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# Poetry and COVID-19: the benefit of poetry and the *poetryandcovidarchive.com* website to mental health and wellbeing

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## ABSTRACT

From June 2020 to June 2021, the website *poetryandcovid.com* (now archived as *poetryandcovidarchive.com*) served as a platform for poetic responses by people from around the world to the COVID-19 pandemic. The site featured 1000+ poems by 600+ poets and received c. 100,000 views by people from 128 countries. The poetry, their author's testimonials, as well as "comments" submitted to the organisers and public website, expressed how people felt during the pandemic. In the project's final three months, the website hosted a survey adapted from the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), targeted at understanding the value of poetry, in general, and the website, in particular, to mental health and wellbeing. 400 people took part, 373 completed the WEMWBS, and over 250 participants provided "final comments". The results show that the writing and reading of poetry – as well as the website itself – were of considerable benefit to mental health and wellbeing.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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## KEYWORDS

Poetry; mental health; wellbeing

## Background

Poetry received a significant boost in popularity during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Politicians, medics, teachers, protesters, all manner of people from around the world and in various circumstances, turned to poetry as a means of coping with the new reality. For example, in April 2020, *The Wall Street Journal* published "Poetry for a Pandemic", telling us that "in the lugubrious poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay, there are flashes of optimism that can comfort and inspire us".<sup>1</sup> US teacher Jessica Salfia's poem, "First Lines of Emails I've Received While Quarantining", went viral on social media (and was subsequently reprinted in various newspapers such as *The Washington Post*) for its humorous acknowledgement of how lockdown "struggle" instigated capitalist opportunism writ large: "As you know, many people are struggling. / Count your blessings. Share your blessings. / Get Free Curb-side pick up or ship to your house!"<sup>2</sup> In Ireland, amidst the rollout of lockdown regulations, the Taosaich, Leo Varadkar, quoted

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Noble laureate, Seamus Heaney: “If we winter this one out, we can summer anywhere”.<sup>3</sup> Rory Carroll, in his subsequent article for *The Guardian*, reinforced the Irish public’s appetite for poetry: “Solace and healing: Ireland turns to poetry to ease lockdown strain”. A year into the pandemic, on the other side of the globe, the *Japan Times* reported that “Japanese office workers” were taking to writing *senrū*: “short poems in 3 lines with 17 morae (which are like syllables) ... instead of describing nature they will usually focus on the triumphs and tribulations of everyday life”.<sup>4</sup>

While only anecdotal, these health-oriented claims to *inspiration*, *solace*, and *triumphs* in the face of adversities indicate that the public imagination was open to the possibility for poetry to serve our health and wellbeing during this time of COVID-19. In many respects, this wasn’t new news: the value of reading and/or writing poetry (as well as the wider arts) to health has been documented extensively (especially since the 1980s), as the nearly 40 volumes of *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* testify.<sup>5</sup> If anecdotal evidence is in abundance, however, a literature review reveals a relatively small number of peer-reviewed articles dedicated to exploring the value of poetry during the pandemic, with five of these appearing in *The Journal of Poetry Therapy*, itself.<sup>6</sup> In her article “Reading and rewriting poetry on life to survive the COVID-19 pandemic”, Daneshwar Sharma self-reflects on her own practice of *reading*, referring to “bibliotherapy as an auto-psychotherapy to make sense of the shock and confusion I faced as an individual and as a member of the society under lockdown” (100).<sup>7</sup> Additionally, she describes how her *writing* “autobiographical poems [helped her] to understand how COVID-19 affected my personal life and life in general at societal level” (105). In his article, “Lockdown Poetry, Healing and the COVID-19 Pandemic”, Rachid Acim refers to his qualitative study of “the lockdown poems that went viral in the virtual world” during this time, finding that “poetry has therapeutic effects as it can heal like traditional and modern medicine” (68).<sup>8</sup> Offering a similar finding, if by a different method, Judith Blundell & Simon Poole write in their article, “Poetry in a pandemic. Digital shared reading for wellbeing”, of the benefits of the “creative processes involved in reading and writing ... which are most important in improving and maintaining positive wellbeing” (198).<sup>9</sup> They recount how they issued a Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale to their five-person bibliotherapy-invested reading group (including one of their study’s authors), and found that “reading groups are a kind of social capital, which improve confidence, self-esteem, connectedness, belonging, and self-efficacy and control” (198).

While the above studies are oriented around self-reflection and/or small scale methodologies, this paper offers a comparatively large-scale quantitative and qualitative study regarding the value of reading and writing poetry to health and wellbeing during the pandemic. The study was part of the project “Poets Respond to COVID-19”, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council between 1 June 2020 and 31 May 2021. One workstream of the project, and the producer of the data for this study, was the creation and maintenance of *poetryandcovid.com*, an interactive website (now archived as *poetryandcovidarchive.com*, which will be used throughout this article), dedicated to publishing submissions of English-language poetry related to COVID-19 from people around the world. Short of a couple of set-up weeks, the website was live for the life of the project (effectively mid-June 2020 – mid-June 2021), and, in addition to enabling members of the public to submit their poetry,

provided a space for comments and discussion of poetry during the pandemic. The site was moderated by the researchers, with almost all poems submitted uploaded to the site, though a small number deemed “anti-social” were denied. Just over 100,000 people from 128 countries visited the site, which featured 1000+ poems by 600+ authors (most submitted by the writers themselves, with some submitting poems by others that addressed pandemics). Additionally, over 60 unsolicited testimonials on the value of poetry and/or the web-based platform to the public were submitted to the editors of the website over the year.

In its final three months (April – June 2021), the website hosted a survey adapted from the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). 400 people took part, with 373 completing the WEMWBS, and the quantitative results, supported with over 250 qualitative final comments by respondents, show that the writing and reading of poetry – as well as the website itself – had demonstrable positive impact on participants’ “wellbeing”, and specifically those suffering from “common mental health symptoms”, such as feelings of isolation and loneliness, as well as those suffering from grief (see the Results and Appendix for quantitative survey results).

Moreover, in addition to supporting the health and wellbeing of its participants, the website informed social and cultural recovery, offered an understanding of how poetry was being used as a mode of discourse during the pandemic, and now provides an historical archive for how people around the world used English-language poetry to navigate the crisis. As Acim notes in his aforementioned article, the sharing of poetry during this time helped “to create what Van Dijk has called a ‘Network Society’ that permits people to get in touch with each other, either emotionally or intellectually” (2021, p. 71). The *poetryandcovidarchive.com* website performed as just such a “network society”<sup>10</sup>, enabling people to be part of an online poetic community during lockdown, when face-to-face communication was limited. The poetry written and published on the site was wide-ranging, but repeatedly communicated fear, loss, isolation, confusion, and loneliness, as well as hope and resilience. It was at times expressive of graveness (grief, etc.), and at other times humorous, e.g. regarding the perceived banality of living through lockdown. Our findings recognise the value of poetry therapy in the 2020s to support health and wellbeing, and aims to provide some of the “robust evidence” called for by Public Health England, whose “Arts for health and wellbeing: An evaluation framework” was published in 2016; their call for evaluation still stands as the UK (and governments around the world) continue to seek new ways to support health and wellbeing needs.<sup>11</sup>

## Research approach and methodology

Research aims and objectives for the project included evaluation of the perceived efficacy of poetry in general, and the website in particular, on the health and wellbeing of its participants. The 1000+ poems submitted via email, and subsequently published on the *poetryandcovidarchive.com* website, provided the large-scale raw material for our qualitative analysis of how the poems supported the health and wellbeing of their authors (note: in a very few cases, people submitted poems they did not author themselves, but wanted to share with others, implicitly for positive effect). Additional to this, over 60 comments were received via unsolicited emails to the

project organisers which further addressed health and wellbeing benefits of both the website and poetry in general.

Towards the end of the project, from April to June 2021, on the front page of the *poetryandcovidarchive.com* website, we incorporated a banner with a weblink inviting visitors to the site to take part in a survey. The survey included an amended Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). 400 website visitors took part in the survey; 373 completed the WEMWBS; and over 250 wrote “final comments” in response to the prompt: “Please provide any final comments to let us know what you think of the Poetry and Covid site overall”. The survey was designed within the Ethics protocol of the University of Plymouth and supported by SERIO. The most relevant quantitative survey results appear below. Further supplemental survey findings are documented in the appendix.

## Results

### *Quantitative analysis of survey data*

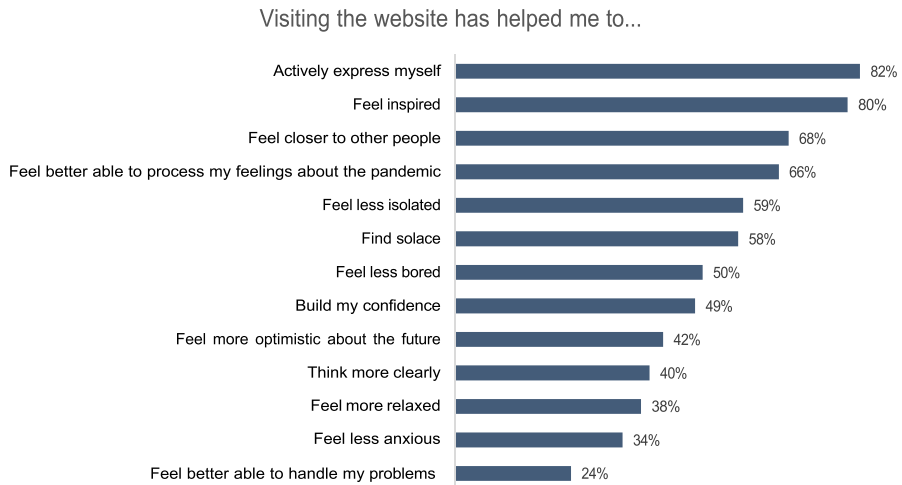
The key motivators for visiting the website by the 400 surveyed were declared to be to submit one’s own poetry and to read poetry (75% and 59% respectively), but also “to learn more about poetry during the ongoing pandemic” (32%) and, attesting to the lure of being part of a wider community, “to engage with other poets” (31%). When asked to state what experience was important to them when visiting the website, just over three quarters (77%) highlighted that reading the poems was important. Publishing their own poetry (59%) and feeling encouraged to write their own poetry (56%), were also felt to be important. For just under half (45%) of respondents, it was important to help them find a way to better understand the pandemic.

For most readers, poetry, in general, and the *poetryandcovidarchive.com* website, in particular, was noted to be of considerable value to their wellbeing. Approximately 50% of respondents found that poetry in general helped ameliorate “feelings of loneliness and/or isolation” and “feelings of anxiety and/or depression”. The website in particular helped over 80% to “feel inspired” and “actively express myself”, over 65% to “feel closer to other people” and to “feel better able to process my feelings about the pandemic”, and over 50% “to feel less isolated”, “to find solace”, and to “feel less bored”. 38% and 34% respectively, felt that engaging with *poetryandcovidarchive.com* helped them feel “more relaxed” and “less anxious”, while 24% felt that the website helped them “feel better able to handle my problems”. 17% of respondents expressed that it helped them to deal with issues relating to bereavement; 16% their “ongoing mental” health symptoms; and 14% their ongoing physical health symptoms. These percentages (even the slimmer ones) are substantial. Writing and reading poetry, as well as engaging with the website (as public platform), had a considerable positive impact on the wellbeing of the participants during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### *What effect did the Poetry and Covid website have on readers’ wellbeing?*

Respondents were asked to indicate if visiting the website had helped them in any way, as per the below chart, with a broad range of impacts felt. The most commonly felt impacts were

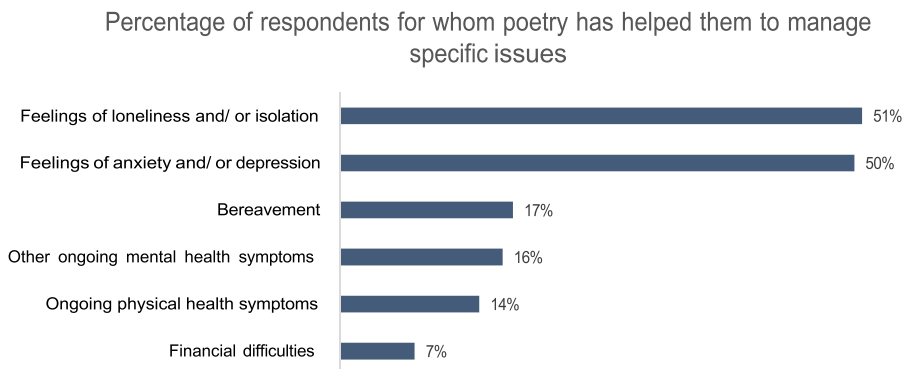
helping them to express themselves and feel inspired (82% and 80% respectively). Many also benefitted from feeling closer to others, feeling better able to process their feeling about the pandemic, feeling less isolated and finding solace (68%, 66%, 59% and 58% respectively).



NB: Multiple response question

***How has reading and/or writing Poetry helped survey respondents to deal with specific issues?***

Just over half (51%) of respondents indicated that reading and/ or writing poetry had helped them deal with feelings of loneliness or isolation, and for a further 50% it had helped with feelings of anxiety and depression. This highlights the role that poetry and websites like the Poetry and Covid website can play in supporting individuals to manage considerable personal issues.



NB: Multiple response question

### ***How have visitors to the poetryandcovidarchive.com website been feeling?***

Finally, visitors were asked to respond to 14 statements about how they had been feeling over the previous two weeks. These statements form the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS), a widely used and validated measure of wellbeing. A total of 373 survey respondents provided responses to these statements, with average scores for each statement (on a scale of 1 to 5) provided below. The average aggregated score was 47.8, out of a maximum possible of 70.

WEMWBS statement	Average score
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	3.2
I've been feeling useful	3.5
I've been feeling relaxed	3.1
I've been feeling interested in other people	3.7
I've had energy to spare	2.9
I've been dealing with problems well	3.4
I've been thinking clearly	3.6
I've been feeling good about myself	3.3
I've been feeling close to other people	3.3
I've been feeling confident	3.3
I've been able to make my mind up about things	3.8
I've been feeling loved	3.8
I've been interested in new things	3.7
I've been feeling cheerful	3.3
All statements	47.8

The table below displays the proportion of respondents with low, moderate, and high wellbeing, based on each individual's aggregated score.

Wellbeing level	Percentage (%)
Low wellbeing	29%
Moderate wellbeing	65%
High wellbeing	6%

The table below shows the percentage of respondents who selected each of the five possible response options for the 14 statements (none of the time, rarely, some of the time, often, all of the time).

	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future.	2%	13%	51%	28%	5%
I've been feeling useful.	2%	8%	41%	40%	9%
I've been feeling relaxed.	3%	18%	48%	28%	3%
I've been feeling interested in other people.	3%	4%	31%	44%	18%
I've had energy to spare.	7%	25%	46%	18%	4%
I've been dealing with problems well.	2%	8%	47%	34%	9%
I've been thinking clearly.	1%	8%	37%	43%	11%
I've been feeling good about myself.	3%	12%	44%	34%	8%
I've been feeling close to other people.	3%	12%	41%	33%	10%
I've been feeling confident.	3%	14%	44%	32%	8%
I've been able to make up my own mind about things.	2%	4%	28%	45%	21%

(Continued)



Continued.

	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling loved.	2%	9%	25%	37%	26%
I've been interested in new things.	3%	8%	29%	41%	19%
I've been feeling cheerful.	2%	11%	46%	35%	6%

### ***Qualitative analysis of “final comments” to the website survey and unsolicited messages sent to project organisers***

Over the course of the year, the organisers received over 60 unsolicited emails from visitors to the website; they also received over 250 “final comments” to the survey. Taken together, these qualitative comments and messages perform as testimonials to the therapeutic value of poetry (reading and writing) and the website, in general.

Examples of those comments/messages singling out the value of *reading* poetry on the website include:

- “Thank you poets for articulating on my behalf, without knowing me, so many sentiments that swirl in my head but I have not been able to articulate. I feel less like a groundhog hiding until a better day, and more connected to people around the world. What has helped me, perhaps more than meditation, wine and therapy, is the imagery each poem has evoked . . . and the variety of images that I think I can cling to until we all receive vaccines. Your poems are memorials to individuals, experiences and our forever changed lives”.
- “Hearing the perspectives of a global community of poets granted me a greater insight and feeling of groundedness during this isolating period”.

Examples of those singling out *writing* poetry, include:

- “I am an Indian, a privileged Indian at that. During the initial lockdown phase, innumerable workers in India walked hundreds of miles back to their home. Some inevitably died in the process. I sat in my blessed home in Graz and my mind bled to concussion. The fates of the unnamed individuals haunted me day and night. I could barely function as a human being in those days. These poems were written in that frenzied state of mind”.
- “I appreciate your efforts and feel fortunate to have had one of my COVID poems accepted in your journal. I live alone and am very lonely some of the time. Also, I have written more poems in the last year which has been wonderful and yet sad that a pandemic had to be the catalyst”.

Examples of the value of *both reading and writing* was commonly cited (or inferred):

- “Poetry has been a life-line throughout the pandemic, both reading and writing it, (sometimes a strong rope and other times a thin little string)”.

Many of the comments/messages received referred to the value of the *website* as an engaging and enjoyable place to read and submit pandemic-related poetry, and thanked the organisers. Moreover, many highlighted that the website was a place that

enabled “community”, helping people to personally (or collectively) tackle some of the issues faced during the pandemic, and to feel connected to others in similar situations. Examples include:

- “What a wonderful way to connect to our world during these terrible times. It helped me through the recent death of my mother related to COVID”.
- “What an extraordinary example of the evocative nature of poetry! This inspiring initiative has provided a healing sanctuary and hub of interconnectivity around the world at an especially dire time”.
- “Thanks for this terrific initiative to provide a creative outlet for everyone affected by the pandemic. It was an inspiring source of great poetry to help ease anxieties and come to terms with our human condition. Well done”.
- “I have been really impressed with the raw emotions/feelings expressed by writers on the Poetry and Covid site. There have been many benefits to me personally, realising that I was not alone in having the feelings of anxiety that I was experiencing”.

Those who submitted poems to the website also expressed that by virtue of being “involved” they found value in their own public service:

- “I’m glad I can contribute and feedback something positive into our overall current situation. The ‘Poetry and Covid’ project sounds as though it can hopefully offer both a valuable contribution and record, as well as provide some level of solace and contemplation. It certainly makes you stop and think of what is happening, of what we are all living through. It’s good to be involved (in a small way) in the project”.
- “I’m looking to submit some poetry related to my father’s recent passing, which was due to COVID-19. I want to capture some of the conflicting emotions I’ve been feeling since news of (several) promising vaccines have been reported so close to his death. I hope the piece will connect with others who have lost loved ones, but also provide hope for those who are isolated and waiting for loved ones to return home. This is my first piece of poetry”.

Many noted that this project had inspired them to share their own poetry, which they might not otherwise have done, and provided an “inspiring” outlet for them to express themselves through poetry, again highlighting the desire for a feeling of creative community. Still others, again, explained that through publishing their poetry on the website, their confidence with writing poetry had increased, and that they had since found opportunities to publish and discuss their work elsewhere, including in podcasts and printed publications:

- “From reading the biographies it seems to me that many of the authors are writing for the first time, suggesting that poetry has been extremely important to people during the pandemic. The Poetry and Covid site is an extremely important outlet for writers; especially those writing for the first time”.
- “Submitting and getting published at Poetry and Covid helped me discover that writing poetry is very therapeutic for me – more so than traditional journaling. I will continue to write. Thanks so much!”

## Qualitative analysis of poems published on *poetryandcovidarchive.com* (all poems cited can be found on the website)

Reading the more than 1000 poems by over 600 poets published on *poetryandcovidarchive.com* provides unique insight into the ways in which poetry contributed to the health and wellbeing of a diverse global community. The poems are tragic and joyous, angry and humorous, cathartic and hopeful, and often written in response to key events of the pandemic. When taken as a whole, they contain patterns of themes and attitudes which trend on and off over the year, the pandemic providing an inciting event from which to re-evaluate our relationships to language, art, and health. Exploring these trends in relation to global events reveals poetry's role as both an intrinsic source of solace and an effective method of reflecting and negotiating with "the new normal". The poems strive towards a shared experience, an eagerness to address the disparities between the privileged and suffering, healthy and unhealthy. The majority read as both nakedly personal as well as universal, since so many of the experiences were shared widely, at least in broad terms. For example, Eleanor Fry's "A Distant Memory", featured on BBC radio in April 2020 and published on *poetryandcovidarchive.com* in the first month of the project, considers the paradoxically "shared" plight of lockdown-enforced isolation, with a special emphasis on those less fortunate than the speaker is implied to be:

At night we peer at silhouettes  
Of people we have never met,  
And wonder if they are alone,  
Imprisoned. Caged within their homes.

Each "cage" was of course made of lockdown policy, not iron, but its effect was almost the same as imprisonment for those with a need to shield; those who tested positive were prevented from leaving home at all, concomitantly highlighting inequalities in housing and access to open space. Yes, we were all in it together, but, as this poem and others make clear, some of us were in it more than others.

### ***Solace: nature, poetry and pausing***

Although there was anger and frustration among the first poems published on the website in the summer of 2020, there was also a sense of hope and healthy re-adjustment for an anticipated post-pandemic world. From the start of the project, poetry was used to frame, or re-frame, the world around us in light of social distancing, divisive politics and rising mortality rates. Contributors were drawn to the resilience of ecosystems and the solace found in an enduring sense of local landscapes, anchors of relative stability among unprecedented circumstances. Reflecting on the restrictions of governmental lockdowns, the seemingly unrestricted natural landscape provides a shock of normality, as in Jon Croose's "Sanctuaries" (12/10/20):

No distance here,  
save tree and sky, and silhouette and pheasant cry,  
no mask, save twilight's fading eye,  
no breath to fear,  
just in and out,  
no regulation, harm, or doubt,

just butterfly  
 and cockerel call,  
 red brick, and tile,  
 and ancient wall,  
 and buried plough  
 let fall, of old,  
 and Roman road,  
 and Saxon gold.

The poem forms a long landscape, rich with ancient and modern history, the “buried plough” calling to the comforting rhythms of agriculture – life goes on, just as “twilight’s fading eye” cloaks as easily as it ever has. Nature continues, and poetry as medium provides a home for it. In this sense, “Sanctuaries” represents many of the nature-themed poems published on the site, eager to establish the enduring life and song of nature’s resilience, which, in stark contrast to the vulnerability of humankind, is either oblivious to, or has benefited from, the pandemic.

Other nature poets were more cautious, however. Many UK poets were looking back on the early events of March and April 2020, when the first national lockdown created an eerie pause, the bright scenes of spring tinged with the reminders of a new proximity to death. In Deborah Harvey’s *Mapping the Lockdown in Foxes* (4/11/20), a fox “streams through sleepless gardens”, and “pause[s] to listen/yawn and scratch in thin March sun”, while “An ambulance flickers past in silence”. The juxtaposition between lyrical glimpses of restful, reassuring nature amidst the persistent presence of illness was common to many of the submitted poems. For example, in “Elegy for Easter 2020” (21/4/21), Rachel Clyne write of a similar scenario:

Sparrows are nesting in the firethorn,  
 A woman round the corner struggles  
 To breathe through scarred lungs.

Health is a luxury in many pandemic-nature poems, with poets reflecting on how the landscape is not a simple retreat from the pandemic, but a source of inspiration for coping with it. Themes of the natural world contribute to themes of hope and community.

### **Writing community and hope**

Just as poetry and nature provided models of companionship, beauty and wonder, supporting the re-adjustment of our priorities and place in the world, a sense of solidarity in a shared experience was a common theme throughout the summer and Autumn of 2020, with many poets reflecting on the initial lockdowns. Clyne contextualises her poem, cited above, in an explanatory comment: “I see covid as the start of a tide of transformative challenges we face this century. Earth pressed the pause button”. Indeed, COVID-19 united people in their vulnerability, and it is from this position that change was envisioned in poetry. Everyday acts of kindness were celebrated in the poems, such as shopping for neighbours and supporting local businesses. And yet, stark reminders of wealth disparities were often not far behind. Poets worldwide were keen to acknowledge that the ability to socially distance and self-isolate in comfort was not universally shared, as they explored COVID in prisons, cramped high-rises, impoverished neighbourhoods. Poetry was being used to connect and share both the good and bad, often providing

methods by which to work through the horrors of social inequality and tragedy. Images of COVID struggles in India were common 8 May, when a rail accident took the lives of 15 people, many migrant workers, who were resting on the tracks, as Shikhandin's poem "Track Spill" (11/12/20) reflects:

A year later, perhaps when the fever  
Is past, the bloodstains on the tracks  
Will gleam like glass  
Beneath a May morning.

*Track-Spill* is complemented on the site by many poems commemorating the dead in the context of a hoped-for future in which the pandemic is a distant memory. Through such poems, suffering and death of those displaced by the pandemic become catalysts of change. By creating scenes of reflection on the tribulations of the present and giving perspective to tragedy, the future cannot help but "gleam".

Many poets were keen to emphasise that such suffering is an opportunity for solidarity and social change, a chance for collective resolve. Writing is a vital part of this, sharing the realities of the day, and speculations about what comes next, ie. when the pandemic is over. Bhuwan Thapaliya, a Nepalese poet, explains in a public note supplementing his poem, *The Marching Millions* (16/1/21), that "The weaving of dreams, printing of belief, crafting of tolerance is all done". The notion that writing/weaving and printing/sharing the stories of suffering from the pandemic will lead to a kinder society was common, and highlights poetry's role as both a provider of solace and a method by which to negotiate fear and tribulations. Thapaliya's image of weaving is a pertinent conclusion to those poems declaring a call for home and resilience, the action mirroring the momentum and movement of walking and writing. As Shikhandin suggests, each step, and each poem, becomes a crafting of camaraderie, a steady weaving of strength and hope able to cross borders and oceans. Thapaliya, like many poets engaging with this theme, urges us to stand with those whose lives have been uprooted by the pandemic, no matter where we are in the world: "We are the marching millions. Our journey never ends".

### ***Social distancing, grief and wordplay***

The politics, practicalities and language of social distancing inspired poets throughout the project's 2020–2021 year. Poetry became a safe-space by which to investigate what "social distancing" meant, a mode to explore ideas about solidarity – in particular, the paradox that staying apart can bring people together. Social distancing, in these works, is not just a physical act, but a stance of compassion and humility. It also provided opportunities to engage in poetic play, to marry content and form in innovative ways. Yuan Changming's "Social Distancing: Were I Ever Absent", for example, comprises three "socially-distanced", staggered columns of words. The opening, which steps down across the page, reads:

All human d stances  
Would be d\_stances

The poem continues to take the "i" out of words ("Noth ng", "Ex stence", "L fe", "T me", "H story"), with, perhaps, the shift from "distances" to "stances" being the most striking. By being seen to stay apart, people demonstrate a belief in the pandemic. By getting close to

one another, people become outsiders to that collective effort. In other words, the way we choose to negotiate public spaces becomes a political stance. Even the act of shopping becomes a public display of allegiance. In this way, poetry provides a mode of discourse which is both public and personal. Changming, in an explanatory comment, complained about the “overly politicized” nature of the crisis and urged readers to adopt a more “pacified” attitude. The page becomes an area in which to think and move freely. Negotiating public spaces in a pandemic world demands a re-adjustment of public-responsibility, an awareness of ourselves as potential transmitters of a potentially lethal virus. The stark truth that, in many places, our proximity to others could not only be unlawful, but lethal, is inherently shocking. Poetry, thus, becomes a way of not only reflecting the isolation of social distancing, but an enacted visualisation of it as normalised. The page becomes the safe space in which we can move freely, handling divisive language and even finding humour and play in the cathartic pursuit of our own wellbeing.

Many other poets negotiated the pandemic through comparable wordplay. Michael J. Leach, an Australian epidemiologist, became a firm supporter of the site, submitting multiple batches of poems and commenting on the work of others throughout the project. His visual pieces are striking balances between the science of infection and virus, and social and political reflections on various governments’ reactions (or non-reactions) to the crisis. His poems investigate the language of biology, working from home, quarantine, and political and social conditions, via a range of visual and spatial typography such as in graphs, staggered stanzas and scattered letters. In “The Shape of the Virus” (19/7/20), his use of language mirrors the spiked virus images that became ubiquitous via the media.

Spike  
g  
p  
Recently, my  
sense of sight has been flooded  
with various artist’s impressions of the novel  
coronavirus. It is as though virion balls are all I see.  
Those spherical, viral pincushions are fully punctured with  
spike glycoproteins (gps). The shape of these particular proteins  
is perfectly suited to binding with viral receptors on our bodily cells  
like keys in locks, so as to inject the virion’s genetic contents in aid of  
survival – replication & transmission. It’s so scientific and microscopic.  
The shape of this virion is also symbolic when it becomes macroscopic.  
Sometimes I wonder if it’d be worth annotating all those stylised virus  
decorations on news bulletins with scientific information in plain  
language. Then all members of the public might develop a basic  
understanding of the image flooding their senses of sight.  
We might all come to appreciate how much more  
dangerous this virus is than a spher-  
ical pincushion.  
p  
g  
Spike

This play of language and form, in which the over-familiar “spherical pincushion” of the virus is rendered perfectly legible, is a product of writing through frustration. The gap between what many scientists were predicting is presented alongside the actions of a world heading inexorably into a multi-wave global pandemic. The spiked virus shape that flooded our screens may have become a known given, but its biology and consequences remained largely unknown: an image used as a backdrop to news rather than news itself. Leach seeks to re-assert the image of the virus and convey its significance in a down-to-earth simile: the virus binding “like keys in locks”. Poems such as these search the boundaries of form for an effective medium by which to convey (and comment on) confusion. The innovative form houses a special solace, the “shape” of the virus being manipulated in the safety of the page rather than invisibly encountered in the streets.

In this way, poets began to close the distance or disconnect between the mortality rates and the individuals they represented. Poetry was used to work through grief: to write elegies for loved ones, or give life and perspective to the figures reported in the news. Perhaps surprisingly, though, a high proportion of these elegiac poems are calm: full of sentiment, but analytical in a manner that eschews sentimentality. They are simultaneously aware both of personal and universal fears and hopes, even as they fall devastatingly out of alignment. Phil Vernon, in “Re-reading *La Peste* in the Time of Covid-19” (4/9/20), writes:

When we'd begun to learn the art of joy again  
and rediscovered how to walk in crowds,  
and ring the bells, a close friend died:  
a soldier fallen,  
as news of the armistice arrived.

Joy and peace are hard-won and ostensibly universal, however painful our personal griefs. Compare this to Jessica Tsun Lem's “Cure”, in which she refers to “hope of a vaccine” complicated by the “gnawing pain” of her father who died a week before vaccines became available. Or Alwyn Marriage's “708 Today” (25/8/20), in which she refers to the daily UK death toll as the first wave abated: in late April 2020:

fewer  
than yesterday, which  
  
sounds encouraging,  
unless, of course, the 708th  
was someone you loved.

My brother, for instance [...].

The enjambment does a lot of work here, as we move from the horrific yet contextually positive statistic to the reminder that each number is a death, and finally to the specific human subject. As he lay in hospital, “hope rose / and fell in us like the oxygen / being pumped in and out of his lungs”: eventually, it was exhausted. These enjambments also keep us poised between two experiences: that of the brother, and that of the speaker and other relatives. The first exacerbates the rising and falling of both hope



and the laboured breath of the dying, and the second emphasises that this oxygen must be forced in mechanically, unnaturally, by ventilator.

The poem remains incongruously calm considering what it describes. The same can be said for Robina Afzal's "14/1/21", which focuses on the lack of ceremony following a COVID-death during lockdown, and the enforced inability of mourners to comfort one another fully: "no hugs, no tears, / just a white plastic bag with some clothes and a phone in it". The inability to attend funerals in person is a theme common to several poems on the site, and again the tone of these poems is frequently analytical, as though they are exercises in ostensibly keeping calm and carrying on, by writers simultaneously aware of collective and personal endeavours and keen to acknowledge both. In Sarah Bingham's "Grief ... Interrupted", we read: "I had thought at your last service / I would be surrounded ... [by] companions sharing my grief". And in Laura Glenn's "Zoom Funeral", the mourners appear as "a sheet of commemorative stamps" – gathered more tightly than they could be in life, but only virtually, which is to say not at all: "together, / sans hugs, food, schmooze". Again, the enjambment highlights the separation: first by pretending companionship, then by undermining that across the line break by listing some of what is lost. Indeed, in this virtual "togetherness" they are able more easily to hide their true feelings, as people are wont to do, and against the best interests that would be forced on them in non-virtual company:

I square my shaking shoulders.  
The song ends. Composed,  
I smile at my family, then  
our windows blacken.

Shivani Sharma's "Not a goodbye, a see you later, papa" is also movingly restrained, and addresses the deceased: a common trait of elegies, continuing in verse one side of a conversation that can no longer be had in person. Sharma is an Indian student in the US, who returned to Delhi when her father contracted the virus; he died. Her poem evokes both the rule of threes and the Biblical nativity (and trinity), but rather than eventual solution and triumph it finds disaster: "that first hospital turned us away saying they had no oxygen", "the second" also "turned us down", and "the third place declared you dead". The poem then moves through self-reproach – "You sent me away for a better life and I came back only when you were in pain" – to a hope for spiritual reunion, in which the father remains as paraclete: "maybe you will again hold my hand, place it in yours and guide me".

"Last Hug" by Stephen Daws is dedicated to a "dear friend who died of COVID-19". As well as this personal grief, Daws has been affected by the pandemic through his job as an employment law specialist for the Citizen's Advice Bureau. The poem plaits together grief, empathy and an anxious feeling from a keyworker that the impediments of the time prevent him from rising to the occasion: we have the funeral "watched", not attended, "from the sunny corner of the dining room"; the "gusty" (not the more expected "gutsy") "whoop of an unfamiliar, vulnerable neighbour" rising through the weekly "clap of gratitude" for the NHS, which "ebbs, surges, peaks and moves, / like a virus" (note again the enjambment, which delays then highlights the comparison); and finally the speaker's "dutiful tongue" and "fingers", which "dispatch words / to remote strangers"



with enforced clinicality. Sometimes, the best way to improve your mental health is to reckon directly, without adornment, with what is affecting it.

Throughout all these poems, writing becomes a way of regaining control and communication in a divided, uncertain world. There's as much hope as there is fear, and these contrasting opposites, brought so close and interchangeable by the shifting uncertainties of a global pandemic, are explored in both personal and public contexts. The benefits of writing poetry are two-fold: to find solace in the enduring and unrestricted space of the page and language, and to re-examine the world and its politics in light of "the new normal". The poems exist as reinforcements of personal exploration and validations of public platforms (in this case, the website). These are poems which offer a patchwork of private attempts to recover, as well as documents of collective, communal care.

## Discussion/conclusions and implications

The *poetrandcovidarchive.com* website provided an opportunity for people around the world to read pandemic-related poetry and to publish their own poetry. Both reading and writing poetry, and the website as platform, were noted as supporting health and well-being, with many participants referring to feeling more connected to the wider community, having increased self-value, and an easing of common mental health symptoms (feelings of loneliness, isolation, anxiety). The distinction between the reading and writing of poetry and the value of website to health and wellbeing (as individual components) is difficult to meaningfully segregate based on the data. Qualitative comments variously referred to each as being meaningful and significant; as one person emailed the organisers: "Poetry is at once intimate/personal and also public". It is likely that tethering poetry to a community-building platform (in this case the website) is responsible for the most positive relationship between poetry and wellbeing. It may be inferred that not just poetry, but other modes of creative and/or expressive writing, may positively affect health. It may further be inferred that the wider arts (visual, performance, etc.) may also support well-being. Finally, community platforms, of whatever their nature may well be a significant implied factor in health and wellbeing. The fact that the survey took place during the pandemic (and a series of lockdowns) should be taken into consideration, however, since people were often removed from their common reality. It is likely that the pandemic exacerbated the conditions of crisis and unwellness, thus exacerbating the "need" for poetry and the *poetryandcovidarchive.com* website to serve a positive therapeutic purpose.

## Notes

1. Opelka (2020).
2. Salfia (2020).
3. Carroll (2020). "More than 1,000 people have died and the long lockdown, which begins to ease from Monday, has kept others apart, but Ireland has found at least one comfort in the time of coronavirus: poetry ..."
4. Murakama (2021).
5. For a summary of how pre-pandemic arts interventions support health and wellbeing, see Jensen and Bonde (2018).
6. Outside of *The Journal of Poetry Therapy*, other articles include: Zhang (2021), Giovanelli (2022), and Virgil and Gallagher (2021).

7. Sharma (2021, 2023).
8. Acim (2021).
9. Blundell and Poole (2023). For more on how poetry workshops “can serve as an effective antidote to loneliness and the health complications that social isolation brings”, see Xiang and Yi (2020).
10. Van Dijk (2020). Of note: Acim cites Van Dijk in the aforementioned article (p. 68).
11. Public Health England (2016).

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Dr. Rory Waterman (Nottingham Trent University, UK) was the co-investigator.

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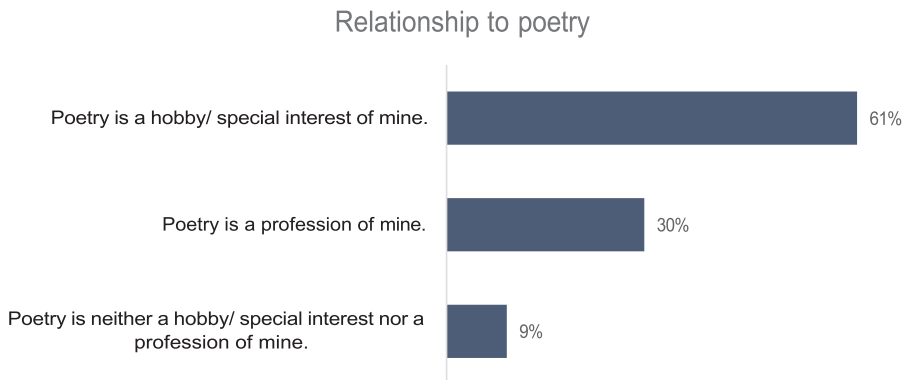
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## Appendix: Additional poetryandcovidarchive.com survey results

All members of the public who visited the poetryandcovid.com website (now archived as poetryandcovidarchive.com) were invited to complete the “Poetry and Covid Reader Survey”, to provide an understanding of how and why they came to use the website and what impact doing so had on them. A total of 400 responses were received.

### Who were the readers?

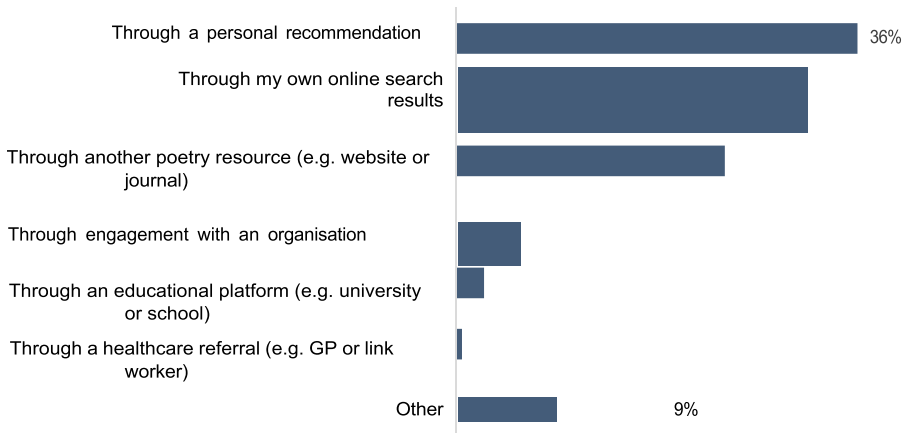
As shown in the chart below, for the majority of readers, poetry was a hobby/special interest (61%). For almost a third (30%), it was their profession.



### How did readers find out about the website?

Respondents were asked to indicate how they found out about the Poetry and Covid website. Through a personal recommendation and through an online search were the most commonly cited responses (36%; and 32% respectively). A further 24% of respondents found the website through another poetry resource, such as a journal or other website. For the 9% of respondents who selected “other”, almost half found out about it via social media, with many citing the platforms Facebook and Twitter.

### How readers found out about the website

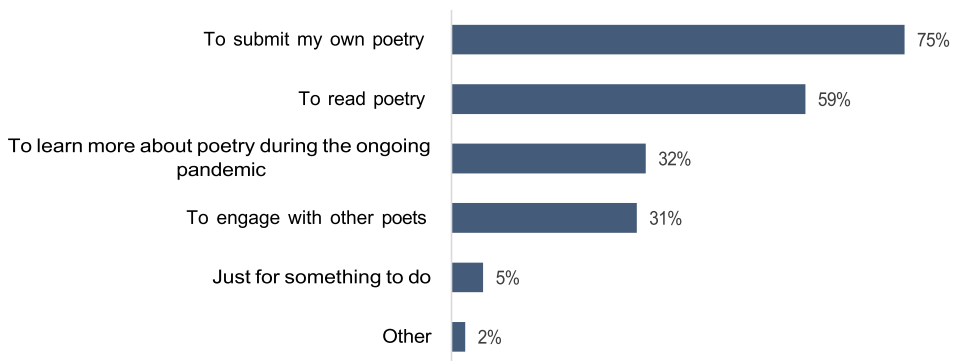


NB: Multiple response question

### Why did readers choose to visit the website?

The key motivators for visiting the website were to submit one’s own poetry and to read poetry (75% and 59% respectively). Just under one third of visitors wanted to learn more about poetry during the ongoing pandemic and to engage with other poets (32% and 31% respectively).

### Motivations for visiting the website

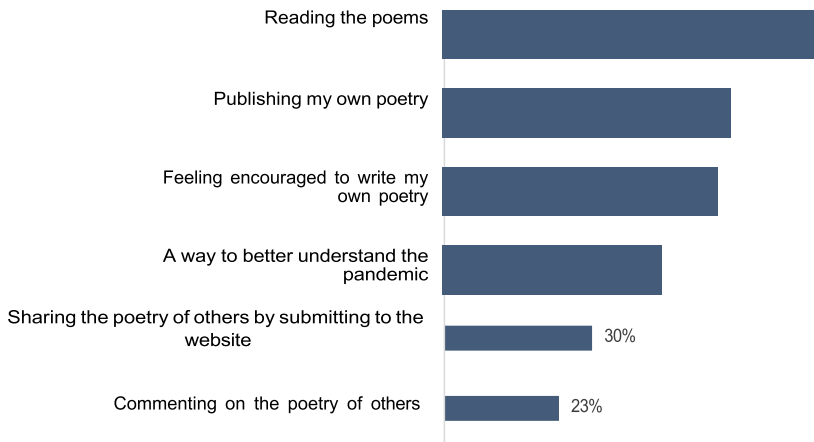


NB: Multiple response question

### What experience was important to those that visited the website?

Visitors were asked to state what experience was important to them when visiting the website. Just over three quarters (77%) highlighted that reading the poems was important in their experience of the website. Publishing their own poetry (59%) and feeling encouraged to write their own poetry (56%), were also felt to be important. For just under half (45%) of respondents, it was important to help them find a way to better understand the pandemic.

### What was important to website visitors

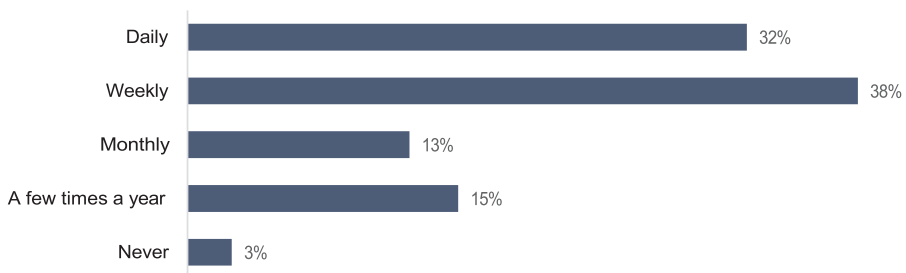


NB: Multiple response question

### ***What effect did the Poetry and Covid website have on reading and/or writing poetry?***

Over two thirds of participants read and/or wrote poetry at least weekly before visiting the website (70%). Only 3% of readers had never read and/or wrote poetry prior to visiting the website.

### Frequency of reading and/ or writing poetry prior to visiting the website



For almost a quarter of respondents (23%), visiting the website had already resulted in them reading and/ or writing more poetry, and a further third believed they would read and/or write more poetry in the future as a result. This demonstrates the value of the website for encouraging individuals to engage with poetry more often.

### Impact on frequency of reading and/ or writing poetry

