

## **Writing as Self-Actualization: How Composing Poetry and Prose Engages Neural Pathways to Promote Healing of the Psyche**

By Ava Samson

When experiencing mental health turmoil, the sense of self can often become muddled, and feel as though it is in a perpetual state of suspension. In a world that pathologizes mental illnesses, vulnerable individuals frequently witness as their identities are diminished into lackluster clinical terminology; their minds and bodies treated as vessels to be medicalized and addressed with caution. When medical institutions address these individuals as case studies rather than human patients—utilizing their lived experiences as mechanisms for research advancement, isolating them from social interaction under the guise of “recovery”, and positing them as problems to be confronted solely with invasive clinical medicine—their humanity becomes secondary to their role in the system. This is an issue that creative expression functions to address: by allowing those struggling with mental illnesses to separate themselves from structural dehumanization and reclaim authorship over their own narratives, forms of creative writing such as poetry and prose facilitate reconstruction and reclamation of the self.

Oxford Languages defines creative writing as “writing, typically fiction or poetry, which displays imagination or invention” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Often introduced in juxtaposition with academic writing, creative writing engenders a style of writing free from grammatical constructs and intellectual hierarchy; namely in the case of poetry and prose. Known particularly for their use of figurative language, poetry and prose serve as particularly poignant outlets for creative expression, encouraging individuals to write within personal constructs at liberty from pedagogical standards. In this literature review, I aim to extend the scholarly dialogue

surrounding how creative writing, specifically poetry and prose, serves as an accessible therapeutic tool in activation of mental healing. The focal point of my research and analysis is to examine the activation of neural pathways and brain regions during the composition of poetry and prose, and explore prospective implications of such practices on cultivating self-awareness and promoting recovery from mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In navigating this discourse, I present the following research question: How can composing poetry and prose serve as a therapeutic tool to promote self-awareness and recovery from mental disorders, and which regions of the brain are implicated while engaging in this creative activity?

There are a multitude of forms in which creative expression is capable of embodying. It is found in the music we both hear and compose, the films we view, and the images we capture; evidently, creativity is not a passive process. Creative expression entails cognitive demand, implicating various neural systems that shepherd human thought throughout the ongoing process. *The Creative Brain* (2020), written by cognitive neuroscience researcher Roger E. Beaty, illustrates the usage of brain imaging technology and behavioral experimentation to analyze brain regions and activity associated primarily with the formation of creative thought and subsequent action. His *Cognitive Neuroscience of Creativity Lab* at the University of Pennsylvania illuminates various findings, such as that brain regions utilized to actively recall the past and envision the future display an overlap in the *default network* of the brain, encompassing the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, bilateral inferior parietal lobes, and medial temporal lobes (Beaty, 2020). Additionally, the hippocampus, familiarized for its role in long-term memory formation and retention, enables individuals to extract meaning from their past experiences and utilize them to envision future events. Furthermore, research by

Beaty and colleagues encouraging participants to engage in free association with object cue words, displayed a noticeably significant overlap in brain regions sustaining memory, imagination, and creative thinking faculties (Beaty, 2020).

Creative writing, by nature, is an endeavor that cultivates creativity; after all, the name itself is embedded within the phrase. Shah et al. (2013) offer one foundational perspective in this field: a study utilizing fMRI to scan brain regions involved in creative thinking. In this study, Shah and colleagues consequently discovered striking similarities between the neural correlates of creative activity and creative writing; in which engagement in creative writing is broken down into the primary processes of brainstorming and generation. Episodic memory retrieval, free association, spontaneous cognition, and semantic integration—each involved in the brainstorming process of creative writing—may be localized using this imaging technique to a right-lateralized activation pattern in bilateral hippocampi, bilateral temporal poles, and the bilateral posterior cingulate cortex (Shah et al., 2013). Creative writing composition, as an act, primarily exhibits activation of the brain's motor regions, suggesting that such an activity implicates intricate engagement across mind and body.

Building upon this broad substructure, Liu et al. (2015) further flesh out the neural dynamics of creative writing in examinations of brain activity documentation during various tasks of engagement with poetry and prose: recitation of memorized poems, generation of new poems, and revision of poems (Liu et al., 2015). Their discoveries propose an integral role played by the prefrontal cortex in the creative process of the generation stage of poetry composition, while the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and executive systems of the parietal cortex display phase-dependent activation during the process of revision. In conjunction, these studies further show that the composition of creative writing, namely poetry and prose, entails a great

deal of cognitive labor; from promoting executive functioning and motor retrieval skills to activating sensorimotor systems in the cerebral cortex. Navigating these neural networks then authorizes us to unveil a more comprehensive, profound therapeutic potential: as individuals with mental health disorders take on practices that promote neuroplasticity and encourage full-fledged corporeal awareness, they gradually become able to regain agency over their minds and bodies in the process.

Individuals battling mental illnesses who participate in creative writing workshops report the immediacy to which this form of creative expression allows for self-actualization.

Contemporary research, as furthered by Springer et al. (2025), displays that growth is an intimately personal endeavor; one which is “connected to the recovery from involuntary social isolation, identity crises, hopelessness, powerlessness, and a loss of self-esteem” (Springer et al., 2025). And while medicine remains remarkable in its ability to aid in symptom reduction, no amount of clinical intervention feels truly liberating—individuals are still left wounded by these afflictions, irresolute in how to draw meaning from their experiences. As such, Springer argues that when personal autonomy is placed on the backburner for patient priorities, recovery becomes contingent upon practices that are separate from the system. By reveling in exercises that allow them to dismantle cognitive distortions hindering personal growth, only then are patients able to fully develop a sense of purpose beyond the confines of labels which seek to pathologize them and strip them of their self-governance.

Behavioral therapist Wanda Springer highlights the evocative nature of poetry, in its employment of metaphorical language as a means to communicate meaningfulness. She shares the anecdote of an interaction between her and a client of hers struggling with a harmful and suffocating relationship dynamic: “For example, one client described her possessive boyfriend as

an ‘owl in a tree’ and her trapped feeling as being ‘duct-taped in a box’” (Springer, 2006). By manipulating language in such a fashion, individuals learn to externalize their experiences, creating distance between distressing emotions and their selfhood in a manner that feels safe, allowing them to envision further healed, more mentally-sound versions of themselves. Disparate from other empirical approaches to therapy, poetry encourages transcendence across structural limitations that academic writing seeks to adhere to.

In a similar vein, the creative process implicated by poetry composition enables individuals struggling with mental disorders to regain autonomy over themselves, as such encourages them to generate understanding and a sense of meaning from their experiences. Yet a significant gap in this research still remains, idiosyncratically in the situation of psychosis and psychotic symptoms. Such a gap sets the research conducted by Pearson et al. (2020) in motion, analyzing the stigmatization of psychosis in a manner that is distinctive from other psychological symptoms and disorders. This is apparent in how psychotic speech is often depicted as unreasonable or threatening: “Psychotic speech has historically been viewed as unstable and representative of the chaotic thought disorder experienced by an individual experiencing psychosis...such a reductive hypothesis fails to consider that whilst those who have experienced psychosis often communicate in idiosyncratic linguistic terms, these terms [] are rich in emotive content” (Pearson et al., 2020). These expressions may often be indicative of deeper emotional trauma that clinical approaches fail to acknowledge; by nature, poetry encourages these individuals to engage in free association and freedom of stylistic prose in order to regain autonomy over their thoughts and behaviors.

We must acknowledge that there is further research to be done before we draw any definitive conclusions regarding the effect of poetry and prose composition on brain regions.

And albeit a holistic approach toward addressing a variety of mental disorders and abnormalities, composition of poetry and prose may not appeal to all individuals, nor will it operate upon equal footing of effectiveness among those who *are* willing to approach it with openness. In light of these nuances and structural limitations, poetry and prose may be addressed as potential therapeutic options rather than a “check-all” universal remedy. It may furthermore be utilized alongside other legitimate forms of treatment backed by scientific heuristics to promote recovery. Nonetheless, contemporary research suggests that poetry and prose may be capable of healing the psyche in ways unforeseen to traditional therapeutic practices. With this comprehensive account, there is no denying the immediacy of these creative endeavors, and the transformative potential they carry over the ways in which we understand, interpret, and reclaim our own lived experiences.

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