

Beyond the Microscope: How AIDS Poetry Exposed the Social and Personal Implications of Disease in American Society

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Abstract

Illness constitutes some of the most disturbing aspects of the human experience and is highly stigmatized as a result. This attitude towards illness impacts the (in)frequency with which it is discussed, portrayed, and explored across art and media, including in poetry. When examining the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic, this phenomenon is blatantly paired with the historical subjugation of marginalized groups within the American healthcare system. The AIDS epidemic—initially ignored due to the stigmas surrounding it—claimed the lives of thousands of Americans and eventually opened the door to discussions regarding equality, the LGBTQIA+ community, and racial justice within the medical field. My research seeks to explore how this discussion emerged from and impacted the world of poetry. I first discuss how illness poetry has traditionally been regarded compared to other forms of poetry, then launch into a case study analysis of three poets who experienced and wrote about the AIDS epidemic in America from different lenses: Tory Dent, Essex Hemphill, and Mark Doty. In doing so, I demonstrate that AIDS poetry acts as a tool for patient care and relief, a medium of social and political advocacy, and a precedent for other subgenres of illness poetry.

Introduction

i try to take the Truth in my teeth.
grind on it. stroke my tongue over it.
anything to change the Outcome.
but free will won't save me from this Sentence

- "Under the Microscope," Chidubem Nwosu (2024)

I began using poetry as a coping method after being diagnosed with traction alopecia during my freshman year of high school. The elaborate techniques and styles used to maintain my Afro-textured hair had always intrigued me, even more so after I began treatment for traction alopecia; the reality of having to bid farewell to the patterned cornrows and proud Afros of my childhood left me feeling distraught. As a result, I was driven to develop a deeper understanding of the social implications underlying my condition within the Black community. The following year, I spent the speech and debate competition season speaking about how social stigmas surrounding Afro-textured hair have forced Black women like me to use unhealthy, dangerous hair products like hydrogen peroxide, which often lead to traction alopecia. Countless hours of research eventually culminated in the construction of a dramatic script consisting of Black women's narratives expressed through films, newspapers, and poems. The ability to creatively learn, then teach, about my hair condition allowed me to more easily come to terms with my traction

alopecia. The fruits of my poetic pursuits are also cherished by thousands of individuals suffering from other illnesses. This phenomenon begs the question: How does poetry explore the social and personal implications underlying illness?

Poetry and Chronic Illness: A Long-Term Relationship

For centuries, poetry has served as a primary method of communication for individuals suffering from a wide array of medical conditions and chronic illnesses. Julia M. Wright of the Royal Society of Canada references how “war” was often used as a metaphor for the COVID-19 outbreak (2020). Dr. Majda Khoury of The Medical Republic claims that ancient Arab poets like the 7th century poet Labeed use imagery and the metaphor of death to personify rheumatic diseases like osteoporosis and Parkinson’s Disease. Such poems sit in stark juxtaposition to magnum opuses of their time like Homer’s long epic poem *The Odyssey* and poems on philogyny by Sappho (Khoury, 2022). While people generally marvel at adventure-filled and romantic poems, they tend to frown upon poetry about illness and suffering because it calls attention to the uglier, yet inevitable, aspects of life (Linder, 2016). However, in recent decades, poetry on illness has been recognized as uniquely insightful and reliable, so much so that it has become a popular genre of its own. Specifically, following the initial outbreak of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in the United States in 1981, poetry emerged as a first responder in the absence of tangible medical and political aid, paving the path toward normalizing poetry on chronic illness (Buddhdev, 2020).

AIDS is the final, most severe stage of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), an illness characterized by the destruction of one’s T-cells. Often referred to as “helper cells,” T-cells primarily serve to eradicate pathogens that have invaded the body. Without T-cells, an individual is susceptible to life-threatening infections from viruses as common as the flu. AIDS occurs when the immune system has been substantially impaired. Despite the infamously aggressive nature of this disease, politicians and healthcare professionals initially refused to acknowledge it due to its almost immediate classist, racial, and sexual connotations. In fact, it took President Reagan until the conclusion of his first term in office (1981–1985) to even say the word “AIDS” publicly and an additional year before finally allocating government funds towards AIDS relief and research.

In a world where the conversation surrounding the AIDS crisis is often marred by complacency and negative social implications, poetry serves as a call to action that forces audience members to acknowledge the multifaceted reality of AIDS and its effects on patients (Stephens, 2022). Individuals affected by AIDS have utilized poetry to urge American society to acknowledge the danger the disease poses. As a result, poetry has served as an efficient combatant to homophobic and racist media rhetoric, which has contributed to countless complacent deaths associated with AIDS and disproportionately affected Black/African, Latinx, and LGBTQIA+ communities. Consequently, in contrast to centuries past, poetry on AIDS has now been recognized by scholars and advocates as a primary source and adapted into numerous academic fields including the medical humanities, nursing care, psychology, social justice, and history (Keisler, 2023). This paper is a case study on three of the most influential figures within the AIDS poetry genre: Tory Dent, Essex Hemphill, and Mark Doty. Through these case studies, two major attributes of poetry on AIDS will be explored: first, how poetry tells the story of AIDS from an intimate and individualized perspective; then, how poetry is utilized by poets to spur conversation about socially stigmatized illnesses.

A Poem Versus a Microscope: The Necessity for a Perspective of Experience on Illness

Poetry on chronic illness elicits a private yet resounding, imaginative, and otherwise unattainable insight into disease from the viewpoint of a patient and/or those close to them. Dr. Sarah Nance, author and medical humanities scholar, describes poetry as able to “depict the way time extends itself during experiences of chronic illness” (2023). Chinese poet Guo Lusheng (b. 1948), who was diagnosed with schizophrenia and kept in an insane asylum, embodies this theory. During this period in his life, which he refers to as “years of hell,” Lusheng went years without writing (Linder, 2016). This period of literary silence is consistent with what theologian W. T. Reich deems the “mute stage of suffering when coping with an illness” (Linder, 2016). Similarly, Tory Dent (1958–2005)—one of the prominent voices in AIDS poetry in the 1990s—wrote poems illustrating disease as a kind of lurking phantom that renders all other aspects of life silent. This is most evident in her poem, “The Pressure”:

The x-ray glows extraterrestrial and nefarious in the late December blackness
that infiltrates my physician’s office and obscures all other objects and details
other than his head, my x-ray, his desk lamp, and that strange, uncurtained window
that seems to erase all at once, in one glance, my hope of long term survival.
(lines 65–68)

The initial contrast between Dent’s x-ray and the gloomy characteristic of December paints an idiosyncratic description of AIDS that is unattainable through any other medium. Within this poem, AIDS appears to exist corporeally through the x-ray and presides as Dent’s merciless, “nefarious” opponent. When Dent describes the x-ray as “extraterrestrial,” she portrays AIDS as possessing an otherworldly and impending presence. In doing so, she presents the audience with a salient message: AIDS is so consuming that it seems to stand against nature. Dent goes on to create an image within the poem which describes an environment where only three characters seem to matter: her illness, her physician, and her waning will to remain alive. As a result, she sets a tenebrous mood which introduces her audience to the threatening aloofness that accompanies chronic illness. She represents her faith, her physician, and the environment as factors dependent on the x-ray, thereby personifying both it and her illness. AIDS is thus distinguished as remorseless and autocratic, capable of “erasing” her “hope of long-term survival” without a second thought.

Poets often weave vivid images which illustrate how their perception of time is warped due to the recurring pain, uncertainty, and emptiness which accompanies chronic illness. This experience can be thought of as a period of “in-betweenness” where the “body and time are suspended” (Nance, 2023). Nance references Pulitzer Prize Winner Jorie Graham’s collection, “From Inside the MRI,” while calling attention to the more recent and recurring appearance of medical technology in poetry on illness—a motif also present in “The Pressure” through the recurring role of the x-ray. Graham describes being in the MRI or preparing for a transplant while suffering from breast cancer as an out-of-body experience that forces her to reflect on the timeline of her illness. Her conceptualization of time as an abstract variable allows her to personify disease as a silent yet ambitious presence; it is so pervasive that it insists on carving out an era of someone’s life signified entirely by its existence. The theory of time as altered during illness has been explored by various scholars, psychologists, and lyricists; however, efforts to define this concept only began after its emergence in poetry on illness (Nance, 2023).

Tory Dent’s poems on AIDS also often represent her experience with AIDS as a period of “in-betweenness” while illustrating the progression of her illness as a function of time: continuous and inescapable. During the first few lines of “The Pressure,” she proclaims:

Too many times have I with the sun on my back, flamboyant, heinously direct,
 rocked, wrung hands, my shaking head refuged in a now-wet Bounty paper towel
 or institutionalized inside the free-space of my bedroom that opens like a file ...
 Like a shot of B12 effective only if injected intramuscularly I am neutralized.
 (lines 1–3, 6)

Dent places descriptions of her physical and mental health before and after her AIDS diagnosis to create a stark contrast between different stages of her declining health over time. While comparing her prior state of being to an object as imposing and proud as the sun, she transitions sharply to describing her current state of being as “refuged.” She then goes on to describe her quality of life while suffering from AIDS with terms like “institutionalized” or “a shot of B12.” This serves as a clear signal to scholars—particularly those in the medical field—about the dimensions of an individual’s mental state during a period of illness. Overall, poetry offers an incomparable perspective on chronic illness that is shaped most distinctively by experience rather than any amount of learning or studying.

AIDS Poetry as an Instrument for Change

AIDS poetry often elicits an insistent yet heartrending demand for recognition of individuals with AIDS as more than the personalized name tags society sticks on them. Essex Hemphill, one of the most influential Black gay poets of the AIDS era, released one of his few and most groundbreaking AIDS poems, “Vital Signs,” in 1995. Within the poem, Hemphill—who died from an AIDS-related illness two years after his fellow poet and lover, Joseph F. Beam, passed away—blames social inequality for his declining health as much as he blames AIDS:

Some of the T cells I am
 without are not here through
 my own fault. I didn’t lose all
 of them foolishly, and I didn’t
 lose all of them erotically.
 (lines 1–4)

Hemphill continues,

Actually, there are T cells
 scattered all about me at
 doorways where I was denied
 entrance because I was a faggot
 or a nigga or too poor or too
 black.
 (lines 20–25)

Within the first three lines of the poem, Hemphill asserts that the cause of his AIDS cannot be

solely attributed to his sexual relations or behavioral patterns. According to the U.S. Department Office of Minority Health, African Americans are eight to fifteen times more likely to develop AIDS compared to their white counterparts; African American men are 6.0 times as likely to die from HIV infection as non-Hispanic white men. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) claims that individuals in poverty are twice as likely to contract HIV and AIDS, and 70% of individuals living with AIDS are men who have sexual relations with other men. In 1987, a Pew Research Center survey found that 60% of white evangelicals viewed AIDS as “God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior.”

These statistics would rightfully lead one to believe that AIDS discriminates against African Americans, queer men, and the economically disadvantaged. Yet Hemphill presents the audience with a larger truth in “Vital Signs”: AIDS only takes advantage of the social stratification already implemented by society. People held genuine necropolitical beliefs that individuals who were Black, poor, or partaking in homosexual relationships were less than human and unworthy of living. Thus, an AIDS-related illness may have been what ultimately took the lives of Hemphill, his lover, and 448,058 other individuals in America from 1981–2000; but it was policymakers, privileged individuals, and the president who silently witnessed and allowed this to happen.

In the first stanza, Hemphill writes that he lost just as many T-cells to AIDS as he did to “doorways where [he] was denied entrance.” These closed doors likely refer to issues like the lack of sexual education available to minority and gay communities, and medical professionals who swore oaths to save lives yet refused to care for individuals with AIDS. Here, Hemphill also makes a mockery of the myths upholding AIDS denialism, which is when an individual disregards HIV as an existent diagnosis and portrays sexual immorality, drug use, and other factors as causes for AIDS.

Thus, “Vital Signs” —which was released a year before Hemphill’s death in 1994 and represents his first time discussing his personal battle with AIDS in depth—does not only carry a tone of advocacy, loss, and sadness. Rather, the poem is equally characterized by a vindictive, assertive, and at-times condescending tone directed toward social injustice and those who allow it to flourish. Hemphill paints inequality as a pandemic of its own, one with a much longer history of killing Americans than AIDS likely ever will. His use of free verse contributes to creating this tone because it allows him to assert his beliefs to the audience clearly and starkly, almost as if he’s delivering an oration.

On the other side of the coin, 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award winner Mark Doty (b. 1953) writes poetry that personifies the oppressive silence, grief, and melancholy inflicted upon the LGBTQIA+ community following the global AIDS pandemic. This is starkly apparent in his poem, “Turtle, Swan,” which he concludes by stating,

I only know that I do not want you
 --you with your white and muscular wings
 that rise and ripple beneath or above me,
 your magnificent neck, eyes the deep mottled autumnal colors
 of polished tortoise-- I do not want you ever to die.
 (lines 80–84)

The mere fact that Doty feels inclined to proclaim that he does not want his partner to die from AIDS points the audience toward a dark truth: other people do. Within the same proclamation,

Doty even goes on to describe different characteristics of his partner to explain why he doesn't want his lover to die, as if he has to justify their humanity to the rest of the world.

Doty—although heavily impacted by AIDS—is not actually suffering from it. In fact, AIDS poetry is a genre frequently occupied by writers who do not have AIDS but know someone who does. After losing his decade-long partner to AIDS, Doty wrote “Turtle, Swan” and dozens of other world-renowned poems as an ode to his deceased lover. Such poetry written from a third-person point of view opens the door to other conversations regarding how poetry on illness covers a multitude of common literary themes like those Doty evokes: to have loved and lost, memento mori, and the human experience.

“Turtle, Swan,” a free verse poem characterized by vivid imagery and natural motifs, is regarded as one of the most renowned poems in American history because it artfully weaves together the quiet shame underlying AIDS and the resultant loss of life (Poetry Foundation, 2026). In fact, “Turtle, Swan”—like most poems about AIDS—does not include the words “HIV” or “AIDS” at all. This calls to attention the commonality of poets having refrained from outwardly referring to this disease within their work due to the often-violent prejudice that accompanied it. Ironically, in 1995, Doty released “Faith,” a poem describing this phenomenon in society (especially within AIDS literature and the medical field) and its effect on AIDS patients. In “Faith,” the first entry in *Atlantis*, a collection that describes the life-altering experience of losing a lover to AIDS, Doty emphasizes the sheer power held by the word “AIDS.” He narrates:

I'm afraid if I sleep I'll go back
into the dream. It's been six months,
almost exactly, since the doctor wrote

not even a real word
but an acronym, a vacant
four-letter cipher

that draws meanings into itself,
reconstitutes the world.
(lines 19–26)

Doty conveys to his audience that the mere mention of AIDS alone evokes a fear of alienation from society that often transcends fear of the disease itself. By claiming that the word “AIDS” “reconstitutes the world,” Doty depicts the disease as more of a symbol than a diagnosis. To Doty and countless other loved ones of AIDS victims, AIDS symbolizes the ironic inevitability of lost love and its patronizing bystanders.

Within this excerpt of “Faith,” Dr. Nance’s theory of time being warped during a period of illness appears again. Doty accuses the mere word “AIDS” of imposing an unfathomable reality marked by the end of what Doty classifies as a “dream”—a motif he uses continuously throughout the poem. He often finds himself drifting back to the “dream” he considered his life to be prior to the intrusion of AIDS. Doty, like many other poets, illustrates how time serves as a meter for both the progression of illness and one’s perception of it. This further contributes to poetry’s function as a versatile mode of communication within academia for patients with AIDS.

Poetry as an Accepted Form of Communication About AIDS Within Healthcare

Poetry is often classified as the primary form of oral communication about AIDS within the medical humanities (Linder, 2016). It is regarded as one of the most pervasive, powerful forms of expression regarding the global epidemic (Stephens, 2022). AIDS poetry forced medical professionals to face the unyielding reality of AIDS and its victims despite their discrimination against AIDS patients. In fact, it was precisely this disregard for the lives of individuals with the disease that served as fuel for AIDS poetry.

Furthermore, poetic inquiry—a form of creative learning and discussion between nurses and patients which can serve as “therapeutic intervention for vulnerable groups”—is emerging as a dominant area in nursing and the health care system (MacDonald, 2017). Poetic inquiry assists with learning and reflective practice that encourage and allow healthcare professionals and scholars of various disciplines to use poetry to comfortably interact with individuals suffering from diseases like AIDS (MacDonald, 2017). By transporting healthcare providers into the exclusive aspect of a patient’s mindset, poetic inquiry both allows patients to be heard clearly and challenges healthcare providers to acknowledge every aspect of their patient’s health. In doing so, poetry humanizes patients and dissuades healthcare providers from assuming harmful myths about HIV and AIDS. Poetic inquiry is an example of recently adopted medical practices that enhance patient care, and it attests to the emergent nature of poetry on AIDS. Ultimately, poetry challenges people to acknowledge individuals with AIDS as human beings and join the search for qualitative, renovated methods of communication.

Conclusion: The Legacy of AIDS Poetry

Poetry on HIV and AIDS exists as a multifaceted tool for patient care and relief, often used to evoke a passionate call to arms from the audience. Many scholars argue that AIDS poetry gave rise to a new dawn for chronic illness by creating enduring safe spaces for discussion about new controversial diseases like COVID-19 (Buddhdev, 2020). In doing so, AIDS poetry serves as a barrier against prejudice and denialist bigotry while setting the stage for other subgenres of poetry on illness.

As author Franz Kafka (1883–1924) writes, “Incidentally, it’s easy to write a prescription, but hard to come to an understanding with the people writing them” (Linder, 2016). Despite rapidly advancing medical technologies and emotionally adept artificial intelligence, poetry on illness remains unmatched as a metric of information and well-being for the chronically ill. Neither the textbook nor technology can trump the reliability of lived experiences communicated through poetry. As a result, poetic forms of healing and interaction will likely persist within the medical field and expand across national and international platforms. Furthermore, poetry allows patients to contextualize their personal experiences with chronic illnesses, which in turn enables others to do the same. As Lusheng wrote, “poetry tames the fire” (Linder, 2016). In acting as a temporary but essential means of escape and expression for patients suffering from chronic illnesses, poetry conveys paints an image akin to fire, outlining the implications of living with chronic illnesses.

Ultimately, poetry has risen above social stigmas against certain diseases and their corresponding forms of oral communication within the medical field. Poetry on illness continues to demonstrate its capacity to both educate and heal. Its continued survival attests to its distinct and individual nature and its ability to reach a wide audience in striking, effective ways. From 13th century poets who contributed to our understanding of anatomy by describing their arthritis

to 20th century survivors of the HIV and AIDS epidemic and its accompanying prejudice, poetry on illness is a genre which has proven successful in encompassing arguably the most displeasing but unavoidable aspects of the human experience: the inevitable and the unknown (Khoury, 2022; Reed, 2022).

Coda

Under the microscope,
you are the stage specimen.
Coarse Focus tuned all the way up.
Ocular lens cuts a hole in you.

- “Under the Microscope,” Chidubem Nwosu (2024)

In truth, traction alopecia, anemia, and just generally crappy physical health has always made me feel helpless, tired, and insecure, as if I’m stuck in an endless chasm called “24 hours,” all of which seem far too repetitive. Yet through the process of researching and writing about the multidimensional nature of poetry on illness, I finally began to understand that I am not alone.

I shared little pieces of myself through this research; alongside the beautiful, truth-bearing poets who have come and gone; with the scholars whose work I picked apart so I could piece back together; with the Stanford Spoken Word Collective; and with Dr. Jennifer Johnson and the rest of my PWR1 class. Suddenly, there were things to celebrate and people with whom to celebrate.

I have thus completed my first official case study of poetry on illness. Although I had written poetry that hinted at my health struggles, I had never written a poem which outright addressed them until after beginning this research. “Under the Microscope”—my first poem on illness, with excerpts interspersed throughout this essay—details my experience with the sheer uncertainty and defeat I felt during two particular medical encounters, one of which occurred a literal week before submitting this assignment. Through this process, I began to feel less like a stage specimen to be poked, prodded, and stolen from and more like a human being; and I know I am not alone.

The AIDS pandemic was one of the most brutal, devastating events in modern American society. Yet poets served as a light in the dark, as cutting truth amidst blissful ignorance. Likewise, I seek to search for the truth beyond the microscope, to find and speak about issues within my community and the world.

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