

# The Power of poetry

If you feel the need to be soothed, see life more clearly or express a deeply felt emotion, reach for a poem, says Temma Ehrenfeld

I found my first 'grown-up' poem at the age of nine, in the Rudyard Kipling classic *The Jungle Book*. One tiger asks another: 'What of the hunting, hunter bold?' The hunter replies that his prey escaped; he is mortally wounded. 'Brother, I go to my lair to die.' Perhaps this was my way of taking in the awful concept of death. Perhaps it was an articulation of my inner fear of failure. Poetry has more than one meaning, even to the same reader. Some meanings are more powerful, since they are hidden. I only know that the words have stayed with me.

## Healing words

It is no coincidence that Apollo, the god of medicine, is also the god of poetry: historically, the two have

been intertwined. For centuries we have turned to poetry in times of crisis, to help us make sense of unthinkable events. 'Traditionally, poets functioned as the memory of the tribe,' says poet Martin Newell. Chanting and recital played a central role in pre-literate societies. 'Instinctively, we are aware that poetry is a salve on human hurt.'

But, since it became a written art form – practised by wordsmiths from Chaucer to Shakespeare, Wordsworth to Larkin – poetry has gradually moved away from the mainstream. Many of us feel cut off from it, and we don't know where to start. We cling to the few lines we learned in childhood – the Sylvia Plath we swooned over in the sixth form or the lyrics of our favourite Bob Dylan song.

However, a recent flood of books about poetry, by well-known personalities such as Stephen Fry and Griff Rhys Jones, has marked a change. New collections of *Poems for Lovers* or *Poems to Say Goodbye* have reintroduced us to old classics. The *Poems on the Underground* series on the London Tube has inspired and uplifted commuters, demonstrating the impact a few well-chosen words can have on our mood.

Poems such as WH Auden's 'Funeral Blues', which was made popular by the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and came second in the popularity polls only to Rudyard Kipling's 'If', shows how poems can capture the nation's imagination.

Meanwhile, events such as the London bombings, 9/11 and the death of Princess Diana have produced outpourings of poems scrawled on walls or safety-pinned onto teddy bears and bouquets. Our rediscovery of poetry suggests that we feel confused and vulnerable – in need of poetic healing that combines solace with insight.

## A new chapter

It is not uncommon for people who do not ordinarily read poetry to treasure healing quotes or poems over decades. Lily, a 45-year-old psychologist, discovered the Robert Frost poem 'Reluctance' during a painful break-up in her twenties. When a recent relationship ended, she found herself repeating its conclusion like a mantra, and sent the poem to her ex to explain her feelings. 'Ah, when to the heart of man/Was it ever less than a treason/To go with the drift of things,/To yield with a grace to

## Poetry therapy

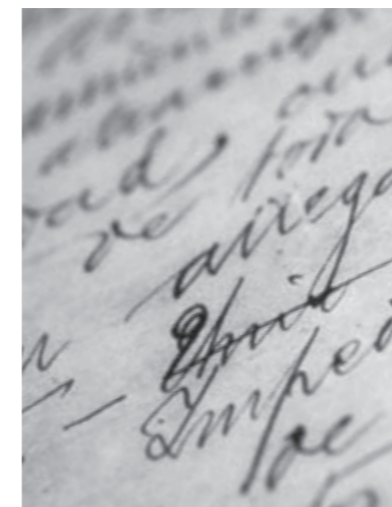
Using poetry for healing or growth goes back to shamans, who chanted poetry for the wellbeing of the tribe. In modern times, the science of psychology recognised its pioneering nature: 'Not I, but the poet discovered the unconscious,' wrote Freud. Today, poetry

therapy is a field with professional standards and credentials. If you are interested in writing poetry, for healing or self-expression, try these tips:

- Create some time alone and write for five minutes continuously. Don't stop to think, write whatever comes into your head.
- An hour later, go

through what you have written and underline anything interesting.

- If you're searching for inspiration, pick a colour and list every association that springs to mind.
- Or try thinking about how you would like things to be. Write a list in the form: I wish I had, I wish I could tell, I wish...



For centuries we have turned to poetry in times of crisis



reason/And bow and accept the end/Of a love or a season?’

It is not just the language and sentiment of a poem that are consoling, but the formal qualities. Rhyme links disparate themes – treason gives way to reason, which moves on to season – forming mental connections and suggesting a process of getting over anger and moving on. A metaphor describes one thing by calling it another, helping us to understand our emotions: love is like the seasons, ever changing like the cycles of nature.

‘There is a history of metaphor being used therapeutically,’ says Dawn Blasko, a US-based research psychologist who specialises in poetry in therapy. ‘It is difficult to face your demons, while talking hypothetically helps people get to things they’re not thinking about consciously.’ Repetition of words or sounds can also be soothing, like the rocking of a chair or a child’s lullaby. ‘That’s why we say “there, there”, instead of just “there”,’ says the poet Kate Light.

To appreciate the power of poetic language, think of the political speeches that move nations. Churchill inspired the British to resist the Nazis when he said ‘We shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength

in the air.’ *We shall fight, we shall fight* – the repetition recalls a rocking cradle, and the love that gives adults courage. While soothing, the repetition also builds to a crescendo, inspiring pride and action.

Poetry inspires personal change and renewal, too, helping us to think

in a new way. When 36-year-old diabetic Carmela discovered her condition meant she’d have to have part of her foot amputated, she returned to a poem she had read as a student, ‘The Road Not Taken’ by Robert Frost. ‘Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by,/ And that has made all the difference.’

‘I may not have always known why I chose a certain path in my life or why I found myself thrust upon a path not of my choosing,’ says Carmela. ‘Yet, now, I know I have learned more by the paths less travelled than those that could have made it an easier journey.’ At the same time, this lovely poem about walking in the woods softened her grief with beauty. Walking would be more difficult, but it was still something she could enjoy.

For some, consolation comes in the form of a poem read on the page during difficult times; for others, it is a few lines committed to memory and recited as a mantra; for others still, it is the refrain from a favourite Beatles song. Poetry has the power to soothe and heal, inspire and make sense of emotion. In an increasingly visual world of Internet and television, poetry is a cure.

When you need to restore yourself, drop your work, find a poem, perhaps one from your past, or a new discovery. Say the words out loud. Take an extra moment, and let a poem sink in. ■

Poetic repetition recalls a rocking cradle, and the love that gives adults courage



## Poetry to help you heal...

### ROMANTIC BREAK-UPS

● At the end of a romance, when anger makes us deny grief – ‘he’s not worth crying about’ – we become bitter. But sadness without anger can lead to depression: anger turned within. Thomas Hardy’s picture of enraged desolation in ‘Neutral Tones’ pushes us to accept the contradictory sides of a break-up.

### ● RESENTING WORK

How many people feel frustrated in their careers, yet fear change? In ‘Toads’, Philip Larkin wittily captures the frustration of feeling enslaved by his need for security. His clarity and humour cuts through to the core issue:

who are you? At the same time, he acknowledges that the answer isn’t necessarily simple. One person can feel like two.

### ● FINDING COURAGE

Chronic guilt is a kind of fear of being unworthy. In ‘A Hymn To God The Father’, John Donne tests God, asking: ‘Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,/And do run still, though still I do deplore?’ The claustrophobic repetition and rhyme conveys painful obsession, and we sigh with relief at the end of the poem in which Donne regrets his wild youth.

### ● FEELING ALONE

When we are lonely, we often feel that we have little to give and become childishly demanding. William Blake’s reassuring poem ‘On Another’s Sorrow’ reminds us that empathy is healing for the giver as well.

### ● OVERCOMING DESPAIR

No one in despair likes to be told that things aren’t all that bad, which is why Donald Hall’s tough-love poem ‘Affirmation’ can be oddly consoling. Hall hammers the reader with one tragedy after another, in order to nail down his conclusion: life is delicious, life is loss. If you find this insight difficult to accept, you’re not alone. The poem shocks you, momentarily, into the wisdom of people strengthened and transformed by loss.

## Read

● *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within* by Stephen Fry (£10.99, Hutchinson)

● *The Nation’s Favourite Poems* by Griff Rhys Jones (available from amazon.co.uk)

● *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* by Kenneth Koch (available from amazon.co.uk)