



Literature and Mental Health: Reading for Wellbeing

Welcome to Week 1: Stress

Paula Byrne: I'm quite interested in this idea that reading a poem is like going into an oasis of calm, that there's all the chaos out there and all the angst and the stress. However, the actual physical act of reading a poem or piece of prose can calm us down, can make us feel relaxed, can make this us composed, can make us focused.

Jonathan Bate: Yeah. I think it's about slowing down and being in the moment. The thing about poetry and other great writing is the writers take great care to compose their words carefully. The great writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said that good writing was putting words in the best order, and poetry is putting the best words in the best order. If we read slowly, whether in our heads or aloud, or perhaps both, we focus down on the poem. We go into the moment and the very act of reading can itself reduce our stress levels.

Paula Byrne: So Jonathan, what are we going to begin with?

Jonathan Bate: Well, we're going to begin with a huge treat. Later in the course, the great actor Ian McKellen is going to be talking to us about King Lear. However, while I was down speaking to him by the River Thames, I slipped him a poem and asked him to read it for us. Just have a listen to this.

Ian McKellen

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This city now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

W. Wordsworth (1770–1850)

Jonathan Bate: That was Sir Ian McKellen reading William Wordsworth's sonnet 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge'. We'll be talking to Ian later in the course about the stress of

dealing with old age, caring for the old, the stress of retirement and questions of dementia in relation to his playing the part of Shakespeare's King Lear. But he was reading that poem for us by the River Thames just downstream from where Wordsworth wrote it in the year 1802. Wordsworth wrote it at dawn, early morning, before the noise and bustle of the city. We didn't quite have that experience because it was in the afternoon and you could hear the lapping of the water and a fair bit of background sound. But still, I think one got the sense of the calm that Wordsworth evokes so beautifully in the poem. It was written at a stressful time in Wordsworth's life. He and his sister Dorothy had come to London on the way to go down to the coast to take the cross-channel ferry to where he was going to visit his former mistress, a French woman called Annette Vallon and the daughter Caroline that Annette had borne to him – he hadn't seen the daughter for many, many years. It was in a way to say goodbye to his former lover and his daughter before he got married himself. So this moment of calm, just being on the bridge, seeing all the different parts of the city, the theatres, the churches, the shops, and everything quiet, the mighty heart of the city lying still and Wordsworth writes that he'd never seen, never felt a calm so deep.

Paula, it's an especially important poem for you, as well, isn't it? One of Wordsworth's poems that you most admire.

Paula Byrne: It's a beautiful poem because it forces you to stop. There's just something about that very slow rhythm and the silence. So although theatres, shops are noisy places usually, what's so wonderful about this poem is it's written at the time in the early morning when those noisy places are really quiet. However, it just forces you to slow down. It's so beautifully phrased and so beautifully written.

Jonathan Bate: It's written in the form of a sonnet, which itself is a very compressed form with a rhyme scheme, a regularity. It's called 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' and I sometimes wonder whether the word composed there has a double sense, composed in the sense of the act of writing, but also a moment where you are composed.

Paula Byrne: Oh, I absolutely agree, but also, isn't there an interesting story about Dorothy's place in this? Because she also wrote about – in a way that she did with *Daffodils* – he used the journals to write the poem, to put it in the form of the poem. However, isn't it also true that Dorothy wrote about this morning.

Jonathan Bate: Yes, it is. That's absolutely right. Dorothy, William Wordsworth's sister, recorded this moment in her journal and as on a number of occasions, William then recreated as a poem an experience, a set of feelings that actually had been first observed for him by his sister.

Paula Byrne: So it's a wonderful sort of symbiosis or synergy between the two that she writes about this in her journal. But it's what he does with... I'm fascinated by this and their relationship because it's what he does with those words that puts it... you talked about composure, composing, putting it into a form. So it's not just simply the words in the journal, he's doing something – It's the alchemy, I suppose is what I'm trying to say. Would you agree with that?

Jonathan Bate: Yeah. I think that's right. However, I think not all of us are poets like William Wordsworth. Not all of us can convert an experience into poetry in the way that he does, but all of us can do what Dorothy does, which is just make a note in a journal of a moment of particular calm, or a moment where your heart is lifted up by seeing something beautiful. The act of writing, like the act of reading poetry, can itself perhaps be a form of stress management.