

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER IN FIVE SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

This study, titled "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in Five Selected Poems," discusses obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a mental disorder marked by intrusive thoughts, urges, or sensations (obsessions) that drive repeated actions or behaviors (compulsions), as depicted in five selected poems. This study aims (1) to examine how the characteristics of OCD are portrayed in the poems and (2) to assess how OCD influences writing patterns in the poems. The objects of this study are five poems: "O.C.D." and "Static Electricity" by Neil Hilborn; "You Can Take Off Your Sweater, I've Made Today Warm" by Paige Lewis; and "I'm Not Crazy" and "I Can...I Will...Replace Those Weeds with Beautiful Flowers!" by Cherry Pedrick. This study applies psychoanalytic theory, as proposed by Sigmund Freud (2005), and employs a descriptive qualitative method through line-by-line analysis within each stanza. The findings indicate that OCD significantly affects writing patterns in these poems. This influence creates distinctive literary expression, offering individuals affected by OCD a space to express and share inner experiences through poetry.

Keywords: *intrusive thoughts; obsessive-compulsive disorder; poem; repetitive behavior*

1. INTRODUCTION

Across cultures and eras, mental disorders have shaped human life, influencing relationships and storytelling. What counts as "normal" changes over time, yet experiences such as intrusive thoughts or repetitive rituals appear repeatedly in both clinical and artistic representations (De Silva, 1994). These concerns motivate an exploration of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) as a psychoanalytic issue in literature—particularly poetry—to gain a deeper understanding of its mechanisms.

OCD is a mental disorder involving persistent intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors (compulsions) intended to reduce anxiety. People with OCD often recognize that their thoughts are irrational, yet they feel unable to control them, which can lead to distress (De Silva, 1994; León et al., 2014). Obsessions often relate to contamination, illness, death, or harm, while compulsions are repeated actions performed to relieve anxiety; when rituals are not performed, distress often increases.

Literature can help explore and understand the lived experience of OCD, raising awareness and providing meaning for those affected. Friedrich (2015) analyzed OCD from literary and linguistic perspectives, emphasizing its social and historical context. Richmond (2018) examined

OCD in twenty-first-century American young adult fiction by pairing clinical overviews with literary analysis to map symptoms and treatments. Chester (2017) discussed Watt (1953) as illustrating obsessions and compulsions as part of human nature, linking them to philosophical questions about existence and the human mind.

This study focuses on how OCD is portrayed in poetry by analyzing five selected poems: Neil Hilborn's "O.C.D." (2015) and "Static Electricity" (2015); Paige Lewis's "You Can Take Off Your Sweater, I've Made Today Warm" (2018); and Cherry Pedrick's "I'm Not Crazy" (2015) and "I Can...I Will...Replace Those Weeds with Beautiful Flowers!" (2015). These poems illustrate how poets express OCD symptoms and characteristics through poetic patterns, offering readers insight into the experiences of those who struggle with the disorder. This study is titled "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in Five Selected Poems."

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Poetry and Poetic Devices

Poetry does not have a single fixed essence; rather, it is often recognized through features such as meter and rhythm, imagery, syntax, linguistic play, emotional exploration, and structural or visual elements (Pierce, 2003). Searls (2015) further notes that some poems can be straightforward, especially when they take the form of songs. In general, poetry is a written or oral literary form that uses rhythm, line arrangement, and stanza structure to express feelings, thoughts, and emotions.

Poetry commonly includes diction, symbolism, figurative language, theme, imagery, mood, tone, rhyme, and form. These elements work together to convey meaning beyond literal interpretation. Poetry often employs symbols—frequently presented as evocative images—to communicate layered ideas. Therefore, poets use poetic devices to enhance meaning and guide interpretation. This study examines diction, verse, stanza, figurative language, theme, mood, and tone to clarify the poems' intentions and effects.

Anindita et al. (2017) define poetry as a way of using language to appreciate sound and to express imagination, emotion, and

intellect shaped by personal and social experience. In this view, poets compose poetry from imagination and emotion and use sound and structure to evoke readers' experiences and understanding.

Ollila and Jantas (2006) state that poetry is a form of language with rhythm and purpose; it can convey a story, a feeling, an idea, or a state of mind. Poetry may use different methods to achieve this creative goal, including diction, rhyme, figurative language, and tone. Diction refers to word choice used to shape style and mood. Rhyme refers to repeated end sounds across lines of a poem and can create effects that are playful, memorable, solemn, or serious (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Figurative language enriches imagery and meaning and includes simile, metaphor, hyperbole, allusion, and personification (Help, 2015). Rasse et al. (2020) explain that conceptual metaphors emerge when poets map abstract ideas onto concrete experiences (for example, treating death as sleep or love as a journey). Readers often draw on multiple conceptualizations guided by the poem's context, and this process helps poetry create embodied experiences of meaning. Tone also matters: it conveys the

speaker's attitude and shapes how readers experience the poem.

2.2 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in Freud's Perspective

This section identifies depictions of OCD through its characteristics. People with OCD experience intrusive thoughts, images, urges, or doubts that are common in the general population; however, they may interpret these intrusions in distorted, exaggerated, or catastrophic ways. Therefore, both core and supporting theories are needed to discuss OCD in literary texts.

Freud (2005) provided a foundational framework for studying human psychology and the mechanisms of the unconscious mind. His theories have influenced literary criticism, particularly in character and action analysis. Freud's concepts about intrusive thoughts, unconscious conflict, and internal tension offer a perspective for understanding portrayals of mental disorders such as OCD in literature.

Abramowitz et al. (2018) outline a cognitive-behavioral account of OCD centered on the misinterpretation of intrusive thoughts. In OCD, intrusive thoughts are often assigned exaggerated significance (for example, as dangerous, immoral, or catastrophic), which generates intense anxiety. Individuals then engage in compulsive behaviors—such as checking, washing, or mental rituals—as maladaptive attempts to prevent feared outcomes. This cycle of misappraisal and compulsion maintains and reinforces anxiety over time.

Doron and Kyrios (2005) argue that OCD can also be rooted in enduring internal representations of the self and the world. Early attachment and parenting experiences may shape a vulnerable, narrowly defined sense of self (often centered on morality or competence) and a worldview perceived as

both dangerous and controllable. Intrusive thoughts become especially distressing when they threaten these fragile self-representations, triggering extreme anxiety and reinforcing compulsive rituals as attempts to reassert control and protect self-worth.

2.3 OCD Influences on Writing Patterns

This section examines how OCD characteristics may influence writing patterns. Writers with OCD may repeatedly revisit and revise their work not only to improve quality but also as a compulsion to reduce anxiety over perceived imperfections (NOCD, 2022). This process can result in texts that are densely layered with detail, heightened imagery, and hyperbolic expression as writers attempt to convey the intensity of internal experience.

Friedrich (2015) discusses how cycles of doubt and compulsion may manifest in language and narrative structure. OCD can shape writing through obsessive attention to detail and perfectionistic drive—qualities that may both enrich and constrain creativity. In this view, literary texts can become a canvas for relentless reworking of ideas and emotions, where repetition and thematic returns mirror recurrent doubt and internal tension.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study applies Freud's (2005) psychoanalytic theory to analyze representations of OCD in five poems: Neil Hilborn's "O.C.D." and "Static Electricity" (2015), Paige Lewis's "You Can Take Off Your Sweater, I've Made Today Warm" (2018), and Cherry Pedrick's "I'm Not Crazy" and "I Can...I Will...Replace Those Weeds with Beautiful Flowers!" (2015). From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, OCD may be linked to unresolved psychosexual conflicts, ambivalence, guilt, and aggression. Individuals may rely on defense

mechanisms such as isolation, undoing, and reaction formation to cope with anxiety.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Approach of Study

This study identifies OCD in five poems using a descriptive qualitative method. Biklen (2010) notes that qualitative methods aim to understand individuals or a small number of cases through direct observation and close contact, rather than generalizing from statistics. Qualitative research is descriptive: its data consist of words and texts, and written reports often include quotations to represent the data accurately and credibly (Biklen, 2010).

3.2 Data Source

The data source for this study comprises five poems: (1) "O.C.D." and "Static Electricity" by Neil Hilborn (2015), (2) "You Can Take Off Your Sweater, I've Made Today Warm" by Paige Lewis (2018), and (3) "I'm Not Crazy" and "I Can...I Will...Replace Those Weeds with Beautiful Flowers!" by Cherry Pedrick (2015).

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic steps aligned with the study objectives. First, the poems were read repeatedly to deepen understanding and identify relevant passages. Next, lines addressing OCD through its characteristics were identified and noted. Finally, significant lines were highlighted and categorized thematically according to the research questions and key concepts drawn from psychoanalytic theory.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis guided by Freud's psychoanalytic theory (2005). The analysis focuses on poetic devices and on how OCD characteristics are reflected in the poems. The steps included: (1) identifying

depictions of OCD characteristics in the speaker(s) across the five poems; (2) examining metaphors, themes, tone, mood, and diction that reflect OCD-related features where relevant; and (3) investigating how OCD characteristics influence poetic composition and writing patterns. This approach aims to contribute to understanding OCD within literary contexts and to offer interpretive perspectives grounded in close reading.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in "O.C.D." by Neil Hilborn

The first poem analyzed is "O.C.D." by Neil Hilborn. It portrays how intrusive thoughts and compulsions dominate the mind, particularly when love and loss are involved. The poem consists of seven stanzas and fifty-six lines and mirrors the experience of someone living with OCD through both form and content.

In the first stanza, the speaker's mental noise is momentarily silenced upon seeing someone they love: "the first time I saw her, everything in my head went quiet" (Hilborn, 2015). This shift from chaos to calm suggests that emotional connection can temporarily suppress obsessive thoughts. The imagery of "tics" and "constantly refreshing images" illustrates intrusive thinking and repetitive mental patterns typical of OCD.

The second stanza reinforces the cyclical nature of OCD through repeated phrases and compulsive imagery, such as checking doors and washing hands. The repetition of "the eyelash on her cheek" represents a shift from distressing compulsion to romantic fixation, suggesting how affection can transform the same mental pattern into something tender. In the third stanza, Hilborn portrays love and acceptance within

OCD behaviors—organizing food by color or counting kisses—acts that remain compulsive yet are accepted by the partner. The contrast between order and affection shows how rituals can become part of intimacy rather than only anxiety management.

In stanza four, repetition such as “when she talked when she talked...” and “off and on and off and on” mirrors obsessive loops and blends compulsions with moments of closeness. Stanza five introduces emotional distance as the partner grows weary of the rituals, implying that compulsions—though once accepted—can strain relationships. The line “I was taking up too much of her time” captures how OCD consumes both personal and relational space.

The emotional climax in stanza six depicts heartbreak and the persistence of obsessive thought after separation. The speaker’s inability to move on—“it’s killing me that she can run away from this and I just can’t”—shows how OCD extends beyond habits into attachment and emotional pain. In the final stanza, obsessions shift from contamination fears to fixation on lost love. Lines such as “the first beautiful thing I ever got stuck on” treat love as another compulsion. The ending, “I leave the door unlocked. I leave the lights on,” symbolizes surrender and loss of control—rituals once meant to ease anxiety now expressing despair.

Overall, Hilborn’s “O.C.D.” embodies OCD through repetition, cyclical phrasing, and obsessive focus. The poem intertwines intimacy with compulsion, showing how the same patterns that cause distress can also express deep attachment.

4.2 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in “Static Electricity” by Neil Hilborn

The second poem analyzed is “Static Electricity” by Neil Hilborn, a slam poem

consisting of eight stanzas and twenty lines. Like “O.C.D.,” this poem reflects OCD through humor, absurdity, and emotional intensity. The metaphor of “static electricity” symbolizes uncontrollable attraction and heightened sensitivity, which can resemble the intensity and repetition of obsessive thinking.

The poem relies on exaggerated metaphors and abrupt tonal shifts to dramatize emotional overflow and persistence. Its cyclical phrasing and escalating imagery can be read as echoing obsessive loops and intrusive intensity. Structurally, repetition and sudden changes in register mirror compulsive and intrusive patterns, portraying OCD as both mental disruption and emotional intensity.

4.3 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in “You Can Take Off Your Sweater, I’ve Made Today Warm” by Paige Lewis

The third poem analyzed is “You Can Take Off Your Sweater, I’ve Made Today Warm” by Paige Lewis. The poem represents OCD-like mental control through layered surreal imagery and the deliberate use of white space. As free verse, it departs from conventional patterns and uses scattered words and disrupted lineation.

The poem suggests compulsive engagement with controlled actions and routines. Sensory fixation and surreal displacements can reflect intrusive cognitive interruptions and heightened vigilance. Other scenes evoke uncertainty and fear that can resemble obsessive appraisal (Clark & Purdon, 1995).

Repetition reinforces cyclical thinking: phrases such as “does it matter which?” and “click click click” suggest compulsive loops, while categorization implies rigid sorting. Questions express anxiety and uncertainty, and commands evoke urgency and control. The poem’s fragmentation and

spacing visually convey racing thoughts and lack of closure, mirroring the struggle to impose order amid mental disruption.

4.4 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in “I’m Not Crazy” by Cherry Pedrick

The fourth poem analyzed is “I’m Not Crazy” by Cherry Pedrick. The poem portrays the speaker’s internal struggle with OCD and the external judgment they perceive. It contains twelve stanzas and sixty-nine lines.

The opening repeats the assertion “I’m not crazy” (Pedrick, 2015, line 1), functioning as self-reassurance and defense while highlighting the tension between logic and compulsion. Repetitive behaviors mirror compulsions driven by anxiety and intrusive thoughts (Salkovskis, 1985). The poem depicts contamination fear, relentless doubt, and the compulsion to “get it right,” illustrating how OCD can interrupt relationships and daily interaction.

Later stanzas shift toward acceptance and recovery through therapy, medication, prayer, and support. The closing rejects stigma and reclaims dignity. Structurally, repetition functions both as symptom and strategy, mirroring internal monologue while also resisting shame and emphasizing endurance.

4.5 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in “I Can...I Will...Replace Those Weeds with Beautiful Flowers!” by Cherry Pedrick

The fifth poem analyzed is “I Can...I Will...Replace Those Weeds with Beautiful Flowers!” by Cherry Pedrick. The poem consists of two stanzas and thirteen lines and presents recovery as an active process of tending a “mental garden.” The garden metaphor offers a concrete representation of how intrusive thoughts can spread and take over mental space.

In stanza one, “floating anxieties” (Pedrick, 2015, line 1) are compared to seeds that can

become “seeds of ugly weeds” (line 2). The line “...are watered with thoughts and fed by worries” (line 3) suggests that repeated worry nourishes intrusive thoughts, allowing them to flourish. The progression toward worries gaining “names and faces” (line 5) conveys how vague unease can crystallize into persistent, intrusive fear. The phrase “...they’re still floating in the air” (line 7) implies a possibility of intervention before worries take root and become entrenched.

In stanza two, the poem shifts to empowerment and intentional change. “Then reach out and replace them...” (line 9) frames recovery as active replacement of harmful anxieties with constructive thoughts. The closing lines emphasize commitment and ongoing care. Through this metaphor, the poem depicts OCD as a self-reinforcing cycle while also presenting recovery as continual cultivation of healthier thought patterns.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Across the five poems, OCD shapes not only thematic content but also poetic form. In “O.C.D.” and “Static Electricity,” Hilborn portrays the speaker’s mind looping through obsessive attention, compulsive energy, and abrupt shifts in tone, reflecting how intrusive thoughts can be temporarily silenced by love and then reactivated through overwhelming attraction. In Lewis’s “You Can Take Off Your Sweater, I’ve Made Today Warm,” fragmented syntax and white space create a visual and rhythmic representation of racing thoughts and control rituals.

Pedrick’s poems employ repetition and metaphor to depict OCD while resisting stigma and emphasizing recovery. “I’m Not Crazy” uses mantra-like repetition to dramatize the conflict between insight and compulsion, while “I Can...I Will...Replace

Those Weeds with Beautiful Flowers!” reframes intrusive thoughts through a sustained garden metaphor that emphasizes agency and continual care.

Overall, these poems allow readers to inhabit the compulsive mind not merely as a set of clinical symptoms but as a site of literary creativity. The language of obsession and compulsion becomes both a register of distress and a medium for resilience, intimacy, and imaginative expression.

5.2 Suggestions

This study analyzed five poems through Freud’s (2005) psychoanalytic lens. Future studies may apply other approaches—such as cognitive-behavioral, discourse-based, reader-response, or comparative cultural analysis—to examine how OCD and other mental health conditions are represented in poetry and other literary genres. Further research may also explore how readers’ empathy changes when encountering literary representations of mental health, or how poetic aesthetics interact with non-normative writing patterns shaped by psychological experience.

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