

Learning poems word for word stanza in good stead

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(Medical Xpress) -- Research from the Universities of Reading and Oxford suggests that learning poems by heart makes people feel better and strengthens identity.

Dr Clare Rathbone, of the University of Reading's School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences, and Dr Abigail Williams, of Oxford University's English Faculty, are challenging members of the public to remember the poems that are significant to them in an [online survey](#) on National [Poetry](#) Day on Thursday and to describe their memories and feelings relating to these poems.

The survey aims to quantify the effects of poetry, asking people to give details of three poems and state what age they were when they learnt the poem. Preliminary results show that people take more comfort from poems they have learnt by heart and that learning poems by rote helps to play a part in people's development of identity.

The researchers also want to explore the therapeutic sides of poetry, particularly with people suffering from Alzheimer's.

Dr Williams said: "Rote learning has become a dirty word in educational theory because it is not seen as a creative or enabling way of learning, but results from our survey so far suggest that over the course of our lives these poems often acquire an emotional significance for us. Poems learnt by heart are significantly more likely to be used to bring comfort than those not learnt by heart.

"We hope our survey might shed more light on the therapeutic possibilities of poetry - as we know, Alzheimer's sufferers may forget people's names, but they can often remember bits of poetry they learned by heart when they were only 10, and often these poems are associated with [happy memories](#) which in turn improve mood. This study helps to show us what kinds of psychological role learnt verse plays in our mental make-up.

Dr Clare Rathbone added: "[Psychologists](#) have shown that when people look back over their lives, they tend to be particularly good at remembering events from [young adulthood](#) (aged 15 to 30), a phenomenon known as the 'reminiscence bump'. This period of life is also when many people say they encountered their favourite films, songs and books.

"Psychologists think that people remember young adulthood best because this is when they are forming a sense of adult identity, and experiencing important self-defining events like getting jobs, starting relationships and deciding who they want to be. As a result of this, experiences from this time tend to be remembered more vividly, and more readily, than experiences from other times of life."

The survey is part of a collaborative research project on 'The Uses of Poetry' run between a group of researchers, teachers and policy-makers, and its early findings will be discussed at an interdisciplinary forum at the Shakespeare Institute on 8 October.

The survey can be found at edu.surveymzmo.com/s3/538676/Poetry-and-Memory

Provided by University of Reading

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