same infirmity, directly traceable to sexuality, intoxicants or narcotics, or to various strong physical or mental passions, *repeatedly* affecting the individual; and with men, as with women, their conditions are similarly liable to be demonstrated in their handwriting.

A curious instance is recalled, where a German and an Irishman were trying to agree upon the terms of a contract; their respective nationalities were a sufficient guarantee that each would do his utmost to outmaneuver the other. They were still jockeying for position when St. Patrick's Day arrived, and on this, his Patron Saint's Day, the Irishman succeeded in having his own kind of a contract signed by the other fellow. When the time came for fulfillment of the contract, the German denied ever having signed it, and disclaimed all knowledge of the paper. The result was a lawsuit, and an examination of the alleged signature of the German, which certainly was not in his usual style of writing. The explanation? The Irishman proposed that the German celebrate the day with him; this the German was quite willing to do, but *the liquor was not of the German brand*, and made a new man out of him; neither was overcome, but both were in the best of spirits, and, while things were thus, the German obligingly signed the improvident contract. The proof? An expert's report on the handwriting, which the German finally admitted was correct.

As to the history of the phenomenon under discussion, the consequences of the infirmity may be innumerable and past belief, but the



result, so far as we now are concerned, is the effect upon the person's handwriting; this is a physical act which is directed by a series of unusual mental impressions and impulses; these in turn are given and actuated by more or less abnormal conditions that are generally physical or nervous, although sometimes psychotic. The changed handwriting may have been produced upon but a single occasion (though usually oftener), but it seems that the mental direction and control must have been *cultivated* by a *repetition* of the causative conditions; this repetition may have been for a greater or less number of times, but must have been sufficient to train the changed mental control to the necessary degree of perfection required to produce an entirely *different* style of writing in an entirely *natural* manner—a result that was claimed by Lombroso and others (but denied by Gross) for hypnotic suggestion, *without* repetition.

The repetition of the causes unconsciously produces what is in effect an abnormal habit, which breaks out every now and then, just as we say a person "has a *habit* of *occasionally* omitting a letter from words," although he knows perfectly well how to spell them correctly. So, when the habit temporarily gains the ascendancy, it operates on the mind and produces an unusual impulse there that later results in the writing, with its untoward complications and effects. This entire train of events is out of keeping with the person's ordinary nature and actions, and is an unconscious development of something abnormal in his usual self, and unnatural to his general personality. On the other hand, it is in entire consonance with, and natural to, his occasional new and extraordinary personality; and as this personality rests entirely on conditions abnormal to the individual, he should not be held accountable for its actions, but should be helped to accomplish its destruction and his own cure.

Thus we find, in their handwriting, something of great assistance, as well as protection to us in dealing with persons who, at times, wander in the twilight zone of the border lands between the state of perfectly normal rationality and the state of absolute irrationality, persons afflicted with an infirmity making them at times really irresponsible for their acts, but perhaps far from a legal condition of either weak-mindedness or insanity; persons against whom the rest of us surely are entitled to protection.

The Arabs have a saying that "the eye of the sun cannot be hidden"; and yet, only too often, obscuring clouds intervene for a time, arising from temporary and localized conditions. Let us endeavor, as far as possible, to prevent or remove such conditions in relation to the matter under discussion.