

## Poetry as a Creative Process in Psychotherapy

Louis Hoffman  
Carrie V. Pate  
Saybrook University

**Abstract.** Poetry and therapy promote healing and growth in similar ways; however, poetry also can enhance psychotherapy. Comparing poetry and therapy can facilitate new insights into how therapy works. In this presentation, several parallels between therapy and poetry are considered. With each of these themes, it is discussed how poetry can be integrated to enhance therapy with some clients. First, psychotherapy seeks to discover insight and create meaning utilizing a language that resonates with the client. The standard language and clichés of therapy sometimes do not connect with clients. Poetry, like therapy, utilizes a unique language of symbols, metaphors, and images to deepen one's understanding. Although a poem seeks to convey the same meaning as could be conveyed through prose, the unique style and use of language allows the poem to make it something more. Similarly, therapists and clients develop a unique way of communicating rooted in symbols, metaphors, and images emerging from the client's experience and way of conceiving the world. Through integrating poetry into the therapy process, the therapist and client may introduce new symbols and metaphors as well as reconceptualizing established ones. Second, poetry can facilitate emotional processing and insight. Emotional processing entails experiencing emotion before transitioning to understanding the emotion and connecting it to meaning. Poems often begin as raw emotions and images that may not make sense or connect with meaning for the poet. The poet creates meaning and deepens their understanding of these emotions through translating them into symbols and images. Introducing poetry into the therapy process can facilitate such creation of meaning. Last, poetry and therapy are intimate forms of communication concerned with the subjective experience of the poet/client. The style of communication encourages intimacy to develop more quickly than in other contexts. Through incorporating poetry, the therapist can facilitate empathy and intimacy in psychotherapy.

Poetry has long been used across many different cultures as a way to seek understanding and meaning, particularly when facing suffering. Poetry long predates psychotherapy as a healing art. In contemporary times, poetry and therapy often serve similar ends, although this is not always recognized or acknowledged. Given the long history of wisdom that poetry comprises, therapy has much that it can learn from practice of poetry. In this paper, we explore some similarities between poetry and therapy,

particularly humanistic and existential approaches to therapy. Additionally, we give consideration to ways that poetry can be integrated into the therapy process.

### **Poetry and the Language of Therapy**

Words provide the vehicle for thoughts, information, and expression, and although words alone do not create all of communication, words identify ideas in a way mutually understood between people. Because of this natural communication structure, words, whether spoken or written, provide one of the primary methods of self-expression. Writing about personally important events, thoughts, and emotions can be beneficial for physical and mental health, improving physical ailments, depression, and anxiety (Horowitz, 2000, Pennebaker, 1997). In general, this writing helps to reposition the thoughts and feelings through processing that involves emotion, as well as event memory (Horowitz, 2000). Language is a key part of the process humans use to order their feelings and experiences. Poetry and therapy both use language in a direct attempt to describe, evaluate, or flesh out emotions. Because of the prevalence of language and its established use in exposing the inner world, poetry can make important contributions to therapy.

The use of language in therapy is as old as therapy itself, and through the development of therapeutic models and theories of the mind, psychology has built a unique language for healing. However, the technical language of psychology may be too pedantic for use in the therapy room, and so therapeutic language has also emerged to facilitate conversations between therapist and client. Therapy topics are by nature personal, and American culture generally does not promote in depth analysis of inner experiences. For this reason, finding new language, or language restructuring in therapy is beneficial to the healing process.

Similarly, poetry helps people restructure language. The changes in word patterns and grammatical rules allow people to express deeper emotions, even those that they cannot yet understand or describe another way. Poetry allows an individual to not only express their inner experiences to a known, unknown, or even imaginary reader, but helps them to find the words that previously eluded them and help them at last see and understand their own thoughts and feelings (Horowitz, 2000). In poetry, many rules of prose no longer apply. Full sentences, completely described thoughts, and chronological thinking are not required. Metaphor, sensory perceptions, images, and seemingly unrelated comparisons or experiences are commonly used in poetry not only to describe the experience, but to pull the reader toward the emotions of the author. This increases the potential for deeper understanding, presence, and honesty. Poetry's truncated structures, perceived "restrictions" of language, push the poet to creatively describe or create an experience.

The language of therapy was designed ostensibly to better identify important inner world experiences. Creating safety in therapy is important for this reason, making the location and relationship socially appropriate for divulging thoughts and feelings one would normally keep hidden. Facilitating deeper expression, or at least personal expression, is important in therapy. Both therapist and client are expected to work together using language to create an experience, a change, a solution to a problem, and/or a relationship regardless of the therapy modality or style. Through this language use, healing or changed behaviors typically result. This use of language and perhaps client hesitance or

lack of any other practice has led to common therapy clichés, such as “walking on eggshells (notice the metaphor, even here),” “communication is our problem,” and “I just don’t know how to be happy.” Similarly, therapists try to explain insight by encouraging the clients to “dig deeper,” as a descriptor of the process of self-exploration.

In many ways, the rules of poetry have become an answer for language in therapy. When a client has a moment of insight or understanding, his words describing his epiphany may sound more poetic. Moreover, therapy encourages the use of poetic metaphor, even when poems are not used directly. Clients may find themselves “pointing to an emotion” on their physical bodies, giving their emotions or experiences colors, textures, and other physical attributes. Not surprisingly, metaphor has naturally arisen in therapy as an attempt to communicate authentic emotional experiences. Authentic human expression relies heavily upon symbols and metaphors (May, 1991). Like therapy, poetry uses the importance of word choice, rhythm, order, and even silence to express and create meanings that may run deeper than typical daily speech (Forsthoefel, 2014). “What is not said is as important, if not more, than what is said” is conventional wisdom in therapy, but is also one of the key elements in reading and writing poetry. In poetry, the pauses, breaks, and transitions often form some of the most important meaning. Indeed, understanding and ordering ideas, thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the human brain requires the use of metaphor (May, 1991).

As in the process of therapy, the language of poetry creates a personal bond with another, and arguably with humanity, as a process of healing. Poetry has the ability to

lucidly reveal something deep and true about reality, including, above all, our humanity and the human contexts of our lives. In so doing -artfully, beautifully- poetry allows us to access something transcendent, real, and true. We feel more ourselves. We feel more “human,” more connected. (Forsthoefel, 2014, p. 111)

In the therapy world, this is often described as being understood, as though the therapist “gets” the client, which helps to validate her or his experiences. Poetry has the ability to connect the individual with humanity’s global and timeless themes, easily connect the individual with myths that may be foreign to them but that depict the core ideas of humans across time and geography (Forsthoefel, 2014; May, 1991). Connecting the client with humanity, even humanity’s larger themes, promotes emotional healing and acceptance by returning the dignity of the person and removing the emotional isolation the “problem” has developed.

### **Facilitating Emotional Processing in Therapy and Poetry**

Emotional processing entails experiencing the emotion, facilitating insight or understanding, and the creation of meaning. Poetry, as well as therapy, can be very effective facilitating emotional processing. When writing poetry, emotions are typically invited with curiosity. They are explored, preferably without judgment, and the poet seeks to describe the emotional content through descriptive and symbolic language. Poems often reflect a paradoxical relationship with emotions, where they are invited in but also often struggled with.

Hoffman and Cleare-Hoffman (2011) similarly note that existential and humanistic approaches to therapy, contrary to some other modalities, avoids pathologizing emotions. Instead, emotions, at their base, are considered to be healthy. The problems with emotion emerge from how individuals respond to their emotions. When they are resisted, suppressed, or repressed, they frequently become problematic in the person's life.

Thus, both poetry and therapy take an accepting approach to emotions. It can be healing in itself to welcome emotions instead of resisting and judging them. Once the emotions are welcomed in, they are often experienced differently. One is able to see the emotions more holistically, allowing for a deeper understanding of the emotions.

Meaning, however, is complex when it comes to emotions. While the emotions often carry a message, which could be consider a form of meaning, individuals also create meaning from their emotional experience. Poetry seems to create meaning through symbols and language. Although the process is different, therapy also seeks to create meaning through symbols and language.

### **Poetry and Therapy as Intimate Communication**

Few communication experiences are as intimate as those in a trusting therapeutic relationship. In order to heal, the client becomes unusually vulnerable, and thus particularly honest with oneself and their therapist. Becoming vulnerable is often intimidating or frightening, leading many clients to resist. For this reason, therapy does well to take time to build the therapeutic relationship. Therapy has the unique goal of normalizing discourse on frequently private, even taboo topics. It is important and healing for clients to become comfortable enough with their therapists to communicate deeply hidden secrets that are equally deeply rooted in their minds in an effort to reconnect with the world and their humanity.

Poetry, in a somewhat similar fashion, has created this environment for centuries (Forsthofel, 2014). In numerous ways, poetry has normalized emotional expression, which makes it a popular tool for adolescent struggles with inner turmoil, individual post-traumatic pain, and grief at any point in the lifespan (Furman & Collins, 2005; Horowitz, 2000). On the one hand, the same emotions that are often shunted from "normal" discourse are perfectly acceptable in poetry, and therapy addresses these same experiences (Furman & Collins, 2005). Although discussing personal matters on the street to strangers is considered inappropriate social behavior, divulging the most poignant or graphic experiences in images and metaphors of verse is considered creative, insightful, even accomplished.

Moreover, poetry's "pretty" words allow the poet to explain emotions as a third entity, a common therapeutic technique, while at the same time fully experiencing the powerful presence of those emotions (Furman & Collins, 2005). The same poetic elements of word limitations, metaphor, and image deliver the emotions to the reader while at the same time ascribing them to the poet. Both the poet and reader are present for an experience of knowing on an experiential level, which is the crux of authentic therapy (May, 1983). Using poetry, the poet can induce an experiential knowing in the reader (or therapist) beyond basic labels of "sad," "happy," "lost," "miserable," or "despairing." Instead, both involve themselves in the experience of the meaning of the words and share a moment of social communion and authentic feeling or therapy (May, 1983). In *Cry for Myth*, Rollo

May hails the importance of universal themes of humanity, language, and stories. “Language abandons myth only at the price of the loss of human warmth, color, *intimate meaning*, values- these things that give personal meaning to life” (p. 23, emphasis added). Much the same can be said for poetry, images, and metaphor.

Additionally, poetic language can improve cultural competence and opens the language by employing creativity (Furman & Collins, 2005). Poetry promotes therapy’s goals of “meeting clients where they are,” and empowerment through vulnerability. Each of these elements in therapy serve to create the intimacy between therapist and client. Poetry creates a safe space to speak of vulnerabilities that the individual may think only impact her, but in fact, larger existential issues become apparent in the poetry, which then facilitates more therapy. (Furman & Collins, 2005; May, 1991). The writing of poetry is an intimate act between the poet and an unknown public, which can facilitate intimacy between a client and an often minimally known therapist.

Poetry often deepens the psychotherapy process and intimacy in the therapy relationship (Hoffman, 2014). Because poetry is an act of courage and intimate expression, the therapist and client often both experience a deeper connection and experience of each other after the sharing of poetry. Often, this change in the therapy relationship through the use of poetry will deepen the entire therapy experience, even the portions that do not entail the use of poetry.

### **Considerations in Integrating Poetry into Therapy**

Introducing poetry into therapy can be a powerful ancillary to traditional psychotherapy, regardless of whether this is the client’s poetry, the therapist’s poetry, or poetry written by neither the therapist or client that resonates with the client’s experience. However, introducing poetry into the therapy process must be done with some caution as both ethical and practical considerations warrant consideration.

Including the client’s poetry or poetry that the client brings to therapy is fairly safe; however, several considerations are important. First, the therapist must be comfortable in how they will respond to the client’s poetry. It is important that the therapist not worry about the quality of the poem, but instead focus on the meaning. Second, it is important that the therapist respond. This may be something as simple as, “that really resonates with what you have been discussing” or “the poem has some significant meaning to you.” When client’s present poems in therapy, it is often done with some trepidation and worry about how the therapist will respond or receive the poem. This is particularly true when the poem is the client’s own writing; however, it can also be true when it is a poem written by someone else that the therapist finds important.

Generally, it is best that therapist resist temptations to quickly interpret the poem and, instead, help the client explore, unpack, and explain the meaning. As poems often emerge at least partially from the unconscious, the client may not fully understand the meaning. The therapist may, at times, make suggestions or ask about possible meanings after the client has shared their understanding; however, the therapist must do this cautiously and recognizing that any interpretation they offer may be incorrect. Additionally, therapists should consider whether the client is ready to receive the interpretation or accompanying insight.

There are additional concerns with the therapist shares a poem that they have written or that he or she feels may be beneficial for the client. First, for some individuals poetry is associated with seduction or romance. Thus, sharing a poem with a client can easily be misunderstood. Similarly, as poetry has connections with the unconscious, the therapist often may be sharing more with the client than they are aware of (Hoffman, 2014). Because of this, it is often wise to consult with a trusted colleague or supervisor prior to sharing a poem with a client, especially the first time this is done.

Therapists need to be prepared for their client's response to their poems as well (Hoffman, 2014). Client may respond by critiquing or interpreting the therapist's poem. This can create anxiety, fear, defensiveness, or a variety of other reactions that could potentially damage the therapy relationship. It is best for the therapist to gently reshift the focus to how the poem could be meaningful or helpful to the client's situation.

If therapists desire to intentionally integrate poetry into psychotherapy, it is best for them to receive some training and supervision in how to do this. Of course, any therapy may have a client without invitation bring a poem into therapy and the therapist need to discourage this if they have not received training and supervision; however, this is different than intentionally integrating poetry into therapy.

### Conclusion

Poetry can be a very powerful form of healing on its own or when integrated into the psychotherapy process. In many ways, therapy can learn from the long history of poetry as a healing art. There are many parallels in how each are used to promote healing. However, poetry also can be used to enhance therapy by intentionally integrating it into practice.

*Note:* This paper was presented at the 122<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in Washington, DC, August, 2014.

### References

- Forsthoefel, T. A. (2014). Poetry as path: The therapeutic potential of a modern lectio divina. *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 27*(3), 111-128.  
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2014.921393>
- Furman, R., & Collins, K. (2005). Guidelines for responding to clients spontaneously presenting their poetry in therapy. *Families in Society, 86*, 573-579. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/230167929?accountid=25340>
- Hoffman, L. (2014). The therapist's use of poetry in therapy: Deepening relationship and understanding through creativity. In M. Heery (Ed.), *Unearthing the moment: Mindful applications of existential-humanistic and transpersonal psychotherapy* (pp. 208-221). Petaluma, CA: Tonglen Press.
- Hoffman, L. & Cleare-Hoffman, H. P. (2011). Existential therapy and emotions: Lessons from cross-cultural exchange. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 39*, 261-267.
- (2000). Writing: A prescription for health. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies, 6*(1), 28-31. doi: 10.1089/act.2000.6.28
- May, R. (1983). *The discovery of being*. New York, NY: Norton.

May, R. (1991). *Cry for myth*. New York, NY: Norton.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). *Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions*. New York, NY: Guilford.

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

2014  
**ANNUAL  
CONVENTION**

August 7-10 2014 ★ Washington, DC

**Poetry as a Creative Process in Psychotherapy**

**Louis Hoffman**

**Carrie V. Pate**

**Saybrook University**





## Introduction

- Poetry and psychotherapy both can be considered “healing arts”
- Poetry long predates the advent of psychotherapy
- Therapy can learn from the wisdom history of poetry
- Poetry can also be used to enhance therapy
- Our talk focuses particularly on humanistic and existential approaches to therapy

## Poetry & the Language of Therapy

- Changes in structure or word patterns, and loosening of the rules of grammar, often allow for a deeper expression of emotions.
- Poetry & therapy encourage “digging deep” into one’s experience
- In therapy and poetry, finding new language is part of the healing process.
- In poetry the pauses, breaks, and transitions are important aspects of the meaning; it is similar in therapy.

## Facilitating Emotional Processing with Therapy & Poetry.

- Emotional Processing can be understood as entailing:
  - Experiencing the emotion
  - Some degree of insight or understanding (though it does not need to be complete)
  - Creating meaning (although this may evolve or change over time)
- Poetry & therapy
  - Invite or observe emotions, often without judgments common elsewhere
  - Often reveal paradoxes of accepting & resisting emotion

## Facilitating Emotional Processing with Therapy & Poetry

- The acceptance of emotions alone can be healing
- After emotions are welcomed in or observed, then one is better able to understand and create meaning from the emotions.
- Images, symbols, and metaphors allow for the creation of meaning alluded in more traditional forms.

## Poetry & Therapy as Intimate Communication

- Poetry & therapy are both intimate forms of communication that rely upon a level of vulnerability
- Poetry & therapy often deal with taboo topics, allowing them to be discussed
- Poetry can facilitate an “experiential knowing” in the reader
- Introducing poetry into therapy often deepens the therapy relationship & alliance, which benefits the therapy process even beyond the portions utilizing poetry

## Considerations When Integrating Poetry Into Therapy

- It is necessary to consider practical & ethical questions when introducing poetry
  - Client's use of their own poetry or poetry that has impacted them is less risky:
    - Therapist's response is important and should not focus on the quality of the poem
    - Important that the therapist does *respond*; silence can be hurtful.
    - Avoid the temptation to prematurely interpret

## Considerations When Integrating Poetry Into Therapy

- Therapists use of poems is more tricky, whether their own or others
  - Be aware of the potential meanings of sharing a poem
  - Poems often contain unconscious material, so may share more than the therapist realizes
  - Client may be judgmental of the poem
  - Best to consult with colleague or supervisor, especially when first doing this

## Conclusion

- Full references and paper version of the presentation along with the Power Point will be available online after the presentation.





Louis Hoffman: [lhoffman@saybrook.edu](mailto:lhoffman@saybrook.edu)

The paper version & PPT will be available able at:

<https://saybrook.academia.edu/LouisHoffman>

and

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Louis\\_Hoffman](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Louis_Hoffman)