Description:

In a recent interview on NPR, the American poet Peter Gizzi said that poetry for him is most fundamentally about listening. This course is based on the idea that reading and listening to poetry can teach us about the process of listening to our patients and our use of metaphor and imagination in understanding what they tell us. We will read a number of poems and discuss the experience of making sense of them as a way of exploring the process of listening to and making sense of what patients tell us and what we tell them in response.

In each class we will read and discuss three or four poems that touch on areas of particular interest to clinical work, such as memory, loss, mind/body, metaphor and the relationship between verbal and non-verbal domains. We will review articles from the psychoanalytic literature that address specifically the relationship between poetry and psychoanalysis and the experience of reading poetry.

Psychoanalysis and poetry share the challenge of putting words to experiences that seem to fall outside what can be verbalized. Both endeavors involve the creative use of imagination to meet that challenge. Using the shared experience of the selected poems, we will review readings that address the larger issues of metaphor and imagination and their use in clinical work.

No particular background in poetry or literature is required to participate in the course. The selected poems are mostly by historically recent poets and some of them may seem “difficult” at first glance. The emphasis will be on what each poem does or does not do for us, without any preconceived notions of what a particular poem is about. The course does not have a primary clinical focus, but the use of clinical experiences and vignettes will be an important component of the course, and many of the articles include a treatment perspective.

With regard to the poems, I strongly suggest that you read them, preferably aloud, for yourself before delving into the articles that provide readings of them. Let them work on you before you open yourself to how others experience them.

(PEP) means that the article is available on PEP
Session 1: Introduction.

We will start by viewing several segments from the DVD accompanying *An Invitation to Poetry* (2004) edited by Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz. The DVD features participants in the Favorite Poems Project reading and talking about their favorite poems. We will read poems by Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, and then discuss the article by Thomas Ogden.

Poems:


Session 2: Poetry and Psychoanalysis.

We will start with the poem by Frost and then discuss the article by Ogden where he uses his reading of the poem to talk about the experience of listening to a poem and listening to a patient. Alice Jones is a poet and psychoanalyst. Her article includes a reading of the poem “Pearl” by James Merrill.

Poems:
Robert Frost: Acquainted with the Night (The Poetry of Robert Frost)


Session 3: Metaphor and Memory 1

The poems by Heaney and the Scottish poet Robin Robertson articulate feelings of loss and mourning from very different angles. The brief piece by Mark Doty provides a summary of some of the functions of metaphor, a topic that we will explore in more detail in the next session.

Poems:
Seamus Heaney: Three poems from Clearances. (Seamus Heaney: Opened Ground, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1998)

Session 4: Metaphor and Memory 2

Poems:
Thomas Transtromer: The Stones (The Great Enigma, New Directions Books, NY 2006)
Thomas Transtromer: Memories Look at Me (The Great Enigma)


Session 5: Words and Wordlessness/Mind and Body

The poems by Merwin and Stevenson thematise the enigmatic relationship between words and what lies beyond words. Stern’s article articulates a way of thinking about this relationship within the clinical setting.
Adam Phillips’ essay is more generally about the relationship between poetry and psychoanalysis with a particular focus on the tendency among psychoanalysts, starting with Freud, to idealize poets and poetry which Phillips sees as a need to seek reassurance from the poets that words can matter. Note his reference to Keats’ idea of negative capability, which plays a role in Bion’s thinking.

Poems:
W.S. Merwin: By the Avenue, The Shadow of Sirius, Cooper Canyon, Fort Townsend, 2009

Session 6: A Brief History of Illusion and Imagination in (British Middle School) Psychoanalysis.

Much of current psychoanalytic thinking about imagination and illusion derives from Winnicott’s writing. The first article by Turner situates Winnicott and the notion of illusion within a larger cultural and historical context. The second article by Turner starts with a review of the section of Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” where he develops the theme of the child being the “father of the man.” Turner draws a line between this paradox as developed by Wordsworth and Winnicott’s thinking about paradox and play. The article covers a wide range of topics. If you are pressed for time, skip the “Conclusion” section and read/re-read Winnicott’s Playing and Reality, in particular “Playing, A Theoretical Statement” and “Creativity and Its Origins.”


Session 7: Imagination in the Clinical Setting

Poem:

For the final session, we will read A.R. Ammons’ poem Corsons Inlet in which he describes a walk along the New Jersey shore. In my reading, the poem captures the sense of indeterminacy, connectedness, non-linearity and openness that guides much of contemporary psychoanalytic thinking.

We will read articles that focus on clinical aspects of imagination. Steven Cooper’s article describes his particular experience and use of reverie. His idea of the ethical imagination refers to “the analyst’s modes of thinking about various forms of enactment of the unconscious transference-countertransference or psychical entanglement between patient and analyst.” Is your use of imagination similar to or different from Cooper’s? Lauren Levine’s article is about the complex meanings that are evoked when a patient shares or gives the therapist a work of imagination.
