

Literature and Coping Skills
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Lecture – 9
Poetry Therapy – 1

Hello, everybody, I am Ajit K Mishra, your instructor for Literature and Coping Skills. I am here again, with you all, to talk about a new idea, a new concept. You all know that we are already through with the first segment that was on the power of literary experience. So, we talked about existentialism, we talked about emotional wellbeing. And we also talked about personality, simulation and higher order thinking, and ended with empathy and emotional intelligence.



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As we move to the next segment, which is titled poetry and healing, we are going to start with the idea of poetry therapy today. And in order to introduce you all to the idea of poetry therapy, I will be walking you through various stages, like poetry, therapy, poetry as therapy, poetry and healing, poetry and voicing.

And we will end with Nicholas Mazzas, Multi-dimensional RES Model of Poetry Therapy. So, we are going to discuss the idea of poetry therapy. I will be citing a few examples to bring forth the idea of poetry therapy, so that you can identify with that. So, let us take a quick look at each of these elements.

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Poetry Therapy

The National Association for Poetry Therapy introduces the idea of poetry therapy thus:

Poetry therapy is the use of language, symbol, and story in therapeutic, education, growth, and community-building capacities. It relies upon the use of poems, stories, song lyrics, imagery, and metaphor to facilitate personal growth, healing, and greater self-awareness.


Poetry therapy, as we all know, is a combination of poetry and therapeutic measures or practices. That is done with an idea to help the suffering people overcome their mental challenges or mental ailments. The National Association for Poetry Therapy has introduced the idea in this manner. Poetry therapy is a use of language, symbol and story in therapeutic education, growth and community building capacities.

So, that means poetry therapy is the use of language, symbol and story in a certain manner that has values and significance and relevance as well in therapy, education, growth and community building capacities. So, the first part of the National Association for poetry's therapies introduction, serves a very, very important purpose.

Let us move to the second part of it. It relies upon the use of poems, stories, song lyrics, imagery and metaphor, to facilitate personal growth, healing and greater self-awareness. So, that confirms the idea that literature, even in the form of poetry, can be extremely helpful in ensuring our personal growth in our healing, and leading to greater self-awareness in us.

So, with the help of poems, stories, song lyrics, and imagery and metaphor, we can in fact, do this and people have been doing this poetry therapists have been doing this for quite some time and quite successfully. So, therefore, we need to acknowledge the importance of poetry therapy, in our lives.

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Poetry as Therapy

- Historically human beings have expressed their emotions through poetry and music
- Richard Milne describes the poet as the “sacred historian of the heart and moral nature's lord.”
- Poetry is also a means of sublimating one's romantic, aggressive or even nihilistic impulses
- It acts as a catharsis, providing relief or therapy

Poetry as therapy, how does that happen? How does poetry present itself as a therapeutic method? Is that possible? How is it possible? How is it done? Let us take a look at all these things. Historically, human beings have expressed their emotions through poetry and music. Now, that is a very plain and straightforward statement. There is nothing special about it, apparently.

But when you look at it closely, we will find that it talks about a practice that has been done historically. The practice is one of expressing emotions, through poetry and music. Before we proceed, let me talk about the power of expression. So, if we cannot express our emotions properly, adequately, it will mean that we are moving towards problems, mental challenges or mental disturbances, because we have already talked about it, emotions are energy fields and we have basic emotions in us.

If we do not find an adequate channel to vent or express our emotions, both with positive and negative valence, it will mean that we are incapacitated, we are inadequate in expressing our emotions. So, if emotions are not expressed, continuously, and adequately that will lead to problems. Since this has been an activity, historically performed by humans, we can understand how important poetry and music are not only poetry, in music, all expressive art forms.

They have served extremely important purposes in helping humans express their emotions so that is important, the expression of emotions. Richard Milne has described the poet as the

sacred historian of the heart and moral nature's lot. The sacred historian of the heart, that means, if the heart has a history, the heart expresses emotions, it makes us express emotions. If the heart has a history, then the sacred historian of the heart is the poet because it understands the heart so very well.

The workings of the heart, the emotional urges, needs and workings of the heart so very well, that the poet turns out to be a sacred historian because it is also the moral nature's lot. If we have been able to develop morality in us, the point is probably instrumental in it. So, this particular dictum by Melanie also tells us a lot of things about the power of poetry as a therapeutic practice.

Poetry is also a means of sublimating once romantic, aggressive or even nihilistic impulses. So, that is very, very important. Because we have certain impulses in us and those impulses or those instincts are very powerful drives. I have already talked about life instincts and death instincts, life drives and death twice. If you remember, you can quickly and easily connect to this particular statement.

So, we are visited by life instincts. We are also visited by death instincts. If we are visited by death instincts, it will mean that we will be aggressive, we will be harmful, destructive, in our attitude and behavior. And this aggression, which is generally directed towards external stimuli may also be directed towards oneself. So, if it is directed towards oneself, it will also mean that it has acquired nihilistic properties.

So, if I am experiencing life instinct, a life drive, that means, I can experience love and affection, I can project myself as romantic. But the moment I begin to experience death drive, I will quickly become aggressive. And I will quickly develop nihilistic impulses. So, it is all about experiencing different kinds of emotions. Since humans have used poetry as an important medium, to express their emotions, we can very safely say that poetry is a means of sublimating, our romantic aggressive and even nihilistic impulses.

Sublimating is very, very important. It is not just about experiencing emotions, with positive or negative valence, it is more about being able to regulate or manage those emotions, I have been talking about the regulation and management of emotions, so that we can ensure our overall well being or subjective, wellbeing. So, poetry helps us, sublimating- so sublimating

is all about managing or regulating our emotions or our impulses, so that our romantic disposition does not turn out to be an excessive one.

And thus, goes beyond our control and becomes manic. Similarly, our aggressive disposition or approach also does not go beyond our control and becomes destructive. So, it is important that we understand the power of poetry, in sublimating these impulses. And then poetry acts as a form of catharsis, I have hinted at catharsis. So, catharsis will mean that the excessive amount of emotion that is produced in us will find a safe channel through which it will be released.

So, once that excessive amount of emotion is released, we will feel relieved. So, releasing will lead to relief and this will be a form of therapy, because, if a particular type of emotion gets built up in us, and if we do not find an adequate channel to express or release that emotion, it will continue to build up in us and it will definitely result in some problems, some emotional challenge for us.

Therefore, it is important that we find channels through which a catharsis can happen and that particular emotion which has been strong in us will be released safely and will feel relieved. And that is the reason why, Aristotle while devising the idea of catharsis talked about the releasing of strong human emotions like pity and fear through catharsis and we all know catharsis is a very, very popular word in our times.

And by catharsis, we mean relieving off excessive or strong emotions. So, when that happens when we feel relieved, we can strongly say that a therapy has been performed so that, is how we can very strongly suggest or propose that poetry is therapy because we have been approaching poetry as therapy. In fact, poetry is therapy.

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Poetry and Healing

- The debate between Inquisitive and Aesthetic approaches
- The strife between expressive desire and inhibitive environment
- The conflict between engagement and withdrawal
- The tension between objective understanding and subjective experience
- The gulf between voice and voicelessness

So, let us take a look at poetry and its healing properties. In order to be able to understand poetry and its healing properties, we need to pass through several debates that have been waged for long. Let us start with the first debate that has been waged for a long, long time. And we have been part of that debate, the debate between inquisitive and aesthetic approaches. We humans are both inquisitive weapons, we have a curiosity side, our rational side, our logical side.

At the same time, we also have an emotional side that makes us aesthetic. So, we are both inquisitive and aesthetic that way, but look at how we get socialized. As we get socialized, the inquisitive approaches are overvalued, they are emphasized, and the aesthetic approaches are undervalued. And they are never emphasized. They are never encouraged. So, if somebody turns out to show greater aesthetic qualities, the person will be shunned, the person will be criticized as not being intelligent, and logical, analytical, irrational.

And that is one of the biggest reasons why during our socialization process, and afterwards, we tend to focus a great deal on our inquisitive self, inquisitive side than the aesthetic side. As a result of this particular approach, this particular practice we have emerged as more inquisitive than aesthetic. But I do not want to say that we are not aesthetic at all. And we have been able to wipe out that particular self successfully, that cannot happen because we are inherently inquisitive and aesthetic.

It is all about our social exposure, our social training, which makes it either more inquisitive, and less aesthetic, or more aesthetic and less inquisitive. The second proposition is not a

reality in our case. So, since we have not focused on the aesthetic approaches, a great deal we lack and especially when we look at academic disciplines, that require the students to be more rational, more logical, more analytical, like yours, we can understand that the inquisitive self will grow stronger than the aesthetic self.

And that is one big reason why we miss out on the healing property of poetry, because it requires your aesthetic self to be activated, so that you can engage and you can get immersed. The second debate is between expressive desire and an innovative environment. All human beings are expressive in nature. We all experience that expressive urge. And I call this the Eureka syndrome.

We all experience the expressive world which is very, very strong in us. Somehow we find ways to either, you know, mellow down this expressive urge or repress that expressive urge, because the innovative environment that we live in the environment may not allow us to express ourselves. If you are happy, and you would like to laugh aloud, the environment may not allow you to do so. So, you will suppress instead of laughing, you will end up smiling.

But you have to laugh. That is the urge. So, the expressive urge is so very strong in humans, that even when we did not have access to language, we used to express through images, through icons, we express ourselves through different ways. So, if the expressive urge is not successfully channelized or accomplished, it will lead to innovations, it will lead to repressions and separations. And that is exactly what has happened.

And it has led to our inability to understand the healing power of poetry. Poetry is all about expressing, it allows you to express it allows you to get connected, get immersed, and express yourself. When you see somebody else expressing those emotions, you feel as if you are doing that mirror neurons again. The third is a conflict between engagement and withdrawal. So, we do not know how to engage with literature as a result of which we draw.

I have been teaching this course to engineering students for quite some time. Most of them are of the opinion that the use of the word literature in the course title is a great discouraging element. I can understand this, because of the conflict between engagements and withdrawal; we do not know how to engage. Since we do not know how to engage we prefer to withdraw.

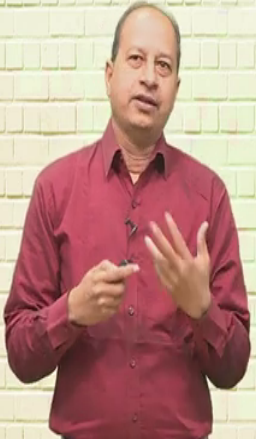

And this withdrawal has resulted in the inadequacy of our understanding of the healing power of poetry. There is a tension between objective understanding and a subjective experience.

Once I begin to understand things objectively, I will never prefer my subjective experience to provide me with insight into those things. Empirical approaches, scientific advancements have made this particular type of understanding, the objective understanding, so popular that we cannot value subjective experience.

And that is another reason why we cannot decipher the healing power of poetry. Finally, there is a gulf between voice and voicelessness. Most often, we are visited by that expressive desire, which requires us to voice our feelings, our emotions, our experiences, but it is the innovative environment and innovative culture that results in voicelessness. So, we need to bridge this gulf.

We need to clear the tension between objective understanding and the subjective experience, so that we begin to understand the healing power of poetry. We also need to pacify the conflict between engagements and withdrawal, we need to clear the strife or end the strife between expressive desire and innovative environment. And we also need to come over the debate between inquisitive and aesthetic approaches. So, all these are required so that we can understand the healing power of poetry.

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Poetry and Voicing

- In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001, poetry sprang up everywhere in the US
- A *New York Times* article on October 1, 2001, documented the phenomenon:
“In the weeks since the terrorist attacks, people have been consoling themselves—and one another—with poetry in an almost unprecedented way ... Improvised memorials often conceived around poems sprang up all over the city, in store windows, at bus stops, in Washington Square Park, Brooklyn Heights, and elsewhere. ...”

Cont.


So, I will discuss an example of the healing power of poetry with a few examples. So, poetry and voicing is an important phenomenon, an important, expressive practice. So, in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11 2001 poetry sprang up everywhere in the United States and that is quite surprising. So, the New York Times reported this phenomenon in 2001.

By saying, “In the weeks since the terrorist attacks, people have been consoling themselves,” consoling because they were troubled, they were suffering. They were pained; they were experiencing anxiety, trauma, depression of all kinds. They were consoling themselves and to one another, how, with poetry, in an almost unprecedented way. That way was unprecedented. If something like that happens here, we will also call it an unprecedented way.

“Improvised memorials often conceived around poems sprang up all over the city, in store windows, and bus stops in Washington Square Park, Brooklyn Heights and elsewhere,” everywhere, in fact. There was poetry everywhere. They suddenly discovered the healing power of poetry, they suddenly realized that poetry can heal them, poetry can console them.

And that is the reason why there was poetry everywhere, because it allowed them to voice their anguish, their pain, their suffering, and thus ensuring their catharsis.

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The image shows a man in a red shirt speaking, with the NPTEL logo in the top left corner. The background is a light-colored brick wall.



- Finding the words to articulate a traumatic experience can bring relief
- In mainstream culture, there are subjects we do not talk about. They are taboo
- *We are all in the dialogue of illness death and dying whether or not we are talking about it.*
- Intense experience and the incapacity of ordinary language

So, finding words to articulate a traumatic experience can bring relief, we know that. That is an instance of voicing; you are using words to articulate a traumatic experience. In mainstream culture, we know there are subjects we do not talk about. We know that. And I started with this particular idea, while talking about existential concerns. The biggest existential concern is this.

We all are in the dialogue of illness, death and dying, whether or not we are talking about it. That is the ultimate reality. But people do not talk about death. They do not talk about illness, and dying, because it is a taboo subject. But then, there are emotions that drive us towards this kind of feeling. Therefore, we have a death drive or death wish. So, the decision to censure some of our emotions is not in favor of our wellbeing.

So, it is important that intense experience and the incapacity of ordinary language needs to be evaluated. Because ordinary language cannot present intense experiences, strong emotions, and we need to find the channel of extraordinary language, of figurative language with the help of which we can express our intense experiences.

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Voicing: An Example

A brain cancer patient at the Department of Neuro-Oncology, UCLA says,



- *I felt I lost my edge
and then I lost my place
but the tragedy is
I have so much to say.*
- Although illness is usually discussed in terms of a patient's symptoms, deficit, or impairment, it is also about how people respond when faced with extreme circumstances and what they have to tell ... us.

So, this is another example of voicing. I have used this content from an article, which I have cited in the reference section of brain cancer patients at the Department of Neuro-Oncology, UCLA University of California, Los Angeles says, I felt I lost my edge. And then I lost my place. But the tragedy is I have so much to say.

So, now you can understand how much people want to say and how less they actually say the gap between how much people want to say and how less they actually say needs to be filled, so that our wellbeing is insured. So, you can see illnesses you usually discuss in terms of a patient's symptom deficit impairment.

But more than these things, it is also about how people respond when faced with extreme circumstances, and what they have to tell us, so, what they have to tell us is more important. But most often, owing to social innovation, our expressiveness is curtailed and censored and it results in inadequacies, mental and emotional inadequacies.

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Mazza's Multidimensional RES Model of Poetry Therapy

- R** Receptive/prescriptive
 - introduction of a poem/song/story into the therapeutic context
- E** Expressive/Creative
 - Focus on written, spoken, and performed communication
- S** Symbolic/ceremonial
 - Creation of metaphors, movement, storytelling, and rituals

That brings us to Nikolas Mazza's multi-dimensional RES model of poetry therapy. So, it has been extremely popular. Several poetry therapists globally practice this model for receptive or prescriptive material, it can be a poem, it can be a song, it can be a story into the therapeutic context so that means, if I am writing a poem, or if I am reading a poem, I am going through a poem. I am listening to a song or reading a story that means it is leading to this receptive power.

It is enhancing my receptive power. Then the second E element that is expressive and creative. When you express yourself, you are creating something. So, I am going to focus on written, spoken and performed communication. For example, take a piece of poem or piece of poetry, which is a written document, which is also a spoken document these days, we are hearing about spoken poetry.


So, this is also a performed communication, because somebody is communicating something very, very important to us, all we need to do is to understand all we need to do is to establish that shared subjectivity. When that happens, that means the expressive urge is being released. And then we come to the symbolic stage, the symbolic or the ceremonial stage, in which metaphors are created.

For example, I have a certain experience, I have a certain emotion built up in me, but I do not know how to express that because I find everyday language ordinary language, so inadequate

to express that I can promptly make use of a metaphor. I can promptly indulge in storytelling practices or rituals to talk about my feelings, my emotions.

So, when that happens, it is a symbolic practice. So, this RES model of poetry therapy is a very, very popular therapeutic approach that strengthens or reaffirms our idea that poetry is therapeutic.

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The image shows a man in a maroon shirt speaking, with the NPTEL logo in the top left corner. The NPTEL logo consists of a circular emblem with a stylized sun or starburst pattern, and the text 'NPTEL' below it.

References

- Carroll, R. (2005). Finding the words to say it: the healing power of poetry. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med*, 2.2: 161–172.
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- Raghuram, T. M.(2007). Poetry as therapy. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 49.3, 221-22.

So, that is how we come to the end of today's lecture. I hope you must have enjoyed today's lecture and it must have enhanced your understanding of poetry as therapy. So, thank you for joining. We are going to discuss poetry therapy, from new perspectives when we meet next. Thank you.