Understanding the Pandemic: Self and Other Alignment with Covid Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how readers in an empirical study of Covid poetry make sense of the events and experiences depicted in a Covid poem. We draw on data generated through pre-reading questions, reading group discussion, and post-reading journals to analyse how readers in our study both align their reading with their own pandemic experiences, and demonstrate empathetic alignment with the experiences of others. Our findings demonstrate that reading Covid poetry triggers powerful responses in readers that may help them better understand the impact of the pandemic. These findings have implications for the medical humanities' use of poetry for wellbeing, in health contexts, with those affected by the pandemic, as well as more broadly for researchers and practitioners interested in the role of literature as a tool for remembering and reflection.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we report on part of a larger study that examines how readers reflect on and respond to poems written about the experience of living through the covid pandemic, what has been elsewhere termed 'Covid poetry' (Author 1, 2023; in press). Our article draws on data generated from the *Writing and Reading the Pandemic* project, which uses a large, and to our knowledge the world's first, corpus of Covid poetry collections to examine both the language of Covid poetry and, through a series of activities centred around group discussions, the ways in which readers interpret Covid poems. This article concentrates on the latter focus

by analysing responses from one of our reading groups to Jackie Kay's poem 'Where are my keys?' (Kay 2020), written from the point of view of a woman in a care home who has dementia. The article addresses two interrelated research questions:

> RQ1. How do readers interpret Covid poetry in light of their own experiences of the pandemic and how do they make sense of the pandemic through their reading?
>
> RQ2. How might reading Covid poetry shape understanding of the pandemic experiences of others?

There are three framing contexts for our project and for this article. The first is the context of writing and reading about and around the Covid-19 pandemic. Described by Venuleo et al. (2020: 2) as 'a sudden, disruptive event that has strained the health system and had huge repercussions both on the social and economic plane and at the individual level', the pandemic had a significant cultural impact on the arts and humanities. Thus, 'creative coping or survival' (Crawford and Crawford 2021, 106) activities produced important performative artefacts that helped make sense of pandemic experiences (Bruzzi and Biriotti 2021; Gray and Tischler 2024). More specifically, studies of 'lockdown reading' (Boucher et al. 2024; Davies et al. 2022) demonstrate the changing nature of public reading habits as readers cited changes in time and circumstance influencing how, what and why they read. Poetry, perhaps because of its relatively shorter and more direct form, became a popular genre offering distinctive and critical representations of a range of factors that came to mark our interaction with a new world (see Author 1 2023). In turn, a number of studies have highlighted both how readers draw on Covid poetry for wellbeing purposes (Yinag and Yi 2020; Acim 2021; Dera 2021; Blundell and Poole 2023; Caleshu et al. 2023), and how writing Covid poetry provided an outlet for coping with new demands (Sharma 2021; Zhang 2021; Boydell and

Lupton 2024). All of these studies, however, focus on reading and writing in the height of lockdown periods (largely 2020-2021), and there has been little if any attention on the extended aftermath of the immediate pandemic. In our article, we address this gap by offering new empirical research that examines readers' responses to, and interpretations of, Covid poetry. In other words, we explore how readers, almost five years on from the advent of the pandemic, make sense of the events, experiences and perspectives articulated in a Covid poem.

Our second and third framing contexts are connected. The second is our position as academic stylisticians interested in cognitive linguistic approaches to literary study including the ways in which readers engage with and report their interpretations of literature. These are outlined later in this article. The third context relates more directly to the wellbeing and empathetic effects of literary reading (Billington 2020). Reading literature is a kind of simulation (Oatley 1994) in which difficult scenarios may be played out in relatively safe spaces, where readers might draw on personal relevance and resonances that exist in the text for them (Sheldrick Ross 1999) through a process of self-implication (Kuiken et al. 2004) or else demonstrate empathetic alignment with others (Mar et al. 2006; Bal and Veltkamp 2013) in order to make sense of experiences outside of their own immediate sphere. Taken together, these three framing contexts are the starting point from which, in this article, we examine responses, generated through three sets of activities centred around a reading group discussion of Kay's poem.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the project, our design and methodology, before reviewing the key theoretical ideas behind the study in more detail (Cognitive stylistics), qualitatively analysing our reader data (Analysis), and discussing the implications of our findings (Discussion and conclusion). Overall, this article offers novel and important insights into how literary representations of pandemic experiences are both

significant cultural artefacts in their own right, how they may be of interest to researchers examining the use of poetry in health contexts (Shapiro and Rucker 2003; Collett and MacLachan 2006), and how the humanities more generally can help us to make 'knowable' (Cooper and Fitzgerald 2024, 4) the lived experiences and consequences of the pandemic.

OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY FOR THE *WRITING AND READING THE PANDEMIC* PROJECT

The research design for our project consisted of multiple stages, which are outlined below.

Stage 1: Scoping of collections and building of our corpus

Stage 2: Selection of poems for reading groups

Stage 3: Recruitment to reading groups

Stage 4: Reading groups (pre-group questions and 30-45 minutes discussion)

Stage 5: Post-reading reflective journals

Stage 6: Analysis of corpus and reader response data

In stage 1, we searched for collections of Covid poetry published between March 2020 and the project start date of 1st June 2024. In order to achieve a good enough corpus size for analysis but to retain some restrictions in terms of scope, we limited the search to Anglophone poetry collections published by publishing houses (i.e. not independently or self-published). In total, our search, conducted via publisher lists, online scoping, and our own connections with the poetry community, generated 80 collections. These collections were then digitised and manually checked against the original sources for accuracy before being analysed as part of a larger study (Author 1, in preparation) using a set of integrated methods from cognitive and corpus stylistics.

In stage 2, we selected the poems to use in our reading groups. These poems were mainly taken from the four collections chosen as extended case studies for the larger study but included several other poems which would be initially read in the groups, including 'Where are my keys?'. These additional poems were chosen on the basis that, in our opinion, they offered particularly moving and accessible perspectives on the pandemic experience and so would be ideal as the first poems the groups encountered. We also felt that the poems explicitly offered ways of testing and exploring both how readers might respond in light of their own pandemic experiences and how they were positioned to align with and empathise with others' experiences. 'Where are my keys?' is taken from *New Poems in Response to Covid-19.* Kay, a Scottish poet and at the time Chancellor of the University of Salford, posted poems from this collection on the university website during the pandemic, accompanied with a YouTube recording. The poem is available online and can be read via the URL in this article's Bibliography.

To recruit participants for the reading groups in stage 3, we recruited via open calls on social media. Our approach was to use a reading group format since it would be more representative of the natural, social context in which people discuss books (Peplow 2016; Lugea 2024). We tested this format in our pilot study (see Author 1, 2023 for details) where it provided a valid and reliable method for generating data. Participants were assigned to groups based on their availability, and therefore commitment, to take part in the same group over an extended period of time. We took this approach because it ensured that the timings could remain constant over the twelve-week period and thus ensure a better data generation process (Parker and Tritter 2006).

Following the pilot study, we structured our reading group sessions to run every 2-3 weeks over a twelve-week period with four sessions per group overall. Each group read three poems from their allocated collection plus an additional poem to make four poems in total.

Each group contained five participants, within the optimal range for focus group research (Fowler, 2009)[1]. As in the pilot study, we ran the groups online since this provided us with maximum flexibility in terms of being able to host the groups at times suitable to participants and without the difficulty of travel to Birmingham. Online groups do, however, pose a potential challenge in terms of ensuring all participants have the required digital skills (Carmi et al. 2023) and avoiding other issues such as the possibility of distractions occurring, technology issues, and misunderstanding of instructions. To mitigate, we ensured that two researchers were present at each group and drew on our own adaptation of a 'Virtual Procedure Document' (Roberts et al., 2021), modified following our experience with the pilot study, in order to ensure each meeting ran smoothly.

Participants were e-mailed a copy of the poem to be discussed a week before the reading group took place together with a link to an online platform where they were asked to record their initial thoughts on the poem and, by way of a Likert scale, indicate the extent to which they could relate the events and experiences described in the poem both to their own pandemic experiences and to those of someone else such as the speaker and/or other characters highlighted in the poem (see Appendix for our pre-reading group questions). These initial questions were designed to produce private, more spontaneous responses and to provide readers with a starting point from which they could discuss their thoughts on the poem with others in the group context. At the beginning of the reading group discussion, we ran some brief 'warm up time' (Breen 2006: 468) activities to further facilitate group discussion in that we asked each participant to give their initial response to the poem using a 'thumb up or 'thumb down' and then a short statement. Following these, participants discussed the poem freely with little if any researcher mediation. Each discussion lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and was recorded on Microsoft Teams. The automatic transcription generated by Teams was then manually checked for accuracy.

Stage 5 of the project involved participants keeping a reflective journal to record their ongoing thoughts on each of the poems over the twelve-week period. This allowed us to trace some of the ways that the poems 'echoed' (Andersen 2022) with readers after the discussion group had finished and how they made continued sense of the poems aligned with others they had read and any other literary or non-literary connections and thoughts that the poems may have initiated. Taken with the pre-reading and reading group data, these post-reading reflections also allowed us to distinguish between different kinds of maturity in response from those made initially to those sometime after, what Stockwell (2020, 10) distinguishes as the different modes of 'interpretation' and 'reading', and thus address more tightly our research questions.

Stage 6 is our analytical stage. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the reader response data (pre-reading, post-reading, and reflective journals) from one of the groups who looked at 'Where are my keys?'. Our data were managed and stored in NVivo, and coded, again following our pilot, using a hybrid scheme of both *a priori* codes aligned to our research questions, and inductive ones that drew attention to other themes that emerged as we explored, the data sets. Aligned with recent practice in stylistic scholarship (Norledge 2021; Author 1 2023; Harrison 2024), our discussion of the reading group data in this article is primarily in terms of content rather than the ways in which participants interacted, although we recognise that this interaction can contribute to the ways in which respective positions are adopted and ideas shared (see Peplow 2016).

COGNITIVE STYLISTICS

In this section, we provide an overview of how our position as cognitive stylisticians. influences the way that we view the relationship between text and reader and outline some key ideas that we explore further through the analysis of our reader response data.

Cognitive stylistics and the discourse world

Cognitive stylistics draws on concepts and models from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics to examine the ways that texts are produced and interpreted. Importantly, interpretations and readings are said to arise from a combination both of the language of the text and from the various kinds of knowledge, memories, and intentions that readers draw on during the reading experience and which are triggered by linguistic and narratological features of the text. This reader knowledge is viewed as an important contextual element in its own right and can, in turn, also be examined alongside the text. In Text World Theory (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), the context of a given reading experience is modelled as the 'discourse world', the immediate situation in which any communicative event takes place and through which the text is conceptualised and understood. Crucially, since readers have access to multiple kinds of knowledge, access to relevant discourse world knowledge is controlled to a large degree by the text, in what is termed the principle of 'text-drivenness' (Werth 1999, 149). In other words, the language of a story, poem, or play specifically triggers knowledge that is salient within the reader's discourse-world. In Text World Theory terms, the reader builds mental representations, or 'text worlds', drawing on this textual detail and the triggered discourse world knowledge. These representations are then developed over the course of the reading experience (see Gavins 2007 for a full overview).

Bidirectionality

For the purposes of this article, we are interested in how participants make visible their use of particular types of discourse world knowledge to generate meanings. We are also interested in how, in turn, discourse world knowledge itself gets updated by participants through the text-worlds they create and subsequently becomes a shared resource in its own right that may be

used in the ongoing discussion. In other words, we examine how the relationship and influence between text-world(s) and discourse world are *bidirectional* (Canning 2017; and see Author 1 2023 for discussion in relation to Covid poetry), resulting in what Lahey (2019) refers to as a 'feedback loop' between discourse world and text-world. We present this bidirectional influence in Figure 1 which highlights how knowledge in the discourse world (the left-hand circle) is first used by participants (P1 and P2) in their construction of specific text-world(s) (the right hand rectangle) which in turn become(s) reified and fed back into participant's discourse worlds, thus providing a 'wider reference frame' (Canning 2017, 183) that is available to be drawn on in subsequent interaction and discussion.

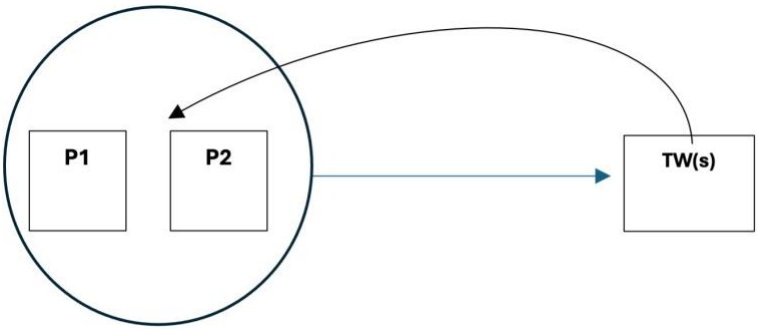

Figure 1 Bidirectional relationship between discourse world and text-world(s)

For example, participants might use their knowledge of living through the pandemic to make sense of the use of the word 'mask'. In turn, and through discussion, different contributions feed back into an overall richer conceptualisation of a 'mask' which then a provides a newly developed common mental context that can be drawn on in further discussion. We explore this phenomenon more fully in the analysis of our reading group discussion

The maintenance and development of discourse world knowledge may also be understood through the broader notion of schema theory (Rumelhart 1975; Schank 1982) and,

particularly, the ways that an ongoing discourse may result in knowledge being updated or altered in some way, what Stockwell (2020, 107) terms 'schema management':

- schema preservation – where incoming facts fit existing schematic knowledge and have been encountered previously (world-building in narrative);
- schema reinforcement – where incoming facts are new but strengthen and confirm schematic knowledge (enriching the world in the narrative);
- schema accretion – where new facts are added to an existing schema, enlarging its scope and explanatory range (narrative development, further enrichment);
- schema disruption – where conceptual deviance offers a potential challenge (a puzzle, minor twist or plot development);
- schema refreshment – where a schema is revised and its membership elements and relations are recast (thorough defamiliarisation in literature);
- schema replacement – the creation of new schemas based on old templates (a radical plot twist requiring re-evaluation, or framing as a new genre or subgenre).

Foregrounding and mind-modelling

The types of activity we have been describing arise from readers being positioned by the texts to respond to linguistic triggers in certain ways. In this article we also draw on two further ideas from cognitive stylistics. First is the concept of foregrounding (Mukařovský, 1964; Short, 1996) which accounts for how readers assume that the making or breaking of textual patterns will have some interpretative significance; for example, repeated words, structures, or sound patterns in a poem are foregrounded aspects that may be understood by readers as being structurally and/or thematically important in some way. Foregrounding is in itself a linguistic realisation of the Gestalt psychology notion of figure-ground (see Haber and Hershenson 1980) which accounts for how certain aspects of a text are primed for attention

(attentional figures) against other less salient aspects (the ground). The theory provides a neat way of examining the degree to which textually foregrounded aspects are noticed by and discussed by readers.

The second concept is mind-modelling (Stockwell 2009; Stockwell and Mahlberg 2015). Drawing on the notion of Theory of Mind (Premack and Woodruff 1978), which recognises our awareness that others have minds like our own, mind-modelling provides a framework for examining how readers create mental models of narrators, characters, and even authorial figures as they read. In keeping with the principles of cognitive stylistics, mind-modelling is operationalized via both schematic (top-down) and text-based (bottom-up) processing. For the latter, Stockwell (2020, 179) argues that our ability to model the minds of characters may be identified through explicit linguistic markers that highlight a character's physical appearance and situation, gesture, speech and thought presentation, idiosyncrasies, and the reactions of others towards them. All of these give rise to modelling of a fictional consciousness in the same way that 'real' minds are conceived of and discussed in our everyday lives. The concept of mind-modelling also aligns with the more traditional notion of 'mind style' (Fowler 1977; Semino 2002; Author 1 2022), which draws attention to both to specific linguistic choices which mark a character's 'cognitive state' (Boase-Beier 2003, 154), and to the process by which readers attribute those minds (Nuttall 2018).

ANALYSIS

We now analyse responses to 'Where are my keys?', drawing on the data generated at each of our three stages but focusing especially on the reading group discussion. All responses are anonymised and use the simple code P1, P2 and so on to refer to the specific participant. Our analysis is structured around the broad *a priori* codes 'Own experiences' and 'Others'

experiences' that align with our research questions, with sub-sections focusing on subordinate themes that emerged through inductive analysis within these initial codes.

Own experiences

In the pre-reading group question 'I can relate the events and experiences in the poem to my own experiences during the pandemic', one participant 'strongly agreed', three 'agreed' and one was 'neutral'. During the group discussion, participants often drew on their own pandemic experiences to discuss particular aspects of the poem. As well as the poem's language triggering particular discourse world knowledge, we can also observe how engaging with the poem through their discussion and interaction with others also allowed participants to reflect more carefully on these experiences.

The FAMILY schema

The references in the poem to 'grandchildren' and 'my husband' appear to have triggered a FAMILY schema for readers that they used to align the poem with their own pandemic experiences. Here, P1, for example, draws a connection between the events in the poem and their own family[2]:

> because my granddad had dementia and he caught COVID and it's very similar in terms of – he was obviously already very confused – and then the COVID kind of compounded that. But also it was hard for him to understand what was actually happening because of the dementia as well.

Here P1's comments focus on their own granddad, recognising his own experience during the pandemic, and reflecting on what that must have been like for him. Importantly, once discussed, the notion of a family also becomes discourse world knowledge that is reified and

drawn on by other participants in the following turns when they reflect on their own family experiences. Here we would argue that the discussion has the potential to lead to schema accretion in that participants are able to consider the different ways in which families may have suffered and compare these with their own which may have been better or worse. For example, P3 comments ‘thankfully, I've never had a family member that's – that struggle with-with the disease’, while P5 indicated that ‘I would like for – oh yeah, [spend time] not seeing family for weeks, months – it was – really that resonated with me’. Later, P1 returns to their initial reflections to make a point more broadly about the impact of the pandemic when they remember that:

> I mean I didn’t see this myself, but also you would see images on the news of like people going to visit their grandparents and having to wave through the window because obviously you couldn't be in the same room as them.

Here, the discussion moves away from the immediate context of the poem and their grandfather to remembering the impact that the pandemic would have had on families who were unable to meet because of social distancing restrictions. P1’s comment is built on by other participants who equally begin to remember, reflect on, and evaluate what the impact of being separated from loved ones must have been. In this way, the FAMILY schema is triggered, drawn on, accreted and, for some, arguable even disrupted. Here for example, is a comment shortly afterwards from P1, reflecting on this impact.

> And obviously when it first started, we didn't know how long it was – it was going to last for. So I think that as well – it almost, seeming like it was just going on forever and when is it going to end? When can people actually go home, you know, from hospital or for-for wherever? Or when can people see their families again and things like that.

Working during Covid-19

Participants also engage with the poem by relating it to specific activities that they undertook during the pandemic. For two of the participants, the poem reminds them of their own experience working in the health sector. The poem's focus on the representation of a person with dementia positions P2, for example, to remember their experience as a doctor.

> I think-I think another-another personal angle that I have on this is that… during the pandemic I was working on intensive care as a doctor. So I've-I've been the man with the green suit on. … And obviously, COVID was all-consuming and it was all anyone could ever talk about for quite a long time. But I think there's one very profound memory I have from maybe… maybe like December or January of 2021. So it was like – we'd been living this for about nine months. I think that was December, Jan, that-that New Year's season was probably the worst that things ever got. And there was a lady… a little bit cognitively impaired, a little bit delirious, and there was a nurse doing a COVID PCR swab on her. And this-this patient just asked, oh, what is this? What are you doing this for? And the nurse said, oh, it's we're testing for COVID. And I can never forget this, the patient said, what's that? And everyone was sort of just doing, you know, doing various things around the area. And I think everyone stopped for a second and just turned around. And that-that's – you know, it didn't take us very long to realise that she just hasn't been aware of what's been going on or if she has, she's not retained that information very long… but – that was the first thing that I thought of when I read this poem.

Here P2 draws on their experience to help make sense of the poem but also uses the poem to reflect on the pandemic more widely. Their comments provide another good example of how personal discourse world knowledge becomes reified and acts as a platform to interpret the wider extra-fictional context. Given P2's comments are now in their shared mental context of

the reading group discussion, we can also observe how these are drawn on by other participants and how this bidirectionality helps generate new personal reflections and insights. For example, P4 immediately follows P2's initial observations to present their own experience to the group.

> I had something similar, so I was nursing in the community during this time, and I remember one of the ladies I was caring for – and I would turn up with my mask – and she was so confused every time, she was telling everyone that she-she was saying, I had a disfiguration with my face, and I had to wear a mask when I was explaining to her about COVID. And every time I went in, she'd say the same thing, 'oh, there's something wrong with her face, don't go by her. There's something wrong with her'.

Here, P4 acknowledges and empathises with P2's observation before aligning the fictional world of the poem with the memory of caring for a patient who reacted to their wearing of a mask. P4's comments equally reflect the symbiotic relationship between text and discourse world knowledge so as to provide a greater understanding of both. It seems that the reading and group discussion results in a degree of refreshment for two distinctive schemas: the first related to the narrative schema (Mason 2019) of the poem itself, and the second to a broader WORKING IN COVID schema.

Reflecting on use of masks

P4's reflections on caring for the patient with mask-phobia prompted a lengthy set of exchanges towards the end of the discussion on the poem's repeated use of 'mask' and its associated interpretative significance. Several participants drew on their own MASK schema, a set of experiences related to the ubiquitous mask-wearing that occurred during lockdown periods, to understand the speaker's fear. The bidirectional relationship between text-world

and discourse world is made visible as individual experiences are reified as shared knowledge, and used to remember, examine, and analyse participants' pandemic experiences. P3, for example, reflects on her younger sister and her fear of masks, 'She found it really scary that my mum and my dad and, you know, her older sisters and brothers were wearing them', and later her grandparents who 'would never wear a mask because they didn't like it', while the poem reminds P1 of the cycle of pandemic associations, first defamiliarizing, then normalised and now, from a temporal distance, defamiliarizing again.

> And yeah, the masks really did feel alien. And I mean, even now, to be honest, I'm so used to seeing them, but I think because we've gone to a place now of not really wearing them as much. Sometimes when I do see someone wearing one, like on the train or whatever, I am a bit like, oh, someone's wearing a mask. And it's funny how now we've kind of gone back to that point again of it being a bit alien in a way.

For many of the participants, the discourse drew them away from the poem to reflect on their own mask-wearing.

> [we had] masks that were kind of, you know, personalised or that – mine had, like the Hamiltons and Hamilton the musical (P3)

> I had a Van Gogh one. I'd forgotten about that. (P1)

> You were trying to flip it into, like your personality, weren't you? I remember I had different ones for different, like outfits. (P5)

> I think as well because at that point it did become such a part of daily life […] It's same as taking your phone or your keys out with you, oh, I'll need a mask with me. (P1)

In these comments, we can once more observe the direction of influence from poem to own pandemic experiences. The fact that the discussion does move from the world of the poem to the broader world of the historical (Covid-19) past is indicative, we would argue, of the ways in which readers use their own experiences to interpret the poem but also clearly use the poem as a resource to support their own remembering and re-understanding of the pandemic experiences.

Others' experiences

In contrast to the pre-reading group question on self-alignment, all participants said that they 'strongly agreed' with the comment 'Reading this poem helps me to understand how someone else experienced the pandemic'. This suggests that the poem positioned them to align more carefully with the speaker's perspective than it did to reflect on their own experiences. Although our aim in this paper is not to provide a detailed analysis of the text of the poem, nor to provide an account of the linguistic features of dementia mind styles (cf. Lugea 2022), we are able to highlight some headline language features that may facilitate this kind of empathetic alignment. For example, the poem is written in the first person, with the emotions and experiences of the speaker outlined through the use of evaluative language, indexing the speaker's perception of events and various desires. In turn, orientational terms position other entities in the poem relative to the speaker, for example 'coming towards me', 'this place', 'at the window', which arguably position the reader to adopt the vantage point of the speaker in relation to the poem's events. Additionally, the extensive use of repetition and rhyme foreground specific aspects of the poem that might be viewed as central to her

characterisation. Thus, the repetition of ‘There’s a man coming towards me with a mask on his face’, ‘Where are my keys’, ‘I’-clause structures, and the rhyming long ‘a’ sounds in ‘face’, ‘days’, place’ all suggest that the speaker is internally reliving the same experience repeatedly. These foregrounded aspects of language would, we argue, offer rich potential cues to enable a reader to model the speaker’s mind in a fairly straightforward and effective manner.

Mind-modelling

Data from the reading group discussion suggest that readers do draw on these specific language features to understand the mind style of the speaker and to empathise with how she sees the world and her current situation within it. For example, P3 draws attention to the ‘simplistic language’ of the poem that helps them to make sense of how the speaker feels about the approaching man and later suggests that ‘[it is] a scary experience for this woman, and I think I could feel that proximity of him kind of coming closer and closer every time this line appeared’. In this instance, P3’s words outline the effect of the poem’s repetition on them through the empathetic alignment with the speaker’s situation and the continued suggested movement of the man towards her. In fact, we can identify several instances in the poem when readers specify textual details to explain how they connect with the speaker’s thoughts and feelings. We present several of these below, outlining how they align with Stockwell’s taxonomy of features that invite rich mind-modelling.

> Physical appearance and situation: ‘it's like she doesn't even feel like she's on Earth anymore. ‘This place’, it's like she's been completely taken away from what-whatever she's known, including humanity and her physical surroundings too’ (P3).

> Gesture: ‘she makes it clear that she doesn't know what anyone else wants.’ (P4).

> Speech and thought presentation: ‘now I'm curious who she's talking to or who she believes she's talking to’ (P4).

> Idiosyncrasies: ‘if they did have dementia and weren't really understanding the news’ (P3).

> The reactions of others towards that character, ‘it's probably someone who has come to visit her, maybe it's even her husband or their-their husband,’ (P2).

In many cases, participants frame their empathetic alignment by commenting explicitly on what they perceive as the feelings of the speaker. In their interpretative summary of the poem and its speaker, P1 outlines how

> She almost feels like she has some autonomy and that she should be able to go home, but obviously she's being cared for… in this way. So she obviously maybe isn't capable of doing that. So it's interesting because she obviously feels like – I need my keys, where are they? I need to go home. She feels like she should be able to do that, but obviously she can't, which is also really sad.

Here P1 uses the verb *to feel* in a manner that highlights a close emotional and perspectival alignment with the speaker. In turn, their extended reflections on the speaker’s state of mind allow them to take an additional evaluative external perspective on the scene in which they comment on, and share with the rest of the group, the interpretative effect of the speaker’s mind style. Indeed, P1’s points here provide a very good example of how mind-modelling becomes visible in reader responses as extended comments on the speaker’s language and its effects are framed within different forms of the verb *to feel* [3]. In this instance, the verb

combines with other modal forms which index the participant's sense of alignment with the speaker's cognitive state, first the tentative 'almost' and 'should be able', and then successive uses of the modal adverb 'obviously'. P1's final evaluative comment 'which is also really sad' then shifts from modelling the speaker's mind to providing a more personal summative comment on the effect of this specific mind style. In fact, this mind style effect was noticed in the reflective journal entry of P2 who had previously commented on their experience as a doctor during the pandemic. A month after the reading group discussion had taken place, P2 observed how 'I was struck by the depersonalisation experienced by this writer [speaker] who has a blockade of all senses including olfactory, visual, and tactile'.

P2's experience working in the health sector during the pandemic unsurprisingly led them to draw much more extensively on schematic knowledge to model the speaker's mind. For example, they explicitly articulate the direct link between their own COVID PATIENT schema, their mind-modelling of the poem's speaker and the reaction to the mask (emphases here are our own).

> And I can never forget this, the patient said, what's that? And everyone was sort of just doing, you know, doing various things around the area. And I think everyone stopped for a second and just turned around. And that-that's – you know, it didn't take us very long to realise that she just hasn't been aware of what's been going on or if she has, she's not retained that information very long… but – **that was the first thing that I thought of when I read this poem,** because someone who's-who's living – you know, COVID isn't mentioned anywhere in this poem. We think it's about COVID, because we know that's where – that's a collection of the poetry. **But this is the experience of someone who's living in COVID – yeah, in in the era of COVID, without any context for what's happening around them**.

The pattern that emerges here typifies a number of P2's contributions, and to a lesser extent those of P4, to the reading groups. Their lived experience of working with dementia patients in the context of the pandemic does not necessarily, we would argue, mean that they have a better understanding of the poem, but does lead to them modelling the mind of the speaker in a somewhat different – top down rather than bottom up – manner.

Integrating self- and other-reflection

We have previously identified how participants in our data often move between self- and other- reflection as they interpret and discuss the poem. They do this by either using their initial response to the speaker and events in the poem to frame their own memories of the pandemic, or else by reifying those memories as salient discourse world knowledge that they, or others, later draw on to examine and comment on the poem itself. The pattern observed in the last quotation is also visible elsewhere in the data when participants move between self- and other-orientation, integrating each into an ongoing dynamic model of the speaker's mind. For example, here is an extract from a comment by P3.

> I think the-the overwhelming feeling here is that – it's just she feels – it's just in a world of chaos that she's just trying her best to get out of something – you know, even when it's, 'I can't hear a single thing he says' – it's like, you know, I think when you get so overwhelmed, you're like, I can't even hear myself think.

P3 begins by aligning their response with the speaker's experience again, like P1 earlier, using the noun 'feeling' and then the verb 'she feels'. They model the mind of the speaker through further evaluative comments such as 'she's just trying', and through directly quoting her speech. P3 then moves into a more general comment using the generic second-person form 'you', 'it's like, you know […] you get so overwhelmed', before returning to the first-

person, ‘I can’t hear myself think’ to firmly position the comment as a self-reflection. A similar pattern emerges in the responses of other participants as they move between the text-worlds of the poem and the discourse world both of the reading group and of other time frames. Here, for example, is another comment by P1.

> I think as well that ‘I've been here for days and days and days’ – during the time, I mean, thankfully, I didn't have COVID particularly bad. I didn't get it, but it was kind of just like a bad cold for me, but I imagine if you had COVID it did feel like forever, and also just the pandemic generally did feel like it was never going to end in – at some point.

Here, P1 explicitly draws first on the poem and then uses that response as discourse world to draw a contrast between different mental constructs of the self: the past self of the pandemic, temporally introduced through ‘during that time’ and marked by the use of the past tense, ‘I didn’t have’, ‘it was’ and the later ‘did feel like it was never going to end’; and the present reading and reflecting self, indexed through ‘I imagine if’. In doing so, P1 normalises the pandemic experience, a realisation that appears to be a result of engaging with the mind style of the poem’s speaker. Overall, the comments provide a substantive example of the ability of Covid poetry to open up various avenues of reflection for readers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our empirical findings in this article have outlined how reading Covid poetry can have powerful effects on readers, positioning them to reflect on their own and others’ pandemic experiences. In discussing the poem, readers in our study were reminded of events and feelings from the past and were able to discuss and make sense of them, making visible how they self-implicated in the poem’s text-worlds. We would argue that our findings demonstrate that poetry, and specifically here Covid poetry, is particularly powerful in positioning readers

to respond in this way. It is clear, however, that our data and analysis demonstrate the empathetic power of literature and of poetry specifically, providing evidence of the ways that readers show 'empathic reactions' (Koopman 2015) through aligning themselves with the poem's speaker. In turn, across both kinds of response, we have provided empirical support to explain how readers draw both on textual features, often foregrounded and primed as textually salient, and their own schematic knowledge to generate interpretations and meanings from the poem. Given the reader-led dimension of our work in this article, it is noticeable that our readers were of one of two types, distinguishable in the degrees to which they drew on specific schematic knowledge in their interpretation of the poem. P2 and P4 had experience of working in the health sector and so, although still clearly influenced by the language of the poem, made less explicit reference to that language in their responses. Instead, they drew on their own pandemic experiences that, as we have demonstrated, then became important discourse world knowledge and used to inform future discussion. Future analysis of our reader response data from the project more broadly, drawing on different poets and poems, and different readers, will allow us to further examine the ways that responses to Covid poetry are formed and the specific significances that are attached to them.

Although the wider project also aims to develop some findings as to the style of this genre (see Author 2023, in press) and is therefore a linguistic exercise, we now outline possible implications and applications of our work as they relate to medical humanities. First, we would argue that our findings add to the wealth of evidence that supports the emotional effects of reading and engaging with literature, and specifically with poetry. Our findings thus contribute to the extant literature on how readers draw on poetry to support self-discovery and reflection (Collins et al. 2006) and extend that literature by demonstrating how readers use poetry to make sense of the pandemic and traumatic times more generally, including the interpretative and resonant effects of verse beyond the immediate pandemic period. Second,

our findings highlight how particular kinds of Covid poetry might help readers understand the perspectives of others. Kay's poem is interesting because, crucially, its depiction of a specific mind style is both extreme in content (a person with dementia) and in context (a person with dementia at the time of the pandemic). 'Where are my keys?' is thus not only an important cultural artefact for outlining how aspects of the pandemic may have been experienced, but specifically for exemplifying how readers respond in terms of their empathetic stances and altered perspectives to characters, and in terms of their belief in the degree to which dementia fiction might be considered realistic (Lugea et al. 2024)[4]. Our research specifically demonstrates how the cognitive stylistic notion of mind-modelling can explain how readers engage in this way.

We would also argue that our findings have significance for the medical humanities around the potential use of Covid poetry to help understand the Covid-19 experiences of others, specifically given the social inequalities that arose as a result of the pandemic (Williams et al. 2020; Gray and Tichler 2024). Specifically we would argue that the contributions of P2 and P4 examined in this article highlight the potential for Covid poetry to be used in health practitioner educational contexts to provide an insight into the very human experience of pandemic experiences. Given, as Frank (2013, 3) claims, an illness narrative is a way in which a narrator is able 'to construct new maps and new perceptions of their relationships to the world', we would see those narratives (and for the purposes of this article the poem discussed) as a way of showing practitioners these important subjective representations. We see two possible ways that Covid poetry may be useful in this respect. The first relates to how health and social care professionals across the whole range of different roles might benefit from engaging with Covid poetry (and indeed other kinds of writing influenced by the pandemic) as part of their ongoing professional development so as to explicitly understand both how experiences are reported and the value of these reports. The

second relates specifically to how reading groups and reflective exercises such as we have outlined as part of our study might be used in encouraging other-alignment and in developing empathetic and shared responses. In both instances, health and social care professionals could benefit from explicitly reflecting on the extent to which their own schemata have been preserved, reinforced, accreted, disrupted, refreshed or replaced through exposure to and discussion of the genre. For example, in our study, P2's responses to 'Where are my keys?' are informed by one particular own experience as a practitioner but, crucially, the act of reading the poem results in P2 reflecting on and adjusting their evaluation of the episode.

While our case study in this article has focused on a poem about dementia and the represented experience of a person with dementia, other collections in the *Writing and Reading the Pandemic* corpus offer similarly powerful accounts that we would suggest offer strong potential for empathic reactions. For example, *Shield* (Hale 2021) is written from the point of view of someone who is told that an underlying health condition means that they will not be considered a priority for critical care treatment, *The Oscillations* (Fox 2021) offers a neurodivergent perspective on 'before' and 'after' the arrival of the pandemic, *Stricken* (Moore 2022) examines the impact of bereavement, and the poems in *Pandora's Pandemic* (Marriage 2021) as well as focusing on the loss of a loved one, highlight the effects of long covid on their speakers' world-views. Long covid is also the focus of *The Long Covid Reader* (Ladd 2023), which offers various outlooks on the ongoing isolation faced by long covid sufferers. Given the substantial and potentially long-term effects of long covid, reading creative responses could help those suffering from the condition, medical practitioners, and the general public reflect on and understand the complexities and the lived realities of this specific experience. Overall, we have outlined how our work provides new insights into the potential of Covid poetry to generate interpretative responses, and how it connects with an ongoing narrative about the value of the humanities in helping us to understand the pandemic

(Biriotti 2022). We hope that our analysis of reader responses to Covid poetry will contribute to knowledge in the medical humanities more broadly with regards to how literary representations offer powerful models of experience for self and other-alignment.

NOTES

1. As indicated earlier in this article, our sampling method was by convenience. This is appropriate to our research given the nature of the project. We should also note that the Research Ethics Committee at our institution does not allow for the collecting of demographic data unless that data is relevant to the project. As in our case we were not examining any participant variables (e.g. age, gender), we did not obtain these in the recruitment process.

2. In their reflective journal, P1 outlined how the discussion in the reading group 'caused me to reflect on my own experiences of having a family member with dementia with covid'.

3. In fact, and interestingly, *to feel* in its various grammatical forms occurs twenty-four times in our reader response data.

4. Kay's poem could also be read alongside other accounts and poems reflecting on experiences of people with dementia during the pandemic. For example, the Alzheimer's Society has published similar representations in the form of poems and stories written by carers. See https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/blog/dementia-poem-care-home-restrictions

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APPENDIX

Pre-reading group questions

This poem is from a collection of poetry about the pandemic. We would like you to read, think about and discuss the poem in the light of your own experience of the pandemic as well as how the poem makes you think about the experiences of others depicted in the text. Please read the poem and then answer the questions below. This will help you prepare for the group discussion.

1. What is your participant code (e.g. D1)?

2. Underline any words and/or phrases that you feel are important and add any comments about your initial thoughts on the poem.

3. Answer the following two further questions by highlighting a point on each scale.

a) I can relate the events and experiences in the poem to my own experiences during the pandemic

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

b) Reading this poem helps me to understand how someone else experienced the pandemic

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree