

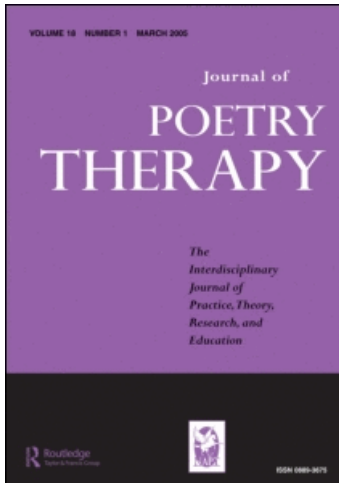
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# Healing the pain of infertility through poetry

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*The experience of infertility can lead to individual emotional distress and problematic relationships. The acts of writing and reading poetry on this issue serve to synthesize and release intense emotions including loss, betrayal, frustration, and anger. The author chose to examine a number of themes both within and across poems that appeared poignant in their relationship to infertility: women's bodies, social obligations, feeling like an outsider, grief, relationship deterioration, and resolution.*

**Keywords** *Grief; infertility; poetry; women; writing*

From religious prescriptions of “Be fruitful and multiply” to Henry VIII and Napoleon’s alleged abandonment of their partners for their failure to produce an heir to the execution of women in the developing world for suspected infertility, child bearing has been viewed throughout the ages as essential not only to the social and political life of a society but also to the survival of a species (Diamond, Kezur, Meyers, Scharf & Windshel, 1999). Mathews (1991) maintained that in the modern age, couples marry with the expectation of having children and as part of their “suitable-mate criteria” the person’s potential to parent. When a child is not forthcoming, infertility often is a life crisis for both the couple and the individual.

Infertility is defined as the inability to conceive a pregnancy after a year or more of regular intercourse without contraceptives or the inability to carry a pregnancy to live birth (*Merck Manual, 1992*). Infertility is subdivided into primary and secondary infertility. Primary infertility indicates that no pregnancies have occurred to live birth; secondary infertility denotes failure to conceive following one or more pregnancies carried to live birth. Estimated prevalence rates range from between one out of six and one out of 10 married couples (Daniluk, 1991; Edelman & Connolly, 1986; Forrest & Gilbert, 1992; Williams, Bischoff & Ludes, 1992). Numerous treatment options exist today and include fertility drugs, artificial insemination, *in-vitro* fertilization, egg and sperm donation, and *in-vitro* maturation, each with varying success rates.

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Infertility entails a number of losses, which occur repeatedly throughout the life cycle. Typical losses include: creating a genetically related child along with the associated experiences of pregnancy, for example, breastfeeding, purchasing baby clothes, arranging a nursery, carrying on a family name that links the past to the future, creating a child with one's partner, attending celebrations (baby shower, birthdays, graduations), and having grandchildren (Inhorn & van Balen, 2002). Developmental losses include the lack of the childbearing stage within the lifecycle and meeting life goals. Physical losses include privacy around the couple's sexual relationship, loss of faith in one's body, and control over one's life. Couples suffering from infertility lose the sense that the world is a just place and that life is meaningful (Diamond *et al.*, 1999). In addition, couples experiencing infertility typically do not feel part of a child-centered community (schools, community centers, playgrounds, children playing on the street) and also experience the anticipatory loss of not knowing whether or not they will ever have children (Sandelowski, 1993). These losses, unlike stillbirth or the death of a child, are intangible and generally remain unseen or unrecognized by those outside the affected couple.

Themes of loss, grief, and psychological distress saturate the research literature regarding infertility (Blake, 2002). Several authors have attempted to capture the phases or stages of grief, similar to those put forth by Kubler-Ross. Frias and Wilson (1985) distinguished between two separate phases with the first characterized by shock, anxiety, and denial and the second involving anger, blame, guilt, sadness, despair, and depression. Daniluk (1991) examined stages of surprise, denial, isolation, anger, guilt, unworthiness, depression, and grief while Diamond, Kezur, Meyers, Scharf & Windshel (1999), in qualitative interviews with infertile couples, spelled out five phases including dawning, mobilization, immersion (early, middle, late), resolution, and legacy. Burke, Hainsworth, Eakes and Lindgren (1992) described the experience of infertility as "chronic sorrow" which is an "intense, recurring sadness" and "serves as a constant reminder of the loss" (pp. 231–232). The cyclical nature of loss is captured by Forrest and Gilbert (1992) who note that phases do not occur in a set order and "recycling through phases is common" (p. 44), particularly during menstruation, anniversaries, holidays, and interaction with family members who have children (Conway & Valentine, 1998).

The arts have long served as a vehicle for individuals to express intense emotions of sadness and despair. Poetry, in particular, can vocalize the grief of infertility and crystallize the myriad emotions experienced by the individual or couple. Writing poetry creates a landscape for relating to a painful human experience and compresses experiences into the expression of words (Szto, Furman & Langer, 2005). Barney (1992) postulated that poetry may serve as a mechanism to work through grief and explore difficult emotions. Some speculate that an author writing from a personal experience of infertility is able to create a surrogate child through their words, a common metaphor described by Minh-ha (1999) as "writing-as-birth-delivering-labor-concept" (p. 262). Capturing emotions and experiences on the page can serve a therapeutic purpose by providing a new perspective on loss and enabling individuals the opportunity to enter fully into the pain of involuntary childlessness. Chance (1988) aptly described the relationship between pain and resolution: "we

must be enveloped by pain. We must receive it into our minds and undertake the responsibility of it if we would ever free ourselves from it” (p. 96). In addition, exploring the poetry from an author who has shared the same experience may help detract from the solitary nature of personal pain, as is often the case with infertility, and may provide expression for poorly understood feelings of one’s experience. Viewing the pain of another human through the medium of poetry can provide healing of one’s own painful emotions and experiences. As a therapist working with individuals, couples and families, the author encourages clients to write their thoughts and emotions in poetic or prose form, as this exercise can be cathartic and helps release clients from negative ruminations. Clients with an artistic temperament may appreciate the opportunity to project their pain onto an artistic medium.

Poetry has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity through community and literary poetry readings as well as the abundance of poetry writing by both professional and novice authors. Researchers are also recognizing the benefits of using poetry as a tool for social inquiry. Richardson (1992) used poetry to describe the life histories and capture the “lived experience” of unwed mothers through the compression of life narrative interviews and the parsing of key words and phrases. Poindexter (2002) developed research poems to examine the relationship of HIV patients and their caregivers. Other developments in the use of poetry include auto ethnographic research to explore the emotional dynamics of friendship loss (Furman, 2004) as well as the stress of completing a doctoral dissertation (Chan, 2003).

The gendered nature of the following poets may reflect the gendered response to infertility. McEwan, Costello and Taylor (1987), in measuring psychological distress of infertile couples, found distress affected 37.3% of women and 1% of men. However, Frias and Wilson (1985) noted that variation in distress levels between men and women may reflect the socialization of grief responses between men and women and not the degree of sadness experienced. What is more, the cyclical and rhythmic nature of menstruation is both a visual and physical reminder of infertility on a monthly basis and may lead to a depressive reaction among women. The author chose to examine a number of themes both within and across poems that appeared poignant in their relationship to infertility: women’s bodies, social obligations, feeling like an outsider, grief, relationship deterioration, and resolution.

## **Women’s bodies**

### **Forty, Trembling**

She bore no children  
but ghosts emerged  
from between her legs. (Blake, 1994, p. 101)

### **Land of the Living**

...  
Once again, I have given up  
the having of children,  
and celebrate instead  
a monthly flowering  
... (Norris, 2002, p. 203)

The above poems (excerpts) by Rose (1994) and Norris (1995) respectively, reflect on women's bodies as the vehicle for menstruation, conception, and birth. The emptiness of women's bodies is apparent throughout the poems with intimations that they are not of this world. There is some acceptance in the final poem that the author will never bear children; however, the act of acceptance is repetitious and described as "once again."

### **Social obligations**

#### **Family funeral**

...  
"You all need a bunch of kids."  
...  
"You need some sense,"  
Is what I want to say.  
...  
I wonder if this cousin  
Also asks blind people for their favorite color. (Blake, 2002, p. 202)

#### **Newborn**

...  
Only now I have to see him,  
...  
I prepare myself,  
...  
Until I rock him  
And a friend remarks  
"You seem like a natural." (Blake, 2002, pp. 203–204)

These two poems (excerpts) by Blake (2002) examine the reality of dealing with insensitive family members and meeting social obligations involving children when coping with the experience of infertility. The first poem is tinged with humour that covers feelings of anger and frustration. Balancing the joy of a new mother with a

devastating personal loss is evident in the second poem. The decision not to attend the baby shower serves to protect the author but also to isolate her from others. In the end, she must brace herself for meeting the child.

## **Grief**

### **Diffusion of Grief**

Grief unobserved  
Diffuse

No memories to concretize  
... (Blake, 2002, p. 201)

Evidence of depression and grief are observed in this poem (excerpt) by Blake (2002), written before a medical diagnosis of the factors contributing to infertility. What is poignant is the lack of physical loss commonplace during infertility. Unlike other losses where memories were left behind, infertility denotes a grief “unobserved.” Because there are no answers to the author’s questions, this contributes to the silence surrounding infertility.

### **Diagnosed**

September 27, 1995—

...

The remainder of my life will be defined by this day.

... The empty, bottomless flood  
Of drowning tears. (Blake, 2002, p. 203).

Blake (2002) identifies the date she received a diagnosis of an irreversible medical reason for her infertility. Intense grief reactions of shock and depression are apparent through the words “empty” and “bottomless.” Perhaps as a coping mechanism, the author dawns the persona of “a puppet” in order to fulfill her daytime duties. Grief is allowed within the privacy and safety of her home.

### **Summer Night**

I thought last summer  
That after almost two years

Of trying and wanting  
I was pregnant.  
I was wrong.  
(Blake, 2002, p. 201)

The above poem (excerpt) reflects the state of chronic grief felt by many couples experiencing infertility over a period of years. Anger, frustration, and disappointment are evident.

### **Relationship deterioration**

#### **I Get My Period, September 1964**

How can I forgive you this blood?  
Which was not to flow again, but to cling joyously to my womb  
To grow, and become a son?

When I turn to you in the night, you sigh, and turn over  
... (DiPrima, 1975, p. 51)

In the above poem (excerpt), DiPrima parallels the start of her menstrual cycle with the relationship with her partner. Menstruation belies the absence of the much-desired son. The flow of blood and life potential from her body symbolizes failed attempts to connect with her partner.

### **Resolution**

#### **That Night There Was Full Moon, Little Cloud**

...

She sees. She tells me I am beautiful.  
That I'll never have children, but a song  
for every child I might have ...  
The moon's strong pull will claim as a daughter. No blame.  
No wrong. (Meehan, 2000, p. 14)

Meehan (2000) describes a conversation between grandmother and granddaughter following a reading of the granddaughter's future. The vision presages a future of childlessness for the granddaughter but resolution and procreation through the writing of song. She concludes that there is "No blame, No wrong" in her situation.

### **March Afternoon**

...  
I think about my husband,  
My work,  
The cats—  
I've seen first-hand that life offers goodness,  
  
Offers hope. (Blake, 2002, p. 203)

This poem was written before receiving a medical diagnosis. The author continues to display some evidence of depression but the concluding lines reveal the beginning of a resolution. The author also presents a balanced perspective of children.

### **Infertility Group**

...  
Several of us in a room once a week,  
...  
  
you pick your way through the serious, uninhabited mountains.  
Smaller now, and smaller,  
but never out of my sight. (Bernstein, 2001, p. 12)

Bernstein achieves resolution to her experience of infertility through the longed for pregnancy and childbirth. The author notes being “rescued” thus implying that, her former group members continue to remain lost and adrift. Bernstein (2001) describes being “dragged into life” which implies that life only begins with the birth of a child.

### **The Desert**

I'm going to survive—  
...  
At least now I have a name,  
Have a reason.  
...  
Let me be.  
Let me heal. (Blake, 2002, p. 204)

The above poem (excerpt) reflects a survival spirit of the author who now knows the cause of her infertility. It is unclear if having the “name” and “reason” for her infertility is facilitating the author’s ability to move forward but the final two lines are indicative of her potential to journey toward resolution.



### Springtime

...  
It is her that I first realize  
That for the most part I've healed.

...  
I take my husband's hand.  
I am loved.  
I am happy. (Blake, 2002, pp. 204–205)

### Untitled

...  
I cannot have a child.

...  
But I can love,  
Share life, be.  
... (Blake, 2002, p. 205)

In the first poem, Blake uses the metaphor of the wounded bird as a personal metaphor. She will still achieve happiness in spite of the experience of infertility and draws from the love she receives from her husband. In the second poem, written five years after a diagnosis of infertility, Blake refuses to be defined by the term “infertility” and notes the divergence between an absence of life and an ability to love and to share life. The themes of resolution are evident in these last two poems.

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