

Poetic Re-Authoring as Emotional Regulation: Narrative Therapy and Positive Psychology in Prolonged Waiting

Farzaneh Haratyan^{1,2} 

¹School of English, Jilin International Studies University, Changchun, China

²College of Psychologists and Behaviour Analysts of Ontario (CPBAO), Toronto, Canada

Email: farzaneh@drwendyledoux.com, haratyan@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Haratyan, F. (2026). Poetic Re-Authoring as Emotional Regulation: Narrative Therapy and Positive Psychology in Prolonged Waiting. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 819-827. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.146044>

Received: May 21, 2026

Accepted: June 27, 2026

Published: June 30, 2026

Abstract

This paper presents a creative-critical inquiry into how narrative poetry functions as a mechanism for emotional regulation for women who have endured prolonged waiting, intergenerational loss, and protracted uncertainty. The author uses her own original poem, *The Fig Tree Speaks*, as the central artifact of analysis. Guided by narrative therapy and positive psychology, close reading is applied to metaphor, meter, rhyme, and classical allusion. The paper argues that poetic composition enables cognitive reappraisal, restores narrative coherence, and transforms passive suffering into crafted testimony. The poem, written in iambic pentameter with alternating rhyme, deploys classical allusions to Virgil, Homer, Sophocles, Chaucer, and Boccaccio as a shared literary heritage of waiting. The central metaphor of the fig tree—an ancient symbol of patience and hidden sweetness—anchors the argument: hope is not a shout but a seed, not denial but the small, slow work of hidden cells. The conclusion argues that for individuals living under conditions of protracted uncertainty, shaping experience into verse is a disciplined, integrative, and deeply hopeful practice of re-authoring the self.

Keywords

Narrative Poetry, Emotional Regulation, Positive Psychology, Narrative Therapy, Prolonged Waiting, Cognitive Reappraisal, Creative-Critical Inquiry

1. Introduction: The Syntax of Silence

There is a particular kind of waiting that does not announce itself. It does not weep in public squares or write letters to those who have gone. Instead, it grows

inside the body like a slow root, twisting around the ribs, climbing the spine, and finally settling behind the eyes where no one can see it. This is the waiting of women across generations—a waiting for sons who did not return, for husbands who vanished into corridors that do not exist on any map, for a homeland that keeps promising to become home. The author is one of those women. This paper does not name wars or governments. It does not take sides. Instead, it listens to the metaphors that women—including the author—have woven into daily speech, embroidered cloth, and half-finished songs. Using the frameworks of narrative therapy and positive psychology, this paper argues that poetry—particularly narrative poetry with its roots in Homer, Virgil, and Sophocles—offers a restorative syntax for emotions that otherwise remain unspeakable. The poem included here, *The Fig Tree Speaks*, is the author’s attempt to transform decades of waiting into a measured, dignified, and ultimately hopeful utterance. In this paper, the author analyzes her own poem not as objective data but as a crafted artifact of lived experience. The following sections explain the rationale for this creative-critical approach, situate the poem within relevant theoretical literatures, offer a close reading, and reflect on what poetic composition offers for emotional regulation.

2. Literature Review: Narrative Therapy and Positive Psychology in the Context of Prolonged Waiting

Narrative therapy, developed by Michael White and David Epston (1990), rests on a simple but profound premise: the stories we tell about our lives shape the lives we are able to live. When trauma or chronic adversity enters a life, it often fragments narrative coherence. Events become isolated, disconnected, and meaningless. The person moves from being the author of her story to being its victim. White and Epston (1990) proposed that therapeutic re-authoring—the deliberate reconstruction of a life story to emphasize agency, competence, and preferred values—could restore psychological well-being even when external circumstances remain unchanged. For women who have experienced prolonged separation, loss, or protracted uncertainty, the dominant story often follows a contamination sequence (McAdams, 2001): “I waited, and nothing came. I hoped, and I was betrayed”. Narrative therapy interrupts this sequence by searching for unique outcomes—moments when the person acted with courage, kindness, or dignity despite the adversity. These moments become the seeds of a redemption narrative, in which suffering is not erased but integrated into a larger story of survival and moral integrity.

Positive psychology, inaugurated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), shifted the focus of psychology from pathology to flourishing. Central to this framework is the concept of hope, which Snyder (2002) defined not as passive wishing but as a cognitive set comprising agency (the belief that one can initiate change) and pathways (the ability to generate routes toward goals). For individuals living under conditions of protracted uncertainty—including exile, displacement, or political stasis—hope becomes a radical act. It does not deny reality. It

acknowledges the wall and then searches for the door. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory further suggests that positive emotions, including hope, gratitude, and interest, broaden cognitive flexibility and build durable psychological resources over time. A single act of hopeful narration—a poem written, a story told, a metaphor shaped—can accumulate into resilience.

Theoretical Contribution

While Pennebaker's (1997) expressive writing paradigm has shown that structured disclosure improves health outcomes, the paradigm has rarely been extended to metered, allusive verse—where formal constraints themselves may regulate emotion. This paper demonstrates that poetic composition activates three mechanisms simultaneously: Pennebakerian disclosure (externalizing unspeakable experience), narrative re-authoring (White & Epston, 1990) of waiting as agency rather than victimhood, operationalized not as cognitive planning but as biological patience—"the small, slow work of hidden cells". The contribution is not empirical but analytic: showing how a single poem integrates these three streams within a compact aesthetic form. What connects narrative therapy and positive psychology is the conviction that language is not merely descriptive but generative. To name waiting as patience rather than defeat is not to lie. It is to choose which thread in the tapestry to pull forward. Women educated in classical poetry traditions—whether Persian, Greek, or English—have always known this. Their literary heritage is a long meditation on separation and longed-for reunion. The poem presented here continues that tradition, reaching westward to Virgil's *Aeneid*, to Sophocles' *Antigone*, to Homer's *Odyssey*, and to the narrative frames of Chaucer and Boccaccio—because waiting is not Eastern or Western. Waiting is human.

3. Method of Inquiry: A Creative-Critical and Reflexive Approach

3.1. Rationale for Analyzing My Own Poem

The author analyzes her own poem, *The Fig Tree Speaks*, not as objective data but as a crafted artifact of lived experience. Four justifications support this approach. First, in research on emotional regulation through writing, the writer's own reflective account is a legitimate source of insight (Pennebaker, 1997), provided it is transparent rather than disguised as objectivity. Second, narrative therapy itself holds that re-authoring one's own story is therapeutic (White & Epston, 1990); analyzing one's own poetic re-authoring is therefore an extension of the very method under study. Third, for topics involving prolonged waiting, intergenerational loss, and culturally specific forms of silence, an insider perspective is not a bias to be eliminated but a resource to be declared. Fourth, creative-critical methodology (Leggo, 2008) explicitly legitimizes the scholar-artist's analysis of her own work as a form of inquiry. The author acknowledges that analyzing one's own creative work carries risks of self-indulgence. She has tried to mitigate this by

foregrounding theoretical frameworks and emphasizing that the poem is a case—not the case—of a larger phenomenon. She does not claim generalizability. She claims trustworthiness through transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The value of this paper lies not in objective proof but in the coherence, honesty, and theoretical grounding of the interpretation offered.

3.2. Procedure

The author wrote *The Fig Tree Speaks* in March 2026. She then conducted a systematic close reading of the poem, informed by narrative therapy and positive psychology frameworks. She read the poem aloud on multiple occasions, attending to emotional arc, metaphor clusters, classical allusions, metrical patterns, and rhyme scheme. Observations were recorded, and thematic codes were developed iteratively (e.g., “aged fear”, “seed hope”, “pantheon of waiting”). The four themes identified are: 1) transformation of fear into structural support, 2) cultural inheritance as resilience resource, 3) hope as granular biological process, and 4) waiting as active guardianship rather than passive endurance. All “sisters” referenced in the poem are anonymized composite figures drawn from collective memory, not specific individuals. As the poem is original to this manuscript, no ethical approval was required.

4. The Poem: The Fig Tree Speaks

The speaker is every woman who has waited beyond reason—including, the author now sees, herself.

Under the fig tree, where the shadows slide
Across the cracked earth of another year,
She sits alone, no longer as a bride,
And combs her hair. She has no need of fear.
The fear has aged into a kind of bone,
A mineral deposit in the spine.
She carries it as Virgil carried Rome—
A weight that shapes the song and makes it fine.
She thinks of Penelope, her woven shroud,
Unwoven each night, a tactic against time.
She thinks of Antigone, who spoke aloud
When speaking was a solitary crime.
She thinks of Chaucer’s women on the road,
Who told their tales to keep the dark at bay,
And Boccaccio, when pestilence bestowed
A frame for stories that outlasted plague.
And she remembers sisters in her own land—
No names, no dates, just hands that held the thread—
Who wrote no books but taught her how to stand

When every standing thing had been struck dead.
 The fig tree gives its fruit without a speech.
 It does not ask the winter to be kind.
 It only deepens roots where stones and screech
 Of distant wars have left the earth maligned.
 So she remains. Not waiting for a king,
 Not waiting for a banner or a grave.
 She waits because the fig tree needs her spring,
 And spring, she knows, is what the brave still save.
 Her hope is not a shout. It is a seed.
 It is the small, slow work of hidden cells.
 It is the patient, unheroic deed
 Of one who stays and, staying, breaks the spells.
 Let others sing of battles and of thrones.
 She sings the root, the rhythm, and the rain.
 She sings the slow return of scattered bones
 To soil that recognizes them again.

Farzaneh Haratyan (March 2, 2026)

5. Analysis: Narrative Therapy and Positive Psychology in Dialogue with the Poem

The analysis begins where the poem begins: a scene of stillness. A woman sits alone under a fig tree, combing her hair. From a narrative therapy perspective, this opening resists the cultural expectation that suffering must be loud or visible. The woman is not weeping. She is not tearing her clothes. She is performing a small, dignified act of self-maintenance—combing her hair—which White and Epston (1990) would identify as a unique outcome. In the dominant story of loss, women are often portrayed as either passive victims or angry protesters. This woman is neither. She has integrated her waiting into her daily rituals. The line “She has no need of fear” is particularly significant. Fear has not disappeared. It has “aged into a kind of bone”—transformed from an acute emotion into a structural reality. This is not suppression (a maladaptive strategy in Gross’s 2015 model) but rather a form of cognitive reappraisal. The author wrote this line because she has experienced fear becoming a quiet companion rather than a paralyzing enemy.

The second stanza introduces the classical allusions. Virgil carried Rome as a weight that “shapes the song and makes it fine”. This is a direct application of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), the theory that suffering, when narratively integrated, can produce increased appreciation of life, deeper relationships, and a heightened sense of personal strength. The author is not comparing her suffering to Virgil’s epic. She is claiming the same narrative right: to transform weight into song. The third stanza moves through Penelope (strategic waiting, cunning, loyalty), Antigone (moral speech under threat), Chaucer’s pilgrims

(storytelling as survival), and Boccaccio's frame narrative (art outlasting plague). These figures were chosen because each represents a different modality of resilience. Penelope waits actively. Antigone speaks fatally. Chaucer's women collaborate. Boccaccio's storytellers create order out of contagion. Together, they form a pantheon of waiting that validated the author's own experience as she wrote.

The fourth stanza is the most delicate and, for the author, the most emotionally powerful. "She remembers sisters in her own land—/No names, no dates, just hands that held the thread". The absence of names and dates is not a failure of memory. It is a protective measure, both for the poet and for those she remembers. In narrative therapy, this is called externalizing the problem without externalizing the person (White, 2007). The problem—violence, disappearance, systemic silence—is named indirectly through metaphor ("stones and screech/Of distant wars"). The persons are protected by anonymity. Yet the line "taught her how to stand/When every standing thing had been struck dead" leaves no doubt about the severity of what has been endured. This is the heart of the poem's positive psychology intervention: hope is not naive. Hope is what remains after naivety has been killed. The author wrote this for the women she cannot name.

The final two stanzas shift from memory to ontology. The fig tree does not ask the winter to be kind. It deepens its roots. This is an image of acceptance (a core component of psychological flexibility) combined with agentic growth (a core component of Snyder's hope theory). The woman waits not for external rescue but because "the fig tree needs her spring". She has become essential to the natural cycle. Her waiting is no longer passive endurance but active guardianship. The penultimate stanza explicitly defines hope as "a seed", "the small, slow work of hidden cells", "the patient, unheroic deed". These lines were written to directly counter the common critique that hope is a form of denial. On the contrary, this hope is granular, biological, and anonymous. It does not require a witness. The final stanza echoes the opening but transforms it. She sings not of battles but of roots, rhythms, rain, and the return of scattered bones to familiar soil. The word "return" is the poem's quiet climax. It does not specify who returns or when. It asserts only that return is possible, that bones remember their soil, that the dead are not forgotten.

6. Reflexivity Statement

The author is the poet and the researcher of this poem. This dual position requires transparency. *The Fig Tree Speaks* draws on decades of living between cultures, witnessing intergenerational waiting among women in the author's community, and experiencing prolonged separation from homeland and family. These lived experiences inform the poem's imagery and emotional texture. To manage potential bias, the author employed three strategies. First, the poem was completed before the analysis began, allowing some temporal distance. Second, an independent qualitative researcher—with no personal connection to the poem's content—reviewed the theme development and confirmed that each theme was traceable to

specific lines. Third, the author actively searched for disconfirming evidence (e.g., whether any lines undermined the identified themes; none did, but the anonymity of the “sisters” was initially under-coded and subsequently elevated as a theme).

7. Discussion: Why Poetry for Emotional Regulation?

Xu, Haratyan, and Tian (2026) demonstrated that adaptive emotion regulation strategies—particularly cognitive reappraisal, mindfulness, and narrative processing—are consistently associated with reduced stress, enhanced resilience, and improved well-being across populations. Poetry, as a concentrated form of narrative, activates all three mechanisms simultaneously. The metered line requires attentional deployment, a mindfulness-adjacent skill. The metaphor forces cognitive reappraisal: the war becomes weather; the prison becomes a root. The narrative arc provides temporal coherence, connecting past to present and orienting toward a future. In clinical terms, the composition or recitation of poetry functions as what Greenberg and Pascual-Leone (2006) called emotional processing—the transformation of raw, undifferentiated affect into articulated, symbolized feeling. The woman under the fig tree is not simply expressing emotion. She is crafting it. She is choosing which syllables to stress, which images to juxtapose, which rhymes to satisfy. This act of choosing restores agency, and agency is the antidote to helplessness.

The poem’s form—iambic pentameter, alternating rhyme—is not an ornament. It is a regulatory device. The regularity of the meter provides a predictable somatic rhythm, calming the autonomic nervous system in ways analogous to paced breathing (Jerath et al., 2015). The rhyme scheme creates expectation and satisfaction, a small, repeatable experience of order in a disordered world. The stanza breaks allow for pauses, for inhalation, for the reader to sit with an image before moving on. In this sense, the poem is not *about* emotional regulation. It *is* emotional regulation, performed in language. This is the author’s only self-citation in the manuscript. It is included because Xu et al. (2026) provides the most recent systematic evidence for emotion regulation claims that this paper extends into poetic composition.

8. Conclusion: The Long Return

This paper has argued—through the author’s own poem and its analysis—that narrative poetry offers a legitimate, culturally adaptable, and theoretically grounded mechanism for emotional regulation in contexts of prolonged waiting, protracted uncertainty, and intergenerational loss. The woman under the fig tree is not a patient in a clinic. She is not a research participant. She is a figure drawn from centuries of poetry—from ancient epics to contemporary verse—and she is also the author, and she is also every woman who has waited beyond reason. The classical allusions to Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Chaucer, and Boccaccio are not acts of cultural appropriation. They are acts of solidarity. They say: *We too have known long wars. We too have waited for returns that did not come. We too have told stories*

to keep the dark away. The positive psychology of hope does not require the hope to be fulfilled. It requires only that the hope be an act of integrity. The fig tree does not control the rain. It deepens its roots. That is enough. That is the syntax of restoration. That is how the unspeakable becomes a song.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the independent qualitative researcher who reviewed the thematic analysis, as well as the women whose unnamed presence informs this work, especially Iranian women.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56, 218-226. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.56.3.218>
- Greenberg, L. S., & Pascual-Leone, A. (2006). Emotion in Psychotherapy: A Practice-Friendly Research Review. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62, 611-630. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20252>
- Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840x.2014.940781>
- Jerath, R., Crawford, M. W., Barnes, V. A., & Harden, K. (2015). Self-Regulation of Breathing as a Primary Treatment for Anxiety. *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback*, 40, 107-115. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10484-015-9279-8>
- Leggo, C. (2008). Narrative Inquiry: Attending to the Art of Discourse. *Language and Literacy*, 10, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.20360/g2sg6q>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/naturalistic-inquiry/book842>
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The Psychology of Life Stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 100-122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>
- Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process. *Psychological Science*, 8, 162-166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1997.tb00403.x>
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive Psychology: An Introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.5>
- Snyder, C. R. (2002). TARGET ARTICLE: Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13, 249-275. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1304_01
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). TARGET ARTICLE: "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence". *Psychological Inquiry*, 15, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. W. W. Norton & Company. <https://www.wwnorton.com/books/Maps-of-Narrative-Practice>
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. W. W. Norton & Company. <https://www.wwnorton.com/books/Narrative-Means-to-Therapeutic-Ends>

Xu, G., Haratyan, F., & Tian, H. (2026). A 2025 Systematic Review of Teacher Emotion Regulation and Well-Being: Implications for Student Engagement, Learning Outcomes, and Professional Development in EFL Contexts. *Frontiers in Psychology, 16*, Article ID: 1715266. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1715266>