

## **The potential therapeutic benefits of reading poetry to nursing home residents : the road less travelled?**

HEALEY, Joan, HOPKINS, Chris <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6520-5603>>, MCCLIMENS, Alex <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2859-910X>> and PELOW, David <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6535-8095>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/14961/>

---

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

### **Published version**

HEALEY, Joan, HOPKINS, Chris, MCCLIMENS, Alex and PELOW, David (2017). The potential therapeutic benefits of reading poetry to nursing home residents : the road less travelled? *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 30 (3), 153-165.

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

# The Potential Therapeutic Benefits of Reading Poetry to Nursing Home Residents: The Road Less Travelled?

## **Joan Healey**

Department of Allied Health Professions, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S10 2BP  
01142 255754  
[j.n.healey@shu.ac.uk](mailto:j.n.healey@shu.ac.uk)

## **Chris Hopkins**

Department of Humanities, City Campus, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S1 1WB  
01142 254010  
[c.i.hopkins@shu.ac.uk](mailto:c.i.hopkins@shu.ac.uk)

## **Alex McClimens**

Centre for Health and Social Care Research, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S10 2BP  
01142 255917  
[a.mcclimens@shu.ac.uk](mailto:a.mcclimens@shu.ac.uk)

## **David Peplow<sup>1</sup>**

Department of Humanities, City Campus, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S1 1WB  
01142 254225  
[d.peplow@shu.ac.uk](mailto:d.peplow@shu.ac.uk)

The authors have received no personal financial benefit from this research. There are no conflicting interests.

## **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported through funding from Sheffield Hallam University.

Received: 7/15/16

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author

**Abstract**

In this paper we report on a project to take poetry into a nursing home, building on the widely-held belief in the benefits of poetry in therapeutic settings. This intervention involved us reading poetry aloud in a nursing home and reflecting on how residents reacted to these texts. Our findings suggest that talking about the poetry allowed members of this community to self-reflect and tell narratives that were important to them. Sometimes the poem served as a catalyst, encouraging the disclosure of poignant stories, while at other times the poems seemed incidental to the stories told by the group. Our subsequent reflections also suggested to us that there were several areas that needed further exploration. The poems are not delivered straight to the listener with no mediation; rather, the poems and the discussion afterwards are mediated by both the general expectations and particular interventions of the audience and the facilitators.

**Keywords: discourse, nursing home, qualitative methods, reading, reminiscence**

'The aim of the poet and of poetry is finally to be of service, to ply the effort of individual work into the larger work of the community as a whole'

Seamus Heaney (cited in Kerrigan & Wiley, 1999, p.127)

### **Introduction**

We report here on a small project to take poetry into a nursing home, building on the available evidence of the benefits of poetry in therapeutic settings (e.g., Heimes, 2011; Mazza, 2017) and extending this to this particular context.

With reference to older populations the importance of social interactions, such as listening, talking, storytelling and reminiscing, has been noted (Randers et al., 2003), and this importance is confirmed by recent research which has found that many older adults with active participation in social and leisure activities report positive wellbeing (Betts Adams et al., 2011, p. 683; Ingeberg et al., 2012; Wikstrom, 2002).

Over a number of weeks poetry was read aloud to a small group of residents, with discussion about the poem facilitated after this reading. The intention was to make some assessment of impact on well-being with a view to extending the intervention more widely across the local population. Our findings suggested that talking about poetry allowed members of this community to reflect, telling stories that were important to them. Sometimes the poem served as a catalyst, encouraging the disclosure of poignant stories. However, our subsequent reflections also suggested to us that there were several areas that needed further exploration: firstly, we began to reconsider the idea that reading poetry - any poem, all poetry - would always work equally well for the listeners, and secondly we began to realise that the facilitation of the discussion needs just as much consideration as the effect of the poem itself. The poem, let alone the discussion which follows, is not after all delivered straight to the listener with no mediation, but rather is mediated by both the general expectations and particular interventions of the audience and the facilitators.

### **Methodology**

We contacted the activities coordinator of a nursing home, who discussed our proposal with a group of residents whom she knew to be keen on reading activities. We then visited the home to meet the likely participants, which helped us to identify the kinds of materials best suited to the target audience. The poetry group was a convenience sample, comprising 5 residents, the activities co-ordinator<sup>2</sup>, and members of the project team (although no more than 2 members of the team were present at any one session). The group met nine times

---

<sup>2</sup> Referred to as AC in the transcripts

over eight weeks. Each session lasted between one and two hours, during which time two or three poems were read and discussed. We audio-recorded the reading sessions and undertook post-intervention interviews with the residents and the activities coordinator. The purpose of the recordings was to gather rich qualitative data so that we could investigate how the group talked about poetry in this setting.

The poems read and discussed are listed in Appendix 1. We chose poems we thought the residents would like to hear and also poems that we liked ourselves. Like Wexler (2014), we selected poems that moved us and that we “knew and enjoyed”(p.36), including a mixture of poems we thought might be familiar, perhaps from school-days, and more modern poetry which we hoped would be fresh experiences for the residents. As we discuss later in the article, our initial sense that the choice of poems was not that vital may have been wrong.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The project was designed to explore the effects of a reading-group intervention on the wellbeing of a group of elderly care-home residents. It is accepted that reading aloud brings benefits to socially isolated groups, with evidence suggesting that one factor affecting the mental health of older people is their access to and participation in meaningful activity (Glass et al., 1999; Mozley, 2001; Klumb, 2004; Lampinen et al., 2006; National Institute for Health and Clinical excellence, 2008). Tailoring activities to match the individual's abilities and providing choice so that the activity is meaningful have been highlighted as significant issues in mediating the impact on wellbeing (Greaves & Farbus, 2006; McGuinn & Mosher-Asley, 2000). The principal aim of the project was to improve the well-being and connectivity of the care-home residents. From this our objectives were to: -

- compile a portfolio of materials that the audience finds attractive
- make some estimate of the benefits for the audience
- work with the activities coordinator to sustain the reading group beyond the life of the project.

### **The poems: reminiscence and catharsis**

We have limited ourselves to an analysis of those poems which seemed to us to provoke the most vigorous reaction from our audience. The question of why some poems should produce strong reactions and others little or no reaction will be considered as part of the discussion. The poems we will focus on are *Poem* by Simon Armitage (2001, p. 39), *Night Mail* by W.H.Auden (1966, p. 83), and *Love After Love* by Derek Walcott (1992, p. 328).

In the rest of this section we discuss these three poems in turn, offering a literary analysis of each poem and a consideration of how each poem was received in the group. We became aware that the dominant response to the poems centred on reminiscence, so for most poems (with the exception of Armitage's *Poem*, discussed below) the conversation quickly gravitated towards reminiscence. In analysing the talk we therefore focus on how reminiscence is attended to by the participants and encouraged by the facilitators, since the interaction between poetry, facilitation and reminiscence seemed to be a key issue in understanding the effects of the poems on the audience.

There is abundant literature to confirm the potential benefits of reminiscence within health and social care settings (e.g., Hagens et al., 2013). What is less clear, however, is the link between poetry as a vehicle for prompting the process of reminiscence and the form and content of the poems themselves. A variety of topics were discussed in the group, and much of this talk clearly arose from the subject matter of the poems; however, there was often no attempt on the part of the participants to turn that discussion back to the texts or indeed to the authors, and indeed there were mixed approaches to generating discussion on the part of the facilitators, who at all sessions included project team members who selected and read the poems and also the activities co-ordinator.

For example, following on from the reading of the e.e.cummings poem *maggie and milly and molly and may* (cumplings, 1960, p. 81) the talk moved quickly to a discussion of popular UK seaside resorts. Even after a second reading and a direct question about the identity of an entity within the poem, the "horrible thing / which raced sideways while blowing bubbles", the group, having identified a crab, immediately moved on to a discussion of eating seafood. We see a similar pattern in the discussion of *Adlestrop* by Edward Thomas (1978, p. 71). Much of the discussion of this poem focused on technological advances in rail travel and the group's memories of steam trains.

Extract 1 - *Adlestrop* and steam trains<sup>3</sup>

1	AC	what did you have to do when you went through a tunnel↑ (1.0) what did you have to do↑
2	M1	shut windows
3	AC	they used to warn you didn't they (0.5) before you went into a tunnel (2.0) did they ring a bell↑
4	F3	=yes yes
5	AC	d'you remember that having to shut a window↑ (0.5) on the way to Brid

---

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2 for a transcription key

In the case of *Adlestrop* the rapid move to reminiscence seemed motivated more by the literal content of the poem than the features or poetic effects. As we shall see in the next section, *Night Mail* (another poem with a railway theme) also appealed to the residents both because of the familiar topic and because of the poetic features of the text.

### ***Night Mail***

Auden's *Night Mail* was perhaps the best received of the poems. One of the group recognised it and commented that "it's one of my favourites", while others who were hearing it for the first time remarked that it was a "good poem" and one participant praised it as the "best" poem he had ever heard. The obvious rhythm of the piece seemed to catch the mood of the group, with one member commenting on the sound of Auden's poem, saying that it evoked "the rhythm of the train".

*Night Mail* specifically celebrates the transportation of mail by the London, Midland and Scotland train. This is, of course, closely linked to the poem's genesis as a text specifically commissioned to form part of the soundtrack of the GPO Film Unit documentary *Night mail* (Wright & Watt, 2007). The much admired evocation by the poem of the varying rhythms of the mail train, which clearly had an immediate impact on the group members, was partly a result of this multi-media collaboration between Auden, the film's editor, R.Q. McNaughton, and one of the film's two directors, Basil Wright (Hardy, 1979, pp. 76-79). The film was partly a hymn to the wonders of modernity, which in this case is represented by the extraordinary speed of communication across the whole of Britain enabled by the steam train and by the sophisticated national organisation of the Post Office. The poetry group certainly identified the core topics of the poem - the excitements of train travel and of sending and receiving letters - and also responded immediately to the poetic effects of rhythm and variation which bring those topics alive ("it has got everything"; "the rhythm of the train"). Though originally the poem was a celebration of modernity, the technologies on which it centres (the train and the letter) though still very much in use, are perhaps now more readily seen as established rather than cutting-edge communication systems. But the period from which the poem comes, and the continued importance of these forms of communication into the nineteen-fifties may also have contributed to the positive reception of this poem by the group: in their early adulthood train travel and letters were probably both everyday experiences and yet potentially sources of access to less everyday possibilities.

Once initial evaluations of the poem were made by the group, the discussion of *Night Mail* moved on to personal memories that were evoked. The poem sparked a range of memories from the group, with some remembering train journeys and trips to London. One man discussed his rail journeys from Stocksbridge (Yorkshire) down to Dover (Kent) when he was in the army, while a female member of the group recounted a story of a trip to from Yorkshire to London and getting reprimanded in Harrods for being too loud. Others recollected films they had seen and stations they had visited.

The story of the *Night Mail* delivered a long and very thoughtful reminiscence from one of the group (F1) who spoke at length about a correspondence she had during the war years. F1 had been unusually quiet and when asked about this she reported that the poem had made her think “a lot” about an “ex-boyfriend in the army”.

Extract 2 - 'I'm thinking a lot'

1 AC you're quiet F1  
2 F1 haha I'm thinking a lot  
3 AC =you are thinking a lot  
4 F1 an ex-boyfriend  
5 AC ah  
6 DP =oh  
7 F1 in the army  
8 AC it says [somewhere about declarations of lovers  
9 M1 [XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
10 DP [yeah  
11 AC doesn't it (1.0) letters of joy from the girl and the  
boy (.) [timid lovers declarations  
12 M1 [got to be some quickness (.) which you would  
obviously get from trains [I think from trains  
13 AC [gossip gossip yeah  
...  
14 DP so did you used to write a lot of letters F1  
15 F1 erm (1.0) just space them out because I really (.) I  
hadn't met him (0.5) about three of us girls were  
looking through paper and it said girlfriends wanted  
for the army ha  
16 AC really (.) haha  
17 DP what was that sorry  
18 F1 girlfriends wanted for soldiers in the army haha so  
three of us wrote up and only me got an answer  
haha[haha  
19 AC [haha really (.) it said that in the newspaper  
(1.0) wow (.) I love the fact that you wrote that's  
brilliant  
((laughter))  
20 F1 oh he sent me a lovely Chinese thing (0.5) dressing  
gown [and all sorts  
21 AC [oh you did well  
22 F1 it were only little



23 ((laughter))  
 24 F1 and then I just let it go  
 25 AC was it to keep the men's spirits up  
 26 F1 I think so yeah more than anything  
 27 AC to [make  
 28 F1 [it was on our part  
 29 AC to make them feel that they had [something to come home  
 30 F1 [oh yeah  
 31 AC for (1.0) the ones who weren't married  
 ...  
 32 AC oh that is brilliant F1  
 33 F1 I had forgot about it haha

The theme of letter-writing (and receiving) in *Night Mail* prompted a memory for F1 of sending letters to an ex-boyfriend in the army who sent back strange gifts, such as an ill-fitting small Chinese-style dressing gown (Turn 20). F1 reported that she let the relationship “go” after a while (Turn 24), telling the group that she had forgotten about it until hearing the poem (Turn 33). The poem evidently acts as catalyst for this memory, and for the other readers’ reminiscences, with F1’s story (and the prompt of her interlocutor) possibly occasioned by the poem’s many references to love letters (ll. 4, 26, 30, 40-41). F1’s comments suggest that a memory about something both personal and rather adventurous was brought back to her powerfully by the experience of listening to the poem read aloud. The poem seemed to be highly affective, encouraging members of the group to reflect on things that have happened in their own lives: some funny stories, some sad.

### ***Love After Love***

Similar to Auden’s *Night Mail*, Walcott’s *Love After Love* seemed to be enjoyed by the group, provoking some strong responses. Although letters are not so central a theme in the Walcott poem as in *Night Mail*, the poem implores readers to “take down the love letters from a bookshelf” (l. 12) and this may be the specific catalyst for the disclosure of the personal narrative in Extract 3 below. In general, the reactions of the group did not explicitly pick up what seemed to be the central theme of the poem: the relationship between different parts of the self. This was not surprising, since the poem’s discussion of the relationship between “you” and “you” is far from immediately available and is based throughout on the paradox that the addressee is seen both as an integrated entity and as a split identity: “you will love again the stranger who was yourself” (l. 7). Moreover, the poem is making use of the kind of language which we would expect in a poem about love. This is evident not only in the reference to ‘Love letters’ but in phrases which point towards deep emotion and relationships, such as ‘each will smile at the other’s welcome’, ‘Give back your heart’, ‘ignored for another’. In fact, it undoubtedly is a love poem in that it is about intricate, changing, sometimes elated, sometimes ‘desperate’ relationships between the divided and unified self.

One participant, F2, appeared to be particularly moved by the poem. Not long after the poem had been read she told a story about a love affair she had in the past:

Extract 3 - 'I know now, but I didn't know then'

1 F2 I (.) I used to write a lot of (.) lot of letters  
during the war to a Scotsman from Aberdeen and I  
thought it was serious

2 DP mmm

3 F2 but then he came home and he said he would give me the  
best holiday I have ever had in my life (0.5) and he  
took me to Aberdeen and to Edinburgh (.) and give me a  
lovely fortnight up there (.) but then he decided not  
to go any further (0.5) he wanted to go to Canada he  
didn't want to go back to er (1.0) you know (0.5) army  
life

4 DP mmm

5 F2 or the RAF life (.) he wanted to go to Canada (0.5) so  
when I got back to [place name] (.) I thought it all  
over and I read it through and through (0.5) and then I  
thought well I could never go and live in Aberdeen  
(1.0) not to marry him really

6 DP mmm

7 F2 and if he wouldn't come to [place name] <so I wrote and  
thanked him for all he had done for me and sent him a  
present up> the lovely holiday he had gave me and I  
said I thought that was, that was the end of it (0.5)  
couldn't do it (.) couldn't stand it (.) and then he  
never replied to it (0.5) had no answer never heard  
from him since (0.5) so whether he went to Canada I  
don't know

8 DP mmm

9 F2 and you wrote such lovely love letters don't you, you  
think you are in love with them (1.0) he was in the RAF  
I thought he was perfect (1.0) but he wasn't perfect  
you see (.) he wasn't for me I know now but I didn't  
know then

10 F1 mmm

11 DP it's difficult isn't it (0.5) loving other people (1.0)  
it's hard

12 F2 you take it to heart at the time (0.5) they do mean it  
when they write it (.) and I meant it when I wrote back  
(.) but then it all fell to pieces (1.0) I could never  
have gone to Aberdeen and

13 AC did you keep the love letters

14 F2 did I keep them (0.5) I kept them a good many years but  
I destroyed them when I came here (1.0) because I  
expect he had gone to Canada and meet other girls so  
(.) he never answered my letter (1.0) photograph (0.5)  
got some lovely photographs (2.0)

15 AC oh thank you for sharing F2 (1.0) I know that has been  
a hard thing (.) that part of your life (.) so (1.0)

16 DP mmm (.) thank you

F2's moving story about love letters exchanged between herself and a soldier during the Second World War is connected tangentially to *Love After Love*. F2's story was not prompted or solicited, and was started without any preamble, which made it different from many of the other stories told in the group. As the comment from the activities coordinator at Turn 15 suggests, F2's narrative had not been disclosed many times before as this story of thwarted love had been a "hard" part of F2's life. In the narrative there were parallels with the self-affirmative tone of the poem: "I thought he was perfect but he wasn't... I know now but I didn't know then" (Turn 9). There was some intensity and pain in the recollection (e.g. Turn 7), but compared with the fluctuating sense of self represented in *Love after Love* there was a much firmer sense of a self, sufficiently unified even in the past to make firm choices which have not been regretted (Turns 5 and 12). This reminiscence was not escapist or sentimental, but was rather a form of life review which actively considered something in the past from a current perspective, preserving the narrative of the self and providing enhancement of "ego-integrity" (Pinquart and Forstmeier, 2012). These are also themes that are observable in the poem.

### ***Poem***

Perhaps due to the nature and content of *Poem*, reminiscence was avoided by the group members. Armitage's sonnet received a mixed reaction, and although the poem was not universally liked, it did provoke strong feelings. *Poem* proceeds with a list of observations made with regular iambic pentameter and end-stopped rhymes, but this apparently simple design masks an unsettling narrative in which the unidentified main character engages in a number of morally reprehensible activities. The dead-pan, matter-of-fact delivery only serves to emphasise the casual morality on offer. The group were quick to alight on this, remarking that the main character is "unpredictable" and condemning his actions: "punching her in the face, that's no good that is it?".

The poem invites us to consider how we judge people, stressing the difficulty of arriving at simple categorisations of people and the problems of morally judging others. Just as the poem radically disrupts the sonnet form, it also challenges assumptions readers might have about morality. The man of the poem seems a normal, dutiful father, husband and son - were it not for the disturbing and morally dubious acts which are included seamlessly and without comment in this story of his life. The man mainly does what he should do, but some of his lapses are gross: the assault on his wife, the theft from his mother.

Instead of focusing on reminiscence the group concentrated on more contemporary issues. It is notable that this poem is very explicitly about a life review of, though not by, its protagonist, yet it did not spark off reminiscence but discussion about the moral failure of the character, which quickly moved onto to discussion of the failings of contemporary politicians.

Extract 4 - 'I don't like politics'

1 DP do you think that people's lives erm (0.5) can be  
summed up in this way (1.0) in this sort of quite neat  
way or do you think that people's lives are more  
complicated (10.0)

2 F1 more complicated with what the government are playing  
at (1.0) that is just my opinion on that

3 DP what is that F1

4 F1 I said that is my opinion on that (0.5) they are like  
school boys  
...  
8 because they can't make their own minds up  
9 DP right  
10 F1 so how can they (.) praise to one (.) say conservatives  
do a speech how can it  
...  
17 DP but I suppose that erm (0.5) that a politician might  
make (.) might do lots of really good things  
18 F1 yeah  
19 DP and then make a couple of  
20 F1 mistakes and [that's it  
21 DP [mistakes and then that's it (.) so (.)  
they are people who  
22 F1 yeah but they won't admit to those mistakes will they  
23 DP no that's the problem  
24 F1 that is the problem

A few minutes later, the talk returned to the discussion of politicians, following prompting from the facilitators:

Extract 4a - politicians are different 'inside'

1 DP it just kind of lists a series (1.0) of kind (.) of  
kind of facts that this person's (0.5) of this person's  
life (0.5) erm (.) and some of the facts are quite  
disturbing really (.) so (1.5) and I think that's  
[that's  
2 AC [yes is that what's got you do you think  
3 JH it is quite interesting you talked about politicians  
(.) because they look good on the front but [they  
4 F1 [inside  
they are [different  
5 JH [what goes on behind yes  
6 AC well should we ever expect them to be (2.0) why do <we  
expect [people to be perfect

7 F1 [we expect them to be truthful  
8 AC yeah [ju-  
9 F1 [not perfect just [truthful  
10 AC [yes

Across these two short passages of talk F1 made links between the poem and contemporary politics. There is no obvious connection between the content of the poem and politics, but with the help of others in the group F1 articulated a sense that, similar to the man described in the poem, politicians can appear to be good on the outside but can be very different “inside” (Turn 4, Extract 4a). F1 was a lively contributor to the discussions of poems, and she was most animated in responding to *Poem*, completing other speakers’ utterances on several occasions in order to co-produce a response to the poem. This poem evidently made an impression on F1: it “got” her, according to the activities coordinator (Turn 2, Extract 4a); but rather than choosing to reminisce as with the other poems discussed, F1 saw the poem in terms of how we assess people in the present-day. The vividness and casual brutality in *Poem* perhaps discouraged the group from engaging in reminiscence, and consequently the discussion had a different focus from that of most of the other poems, encouraging the group members to focus on the here-and-now. *Poem* seemed to have a palpable effect on the group and the discussion sparked interesting debate, moving the talk away from a dependency on discourses of the past.

## Discussion

Some of the poems we read to the group were successful, in the sense of facilitating lengthy discussion, while other poems did not generate much, or indeed any, talk. A great deal of the discussion involved reminiscence, but we might perhaps see some poems as evoking a much more personal reminiscence than others. Butler (1963) defined reminiscence, or life review, as a naturally occurring process which older people may engage in, recalling their past to resolve conflicts and make sense of their lives. Since then, reminiscence as a therapy has been widely used in work with older people, with reminiscence today concerning “the process of thinking or telling someone about past experiences that are personally significant” (Pinquart and Forstmeier, 2012, p. 541). There are various forms and categorisations of reminiscence from 'simple' reminiscence, involving autobiographical anecdotal recall of memories to promote identity maintenance and more 'evaluative' forms of guided reviews of life events, through to in-depth review of past trauma to promote a more positive adaptation to life circumstances (Westerhof et al., 2010). The distinction is usually made between life review, a more structured process for an individual purpose and reminiscence, with a more general aim of recalling and describing past events. It is

reminiscence in its most simple form that has been most widely adopted in social care of older people (Coleman, 2010), as it is activity that can be carried out with individuals or groups of people, as a means to promote identity maintenance or to keep the narrative of self alive (Pinquest and Forstmeier, 2012). It can also be employed to encourage communication and social interaction between care home residents, although this particular use of reminiscence has its critics. Butler (1963, p. 963) identified 'life review' as part of the normal ageing process, but he also warned that it could have negative effects and cautioned against its universal application to all older people. Coleman (2010, p. 291) likewise argued that some forms of reminiscence is an 'easy option' for working with older people and could be seen as 'naïve and sentimental' rather than constructive. This was perhaps the case in some of the responses to the poems either because the audience had become used to reminiscence as a common - and perhaps sometimes rather automatic - activity, or because it was often resorted to by both the facilitators, including project members as well as the activities co-ordinator, when more immediate responses were not forthcoming. Hagens et al. (2003, p. 98) noted that the nursing home environment tends to promote task-oriented communication between staff and residents and that this can promote dependent behaviour leading to demotivation and loss of self-esteem on the part of the residents.

Although the use of reminiscence as a therapeutic intervention has its critics, some more recent studies and meta-analyses have shown more of a connection between reminiscence interventions and improvements in wellbeing and mental health (Westerhof et al. 2010; Moos and Bjorn 2006; Woods et al. 2005). Pinquart and Forstmeier (2012, p. 548) conclude in their meta-analysis by asserting that "reminiscence interventions produce small to moderate improvements" in mental health conditions such as depression and can help with "ego-integrity, positive well-being, purpose in life, mastery, cognitive performance, social integration and death preparation".

The three poems presented above all prompted discussion, perhaps because these texts concerned physical and concrete objects or places or times that the participants could hang their discussion on; for instance, *Night Mail* allowed for talk about trains, the postal service, and technological advances. This poem is clearly rooted in the past, describing a technology from the 1930s that was contemporaneous with the poem's publication. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the group's talk focused on aspects of the past. *Poem* was similarly concrete in its referents, focusing on the life story of man and describing his misdeeds in shocking detail. Rather than being rooted in the past, however, time, place and person in *Poem* are all left unspecified. As a result, discussions of the past were not so easily facilitated, and reminiscence specifically was not an option for the participants. The

members of the group found *Poem* a difficult text to discuss, but it was successful in the sense that the poem prompted strong reactions and, perhaps most importantly, encouraged the facilitators and the participants to move away from a dependency on reminiscence and to focus instead on ethical decisions about the poem's protagonist. *Love After Love* concerned the more abstract notions of love and the self. Perhaps because of the poem's abstractness the group found it difficult to articulate responses to this poem; however, as F2's unsolicited narrative in Extract 3 demonstrates, the poem did provoke poignant memories and the disclosure of stories from the past that were simultaneously self-affirming in the present.

### **Conclusion**

When we began our inquiry we shared an uncomplicated notion that reading poetry aloud to people was an unqualified 'good thing', that might, with further, more rigorous study, be shown to demonstrate measurable improvements in health and well-being. In reviewing our efforts, however, we had to concede that we have generated more questions than answers and our understanding of the therapeutic effects of poetry is still in development. It was apparent from the literature in general (Stevens et al., 1998) and from Wexler (2014) in particular that taking poetry into a nursing home can be a slow process with many practical difficulties getting in the way of an appreciation of the poems on offer (2014, p. 36). Wexler adopted a more multi-media presentation style, but the concerns he faced about the value of his efforts matched ours (2014, p. 40). As we have highlighted in our introduction, the poems were not delivered to the participants in an unmediated fashion, but in a highly contextualised setting. The presence of the Activities Coordinator facilitated our access to the group and to the smooth running of the readings, but the observer effect may well have influenced the reactions of the participants, inhibiting or directing their responses. As a research group, we were at times reliant on established modes of communication within this setting, with the possible danger that these might inhibit the de-routinizing potential of poetry. All of this notwithstanding, our innovative approach involving analysis of group talk coupled with literary analysis has allowed us to investigate the potential for poetry to act as a catalyst for discussion and self-disclosure. The poetry readings evidently opened up a space in which participants felt able to discuss their own experiences and, as the above extracts demonstrate, these moments of self-reflection could be valuable and affirming. Reminiscence was prominent in our encounter with the residents and there is plenty in the literature to account for its place in this kind of settings. We remain keen to discover whether, and how, a poem affects or directs specific reminiscences: were some kinds of reminiscence sparked by poems more authentic and more valuable? was there significant benefit when poems actively cut off the possibility of reminiscence? On the second point, Armitage's

*Poem* might not have provided a starting point for reminiscence because those reminiscences could have been painful, but it could be that poetic features of the text (e.g. the poem's timeless and generic setting) may not have encouraged any backward-looking considerations.

We are also interested in the less successful readings. Why was it that a well-known piece such as *The Tyger* should inspire only talk about favourite animals? or that *Adlestrop*, so redolent of nostalgia, should generate so little debate among the group? Might it be that these poems are too abstract in their content? Certainly both *Night Mail* and *Poem*, which both attracted plenty of discussion, are more concrete. We are left wondering if the binary arrangement of concrete/abstract might be worth closer inspection. It may well be that there needs to be much more attention paid to both the potential meanings and effects of the poetry itself (including particular poems and types or genres of poetry) and the discourses, practices and contexts which inevitably mediate and interpret those meanings for the audiences whom the practice or of poetry therapy is intended to benefit.



## References

Auden, W. H. (1966) *Collected shorter poems: 1927-1957*. London: Faber and Faber.

Armitage, S. (2001) *Selected poems*. London: Faber and Faber.

Betts Adams, K. Leibbrandt, S., & Moon, H. (2011) A critical review of the literature on social and leisure activity and wellbeing in later life. *Ageing and Society*, 31(4), 683-712.

Butler, R. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence and the aged. *Psychiatry*, 26, 63-76.

Coleman P. G. (2010). Uses of reminiscence. Functions and benefits. *Aging and Mental Health*. 9(4), 292 – 294.

cummings, e. e. (1960) *Selected poems: 1923-1958*. London: Faber and Faber.

Glass, T. A., Mendes de Leon, C., Marattoli R. A., & Berkman L. F. (2009). Population based study of social and productive activities as predictors of survival among elderly Americans. *British Medical Journal*. 319, 478-483.

Greaves, C., & Farbus, L. (2006). Effects of creative and social activity on the health and well-being of socially isolated older people: outcomes from a multi-method observational study. *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126(3), 134–142.

Hagens, C. Beaman, A. & Ryan, E. B. (2003). Reminiscing, poetry writing, and remembering boxes. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 27(3-4), 97-112. doi: 10.1300/J016v27n03\_07

Hardy, F. (1979). *John Grierson: A documentary biography*. London: Faber and Faber.

Heimes, S. (2011). State of poetry therapy research (review). *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 38(1), 1-8.

Ingeberg, M., Wikstrøm, B., & Berg, A. (2012). The Essential Dialogue: A Norwegian Study of Art Communication in Mental Health Care. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*, 50(8), 22-30.

- Kerrigan, J. C. & Wiley, J. J. (1999). An interview with Seamus Heaney. *Nua: studies in contemporary Irish writing*, 2(2), 125-137.
- Klumb P. L. (2004). Benefits from productive and consumptive activities: results from the Berlin ageing study. *Social Indicators Research*, 67(1-2), 107-27.
- Lampinen, P., Heikkinen, R. L., Kauppinen, M., & Heikkinen E. (2006). Activity as predictor of mental well-being among older adults. *Aging and Mental Health*, 10(5), 454-66.
- Mazza, N. (2017). *Poetry therapy: Theory and practice (2nd. ed.)*. New York: Routledge.
- McGuinn, K. K. & Mosher-Asley, P. M. (2000). Participation in recreational activities and its effect on perception of life satisfaction in residential settings. *Activities, Adaptation and Aging*, 25(1), 77-85.
- Moos, I. & Bjorn, A. (2006) Use of the life story in the institutional care of people with dementia: a review of intervention studies. *Ageing and Society*, 26(3), 431-454.
- Mozley, C. (2001). Exploring connections between occupation and mental health in care homes for older people. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 8(3), 14-19.
- NICE (2008) Occupational Therapy Interventions and Physical Activity Interventions to Promote the Mental Wellbeing of Older People in Primary Care and Residential Care. *Public Health Guidance 16*. Retrieved from <https://www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/PH16>
- Pinquart M. & Forstmeier, S. (2012). Effects of reminiscence interventions on psycho-social outcomes: a meta-analysis. *Aging and mental health*, 16(5), 541-558.
- Randers, I., Mattiasson, A. C. & Olson, T. (2003). The "social self": The 11th category of integrity--Implications for enhancing geriatric nursing care. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 22(2), 289-309.
- Stevens, A. B., Camp, C. J., King, C. A., Bailey, E., & Hsu, C. (1998). Effects of a staff implemented therapeutic group activity for adult day care clients. *Aging & Mental Health*, 2(4), 333-342.
- Thomas, E. (1978) *The collected poems of Edward Thomas*. R. G. Thomas (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Walcott, D. (1992) *Collected poems: 1948-1984*. London: Faber and Faber.

Wright, B. (Producer), Watt, H. (Director). (1936/2007). *Night mail* [Motion Picture]. London: BFI.

Westerhof G. J., Bohlmeijer E. & Webster, J. D. (2010). Reminiscence and mental health : a review of recent progress in theory, research and interventions. *Aging and society*, 30(4), 697-721.

Wexler, M. (2014). A poetry program for the very elderly—narrative perspective on one therapeutic model. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 27(1), 35-46. doi: [10.1080/08893675.2014.871811](https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2014.871811)

Wikstrom, B.M. (2002). Social interaction associated with visual art discussions: a controlled intervention study. *Aging and Mental Health*, 6(1), 82-87.

Woods, B., Spector, A., Jones, C., Orrell, M., & Davies, S. (2005) Reminiscence therapy for dementia. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, Issue2. doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD001120.pub2

## Appendix 1 – List of poems read to the group

Session no.	Poems read
1	'Digging' (Seamus Heaney)
	'The bright field' (R. S. Thomas)
2	'On the roofs of Terry Street' (Douglas Dunn)
	'An Edwardian Sunday, Broomhill, Sheffield' (John Betjeman)
3	'Poem' (Simon Armitage)
	'The road not taken' (Robert Frost)
4	'To Chloe, Who for his sake wished herself younger' (William Cartwright)
	'Flowers' by (Wendy Cope)
	'maggie and milly and molly and may' (e. e. cummings)
5	'Night mail' (W. H. Auden)
	'Adlestrop' (R. S Thomas)
6	'Loveliest of trees, the cherry now' (A. E. Housman)
	'Home thoughts, from abroad' (Robert Browning)
7	'The tyger' (William Blake)
	'Aunt Jennifer's tigers' (Adrienne Rich)
	'Ariel's song' (William Shakespeare)
8	'Giving up smoking' (Wendy Cope)
	'Remember me' (Christina Rossetti)
	'Love after love' (Derek Walcott)
9	'How do I love thee' (Elizabeth Barrett Browning)
	'Happiness' (Raymond Carver)

## Appendix 2 – transcription key

Transcript feature	Key
(.)	brief pause - less than 0.5 seconds
(0.5)	timed pause
=	latching - no pause between speakers' turns
[yeah [yeah	simultaneous speech
<u>Underlined talk</u>	emphasis on word or phrase
>yes<	speaker speeds-up
<no>	speaker slows down
xxxxxxx	inaudible speech
↑	rising intonation
↓	lowering intonation
...	some talk omitted
((laughter))	paralinguistic or nonverbal communication feature