



Committing poetry to memory is so much more than a rote exercise. Taylor Ann Wright/Unsplash

Ode to the poem: why memorising poetry still matters for human connection

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Memorising poetry was once common in classrooms. But it has, for the most part, gone out of style. There are good reasons for this.

Memorisation can clash with creativity and analytical thought. Rote learning can be seen as mindless, drone-like, something done without really thinking about why we're doing it and what the thing we memorise might mean.

In other words, it can be counterproductive to learn a poem by heart without understanding its content, knowing anything about its author or historical context, or asking what specific aspects of its language make it powerful and appealing.

Literature instructors tend to focus more on showing students how to conduct careful textual analysis than on having them reproduce poetic lines word-for-word. Analytical skills are crucial, and educators should continue to emphasise them.

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But there is great value in memorisation as well. Internalising a poem need not be a rote process. Done right, in fact, it is an intellectual exercise that illuminates the structure and logic of the text.

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Nevermore, evermore, nothing more

A teacher might prompt his or her class to reflect on which patterns of sound (such as rhyme, meter or alliteration) serve as memory aids, asking how these patterns interact with the narrative arc of the poem.

Let's imagine a student sets out to memorise Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven."

Here are two lines from that poem:

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain

Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before

Someone searching for memorable patterns in the language would probably pay close attention to Poe's internal rhyme: "uncertain" gives us "curtain," and "thrilled me" prompts "filled me".

But that same student might also struggle to keep the exact phrasing of the stanzas' final lines straight, given that all eighteen of them conclude with "nevermore", "evermore" or "nothing more".



Most of us will at some point grapple with unhealthy fixations or paranoid fears. kalpesh patel/Unsplash

This could generate a conversation about the role of repetition in the poem – for instance, perhaps it reflects the obsessive and confused mindset of Poe’s speaker.

Students tasked with memorising poems are often required to speak them aloud as a test of mastery. This, too, has its benefits. Reciting a poem can provide a deep and visceral understanding of its linguistic strategies (think of all those rustling “s” sounds in “silken, sad, uncertain”).

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And when saying the poem aloud, you can hear another consciousness speaking in the cadences of your own voice. Counting out the beats of each line, you may feel the poem’s metrical pulses in your tapping fingers and toes.

In this way, the poem becomes an embodied experience and not merely a printed object.

A rich mental resource

True, reading a poem aloud rather than memorising and reciting it can have similar effects to all those above. But performing that poem without the distracting mediation of the page helps incorporate it more thoroughly into mental life.

In doing so, you can enact the way in which many poems – even as they give voice to a sensibility outside our own – also appeal to us precisely because they seem to articulate our unuttered thoughts and feelings. Reciting a poem without reading it can make it feel like it’s just you talking, not necessarily somebody else.

Few of us have dealt with an ominous raven perching in our chambers, but most of us will at some point grapple with unhealthy fixations or paranoid fears.

Memorising poetry, then, is also a kind of long-term investment. To take a poem with us so we can truly know it, we must know it by heart.

When we commit poems to memory, we internalise a voice that may comfort or inspire us in the future. We create a rich mental resource that lets us summon compelling, evocative, finely-crafted language at exactly the moment when it is most relevant to our emotional lives.

Such language both illuminates and is illuminated by our experiences. Christina Rossetti’s “A Birthday” begins with these lines:



Memorising poetry provides a rich mental resource of beautiful phrases. Daniel Hansen/Unsplash

*My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit.*

For a school child who learns Rossetti's poem, such metaphors may not be particularly meaningful. But if she carries those lines in her mind over the years, they are likely to take on fresh significance.

If later in life she falls in love or has an intense spiritual experience, they may help her articulate her feelings to herself. Perhaps on a snowy day she will think of Charles Wright's words: "Things in a fall in a world of fall [...]".

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Perhaps the arrival of a child will remind the former student of Sylvia Plath's "Love set you going like a fat gold watch".

Understanding our own sentiments through someone else's words can provide a thrilling sense of connection, of shared humanity across time and space.

There are certain intellectual advantages to having a wealth of information at our fingertips at all times. But the vast resources that smart phones provide can't make the beauties and insights of poetic language part of our everyday perspective on the world and fine-tune our emotional vocabulary in the process.

For that, we must still memorise.



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