

# Regarding Poetry as a Tool For Personal Healing

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In comparison to other forms of literature, poetry remains one of the most unique literary styles because of its distinct writing and reading experiences. The nature of poetry is to remain ambiguous and provide the readers with space to explore the poet's questions and ideas. This ambiguity is not only the result of the poet's prose and metric, but it also reflects the potential reservations that draw both writers and readers to poetry. It is the healing nature of poetry that particularly attracts those with inner conflicts, as poetry can be a way to articulate ideas and feelings, find community with those who may share similar experiences, and discover new perspectives on things that people may be struggling with. In providing these tools, poetry becomes a place where people can emotionally and socially heal, which is particularly important for

those who are facing medical ailments.

Poetry provides suggestions and questions for readers, rather than directly informing and reasoning through a persuasive claim. Even if the poet means to make a point or elucidate particular emotions, it is only subtle cues in the poet's writing through which the poet's intentions become clear. Spacing and cadence are particularly useful in emphasizing an idea or question that the poet has deemed important. Repetition of a word or phrase can cause a change in the cadence, which can alter the tone of the piece— thus impressing a different picture upon the readers. Similarly, spaces left in between certain phrases also create a figurative space for the reader to pause and digest the writing. It is possible that spacing and cadence also reflect the poet's organic thought processes during

the writing process, thus providing unbiased potential insight into how the writer is feeling without forcing these thoughts onto the readers. Similarly, poetry often uses imagery to portray ideas, people, or feelings. Imagery is an excellent tool for engaging the readers with a literary work and making the resultant feelings and thoughts from an image or scene a more visceral experience. Readers view a snapshot of a moment without an understanding of what that moment is meant to portray. As a result, readers are left with an obligation to draw their own conclusions about what that moment means—again inspiring more questions about the poetry and what that poem means to the reader. This, more than anything else, allows the ambiguity of poems to become a space for introspection and, consequently, healing.

One of the reasons that poems often lack immediate clarity is that the poets themselves use writing as a way to disentangle inner conflicts and questions that they may hold. Through the process of recording and transcribing one's feelings and perspectives, the poets can see their thoughts both completed and shared for others to read and

reflect upon. This is advantageous, and even therapeutic, for multiple reasons.

On an individual level, poetry forces writers to confront their innermost questions and transform those feelings into a more tangible belief. One such example of the therapeutic nature of poetry is in Bettina Judd's collection of poems: *Patient: Poems*. Throughout the collection, she tries to grapple with the realization that much of modern gynecology was founded on the scientific discoveries made by exploiting three enslaved women. And as she struggles with her own gynecological issues, Judd faces both grief and guilt through her poems, writing in her poem "In 2006 I Had an Ordeal with Medicine":

In 2006 I had an ordeal with medicine. /  
I must have been found guilty of some-  
thing. I don't *feel* /  
innocent here lurking with ghosts.  
See it happens like /  
that. I start at a thought that is quite  
benign and end up /  
peccant, debased.  
I had an ordeal with medicine and was  
found innocent /

or guilty. It feels the same because I live  
in a haunted /  
house. A house can be a dynasty, a  
bloodline, a body.  
There was punishment. Like the way the  
body is /  
murdered by its own weight when  
lynched. Not that I /  
was wrong but that verdicts come in a  
bloodline. /  
In 2006 I had an ordeal with medicine.  
To recover, I /  
learn why ghosts come to me. The  
research question is: /  
Why am I patient?

Themes of guilt and grief pervade her poems as she grapples with her illness and the burdens of that sickness, as is clear in those first few lines. Yet it is also apparent throughout the rest of her writing that she is trying to reconcile with these feelings and, through this process, she realizes what questions she is truly struggling with. This is healing because Judd, like all poets, can gain a newfound level of self-awareness that may allow them to critically analyze their feelings and questions—which is the critical first step of any healing process.

In a more collective sense, poetry is a way for writers to find a community of those who share similar experiences and questions. By sharing their perspectives and personal experiences with others, they counteract the isolating thoughts and feelings that they may be harboring. For example, Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" was written just after Plath had an appendectomy, shortly following a miscarriage. It is clear that she is struggling throughout the poem, and that she still feels an incredible amount of loss. She writes about her hospital experience, and in one stanza she writes:

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted /  
To lie with my hands turned up and be  
utterly empty. /  
How free it is, you have no idea how  
free—— /  
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you, /  
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few  
trinkets. /  
It is what the dead close on, finally; I  
imagine them /  
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Com-  
munion tablet. /

In this, she hints towards suicide as she describes that “[she] only wanted / To lie with [her] hands turned up and be utterly empty” (Plath, lines 29-30). But it is possible that by putting her grief into writing, Plath may have been able to prolong these thoughts and find comfort that she is not the only person with such experiences. Hence, when poets explore their feelings through writing and find people who relate to them, poets can use this act of emotional purging and their newfound community as tools to find healing.

Reading poetry is a completely different experience than writing. Rather than writing down one’s thoughts and feelings, as a poet does, those thoughts and feelings can be discovered through the process of reading poetry. This is often beneficial for those who may be resistant to intentional introspection, or for those who are seeking to improve their outlook on a particular subject. By virtue of the ambiguous nature of poetry, the vague suggestions and unanswered questions give readers the grace to form their thoughts regarding these points independently from that of the poet. For example, in Judd’s poem “The Researcher

Discovers Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy” she compares her medical experiences with those of Lucy, Anarcha, and Betsey’s experiences: Judd is “[sent] *home with oxycodone, ibuprofen*” while people like Lucy, Anarcha, and Betsey are “[unanes-thetized] thetized], addicted to opium” (Judd, lines 9 and 18). Judd forces readers to face the disturbing abuse these women suffered, and she draws comparisons to both her and the readers’ experiences with medicine and gynecology to illustrate the differences in care. Moreover, as readers read the conflicted musings that she voices regarding these women and their sacrifices, they subconsciously compare their feelings with hers. As a result, readers engage with the poetry and its meanings without direct prompting.

Some readers seek poetry with more intentionality; because poems express their writers’ perspectives without forcibly impressing them upon their readers, readers will often seek poems to gain insight into problems they may be struggling with. Similar to how poets use their writing to seek out a community and combat certain isolating feelings, readers may seek out poems that offer different

perspectives. In Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for Death," death is personified and "[he] knew no haste / And I had to put away / My labour and my leisure too, / For His Civility" (Dickinson, lines 4-7). While death is typically a feared fate and a dreadful topic to discuss, Dickinson makes death seem peaceful, if a little eerie. While the portrayal of death is not immediately clear, and thus may cause readers to interpret the poem as they wish, one interpretation of the poem is that death is not necessarily something to be feared. Instead, for those who fear death and seek the poem as a way to overcome this fear, this interpretation would offer them a portion of comfort. In providing this alternative perspective, the poem could give readers a sense of peace. By resolving such an internal conflict, it is clear that there is clarity and relief in understanding one's thoughts and adopting healthier perspectives. It also becomes clear, as any reader of poetry can attest, that this personal healing is a common reward for engaging in the therapeutic nature of poetry.

Writers have predominantly focused on the psychological and social

effects of their various medical ailments and disabilities. While the physical obstacles are expected, the consistent fixation on the emotional and social consequences that accompanies a diagnosis implies that these are what weigh more heavily on the writers in their later reflection on their illness. Whether it is in Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, where Kaysen describes how she was mistreated by others as an institutionalized patient, or in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as a woman explains how her experience with hysteria made others both isolate and dehumanize her, it is clear that fixation with how our illness affects others is a common experience. However, this makes poetry a perfect vehicle for healing, particularly for those who have suffered from a medical condition. Whether it is through writing poetry, where one can reconcile with their emotions and digest personal experiences and struggles, or if it is through reading poetry, where one can learn to identify their emotions and adjust their perspectives, poetry is healing. Additionally, the vague and suggestive nature of poetry also makes it an incredibly inclusive form of literature; the

emotions and turmoil that the poet may be trying to reconcile with can often be generalized and applied to one's own experiences. As a result, poetry is an incredible space where writers and readers can experience social and emotional healing.

The nature of poetry is to remain ambiguous, letting both the reader and writer check in on and reconnect with their emotional and social well-being. Poetry does not force interpretations or feelings upon the readers, but merely provides the space for personal reflection and is suggestive of alternative interpretations. In doing so, reading and writing poetry becomes a therapeutic activity where everyone, particularly those who struggle with illnesses or are socially and emotionally dissatisfied, can begin to heal.

#### REFERENCES

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