

# Poetry Teaching as a Therapy: A Psychological Approach

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## Abstract

*Teaching poetry is a major part of teaching literature. It can be done adopting a variety of approaches. The most effective approach is the one which helps students anticipate the content and structure of the poem. Poetry as a therapy approach focuses on the psychological aspect of the students. The foundation of this approach is rooted in the psychological theories of Freud and Jung. As a psychological approach to teaching poetry, the therapeutic approach focuses on the psychological development of the student, beginning from finding out the supportive elements in the poem as the mode of empathy and experimenting, action and application, and creative mode of reading poetry in the classroom. This study explicates some of the typical modes and methods of teaching poetry psychologically and how these stages are interlinked for the overall development of students' creativity in learning poetry and creating poetry of their own to reveal their pains, feelings, experiences, and anxieties and transform their negative feelings into creative production. Being an analytical research work, this paper observes theoretical foundation of psychological approach of teaching poetry and establishes basic conceptual framework on how it can be applicable in poetry classroom.*

**Keywords:** Creation, defense mechanisms, empathy, psychotherapy, reflection

## Introduction

Teaching poetry is an essential part of teaching literature and language. Teaching and learning fulfill many functions at a time. Learning means getting knowledge, but it still generates numerous occasions for both the teacher and the learner. Learning becomes meaningful only when it comes with internalization, and teaching also becomes meaningful when it happens as a mode of imparting the self and making the learners internalize the self. Teaching literature can take place with varying approaches, and each approach may fit in a particular situation. The greatest aspect of teaching literature is teaching the matter

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psychologically.

So, teaching poetry is not merely the mechanical process of teaching formulas or just teaching the language as a method of communication. If understood clearly, poetry, “as a highly wrought, densely meaningful, and creative use of language” (Couey and James 1) enhances innumerable opportunities to correspond with human psychology within the classroom. It is an exacting and evocative art form, and it helps to bring the real experience of life into the classroom. Therefore, reading poetry is not just reading between the words as the poetic form; teaching poetry is not just reading between the poetic lines. Teaching poetry makes demands on its readers’ anticipation. It cannot be skimmed or summarized; one must slow down, and then it should enable learners reveal their psychological essence, to cope up with the problems with aesthetics and inclination. In this sense, teaching poetry in the classroom can be a therapy, a means of revealing, anticipating and realizing the psyche. This study observes the theoretical underpinning of the psychological approach, a therapy approach in teaching literature, especially poetry, and it explores how teaching poetry can reveal the psychology of both the students and teachers.

### Statement of Problem

Poetry teaching provides a strong platform for students, teachers, and society to identify the self to newer possibilities. As poetry is a powerful way for poets to express themselves and their psychology, it is also a powerful way for teachers to express themselves and for students to anticipate their feelings and experiences. In the context of teaching poetry in the traditional method, this paper identifies the connection of psychological theory and teaching poetry as the real problem to be reassured. This paper, being purely the observation of theory and its application, makes a link between teaching poetry and psychological as the study of theory.

### Research Questions

This study tries to address the following research questions:

- a. What is therapy approach and how can teaching poetry be a therapy?
- b. What are defense mechanisms and how can they be used in therapy-approach of teaching poetry?
- c. How these approaches are applicable in teaching poetry to the learners?

### Methodology

This is a qualitative research paper. It follows the patterns of collecting secondary data from the books and analyzing the theory to see the aspect of psychology in poetry teaching. The secondary sources include the theories based on psychology from Sigmund Freud to Alisa Schmid-Kitsikis and Todd O. Williams, who have proposed different theories of human psychology. This paper tries to connect this theory of psychological therapy to teaching poetry in the classroom theoretically.

### Limitation of the Study

This paper, being based on the theoretical analysis, is limited within the process of examining different psychological theories and seeing how these theories can be applied in poetry teaching. It has not included the data and classroom tests for the verification of the data in the way quantitative research does; rather it scrutinizes the theories on psychology and how they can be applied in teaching poetry in the mode of connecting theory in context.

### Poetry and Therapy

Teaching poetry and therapy, though these two aspects do not have a seemingly significant connection, have a close connection in relation to psychological treatment. Writing, reading, or hearing a poem makes one feel more alive, calmer, more in touch with reality, more eager, more pleased, and wiser; this overall sense of well-being is the essence of therapy because "poetry can validate our experience as well as enable us to look at something in a fresh or different way" (Hedges 3). A poet writes to confirm his own experiences and feelings, and the reader proves his/her ideas validated with the poetic ideas while reading, which is the way to get fresh and energized.

Both the content and the patterning of the content justify the connection between poetry and therapy. Poetry works on two levels: the content or idea of the poem and how it is expressed – the language, imagery, rhyme, and rhythm. The same is often true of therapy and other contacts between a client or patient and a professional. "There is the 'issue', the content of the problem, but there are subtle ways in which communication is formed and maintained and experienced between the person offering help and the one seeking it" (3). The problem is the content of therapy and the mode of expression for proper communication leading to expressing and understanding. The problem is the pattern. With these two domains, poetry and therapy are connected.

Looking at them separately, poetry and therapy may have many differences, and all therapists may not find their connection. One who has an interest in literature and works as a therapist like Sigmund Freud can properly underpin the essence of them, as he believes, "the sublimation of unsatisfied libido was responsible for producing all art and literature" (10). His analogy of creative writing and children's play figures the psychological level of writing and reading poetry and the activity of creative writing as therapy; "The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality" (Freud 4). With reference to Freud's analogy of children's play and creative writing, it is essentially clear that both children and writers "create an imaginary world which is separate from reality" (Aguinis 20), and their creative imagination for poetry enables them to even stronger emotional activity. Poetic creation has a psychological foundation as much as it has with dreaming and children's phantasy, and it is the language that shows the similarity between children's play and poetic creation.

Like other games and fantasy, poetry is a healthy aspect of the creative arts. A child enjoys the games of fantasy, and so does he/she while writing or reinventing poetry.

Similarly, a child feels better and healthier while playing the games, and does he/she feel while playing with poetry, writing, or reading? If the reading of poetry is transferred in the mode of playing it, "creativity as having a reparative function in the guilt the infant feels in its fantasized attack on the mother" (Hedges 11), and for a child, "creativity is an inbuilt part of being human: therapy could often act to unblock the creative energy" (11). At the same time, a child does have a bundle of even more wishes and desires, most of which are unfulfilled and are repressed. Freud's views allow them to come into expression, and the creative writers, whether children in the classroom or mature poets, are "the imaginary writers with the dreamer in daylight" (Freud 9). With the help of these imaginary creations or fantasies, poetry 'cures' people, as a physical disease might be cured, though therapy is only a partial cure, or the beginning of a process to a happier, more fulfilled life through the expression of repressed desires as the outlet for the pain of unfulfilled desires. In this sense, poetry for kids in the classroom can be better therapy.

The classroom is the place where a student is present to learn something and the teacher is present to teach something, especially the ideas or skills to present. Both have the purpose of their cognitive and emotional activity. All classroom activities are cognition-centered, but reading/learning literature becomes more cognitive than others because the students can generate their understanding of the real and even beyond the real through their excessive emotional practice. Reading literature leads them to the knowledge of the reality around them, and it also empowers them in their imaginative inputs and outputs.

Reading literature, especially poetry, is one of the most effective ways to enhance cognitive practice in the classroom because "poetry offers students the opportunity to increase their self-awareness by helping them examine their experiences in terms of emotions and mental images as well as language" (Williams 17). Reading poetry makes them feel emotionally strong and identify their inner potential with the expansion of their horizons of thoughts into wider and deeper perception. They become more constructive as the poem is "to transfuse emotion and to transmit thought" (Silverman 19), better creative, and fresher emotionally not only within the classroom but also outside the classroom, as poetry helps "students repair negative attitudes toward the world that may prevent pro-social action" (17) and poems motivate their creativity, making them efficient at applying their knowledge in many other aspects of life, which is the exact motif of classroom learning.

Learning has to do with understanding, understanding of the self and others. Understanding the self is realization of the inner potential, and understanding others means knowing the world around and internalizing the outer world within. Reading poetry in the classroom "imposes upon us the otherness of language—what Lacan calls the symbolic order—but also allows us to find our unique place within that otherness" (Williams, 2012, 1). Poetry, as an excellent form of language to produce emotions, helps to find the uniqueness in experience and knowledge, and "Knowledge leads to freedom, at least potentially. The content and scope of knowledge generated by poetry, of course, depends on the poem, but it may range from personal-insights into the human condition" (Forsthoefel

112). It imparts the skill, though different from life skills as such, to make a link between personal experience and insights to cognize the general human condition.

A classroom is a place with a variety of interests. Students have varying backgrounds, culture, and social conditions, and also "the children have a variety of special needs ranging from autism to prematurity" (Rhodes 117). Teaching has to address these situations properly. Reading and writing poetry in the classroom enables them to identify their special needs and their specific potential. Also, poetry in the classroom helps students recognize individual limitations with the understanding of the poetic real and imaginative realms and how to cope with those limitations in a proper manner.

Henceforth, poetry teaching is a major part of teaching language and literature, as teaching poetry in the classroom is essential for students to generate their attitude of learning for knowledge, learning for life and beyond, and learning to understand themselves and others.

### Poetry and Learners' Psychology

The age and level of the children determine their perception of the poems. Kids enjoy the rhymes and songs because they think poetry means rhyming. Slowly, they begin to think about the words on the pages when they grow up a little. Poems are understood by teenagers as expressions of love and hatred, and some students from backgrounds of poverty, suffering, and other problems see the poem as the struggle, pain, suffering, poverty, and others. It means that poetry is understood differently depending on the age, level, and social and cultural background of the students, and poetry has a psychological attachment to an individual with varying experiences.

Every product by human being, especially the creative one, has a certain association with the psychology of the creator. And, so does it happen with poetry? Words make up the poetry. It exists in physical form or structure, and it uses language as the basic means of expression. Psychology has something different. It is the mental state. It does not take its shape as poetry. It exists in the abstract in every individual but is unseen until it is expressed in any form or shape. Despite being different in nature, existence, and patterning, poetry and psychology have a certain labyrinth of connections where emotion is the origin of both. As a verbal composition, poetry is designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way. Language is its power. It makes use of literary techniques such as meter, metaphor, and rhyme. Being highly evocative, these literary devices evoke emotion, joy, sorrow, anger, catharsis, and love in the readers.

Psychology involves the study of mind, behavior, thought, etc. as the study of behavior has its origin in the postulation of the existence of psychic patterns, though these patterns are not as visible as the patterns of language and literary devices in the poem. The patterns of poetry include thoughts and memories, feelings and experiences. These poetic experiences are certainly connected with the unconscious through symbols, metaphors, imageries, and other devices representing different aspects of life in dreams, art, religion, society, culture, and many others blended with the author's psychology. Depicting these



emotions in the form of a piece of art, as "love, loss, anguish, joy, betrayal, excitement, disappointment, scorn, fear and anxiety are the stuff of poetry" (Hedges 3), poetry influences all experiences, behaviors, and emotions of both the poet and the reader, the students in the classroom.

Students, in the literature classroom (Nepalese and other contexts), as the event of their psychology, give priority to fiction and fantasies over poetry for the sake of their interests and entertainment because "some readers take little from poetry except its simple music and movement" (Drew 28). From the very beginning, poetry was supposed to have double purposes: to delight and instruct, but the students, not being able to find the element of 'delight' in poetry, just think poetry is to 'instruct' and don't feel motivated to read poetry as much as fiction. They focus on the short-term interest in the gradual plot structure, but teaching and reading stories has their own psychological benefits, and they pay less interest in poetry, with no understanding that "poetry is not just an outpouring of emotion. Many poems explore complex patterns of thoughts or show how the poet moves from one thought to another (Hedges 4). Understanding the movement of the thought or the feelings of the poets only makes them feel the tears of the poets in their eyes and hearts because "the range of feelings handed on from poet to reader is as wide as human experience itself, all the way from a kind of superficial hypnosis to the deepest and truest stimulus of the whole being" (Drew 26). Students should think that poetry visualizes the whole man in which he/she is included in an abundant manner with poetic thoughts. In such a context, the problem is not with the poetry; nor is it with the student's psychology, but it is with the way of reading poetry that excludes "the self" from the world of the poem. There is blood, life in the body; imagination, creativity; and intellect, mind, mingled in the poetry, but the problem is the student's psychology, who regards poetry just as an intellect. They are reluctant to enjoy the imagination, to feel life and to understand the intellect in poetry.

Empathy, as a psychological realm of human beings, is an essential part of human relations and also an inherent pattern in human psychology. It is an understanding of a person from his or her perspective. It is not "what I feel toward you," but "what I feel with you. It is the "ability to dip oneself in the experience of another without losing one's own sense of self" (Murphy and Dillon 139). It is a successful clinical approach in psychotherapy. A true empath properly works with the clients, especially in clinical practices. It also has its importance as a work of art. All clinical practitioners can't develop their practice equally because it requires an art like poetry. Empathy is essential in personal relationships, in social relations, and within the relationships within the classroom, and even more applicable while reading and teaching poetry in the classroom and outside.

Empathy is a mode of therapy, the therapy of psychology but not of the physicality. However, empathy can be the result of a physical condition. The connection of a person with other people, things, or objects is connected with a certain degree of empathy, either in the process of therapy or in the process of learning. A driver can make a safe drive if he/she feels the life within the vehicle he/she is driving-the empathy of feeling his/her life

within the nonliving object. Similarly, a therapist can provide good therapy if he or she feels the patient's pain or feelings—empathy for feeling the patient's pain; and a student can develop a good understanding of a poem if he or she feels the poet in himself/herself. So, students with a high degree of empathy can improve their capacity to read and understand the poem through the use of written exercises and through internalizing the situation within. This can be done in the classroom or outside somewhere in the learning process.

As a specific human psychic quality, everyone possesses the sense of empathy. It may vary in degree, but the matter is whether it has got its place in one's psychology. As the proper act of empathy is an art and poetry is also an art, both can be used simultaneously in the classroom to help each other. Poetry can generate empathy for the students and empathy can empower their learning of the poem, both ways because "the development of empathy is essential for personal and social well-being" (Furman 104). One way to generate interest in poetry reading or creating poetry in literature class is to develop students' empathy by encouraging them "to remember a time in their lives when they felt deeply accepted or understood by someone" (105) and bringing them back to the events that are somehow related to the theme and content of the poem. The teaching facilitator can simply assist them in recalling a time when they felt similar to someone in a similar situation and developing it as a method of internalizing the matter in poetic structure.

The second mode of teaching poetry can be done by making the students imagine someone to whom they have a certain attachment. For example, the students can imagine themselves as the hunted bird and feel the sorrow, pain, and feelings of the bird and compose a poem being the bird in himself or herself or read the poem while in the same condition, in which the students will certainly explore "how people feel about being in the role" (105). The students can address the situation by negating themselves and identifying themselves with the object/s depicted in the mode of Keats' "negative capability" or Eliot's "depersonalization". They can feel the poem in such a situation.

Many students love watching films, cartoons, listening to stories, and even playing games. The third way to make use of empathy for the understanding of poetry can be done by making them feel the matter of their interest and associating the poem with their experience of the knowledge of films, cartoons, stories, or video games. For this, the teacher can show a film in the classroom and then ask the students to write the poem/s as they wish, and there should not be any restrictions in the form and content of the poem/s they write in and about. Students can associate themselves with one of the characters or members, in the mode of revelation of the self to the self, and they can be motivated to read the content of the poem in an effective manner.

Likewise, the fourth way could be encouraging them to be attached to the social problems and generating empathy relating to the problems. Students, teachers, as well as poets, often have a wider experience of life and the socially and culturally attached problems, which appear as "the psychological pain as part of their art and to 'treat' the pain" (Hedges 12) through the art of poets and reading the pain of the poet as their own

pain in readers. Students can easily feel the sense of social problems and internalize the social theme into the mode of empathy, such as poverty, garbage or sanitation problems, pollution, and the environment. Allowing them to exercise on such issues can result in tremendous results because "students use various types of writing (letters, poems, short essays, simulated newspaper clippings) to document the issue they are exploring" (Furman 107). Such social problems directly affect them, and they can generate empathy very easily and produce writing on the typical issue they give prime focus to.

One more way of teaching poetry through empathy can be the flexible manner of giving them a chance to interpret the poem for themselves. Repeated reading of the poem in the classroom and making the students write their response to the poem or reframe the poem in the way they like would help generate empathy in them. It is good to ask them to reproduce the poem in their own way as if they were the poet or supposing they were the poet.

### Teaching Poetry: A Psychotherapy

In general, therapy is understood as a process used in clinical and medical practices, especially in making the treatment of patients both physical and psychological. But therapy can be used in multiple domains of human relations and "therapy has something in common with all literary forms" (Hedges 6). Clinical therapy can have "different goals than literary studies, but if we can integrate these goals of therapy with our goals as writers and teachers, we can make literary studies more beneficial to our students" (Williams xiii). It can help unblock channels of communication, and "it can open up the inner world so that it becomes more attuned to the outer world. It can encourage someone to have more belief in himself, but it does not fundamentally alter the individual. Nor is it something done 'to' an individual without his co-operation, but is a collaborative exploration" (Hedges 12). The study of poetry is also therapy because it is a way to validate painful and repressed experiences in the creative mode. It can help us "cope with problems or negative emotions by offering us recognition and allowing for transcendence. Poetry can also stimulate our imaginations and lead us to become more creative, proactive people" (Williams, xiii). Since teaching poetry needs the involvement of two parties at a place and time, students and teacher, with a poem or sentences, this transcendence of the negative emotions into stimulus imagination leads to the therapeutic transition for the students and also for the teacher.

Teaching poetry as therapy, though "it is the province of poetry to show rather than to teach" (Drew 30), is different from the traditional approach of focusing on the meaning of a text or word-to-word annotation; rather it involves activities to focus on the experiences of a text matching those of the readers, the students. It is today's belief that "poetry offers students the opportunity to increase their self-awareness by helping them examine their experiences in terms of affects and images as well as language" (Williams xi). Reading poetry is not just an understanding of the word meaning patterns and just an explanation of the text, but it is a process to allow students "to have new thoughts, perceptions, and affective experiences that can benefit them greatly" (xi). This is an intellectual benefit; the



benefit of psychological wellbeing; and the benefit of mental strength; and hence, teaching poetry is therapy.

Poetry therapy involves "the use of poetry in the psychotherapeutic setting in which the poem can be used to journey into one's unconscious from being involved in empathy to the creation of the poem" (xii). The last purpose of teaching poetry is to make the learners creative enough to write their own poems in which they would "express themselves through the use of verbal imagery and unconscious metaphorical references to their own life situations" (Mitchell and Zanesville 224). They will be engaged in the activity of remaking themselves in their poems, "finding, sorting, selecting, rejecting, and shaping among the "host of shadowy things" jostling one another to become words and sounds, and the reader will discover not only the poet, but another more gifted human being" (Drew 32). Applying this therapy approach aims to develop a student into a creative being, different from others, through the understanding, realization, and reflection of the world in his/her creation.

### Conclusion

Teaching poetry has undergone many approaches, from the traditional manner of explaining the poem in a word-meaning manner to internalizing the poem within. The psychological approach to teaching poetry is a therapeutic approach developed especially since the 60s. It involves activities to focus on the experiences of a text matching those of the readers. This approach focuses on the psychological development of the student, beginning by finding out the supportive elements in the poem such as the mode of empathy and experimenting, action and application, and the creative mode of reading poetry in the classroom.

As poetry is the perfect mode of linguistic expression, it can enhance students' ability to reveal their psychology and experiences through poetry. Not exactly like clinical or medical therapy, poetry can be used as a mode of therapy to transfer students' negative feelings into imaginative and creative modes. Poetry can be used as a vehicle for the expression of emotions that might otherwise be difficult to express. Furthermore, it promotes self-reflection and exploration, increasing self-awareness and helping individuals make sense of their world. It helps individuals redefine their situation by opening up new ways of perceiving reality and validating emotional experiences, and it improves group cohesiveness by helping people realize that others share many of their experiences. This approach can help students realistically cope with negative aspects of reality through their creativity. For them, poems can serve as loving external objects that help students repair negative attitudes toward the world that stifle their potential for effecting social change.

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