

WHAT DOES POETRY DO TO READERS AND LISTENERS, AND HOW DOES IT DO THIS? LANGUAGE USE AS SOCIAL ACTIVITY AND ITS CLINICAL RELEVANCE

O QUE A POESIA FAZ PARA OS LEITORES E OUVINTES, E COMO ELA O FAZ? USO DA LINGUAGEM COMO ATIVIDADE SOCIAL E SUA RELEVÂNCIA CLÍNICA

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**ABSTRACT**

Poetry aims to change people's talk, thoughts and actions but does not do this through direct commands, mandates, or directives. The aim of this paper is to explore poetry in a behavioral or contextual analysis to analyze (1) *what poetry does to people* and (2) *how it does that*. In exploring a first question, "What does poetry do to people?", it was found that poetry is a way of writing which acts to disrupt normal forms and grammar of writing and, while the lack of grammar slows the reading fluency and accuracy, the disturbances have novel effects on readers' actions, talking and thinking. In answer to a second question, "How does poetry have effects on people?", the social disruptions which produce the effects of poetry have been developed over long histories and include disruptions to form and grammar, the written presentation on a page, line length, and the inclusion of stress patterns rhymes and rhymes. Some of these also help sustain the attention of the reader since the lack of normal grammar and presentation makes reading poetry more effortful. Finally, a few clinical applications are drawn out, especially since the experiences and ideas evoked through poetic forms, just like experiences of mental health, are ones which *cannot* usually just be stated as directives.

*Keywords:* poetry, contextual analysis, verbal behavior, discourse analysis, literary effects, poetic form, enjambment, literary styles

**RESUMO**

A poesia objetiva mudar a fala, pensamentos e ações das pessoas, mas ela não o faz via comandos diretos, mandos ou diretivas. O objetivo deste artigo é explorar poesia em uma análise comportamental ou contextual para analisar (1) o que a poesia faz às pessoas e (2) como ela o faz. Ao explorar a primeira questão, "O que a poesia faz às pessoas?", encontrou-se que a poesia é uma maneira de escrever a qual age para romper com formas normais e com a gramática da escrita e, ao mesmo tempo em que a falta de gramática torna mais lenta a fluência e a precisão de leitura, essas alterações têm novos efeitos sobre as ações, a fala e os pensamentos dos leitores. Ao responder a segunda questão, "como a poesia tem efeito nas pessoas?", as alterações sociais que produzem os efeitos da poesia se desenvolveram ao longo de extensa história e incluem alterações na forma e gramática, na apresentação da escrita na página, comprimento da linha e a inclusão de rimas e padrões de rimas. Parte disso também ajuda a sustentar a atenção do leitor, considerando que a ausência de gramática e apresentação usuais tornam a leitura da poesia mais difícil. Por fim, algumas aplicações clínicas são apresentadas, especialmente considerando que as experiências e ideias evocadas via formas poéticas, assim como as experiências de saúde mental, são aquelas as quais não podem ser simplesmente definidas como diretivas.

*Palavras-chave:* poesia, análise contextual, comportamento verbal, análise de discurso, efeitos literários, forma poética, corte de sentença, estilos literários.

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**Are We in Babel Yet?**

We live in language  
as fish live in water, so  
do we know language as  
fish know water?

Fish swim in water, and  
just swim. But  
we say, language  
    means something  
        communicates  
            expresses  
                represents  
                    refers.

Meanwhile,  
our experts swim blindly around,  
googly-eyed, in  
circles,  
concurring and conferring.

There is a common-sense idea that language is something which originates internally, or is some internal process, and that it is used to ‘express’, ‘communicate’, ‘represent’ or ‘refer’. This idea has been accepted by academics on the whole, but with some notable exceptions who have instead approached language use as an activity, an event that people do with or to other people (Bentley, 1935, 1941/1975; Burke, 1966; Cicourel, 1973; Edwards, 1997; Freire, 2014; Gee, 1992; Harré, 1976; Kantor, 1981; Mills, 1940; Mukařovský, 1977; Potter, 2006; Sartwell, 2000; Searle, 1995; Skinner, 1957; te Molder & Potter, 2005; Vygotsky, 2018; Wertsch, 1985; Wittgenstein, 1958)

Both the introductory paragraphs above use words, but they have different histories and therefore they have different impacts, and hence different consequences for both the readers and writers. The writers cited in the bottom paragraph cover many disparate approaches to human behavior and language, from verbal behavior (Skinner, 1957) to discourse and conversational analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1993; Freire, 2014). However, the main idea from all these writers, though stated in different ways, is that to analyze how language functions in our lives, we must always analyze the social and other contexts within which language operates.

The top paragraph also gives different experiences of language not being ‘inside us’ by comparing our use of language to fish in water. It also tries to ridicule that there is more significance to language as there is no extra significance to water. However, this is done in a different form of writing and produces different effects in readers than the bottom paragraph, even though many of the same outcomes can be produced.

The research questions for all these writers therefore arise from a generic question: what does using language *do* to listeners when we seem to be just swimming in it and hardly recognize its existence sometimes? What are language’s effects on people; what are the consequences of using language which affect its future use? While this might seem easy, a problem for all these authors listed has been that it is difficult to change the common-sense ways of thinking about language use – that language means,

expresses, communicates, represents, or references ideas or things.

For example, it is common to think that if someone tells a story with a lot of vivid details this is because their ‘internal idea’ is vivid and is therefore expressed, communicated, represented or referenced with vivid words. For some of these writers above, however, the story is presented in a vivid and detailed manner because of what doing that does to the listener, and what it has done in the past (Guerin, 2003, 2016; Potter & Edwards, 1990; Potter, Wetherell & Chitty, 1991).

There are many forms of using language which could be studied in terms of ‘what it does to listeners’: prose, poetry, conversation, suggestions, song, argument, therapy talk, hypnosis, shaman ritual, rule-giving, science talking and writing, drama, advertising, political oratory, magic spells. The assumption here is that even though the same words might be used within these different literary forms, they are classified differently because the words are used in different contexts and do different things to their audiences, which in turn leads to different consequences for their speakers, writers or singers.

The aim of this paper is to draw on all the authors listed earlier and explore one example of these literary forms in a behavioral or contextual analysis formed loosely from their writings: the example of poetry as language use, to analyze (1) *what poetry does to people* and (2) *how it does that*, rather than explain what it is ‘inside’ of us that is expressed, communicated, represented, or referenced in poetry.

So, our research question is: *what does poetry do to listeners or readers and how are poets and readers of poetry trained or shaped to do this with poetry?* Poetry does something different within our language communities than most of our other ways of speaking and writing (conversation, story-telling, joking, written materials, teaching, rule giving), so how can we capture that in analyses, and find out why poetry is sometimes used rather than other forms of language use?

To begin to explore these research questions, I used two methods. The first worked from what is known about the basic social properties of language use in general (especially Edwards, 1997; Guerin, 2003, 2020; Potter 1996; Skinner, 1957), to derive 13 possible analysis points about the use of poetry. For the second method, I analyzed several books about how to write poetry, treating these as books by those who are expert in the best ways to get poetry to do things to people.

### Analysis 1: What does poetry do to people?

To explore the idea of poetic social function, I will start with this first line from a sonnet: “I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.” (Neruda, 1986), and try to analyze *possibilities* (Guerin, 2016) or brainstorm what we can. Clearly, this is not just a description or representation (like a tact), nor is it a definition of love, nor does it mean that the poet is revealing his ignorance about love as a statement of fact, nor is it trying to get the reader to do something specific (an action of some sort, a mand). What it is meant to do to readers is not clear even though it could be taken as any of the above by some readers. The first question, therefore, of the performance itself when this poem is spoken or read, is: what has talking like this done to listeners in the past in different contexts, and in what contexts is it being said now, since it does not seem to be a common directive (like a mand) or statement of fact (like a tact)?

So, from these basic ideas we might first guess:

**Point 1.** *The poem is trying to do something different to readers or listeners and it is not meant to be simply factual or be a simple command.*

We might also brainstorm that:

**Point 2.** *The poem is aimed at precise but multiple effects, and as determining complex or novel effects that simple prose language use cannot bring about, hence it often seems ambiguous compared to normal prose.*

A further point we can raise from the opening line is that of why people would want to hear this or why they would pay money to buy and read a book of poems like this one? Following from before, another point is that “What does this poem do to readers?” will have no one answer – *it is probably different for each listener.* Hearing this line (“I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.”) will be a social context for many other possible responses, rather than an end-in-itself.

So, from this we might suggest:

**Point 3.** *The poem is doing something to the readers or listeners since they seek out or pay to hear or read such verbal behavior*

**Point 4.** *The poem will likely have different effects on every different listener or reader, since we have never been trained to perform standard responses to particular lines of poetry, unlike clear directives or factual statements which try to be precise.*

To continue this poem further: “I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. I love you simply, without problems or pride: I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you, so intimate that your hand upon my chest is my hand, so intimate that when I fall asleep your eyes close.” Whatever the effects on readers or listeners of all this, which will then in turn have *consequences for shaping the poet*, we have already seen that this not like a simple command nor even doing an action which *directly* affects the poet. Something more complex is happening.

One effect if the poem ‘succeeds’ for the reader or listener is that it will maintain the relationship with the poet, whether this is applauding at a recital, recommending the poems to friends, or buying more books of their poems. But it is still not clear why saying words like this would have those effects. Surely the poet would be better to write simple directives or mands such as, “Be friends with me”, “Tell your friends to read my poems”, or “Please buy more of my books”, instead of dressing it up in poetic form. Which leads us to these questions:

**Point 5.** *Why not simply state the social outcomes for the poet rather than writing it out as a poem if that is all the poet wanted?*

**Point 6.** *Perhaps what is being done with a poem cannot be done with other forms of language use? What is unique in the effects of poetry on people?*

**Point 7.** *Is the poem being written because the poet cannot get whatever social outcomes another way or because the reader or listener cannot get the effects with other forms of language?*

What these first seven points put together mean is that poetry must be shaped for audiences, whether that is specifically for effects on a close friend, or to have more diverse effects across a larger and diverse population of readers or listeners, but at least get some effects. But this is difficult because there will be phrases which have histories with some listeners but not all, and so some nuances or subtleties *will not be universally effective* on the listeners or readers.

This means that *poets must be skilled in the best ways to affect people using the poetic forms of language*; this is one of their most important challenges and takes a lot of time and effort. For the poet, far more important than finding ‘inspiration’ for a poem is that they must know how

words will affect diverse people; so, a poet needs to know a lot about people and how they are likely to respond to words with thinking, imagery and talking. A poet might have all the ideas and inspiration but if they cannot write in a way that affects their listeners so that it has some consequences, then they have failed as a poet.

The point here is that poetry requires a lot of skill in knowing words and phrases, knowing their different effects on diverse people, and knowing the contexts in which they will have those different effects. This is an answer to a frequent comment that poetry is so vague that anyone could write it. In reality, a poet must know a lot about how diverse listeners are affected by diverse words; they must be discursively skilled.

**Point 8.** *To get the diverse social outcomes, poets must know a lot about language and its use, and a lot about the ways diverse people respond to hearing words.*

From this it is clear that the audiences and their characteristics will be important for the poem. As a poet, it is probably easier to have a more precise effect on people whom you know personally and with whom you have frequent contact. This is why it is easier to write a poem which will affect a boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse than it is to write something that will affect a whole country of people—a nation. At the least, there will be different skills involved and therefore different words involved when affecting a single known person compared to affecting a whole nation of people (cf. Guerin, 1995). The problem with this is that most ‘available’ poetry aims to affect a lot of people, not just a single girlfriend or boyfriend—so a good poet must have skills for achieving diverse outcomes across diverse peoples.

There is, therefore, like a balance or trade-off between poetic language which has known but multiple effects on a lot of people, and a poem directed at a smaller number of people with whom the poet has a relationship. So, Neruda could have written, “*I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where, but I love you the way you pat your cat Mandy in the mornings before work.*” This would not make sense (have effects) for most people since they do not know Neruda or Mandy, but it would get very specific thoughts and experiences arising for Mandy’s owner, and possibly actions.

**Point 9.** *Poems can be written for specific people or specific communities or written for the general public and future readers, but the styles are likely to differ.*

Summarizing our points, it is true that everyone ‘reads’ a different poem even if the same words are on the page. This is not contradictory or mysterious but arises because there are variations in how people are trained or have been shaped in using language to respond to words and larger discourses—people live in different discursive worlds with different histories. The effects of a poem are also not meant to be very specific (or the poet could just do this).

In cases when the poet alludes to or names some specific events or people, or specific images from their

own life, the readers and listeners will likely: (1) have only vague and ambiguous responses; (2) respond in the way they have been trained with similar specific events and people from their own life and experiences (and the poet might be aiming for this in fact); (3) make repeated readings and have different multiple effects from the poem and experience all these differently; or (4) will do some research about the poet, their life, and the specific allusions which might be in this poem—that is, the poetry readers will be reshaped from reading *about* the poem more (and the poet might also be aiming for this in fact).

**Point 10.** *Readers or listeners can make repeated readings or learn some words about the context for the poem they are reading, and in this way, get new responses to the specifics of the poem.*

In general, however, good poets learn through their own life experiences that there are a lot of common experiences for otherwise different people. This can occur in the historical training of language for readers, in the verbal contexts for the poems, and in the likely responses to ways of writing. However, very specific verbal contexts and discourses might not have an effect at all for some readers without learning further stories from a different discursive community. For example, if you are reading a poem from a foreign country, there are often verbal references which make no sense until you read some contextual background about that poem. Many poems will *supply* those verbal contexts within the writing as far as possible, but most analysts recommend learning about the context for a poem whether or not there are references you do not understand. For example, T. S. Eliot often added notes himself about specific words and events at the end of the poem. [This contrasts with prose novels in which giving the context around the ‘plot’ or ‘story’ is important and must be present.] And even though it is a “Love Poem”, if we know a little about Neruda, we would always read his poems for perhaps some effects of a political nature.

**Point 11.** *Good poets have learned a lot about common life experiences of diverse people and use their knowledge of language styles and properties to elicit these effects for readers.*

The final point is to summarize something that has been implicit in the above. As poets are usually very accomplished at wielding words to do things to people, they should be able to have the effects they want through simple prose or directives. This suggests that *poetry is having effects which are not even possible* through using normal prose or other forms or writing and speaking. That is, the effects of poetry are likely to be weak by simply stating that effect as a directive. This follows what is often referred to as ‘expressing the ineffable’ in poetry, but in this paper’s terms, poetry does things to people that cannot be done with words in other ways.

This would be the difference between Neruda writing “*I love you*”, “*Please love me*”, “*I am really unclear about my love*”, or “*Do you know that I love you*” and writing, “*I love you without knowing how, or when,*

*or from where.*” Something different is happening in the last case that has very different effects on different readers or listeners. This last phrase is not just a flamboyant embellishment on the first two, but an attempt to do different things to the listener which are not possible by just stating the first simple phrases.

**Point 12.** *Poetry in many instances is likely to be trying to have effects on listeners or readers which are just not possible through other forms of language use.*

The final point has not been discussed but is likely to be of interest. It is well known how difficult it is to translate poetry from one language to another, but the present analysis shows more clearly, I believe, why this is so.

**Point 13.** *Translating poetry is difficult not because we do not have enough words, or nuances in words, or because the ‘meaning’ or word-associations differ between languages. Translating poetry is difficult because the translator needs to be translating the effects which the words have on diverse readers or listeners in the original language, matching all the actions, talking and thinking which are affected by a poem into the new language.*

All the 13 points I have made above are broad and I have not really spelled out the likely specific contexts and responses for poetry as a form of discourse. The aim was to learn more about what poetry as verbal behavior in context *does* to people, and what are the responses to poetry that might maintain the behavior of the poet. With these ideas, I will now examine what some ‘experts’ say about poetry and its effects, to get more details.

## **Analysis 2: What does poetry do and how does it do this?**

To attempt to further analyze what poetry does to people and how it does this, I used a few very popular but well-respected poetry manuals, focusing initially on one by a writer who won a Pulitzer Prize for her poetry (Oliver, 1994) and then working through three others (Bell & Commane, 2017; Orr, 2018; The Poetry Center & Timpane, 2001). The rationale was that rather than consult academic books about poetry, which mostly focus of the ‘meaning’ or interpretation of poetry—what poetry expresses, communicates, represents, or references—these four books were specifically aimed at teaching people *how* to write good poetry, that is, teaching them how to influence people with poetry in ways that ‘work’.

I first went through the Oliver (1994) book closely and singled out all those paragraphs in which Oliver (1994) wrote about *the influence of poetry* or *how poetry has effects on people* and does things to people. These paragraphs were then ordered into similar groups or themes about ways of doing things to the readers or listeners. This was then followed up in the same way with

the other three books which also taught how to write and read poems. Most of these further extracts could be put into the original themes but they clarified and gave a fuller account than just from the original Oliver (1994) book.

## **RESULTS**

Obviously, the authors of these books wrote them for a popular audience and did not write in non-mentalistic ways about language-as-doing-things-to-people, following the authors listed at the beginning of this paper. I can, however, discuss their quotes in this way to make sense of poetry in the terms of analysis outlined in the introductory sections of this paper.

I found it convenient to make three main divisions: (1) what was said about poetry as an activity; (2) ways in which poetry commonly affects people; and (3) the styles or techniques which are used for poetry to produce such effects. How I divided the relevant quotes from the books into these sections is somewhat arbitrary and over-lapping, but by giving many quotes in full, the readers can do their own analyses and perhaps find a better way to organize these materials. This paper is looking for possible analyses not anything absolute.

### **1. Poetry as an activity**

**1a. Why write poetry?** Most of the answers in these books to the direct question, “Why do people write poetry”, resort to common socially acceptable attributions (Edwards & Potter, 1993; Mills, 1940). But these still give us some idea of the wider aspects of using language which include poetry. The Poetry Center and Timpane (2001, p. 11), for example, list these reasons from old to new with examples:

*Make nice with the gods, as in the Psalms or the Bhagavad Gita.*

*Tell the stories of their communities, as Homer did in The Odyssey.*

*Record history, as Anna Akhmatova did in “Requiem, 1935–1940.”*

*Commemorate a moment of personal history, as Ben Jonson did in “On My First Son.”*

*Take an achingly clear snapshot of experience, as H.D. did in “Heat.”*

*Embody their feelings, as Theodore Roethke did in “I Knew a Woman.”*

*Create a state of feeling, as Stéphane Mallarmé did in “Afternoon of a Faun.”*

*Explore language, as John Ashbery did in “Corky’s Car Keys.”*

Obviously, each of these would involve multiple other reasons, and the reasons would have been more complex. For example, “Commemorate a moment of personal history” and “Take an achingly clear snapshot of experience” tell us nothing about why anyone would want to do these in the first place. They do also not tell us why they were commemorated or snapshotted as poetry rather than written in another form of language.

In a similar way, Bell and Commene (2017, p. 77) give a nice example of how writing poetry can be viewed as *necessary*, but we still do not know much about why it was necessary or why poetry was the form chosen for influencing people:

*Yet it was soon after I became a father that the necessity of poetry came back to me—in the neonatal intensive care unit of our local hospital, holding my infant son in my arms for the very last time.*

We will learn more about this below after looking at what poetry actually does to people and what is unique about poetry.

**1b. What is poetry trying to do?** A less direct causal question can be framed as, “what is poetry trying to do to people?” There were many answers to this, mostly abstract: “He [Stevens] once defined poetry as ‘a momentary existence on an exquisite plane’” (Orr, 2018, p. 273). This is close to using poetry itself in order to explain poetry. Some writers had a mixture of abstract and concrete:

*Poetry serves many purposes: poetry as beauty, as information, as anaesthetic, as pain, as journey, as political discovery... I want to feel changed when I read or listen to a piece, and so I expect the poet to have also experienced some internal shift, some changes in their being, during the process of creating that piece.* (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 90)

But some similar themes were written about in a more concrete way:

*A poem is a tool for imagining. Drafting is what we do to make it function.* (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 50)

*But most poets are trying to do one or both of the following:*

*Create an intense emotional experience.*

*Draw attention to something that is true.* (The Poetry Center and Timpane, 2001, p.11)

Putting these together, three functions of a poem stand out. First, the poem must ‘make a connection’ with some audience or another; that is, the poems must be attractive or engaging in some way (dealt with below) so that people want to read or hear them and keep reading them. Second, the poem must provide or induce an ‘experience’ for the reader or hearer during or after the poem. And third, the poem usually makes a more declarative point (that is, discursive) about something in life, the world or experience, but this is not done by just stating that point in prose.

Of course, most other forms of language use do these as well, so we need more detail about what is *unique* in achieving these for poetry. A prose novel, for example, can engage readers, provide experiences for the readers, and make some broader points. So far, then, there is

nothing about the unique aspects of poetry, but I will use these three functions to follow through these results.

## **2. What effects does poetry have on people?**

There were three main themes about how poetry can affect readers: as an audience; providing pleasure and good moods; and provoking or evoking ideas and experiences for the listener or reader. These loosely correspond to the three themes in the last section, but more detail is spelled out.

### **2a. Building relationships with audiences.**

There were several indications of writing for audiences and how this is done. This follows my introductory points about how poets shape what they write for their audiences, whether these be small or large audiences. Some were abstract and themselves poetical in form:

*...in the imagination, we are henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one.* (Orr, 2018, p. 62)

Others urged that it was during repeated drafts that the poet should include the audience reactions and think them through:

*...the first draft is us telling ourselves the story, then subsequent revisions are where you find out how to make it clear to others, where you start a relationship with the imagined reader.* (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 51)

So, in the end, for the reader:

*... it will feel as if the writer is speaking, clearly and presently to me.* (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 165)

Oliver (1994) makes some interesting observations on the historical changes from lyrical and rhythmically structured poetry, to free-form poetry, and the effects this had on the listeners and readers:

*What was needed [with free-form verse] was a line which, when read, would feel as spontaneous, as true to the moment, as talk in the street, or talk between friends in one’s own house.* (Oliver, 1994, p. 70)

**2b. Please, good moods, keep happy, enjoy, keep interest.** There is a lot written about reading poems as being a pleasurable experience, and then tautologically making this the ‘cause’ for people reading. It is not clear what exactly is meant by this although there are certainly many real events going on when people talk this way. Such comments are matched from the writer’s point of view as keeping the engagement or interest of the readers. Calling this a ‘reinforcing’ effect does not help, however, since this is also circular.

*Pleasure, then, is control, a kind of basic ecstasy induced by language and imagination when we*

*accept a poem's lyric invention.* (Orr, 2018, p. 64)

*Poetry pleases the ear. Its sound structure both 'locks in place' and releases the sense of the poem.* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 27)

*Change the line length or rhythm arbitrarily, or casually, and you have puzzled and sensually irritated the reader—thrown him from his trance of interest and pleasure.* (Oliver, 1994, p. 43)

And from the writer's point of engaging or interesting the reader:

*Above all, ask yourself: is this poem boring? Does it offer the reader anything?* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 62)

*Things don't quite happen in the poem as you expect. I find this extremely attractive and hard to resist. I want to read on, I am drawn in and involved.* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 164).

The final comment above (cf. Skinner, 1957, 1972) leads into the next topic. It not only reiterates that pleasure or feeling good comes from a poem, but adds that poems give the readers some forms of experience:

*I argue that writing a lyric poem serves two basic functions. One is that it feels good to express what is in us... Closely related to this expressive function, yet even more important, is the fact that the writing of lyric poems helps to restabilize a self that has become destabilized by experience (inner or outer experience, or both).* (Orr, 2018, p. 17)

**2c. Evoke an experience or idea in the reader.** Most of the time it is the experiences evoked or in some way brought about for the reader upon reading a poem that is remarked upon as important, and this probably makes up a lot of what is otherwise called the abstract 'pleasure' of reading poems which we saw above. As we have seen a few times already (especially in 1b), this includes both what we call ideas ("Draw attention to something that is true") and experiences ("Create an intense emotional experience"), and both these can change the readers in some way ("Changes something from the beginning to the end").

*Ideas* (poetry shapes new language)

The main comment here is that evoking ideas (giving the reader new discourses) can have readers change how they react (albeit verbally) to their current or future experiences, and they might even get new discourses which can assist in their lives. That is, the poems can re-shape the readers' discourses, so they talk and think differently in the future, and this is probably what is meant by 'changing their ideas'. Examples can all be seen in the following.

*Indeed, the first thing that struck you... is very unlikely to be the real subject of your poem. It probably interested you in the first place because it stands for something that resonates at a deeper level.* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 42)

*But that's not the only reward we get for giving ourselves over to the poem... What a profound moment it is when we hear someone speak about something that connects with us in a deep way.* (Orr, 2018, p. 64)

*Take a poem like Louis MacNeice's 'Snow' for instance, one that describes a moment in MacNeice's life. I didn't share that moment with him, but I know what he means about the 'drunkenness of things being various.' That sense of intoxicating variety hadn't occurred to me before reading 'Snow', but ever since I did it's been a part of my world view.* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 32)

So, poetry can shape readers into talking or thinking in new ways which they did not previously use. But as in Point 4 earlier, this "universal meaning" is not the same for all listeners and readers; it has universal appeal but not the same effects on everyone. But with poetry this is done without logical arguments, persuasion, reason-giving or explanations, and so reiterates the point made in the first section, that poetry might be especially effective in changing people's behavior when other forms of language use are not possible or will not work.

**Experience (physical or sensory).** It is not just the experience of new or transforming words that are mentioned in these books, there is also the evocation of physical or sensory experiences. Sometimes this is referred to as feelings, sometimes as experiences, sometimes as sensory experiences (see next section).

*Your job is not to describe your own feelings, but to make the reader feel them too. This is what the old saw 'show, don't tell' means. If I tell you I'm grieving you are sympathetic, but it makes no impact on you personally. If on the other hand I show you that I see my dead wife's wedding ring on the dresser every morning, you experience a sliver of my grief.* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 54)

*The last line is like the sounding of a gong, which will reverberate in the reader's mind as they continue their day. A quiet slow-burning phrase will keep working over the next hours and days, giving to the person who read it access, not only to your great wisdom, but to their own.* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 69)

*It is that moment when the poet has succeeded, even briefly and partially, in using words to get beyond words.* (Bell & Commune, 2017, p. 87)

*When a lyric poem engages us, we don't just find ourselves interested in listening to its voice; we experience the poem fully by giving up our sense of self and "becoming" the poem's speaker, becoming the "I" of the poem—seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking what that I sees, hears, feels, and thinks.* (Orr, 2018, p. 62)

So, these extracts are quite clear that while poetry consists of words, the whole enterprise of poetry is about *going beyond words* and affecting future behavior and experiences. As Bell and Commane (2017) put it above, “*in using words to get beyond words*” (p. 87). We will see below two main forms of this: evoking sensory experiences and evoking actions in the world.

**Sensory experiences and images.** The point so far, then, is that one main aspect of poetry is not just to give new words and thoughts to the reader, but to try and have the reader *experience* some events beyond words or other than words: to evoke experiences or to change what the reader attends to and observes. How poets do this will follow later, but a large part of poetry is therefore aimed at evoking not just new ways to think about words, but new ways to see the world and experience what is in the reader’s life.

*What all good poets have in common is an appetite for looking. They notice things, and communicate in a way that makes the reader notice them.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 32)

*By all means be fanciful, but let your fanciful phrases evoke the image you want.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 57)

*For me, the five senses are where we have to root every poem.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 71)

*Get rid of abstracts—love, passion, joy, ecstasy. A writer’s work is to make me feel it, not tell me that you felt it. Show it with the five senses instead. Loneliness can be shown by a single cup on the draining board where there used to be two.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 195)

*...concrete, sensory images. You cannot remember “beauty” or “love” or “sadness” or any other abstraction. You can, of course, remember the first time you felt that something was beautiful or the first time you felt “loneliness,” but the memory itself is always concrete and specific...* (Orr, 2018, p. 30)

I have given a lot of examples here because it is important to see how poetry is trying to do something different than other forms of language. It is not trying to tell the reader something directly; normal prose can do that fine. It is trying to have the reader behave differently in some other way, in the words they use for their life and in how they observe and deal with the world in which they live.

**Novelty and depth in ideas and experiences.** Going further with the last point, we can begin to see the general shape of how poets can change a listener’s behavior, talk and thinking by using poetry. *The poem works to change the listener by writing in very innovative ways that disrupt the normal language functioning and patterns, and in this way actually disrupt the on-going experiences for the reader or listener.* Most of our discourses are driven by grammars which function so that

our talk can be fast and have immediate impact, but poetry tries to do something different by disrupting the normal words and grammar to actually give novel experiences and novel language use effects for the reader during and after the poems. Prose can tell us what to do quickly and accurately, but poems disrupt patterns and force us to *experience* new words and new experiences.

*Ask yourself: are you just ‘telling’ the reader what you think—reporting or instructing as if it’s simply a status update or a news report? Or are you creating a scene, where the reader is invited in, encouraged to deploy their imagination and join the dots and make a connection to your writing by reaching an understanding of what you are suggesting?* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 122)

*For example, these might be nature poems that describe nature or encounters, such as a hawk circling over a moor... It’s possible to write a good poem about this subject, but the best ones will go beyond the hawk, and are rarely just a poem about a hawk. The poem should take me elsewhere... A good poem always changes something in the reader, rather than simply reinforcing their existing knowledge.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, pp. 161-162)

**Action and behavior change.** Finally, taking this even further, a lot of poetry aims to have the reader act or behave differently afterwards, not just in their verbal behaviors and observations but in direct actions on the world.

*The poet has an opportunity to build solidarity, or inspire a change in behaviour. How, then, can you address the issues that matter most, and do it well?* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 94)

*Poetry is compelling in a crisis not just because it is concise and immediate, but also because it is superbly designed to handle both aspects of experience: the reality of disorder and the self’s need for some kind of order.* (Orr, 2018, p. 22)

### 3. What does poetry do to have these effects?

We have seen that poetry has many effects on listeners and that these can change with more readings of a poem, more knowledge of a poem’s specific references, and more knowledge of the poet’s experiences. The effects include a broad notion of pleasure or enjoyment, but most importantly poetry changes in the reader’s life by getting new ways to talk, think and act, and so experience the world in new ways.

The final question is that of: how does poetry do this? We could just write, “Think of a wonderful experience you once had” but this directive does not evoke as much of what we call ‘enjoyable’ or ‘meaningful’ as writing it in a poetic form. The answer to the question of “How do poets achieve these effects?” has already been raised above. They do not change the thinking, actions and



talk of readers by plainly telling them what to do. *Poets change the thinking, actions and talk of readers by disrupting the normal grammatical, textual and patterned ways we all talk and write, and doing this leads to a change* whether or not the reader knows this.

In this way, writing prose is not in itself something that changes people, like the words in this paper. A reader might change if the cumulative effect of the words leads to this. But a poem is already *an active event* in the sense of not always obeying the grammatical and textual rules of how we are supposed to write. Compare these two examples, the first prose and the second poetic:

A poet needs to mix up the rules of grammar and textual practice because that is what will change people.

GIVE IT UP BABY!

stop.

that talk.

now!

Be a rebel.....!!!!

The second one of these *is already an action* beyond the words. It makes the reader read in a new way *because* the ‘proper’ rules have been broken. It provides an *experience* which is lacking in the first, even though the first also has very important and learned words.

So, what we will find below are mostly different ways of messing with the common rules and patterns of language use to try and give the reader new ways of reading, and therefore new ways of acting, taking and thinking. It takes more effort and time to read poetry, precisely because the grammar and textual patterns have been changed, but unless the reader gives up reading the poem at all because of this (which probably happens a lot but is not recorded), they will already have had a new type of experience. And this new experience will arise from (1) the words themselves and their history for the reader, and (2) the time spent following the way the words are presented and changed in novel ways. As we will see, under such intentionally difficult conditions there are necessarily other techniques used by poets to keep the reader reading, techniques such as rhyming and rhythms.

**3a. In general.** There are all sorts of tricks of the trade for poets who, as we have seen, need to write in novel and anti-normative ways to induce ideas and experiences for people, but at the same time still make their poetry worth the time and effort for people to read. Below we will outline the main ones discussed by the four poetry manuals, but there are some general methods common across a lot of different poetries. Here are a number of these:

*Attentiveness: Poets are extremely careful with the way they use language. They pay attention to everything from spelling to the way the words sound and what they mean. They think about punctuation and the spaces between and around*

*words. Most people simply don't pay as much attention to these elements of language — but paying attention is the poet's job. And poets want you to pay that sort of attention, too — to the language you read and use and to your life.*

*Concentration: Poetry has more meaning, music, and emotion per word, per syllable, and per letter than other kinds of writing. Poets find ways to open up explosions of understanding and emotion — while using carefully selected combinations of words. More meaning, fewer words — a nice trick. Whenever you find language especially charged with passion, music, or significance, you're probably looking at poetry or something close to it.*

*Experiment: Poets try to use language in as many new, surprising, and challenging ways as they can come up with. They use language in special ways to startle, awaken, or challenge you.*

*Originality: Poetry says or does something new; it makes something new happen in the reader's mind. This new thing can be a totally original observation about life, or it can be a neat way of saying something many other people have already thought or said. Whatever it is, you can tell it's original because it doesn't try to echo someone else's way of saying it — it finds its own way.*

*Form: Most people write from one margin across to the next. Sometimes they indent to show that a new paragraph is starting. But poetry is different: It's very often about form — the very shape or structure a particular group of words takes. The word form also refers to the way a poem is written (its mode). You can write a poem in the form of a prayer, a letter, a laundry list. (The Poetry Center & Timpane, 2001, p. 10)*

In general, then, poetry is trying to do something different to people and give them enjoyment, new thoughts, new experiences, memories of old experiences, and sometimes new ideas (discourses) to help their life. To accomplish this, poets change the normal patterns of grammars of our language use, which are there only to enable fluency and speed in getting people to do things. The main ways we will see are to break the ‘rules’ of grammar to disrupt people’s normal language use, to use rhythms and rhymes to allow fluency or sustainability without grammar, and to change the way poems are written on paper to also disrupt normal grammars (titles, surprises, line shape and size).

**3b. Not conversation or lecturing.** In all that has been written above, it has been made clear that there are marked differences between poetry and conversation, prose writing, and other forms of language use. The poem is not directly trying to tell you something, not directly persuading you of something, and not directly trying to make you like the poet. These effects might occur, but they are not done by commands or directives. For these reasons, the normal textual flow and appearance of prose is changed in poetry,

to mark it out from being prose and therefore to disrupt the normal ways of reading (which is primarily prose).

*They expect a narrative, a story, a conclusion of some sort. Poetry isn't usually set up to provide a neat ending. It leaves us to do a little contemplation at the end, weighing the content of the poem against our own experience. (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 23)*

*He doesn't add as many poets would, 'And I thought to myself, how ironic that such a statue should survive, when the culture that has made it has failed.' He has shown us that with visual images. (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 70)*

*There is a kind of language that is clearly unsuitable when one is writing a poem. I call it informational language. It is the language one would use if one were writing a paragraph on how to operate a can opener. It is a language that means to be crisp and accurate. Its words are exact. They do not ever desire to throw two shadows. The language is cold. It does not reach for any territory beyond the functional. (Oliver, 1994, p. 89)*

**3c. Stanza and form.** There are a wide variety of forms which are used for poetry, to replace just writing from one side of the page to the other and returning. These can be pairs of lines, or groups of three or four, all the way to sonnets and ghazals. They each make people do different things as they read: in the speed of reading, the connections made between lines, the momentum to continue reading, the eye patterns of moving over the page, etc. Poets learn from experience how to 'work' these for the experience and ideas of any poem. The extensive quotes below give some of the minute ways that different forms of stanzas change the experience for readers.

*I love the ballad form because the form is to be used for something specific; telling us a story... written in a bumpy meter which turned on your ear so you could keep it in your memory and pass it on. (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 60)*

*I write in ghazals because the trembling long lines can somehow bear holding the lyric music, and the refrain's echoes at the back of this music are like an ache, like heartache. (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 60)*

*This lyric poem is brief, concentrated, has usually no more than a single subject and focus and no more than a single voice, and is more likely to employ a simple and natural rather than an intricate or composed musicality. It is not unlike a simple coiled spring, waiting to release its energy in a few clear phrases. (Oliver, 1994, pp. 84-85)*

This next long quote, in particular, shows how the attention and verbal behavior of the reader can be shaped by the exact ways that the poem is presented.

*It may be useful, when considering the stanza, to recall the paragraph in prose, which indicates a conclusion of one thought and the beginning of another, a sensible division. I don't mean that the poet should necessarily use the stanza in this way, or this way only, but that the poet might think of the sensible paragraph as a kind of norm (as the iambic pentameter line is a norm in terms of line-length expressiveness) from which to feel out the particular divisions that are best for a particular poem. Such divisions might be natural pauses in the action which is going on in the poem, or they might well be based on something else.*

*It can be said with certainty that a stanza break will inevitably result in either a felt hesitation or a felt acceleration.*

*Ending a stanza at the end of a sentence strengthens the natural pause that follows any line and any completed sentence. Running a sentence through a final line of one stanza and on into the first line of the next stanza hastens the tempo, sometimes extraordinarily.*

*Additionally, it can create a feeling of creative power (power of subject, power of poet) over mere neatness.*

*Any change from an established pattern indicates that the poet wants the reader to feel something different at that point. One of the assets of a pattern is this ability to "manipulate" the reader by breaking it.*

*Besides being a guide to the way the poet wants the reader to feel and understand the poem, each stanza is a part of the design of the poem — a part of its formal order. The stanza is therefore a pleasurable as well as a useful thing. (Oliver, 1994, pp. 62-63)*

Finally, some poems tell whole stories, and these need careful writing to avoid getting tedious (where a prose story form might be better). The Greeks wrote long epic poems which we read at school, but most cultures have some form of long story or narrative which is set as poetry. Careful attention is required to sustain the reader's interest.

*The narrative poem is generally longer than the lyric poem, and its tone is without such a tightly coiled force.*

*It is discursive, it pauses for moments of humor and slowly unfolding description. It sets an easy and readable pace and helps us to enjoy sequential events. At times, in the lyric poem, we feel we are in a vortex; when we listen to the narrative poem, we are comfortable. Engaged, and at times entranced, we could listen for hours. (Oliver, 1994, p. 85)*

*No one writes epic poems now. But poets do write long poems, ambitious poems, with a central idea, digressions, and often different voices. Generally speaking, such poems contain many kinds of writing, according to the subject of the passage*

*and the author's inclination. Such poems include many of the great works of our century.* (Oliver, 1994, p. 85)

*Simply this: metaphors slow down a poem by sending the reader's imagination zooming off to the new connections that the figures of speech introduce. The more metaphors in a poem, the slower the going. The reader has to stop and think (and savor) the comparison... But narrative poems thrive on momentum; they need to keep moving.* (Orr, 2018, pp. 90-91)

*Conflict is essential to story. With conflict, there is no dramatic tension.* (Orr, 2018, p. 94)

**3d. Rhythms and rhymes.** Another way of disrupting normal prose forms of language and conversation is to use rhythms and rhymes in poetry, which do not occur in prose — we just write from one side of the page to the other. This can help keep the reader reading, but it can also make two lines more ‘connected’ if they are rhyming. As mentioned below in the quotes, creating in the poem a steady rhythm or rhyme and then disrupting this, can also be a way of affecting readers.

*Try thinking like a dancer about the rhythms of your poetry—where will you put your next foot, and how will this matter?* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 31)

*Poets writing for performance may get particular value from rhyme, which signposts an audience through the piece, but too much rhyme is boring. Repetition, simple refrains or internal rhymes also hold the hearer's attention without being predictable. A strong rhyme, suddenly broken with a non-rhyming line, can shock us out of complacent listening.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 57)

**3e. Lines, enjambment.** Poets vary the length of lines on the page, and sentences can be run both without breaks or grammar across multiple lines (enjambment) or be cut short in unusual or non-grammatically correct places. If these do not fit with the normal ways we talk and pause, then that is precisely a way to change the reader's attention or ideas. Again, the quotes below show how poets can take advantage of these disruptions to normal patterns. They do not do this because it makes them look smart—they do it to have an effect on a reader who has become used to a single way of reading or listening (prose).

*Instead he sets the word 'tonight' on a line of its own. It gives a sense of immediacy and urgency, highlighting the need and incidentally giving us a simple, hungry image.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 56)

*Line breaks can create a little cliff-hanger, making you anticipate the next word. They can emphasize the last word in a stanza or create a feeling of space and air, slowing down the action. The break is a unit of structure, grouping parts of the poem*

*together almost like chapters of a novel. It can disrupt sense, giving a feeling of incoherence if your narrator is traumatised or confused.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 56)

The final long quote gives numerous examples of strategically using changes to the way lines are drawn to have an effect, often quite precise, on the reader.

*Enjambment—as I have said before—gives the writer an ability to restrain or to spur on the pace of the poem. Like everything else about writing poems, the device of enjambment has about it a great flexibility; it can be employed in many ways, and it can work upon the reader to varying degrees. A line may be a grammatical whole, a sentence, or at least a logical unit. Or a phrase of logic may be broken entirely. Or a logical phrase may be broken at an apparently sensible point, letting the reader feel satisfaction at the end of the line; then, the following line may deliver some continuing information which redevelops the previous line. Sometimes this information is merely continuing, sometimes it is surprising. Two of the stanzas in this poem (The Red Wheelbarrow by William Carlos Williams) develop in this way, with the phrases “a red wheel” and “glazed with rain” redeveloping into “a red wheel / barrow” and “glazed with rain / water.” It is fun. It is a world forming as we read. It is a poem that happens before our eyes.*

*Enjambment can be serious, disruptive, almost painful.*

*In The Red Wheelbarrow it is none of these. Still, it is the main machinery of the poem, and sets the tone of the poem. The varying states of satisfaction and curiosity at the ends of the lines are deft and engaging.*

*They keep us alert. Through them, the poem is unwrapped little by little, like paper pulled back from something sweet: a small, perfectly focused picture which—amazing!—has been created entirely from words and which—amazing!—we see so clearly at the end of the poem and which—amazing!—we see ourselves seeing so clearly. It is, above all, a poem that celebrates not only a momentary enchantment plucked out of the vast world but the deftness and power of the imagination and its dazzling material: language.* (Oliver, 1994, pp. 74-75)

**3f. Effect of line length and word stress.** As mentioned in the “General” section above, poets pay a lot of attention to all aspects of words, and this includes the stresses and accents. There are a variety of ways that words stresses can be manipulated to impact on the readers. This can be a simple alternating stressed and unstressed pattern (“I don’t know what you’ve been told”), or an unstressed followed by stressed (“But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?”), Shakespeare). In prose, there is no

patterning (“In prose there is no patterning”), although it could be done if attention was paid to individual words and their sounds (“In prose, I find, no sounds to blind”). But this is not important to writing good prose and, in fact, diverts attention away from the ‘meaning’ of the prose. In poetry, on the other hand, this diversion of attention is precisely what is required.

The stresses are then also organized into patterns with the lines. For example, the iambic pentameter has lines with five ‘feet’ of unstressed followed by stressed words (“When I do count the clock that tells the time”, Shakespeare). Once again, breaking these rules can be utilized for having effects on readers. This is important to see how the poet is using disruption and actually has strong effects on the reader or listener, so I will give multiple quotes:

*How important this choice of line length is! Its effect upon the reader is simple, reliable, and inescapable.*

*The pentameter line is the primary line used by the English poets not for any mysterious reason, but simply because the pentameter line most nearly matches the breath capacity of our English lungs—that is, speaking in English—and thus it is the line most free from any special effect. It fits without stress, makes a full phrase, and leaves little breath at the end. It gives off, therefore, no particular message. It is, one might say, the norm. All deviations from the norm do, however, emit messages. Excitement of all kinds, with its accompanying physical and psychic tension, “takes our breath.”*

*Any line shorter than pentameter indicates this. The reader is brought to a more than usual attentiveness by the shorter line, which indicates a situation in some way out of the ordinary. Tetrameter can release a felt agitation or restlessness, or gaiety, more easily and “naturally” than pentameter, and so on. (Oliver, 1994, p. 40)*

*A tetrameter line, agitating in itself, begins the piece. The tension is increased by cutting the length of line two by a foot and also by concluding the phrase begun in line one within this shorter span. Then, a similar two lines: tetrameter and trimeter again, creating another single phrase. The repetition, so frequently a device of pleasure, here evokes claustrophobia, a sense of ritual—a terrible formality. One is reminded of Dickinson’s own phrase: “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—” (from No. 341). Also, of course, the sounds of the words are at work, and the similarity of line-end sound (down / noon), and the breathlessness of the dash. Everything, that is, is at work toward the effect of the piece—nothing is static, or neutral. (Oliver, 1994, p. 42)*

*Put one word on a line by itself in a poem of otherwise longish lines and, whether you mean it to be or not, it has become a critical word. All*

*attention is drawn to it. It must mean something very important to be placed where it breaks the rhythm with such a slap and crack.*

*The way in which different poets use the caesura is almost a signature of their poetic style. In the four lines by Emily Dickinson previously quoted (see p. 41), a sense of hesitation, even claustrophobia (her breathlessness, her anxiety, as indicated by the short phrases), is heightened by the momentary but definite grip of the commas that hold back the last part of each line for just an instant, as if, in each case, they required a second push. (Oliver, 1994, p. 51)*

**3g. Oral poetry.** As would be now be expected, when poetry is read out loud, there are other ways poets recommend having an effect on the listeners.

*In the spoken word clubs I grew up in, it was necessary to write simple, didactic pieces with catchy messages and internal rhymes—because you only have 3 minutes to make yourself understood, often over bar-room chatter and to a distracted audience. The space created a poetry of insistence, of urgency. Writing for the page removes the need for that insistence. The reader has time to understand, to re-read and consider the depth of each image or metaphor. They have time to see themselves reflected in the surface of the page. (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 92)*

**3h. Titles of poems.** Poets can even change the experience for the reader by the title of poem, or lack of title in some cases.

*A reader once told me that he felt the title of a poem worked with the last line, to act like the two ends swimming pool. ‘You reach the end of the pool, and the ripples bounce right back to the other end; you reach the last line of the poem, and the ideas reverberate back to the title.’ (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 70)*

*You may be writing about what your dad said to you at the petrol station but if you call it ‘Last Words’, or ‘The Day I Came Out’, or ‘Meanwhile My Mother Was Leaving’, the conversation takes on a different dimension. (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 71)*

**3i. Surprises and suspense.** Finally, there are other tricks to having effects on readers of poetry, and to keep their attention and keep them reading.

*Nor is there any information about who is speaking (beyond ‘I’). It’s unnecessary, because we guess from the last line that it’s a lover. If the poet had made that clear earlier, the last line wouldn’t have such a punch. (Bell & Commene, 2017, p. 24)*

*The opposite of cliché is surprise. Original, surprising language makes us look at something anew but if it's there only to surprise, it can feel gimmicky.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 57)

*Readers can enjoy a 'slow burner' that gradually reveals itself, but there is a difference between an unfolding poem and one that is merely dull at the beginning.* (Bell & Commane, 2017, p. 69)

*The tension between the pleasure of pattern and the need for variety becomes important when writing poems.* (Orr, 2018, p. 32)

## CONCLUSIONS AND CLINICAL RELEVANCE

In exploring the first question, “*What does poetry do to people?*”, it has been found that poetry is a way of writing that disrupts normal forms and grammar of writing and, while the lack of grammar slows the reading fluency and accuracy, the disturbances have novel effects on readers’ actions, talking and thinking. The ‘power’ of poetry to do things to people comes from this changing of the socially normal patterns which facilitates our speed and accuracy under normal circumstances.

What shapes poets and others to write such disruptions in poetic forms is not to convey ‘information’ to a reader directly but to induce or evoke new experiences and ideas (verbal behavior) for the reader. These experiences and ideas are ones which *cannot* usually just be stated as directives so other ways are needed which has led to the rise of poetry.

In general, writers on poetry remark on the effects of poetry to (1) give pleasure and enjoyment, (2) provide new experiences which the reader can use in their life, especially sensory experiences which can increase observations in real life, and (3) indirectly present new ideas or ways of talking and thinking about life which again the reader can use in their life.

In answer to the question, “*How does poetry have effects on people?*”, the social disruptions which ‘power’ the effects of poetry have been developed over long histories and are always changing and new methods found. These include disruptions to form and grammar, the written presentation on a page, line length, and the inclusion of stress patterns rhymes and rhymes. Some of these also probably help sustain the attention of the reader since the lack of normal grammar and presentation makes reading poetry more effortful.

So, upon hearing, “*I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. I love you simply, without problems or pride: I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you, so intimate that your hand upon my chest is my hand, so intimate that when I fall asleep your eyes close*”, Neruda would not expect every reader to have identical responses. The words are not telling readers what to experience but indirectly suggests for them to experience their experiences of love anew, examine the love experiences in their own life, wonder about Neruda’s own experiences, change the way they observe future love experiences in their own life, recall good and bad experiences from their life, and spend more time examining

future love experiences when they now occur and handle them in new ways perhaps.

## CLINICAL RELEVANCE

I would like to finish by drawing out some inferences that are relevant to aspects of clinical therapy but provide a better contextual or behavioral perspective. Most of therapy is now about using language in a clinical setting to change people’s actions, talk and thinking, so what we have found out about language use in poetry may assist in this (Guerin, 2017a). I select just two inferences to outline here.

### 1. Hypnosis, suggestion or poetry?

We have seen that poetry is about changing people’s behavior or affecting them in ways that our normal prose or suggestion cannot: to get people to experience new images, feelings or discourses and getting people to behave in new ways rather than only reading words for instructions. One of the problems of therapy, particularly focused on what comes under the rubric of cognitive therapy, is finding ways to change, distract or block dominant voices, language, discourses, or thoughts. Whether these be anxiety thoughts or paranoid thoughts, a lot of attention is given to instructing clients how to block or distract these pieces of discourse (Guerin, 2017b).

Poetry techniques could also therefore be used to change these dominant thoughts, by having the client put them into poetic forms and thereby break up their power. The experience of living without these thoughts could then be sampled and perhaps change the future thoughts. Some of this already occurs in therapies such as ACT (‘cognitive defusion’) and more especially in the various techniques of hypnosis (Erickson, 1980; Erickson, Rossi & Rossi, 1976). For example, a hypnotist might tell a lilting and almost rhyming prose story to engage the ‘dominant’ or ‘oppositional’ thoughts and then add suggestions in a non-grammatical form during this. The client will ‘experience’ the added suggestions, but the dominant voice will not then be able to comment on or criticize those experiences as normally happens.

Future uses could be to embed the main suggestions commonly used in therapies, those intended to replace the oppositional and critical thoughts which have brought the client to therapy, with poetic versions that bring out the positive experiences of living life without these language symptoms. Some of this probably already occurs without being stated as such.

2. The second use of poetry in therapy I will point out follows from a characterization of therapy made recently (Guerin, 2019). It was pointed out that behaviors get called ‘mental health’ issues in the first place when their environmental determinants are difficult to observe, for both clients and therapists (Guerin, 2017b). This means that in many circumstances people will *not* know, in the sense of being able to talk about or verbalize, what has shaped their ‘mental health’ behaviors.

Under such conditions, people can resort to a variety of socially acceptable explanations for what is

occurring. Failing this, people respond in a number of ways *without words*, including 'emotional' behaviors such as crying or not moving. When words fail, people can also behave with music, dance and non-grammatical forms of language such as poetry (Guerin, 2019). These either block the issue, distract from the issue, or provide alternative ways of behaving which might overcome the issues (Guerin, 2019).

So, poetry can be one way for clients to attempt to overcome the issues even when they (and the therapist, Guerin, 2019) have no idea what it is in their world which has shaped the behaviors which are painful. In some cases, this can lead to new behaviors to replace the old. So, the discursive disruption we have seen in this paper, which poets use to shake people out of their normative patterns of behavior and ideas, can be used therapeutically as well. While they might in some cases only distract the client from the problem, they can also provoke clients to observe and behave in new ways in their normal worlds and so engage with new parts of their environments.

In this way, instead of clients and therapists trying to correctly and accurately formulate what the problem is, when in fact they might not even know (or they just produce theories, Guerin, 2019), the disruptiveness of poetry can jolt clients to trigger actual changes in action, talk and thinking. Where a client might not be able to say what the problem is, they can be encouraged to write verses which *give* them the experiences of the issue (without having the theorize), and verses which suggest how life might be experienced anew without the issue.

#### DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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