

Whitney

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It turns out that the science behind poetry's effect on the brain is very similar to that of music, causing shivers up the spine, linking music and poetry to reward and emotion.

Celebrated bilingual poet Rhina Espaillat, winner of national and international awards including the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Richard Wilbur Prize and the Robert Frost "Tree at My Window" Award, first heard poetry as music long before she understood the words of spoken poetry. Espaillat's poetic sensibilities began with sound, intonation, inflection, rhythm, pace – all elements of music. Dominican-born, Espaillat is not just bilingual – she lives the melodies of both her native and acquired tongues. A master at translation of verse, she not only translates words, she incorporates the meter, and rhyme in both languages!

Wordsworth: "I wander'd lonely as a cloud / that floats on high o'er vales and hills, / when all at once I saw a crowd, / a host of golden daffodils...."

In his article "This is What Happens to Your Brain When You Read Poetry" Cody Delistraty reports about a "goose bump" study done by Eugen Wassiliwizky, at the Max Planck Institute For Empirical Aesthetics, to explore just how poetical pleasure happens. When they measured heart rate, and facial expressions via the "goosescam," of those listening to familiar

metrical poetry, they found every person experienced "chills" with 40% showing visible goose bumps, similar to responses of those listening to music, film soundtracks or watching emotional scenes in movies.

They also found something unique to poetry. Neurological scans showed that listening to poems activated part of the brain not activated by music or movies. Evidently, part of poetry's pleasure power involves a slow-building "pre-chill" experience due to anticipation, similar to what might happen in anticipation of unwrapping a chocolate bar. In fact, skin conductance data showed that emotions were already being stirred, as much as 4.5 seconds before participants pressed a button to indicate they were feeling chills.

Longfellow: "I shot an arrow into the air / It fell to earth, I know not where..."

The pre-chills and chills "triggers" correlated with poetic form itself, firing at closing positions in a poem, ends of stanzas, and at the end of the entire poem – suggesting that poetic form itself creates anticipation and induces pleasure.

I am fortunate to study poetry with award-winning Alfred Nicol whom I met at the Old Orchard Beach Writers workshop. I will never forget how he explained the most surprising aspect of poetic form – the idea that form was not embellishment, or an exo-skeleton added on, or something forced into something else. Instead, form acted like an endoskeleton that comes from inside the poem that

has yet to be. Form puts the poet on a journey to find that exact turn of phrase that will melt into the poem as if it was already there. Form "knows" in an ancient way, has its own presence, its own set of physical sounds and sensations, which is why Rhina recalls responding to the music of words she did not yet understand.

Is there a difference in reading a poem out loud?

Metrical poetry was most likely the oldest ancient form of human literature, its roots going back before written language when poems were passed down in oral traditions – a fact that suggests poetry has a primal stronghold on human cognition and emotion. Annie Finch, in her article "Listening To Poetry" refers to The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind in which Julian Jaynes distinguishes between the "left-brain or free verse brain" and the "right brain or metrical brain" – that in one instance we read a poem like prose, and in other, we hear it like music.

Frost: "Whose woods these are I think I know. / His house is in the village, though. / He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow. ..."

Form also provides a direct link from the poet to the reader/listener – a blueprint and compass that specs exact timber and tempo – for reading the poem, giving clues about how to hear the poem. Finch: "The meter itself guides, and the inner or outer ear has only to hear." Form provides a way for us to "channel" or "unlock" the poem

– by following the poet's embedded message that is not there in free verse.

In other words, poetry is not just metaphysical – it is physical – so there is a fundamental distinction between simply reading poetry and reading it out loud. Spoken words resonate – they vibrate and fill the inner recesses of our minds, transcending reading, thinking and understanding

As T.S. Eliot famously argued: "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is 'understood.'"

A magnificent sculpture of Robert Frost hidden in the woods, on a knoll behind the Observatory at Dartmouth College, exquisitely conveys the metaphysical and physical aspects of poetry – how a poem can be new and old at the same time. George Lundeen crafted an older visage of Frost on a younger country farmer's body, sitting with his lap board on a rock, about to pen Mending Wall. In this moment, Frost is both old and new, meditation and introspection simultaneously, like the way we take in the vibrations and sounds of a familiar poem.

But even science cannot fully measure the effect of poetry "out loud" because it spills out something else, a sense of a deeper mystery, the great unknown that cannot be found with a scan.

The familiar poems interspersed here appear on Meera Kurup's award-winning app, only available for Apple devices. It can be found by searching "ALZSPoetry" in the App Store or through this direct link: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/alzsp poetry/id1367758516?mt=8>.