



**Repressed memories:  
scientific fact or romantic fiction**

By Pamela Berard

Two senior Harvard psychiatrists suggest that "repressed memory" may be simply a romantic notion dating from the 1800s, and not a naturally occurring human psychological phenomenon.

To test that hypothesis, **Harrison G. Pope, Jr., M.D., M.P.H.** and **James I. Hudson, M.D., Sc.D.**, directors of the Biological Psychiatry Laboratory at McLean Hospital, offered \$1,000 to the first person who could find a description of repressed memory in any nonfiction or fiction work in English or in any work translated into English, prior to 1800.

The challenge was advertised on 25 Web sites for several months and placed in a print ad in the Chronicle of Higher Education, receiving mainstream media attention.

"No one anywhere in the world was able to produce an example of repressed memory," amnesia for a specific traumatic event in an otherwise lucid individual, Pope said. "It would be inconceivable over the thousands of years prior to 1800 that no one would have mentioned or even noticed the case even in passing, in any word or language, if the phenomenon actually were happening." The psychiatrists received more than 100 responses.

Pope cited evidence of other naturally occurring psychological phenomenon. "There are thousands of recognizable descriptions of delusions and hallucinations in both fiction and non-fiction works in many languages throughout the ages," he said. "So our ancestors had no difficulty describing the psychological phenomenon that they witnessed."

Pope said detractors of his theory often say that just because something was not described before 1800 doesn't mean it isn't real; rather, perhaps it had simply not been "conceived" before then, that people didn't have the proper language or worldview to describe it.

But that argument breaks down, Pope said. "It isn't necessary to conceive of something in order to describe it. Even though our ancestors had totally different concepts of delusions and hallucinations, you could still recognize their descriptions of it." Repressed memory is "such a graphic, clear-cut phenomenon that you and I would be able to recognize it, even though they may have interpreted it differently," he said. The earliest case the pair can document is found in a fictional character, Dr. Mannette, in Charles Dickens's "Tale of Two Cities" (published in 1859), who has amnesia for large portions of his time in the Bastille.

A more graphic example appears in Rudyard Kipling's 1896 novel "Captains Courageous," Pope said. Penn develops complete amnesia after losing his entire family in a tragic flood. Later, working as a fisherman, Penn suddenly recovers his lost memory after a tragic collision at sea.

The debate over repressed memory is one of the most controversial in all of psychiatry and psychology today, with fervent arguments on both sides of the aisle, Pope said. "It is an important topic because it is of great theoretical importance in the whole structure of psychiatric theory," he said. Such findings could also have legal significance. "Courtrooms are interested in the factual truth, more than the emotional truth, if you will," he said.