

An Example of Bibliotherapeutic Reading of a Short Story Based on a New Bibliotherapeutic Model

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Abstract

This paper introduces an example of bibliotherapeutic reading of a short story. The reading is based on a new bibliotherapeutic model that combines Systems theory, Symbolic Modeling of literary characters, and the analysis of emotional conceptual metaphors, along with principles of Cognitive Therapy for use in bibliotherapy. The reading focuses on metaphorical concepts in the text, specifically on conceptual metaphors and emotional conceptual metaphors, which it attempts to connect with emotions. In addition to the mentioned concepts, analysing the MED cycle – the interaction between thoughts, emotions, and behaviour – is also important in this type of bibliotherapeutic reading. In the reading of this particular short story, the thoughts of the main literary character, which evoke certain emotions, are analysed. These emotions subsequently influence a character's behaviour, more specifically her relationship with her partner. The analysis reveals that this is a behavioural model that formed in the character's childhood and still influences her (romantic) relationships in adulthood.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; bibliotherapeutic model; bibliotherapeutic reading; short story; emotions; relationships

Introduction

The universal applicability of bibliotherapy stands out as an especially intriguing aspect of this method. It does not mean that bibliotherapy can simply be transferred from one context to another in a uniform way, but rather that its broad applicability allows it to be successfully adapted to various contexts. People from different professions – teachers, librarians, mental health professionals, and others – have adapted bibliotherapy to their specific fields, all with the primary goal of helping people. This has led to the development of different forms or types of bibliotherapy.

When preparing to implement bibliotherapy, it is crucial to first ask ourselves what our goal is and who the participants are. Based on these goals and the specifics of the participants, the appropriate type of text for bibliotherapy is then selected. Because the goals and contexts of bibliotherapists vary, there are different forms of bibliotherapy, such as clinical bibliotherapy, poetic therapy, interactive bibliotherapy, developmental bibliotherapy, and literary bibliotherapy (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

Davor Piskač defined literary bibliotherapy in his book *On Literature and Life: Applying the principles of literary bibliotherapy in reading practice*¹, to distinguish it from other types of

¹ The title of the book was translated from Croatian to English by the author. Original title: *O književnosti i životu: Primjena načela literarne biblioterapije u čitateljskoj praksi*.

bibliotherapy. Unlike clinical bibliotherapy, which is carried out in a clinical environment, literary bibliotherapy is primarily conducted in schools, colleges, and comparable institutions (Piskač, 2018). Literary bibliotherapy overlaps with developmental bibliotherapy in several ways, yet it stands apart by prioritizing literary works and utilizing a distinct method that distinguishes it from other bibliotherapeutic methods (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). Its goal is to direct readers towards a "specific manifestation of emotions within the literary work"² (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024, p. 197) so that the reader can identify the "causality of the emergence of this emotion"³ (ibid.). The long-term aim is for readers to apply these insights to their own lives, thus helping them better understand the emotional dilemmas they face daily (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). Literary bibliotherapy is therefore a special method of reading literary texts. It is an approach to reading that combines literary analysis with therapeutic principles. It serves as an effective method for readers to explore various life and emotional situations in a safe manner, free from potential negative consequences that could arise if one encountered such situations in real life. This approach is widely applicable in developed societies due to its versatility and impact (Piskač, 2018).

Practitioners of various bibliotherapeutic approaches introduce different models to shape the bibliotherapeutic process according to the specific approach. For example, Caroline Shrodes (1950) in her doctoral dissertation, *Bibliotherapy: A Theoretical and Clinical-Experimental Study*, introduced one of the most established models of bibliotherapy, which is based on psychoanalytic therapy. The bibliotherapeutic process developed by Shrodes consists of three stages: *identification* (which includes *projection* and *introjection*), *catharsis*, and *insight* (Shrodes, 1955). In the decades following the publication of her dissertation, Shrodes's model has been adopted, applied, and refined by other bibliotherapists and researchers (e.g., Pardeck, 1998; Heath et al., 2005).

Like other bibliotherapeutic approaches, literary bibliotherapy requires a specific bibliotherapeutic model to effectively achieve its goals, while taking into account the unique aspects of its approach and its participants. The goal of literary bibliotherapy is also to gain insight, but it achieves this insight not through identification and catharsis, as suggested by the bibliotherapeutic method introduced by Shrodes and other methods that follow her approach, but through the use of Symbolic Modeling and conceptual metaphors, as well as some fundamental principles of Cognitive Therapy and Systems Theory. This new bibliotherapeutic model is introduced in a book *The Emotional Life of Metaphors: A Bibliotherapeutic Perspective*⁴ (2024). One of the key concepts of this model is also the MED cycle – mutual interaction of thoughts, emotions, and behaviour –, which analyses how emotional metaphors in literature reveal the inner states of characters and their thought processes. By using this bibliotherapeutic method of reading literary texts, readers can explore their own emotions indirectly, creating a safe space for self-reflection.

The literary-bibliotherapeutic reading method is an integrative approach that combines literary analysis with therapeutic techniques to foster emotional awareness and growth. It offers a flexible, creative framework for addressing complex emotional issues through the exploration of literature. The method's emphasis on emotional parallelism, communication complementarity, and structured discussion provides readers with a safe, supportive environment for exploring their feelings. This

² Original text: "določeno manifestacija čustev znotraj literarnega dela" (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). Translated from Slovenian to English by the author.

³ Original text: "vzročnost pojava tega čustva" (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). Translated from Slovenian to English by the author.

⁴ The title of the book was translated from Slovenian to English by the author. Original title: *Čustveno življenje metafor: Biblioterapevtska perspektiva*.

method is particularly effective in group settings, where readers can share their insights and experiences, further enriching the therapeutic process. The bibliotherapeutic approach, while not a replacement for clinical therapy, offers a valuable tool for personal growth and emotional healing. By engaging with literature in a structured, thoughtful way, readers can gain a deeper understanding of their emotions and develop healthier emotional responses to life's challenges (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

While bibliotherapists do not perform psychological therapy unless formally trained, their role is to guide reading sessions in a structured manner. Their primary function is to moderate the reading process, ensuring it maintains focus and helps readers understand how literature reflects and impacts their emotions. The bibliotherapist's role is particularly significant in ensuring that discussions around the text remain constructive and sensitive, especially when offering interpretations or "advice" to literary characters. An essential component of working with clients in this context is creating a safe and respectful environment where participants feel free to express their interpretations without fear of judgment. Readers are encouraged to explore the emotions of literary characters as a way of indirectly discussing their emotional experiences, allowing them to reflect on their thoughts and feelings without being directly exposed. This literary-bibliotherapeutic reading method can contribute significantly to both personal development and mental well-being, making it a powerful tool for educators, therapists, and readers (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

Literary bibliotherapy is primarily structured into workshop sessions and is designed to address emotional dilemmas through the exploration of literature. The process is divided into three key phases: preparatory phase, working phase, and therapeutic phase. Each phase serves a specific function in guiding participants through the therapeutic exploration of emotional states using carefully selected literary texts (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

Preparatory Phase: Setting the Goals and Themes

The initial phase, the *preparatory phase*, involves determining the emotional issue to be explored during the workshop (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). For instance, readers dealing with feelings of hopelessness might opt to explore themes of unfulfilled dreams, as seen in literary works such as *The Great Gatsby* by Francis Scott Fitzgerald.

Once we have determined the emotional issue, which we want to discover, we continue the preparatory phase by selecting a literary text that mirrors the emotional complexity of the issue. This is done not with the intent to offer a solution through the text but rather to present a narrative that resonates with the reader's situation. In this context, the text acts as a mirror, enabling the reader to confront their emotional state in a safe, indirect manner. The text is read either independently or during the workshop, helping the reader become attuned to its emotional nuances (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

Selecting an appropriate text has always been a central aspect of preparing for bibliotherapy. Approaches to text selection are very different, primarily because of the different types of bibliotherapy conducted across various settings and contexts, as well as the varying needs of the individuals involved in bibliotherapeutic processes. Heath et al. (2005) recommend that to foster positive experiences and enhance motivation for change, school psychologists must select bibliotherapeutic stories that resonate personally with students while building coping skills and

providing hope. Effective books should feature realistic, multidimensional characters and feasible problem-solving, while avoiding stereotypes, unrealistic plots, and oversimplified resolutions.

To make text selection easier, evaluation tools for choosing appropriate texts and lists of appropriate books for bibliotherapy have also been published, taking into account factors such as whether the bibliotherapy is intended for children or adults, the individuals' social and cultural backgrounds, and the specific problems or struggles addressed in the texts. An example of such an evaluation tool for bibliotherapy is the Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool (BET), which was created in 2000 by Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson and Paula S. McMillen to evaluate the suitability of literature for bibliotherapy interventions. Developed through extensive clinical experience and a review of mental health and education literature, the tool categorizes and assesses texts based on factors such as developmental level, therapeutic use, and reading suitability (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005).

Lists of appropriate books for bibliotherapy can be found in articles like Pardeck & Pardeck (1997) and Pardeck & Markward (1995). Such lists of appropriate books for bibliotherapy can also be found in works like *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness – 751 Books to Cure What Ails You* by Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin (2013), which provides book recommendations for various emotional states, and William Sieghart's *The Poetry Pharmacy* series, including *The Poetry Pharmacy* (2017), *The Poetry Pharmacy Returns* (2019), and *The Poetry Pharmacy Forever* (2023), which offer poetic prescriptions for personal challenges.

The text must not only be thematically appropriate but also emotionally accessible, meaning it should contain emotional patterns that the reader can recognize and relate to. The selection process takes into account both emotional resonance and narrative complexity, ensuring that the work fosters introspection without overwhelming the reader (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

The literary text provides a framework for the reader to explore these emotions in a structured, indirect way, facilitating a therapeutic engagement with their feelings (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). For example, if a reader or a group of readers is struggling with feelings of inadequacy or failure, the bibliotherapist might choose a work that reflects similar themes, like J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Working Phase: Reading and Interpretation

During the *working phase*, the selected text is read and discussed. The text should resonate with the readers' emotional state, thereby allowing a deeper emotional engagement. A significant aspect of this phase is the principle of emotional parallelism, where the emotions depicted in the narrative align with the readers' experiences. However, the method emphasizes that the narrative is not a direct solution to the problem but rather an entry point into an emotional dialogue. The goal is for the reader to identify with the literary characters' experiences, thereby facilitating introspection (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). For example, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet's existential despair and contemplation of suicide offer a rich source of emotional parallelism for individuals struggling with grief or feelings of purposelessness.

An important element is also the communication complementarity between the text and the reader. The text should evoke a sense of shared experience, which encourages the reader to express and process emotions. This alignment between the literary work and the reader's internal state is essential for fostering open communication about emotions during the workshop (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

A fundamental component of the literary-bibliotherapeutic method is the discussion that follows the reading. The bibliotherapist leads the discussion, encouraging readers to explore the emotions, thoughts, and actions of the characters in the text. This analysis often leads readers to reflect on their emotional patterns and responses, sometimes without realizing it (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

Therapeutic Phase: Engaging with Emotions through Literature

In the *therapeutic phase*, the workshop shifts towards deeper emotional engagement and reflection. Through structured discussions, readers indirectly explore how the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of literary characters mirror their own experiences. This reflective process is guided by the *MED cycle*, where readers analyse how these elements interact within the narrative. By doing so, they can gain insights into their own emotional responses and behaviours (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

The method also integrates *Symbolic Modeling*, where readers examine the metaphors and symbols in the text as representations of their own emotional states. Symbolic Modeling is a psychotherapeutic method that employs emotional metaphors to help individuals explore their symbolic-metaphoric world. Rooted in David Grove's "clean language" approach, this method was further developed by James Lawley and Penny Tompkins in their work *Metaphors in Mind*, emphasizing personal transformation through the elicitation of client-specific metaphors and symbols (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). By leveraging conceptual metaphors, Symbolic Modeling facilitates self-awareness and personal growth, enabling individuals to articulate and understand abstract concepts, emotions, and behaviours through their sensory and symbolic experiences (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). This approach builds on the foundational ideas of conceptual metaphors introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, which emphasize the human tendency to comprehend one domain of experience in terms of another. It helps readers externalize their emotions through the safe distance provided by the literary narrative. By engaging with fictional characters and situations, readers can confront their own feelings without the immediacy of real-life consequences, making it easier to discuss and process difficult emotions (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

A key advantage of this method is that it allows the readers to project their emotional dilemmas onto literary characters, fostering a sense of universality and shared experience. Even though the characters are fictional, the emotions they embody resonate with the readers' real-life experiences. This recognition that others, even in fictional contexts, experience similar emotional struggles can reduce feelings of isolation and open up new pathways for discussion (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

At the end of the literary bibliotherapy session, the readers are asked to provide advice or solutions to the characters' problems, which often mirrors their own emotional needs. This process allows readers to engage with their emotional dilemmas while maintaining a comfortable distance from their own lives. As readers offer advice to the characters, they indirectly counsel themselves, gaining insights into their emotional states and possible resolutions (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

A Practical Example

In the following section of the article, I will describe a practical example of text analysis and the preparation of a bibliotherapy workshop, based on the short story "Apple Tooth" by Slovenian author Anja Mugerli. When we choose a literary text to use in bibliotherapy and start the analysis, we can begin by identifying the emotional issue of the main literary character, and then use a

deductive approach to demonstrate the presence of this issue and its emotional characteristics (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

I will begin with a summary of the entire short story. Then, I will demonstrate the text analysis and the preparation of the literary bibliotherapy process based on a selected paragraph. I will focus on just one paragraph because the format of this article does not allow for a thorough analysis and interpretation⁵. This is also not my intention, as the goal of this article is to describe the concept of analysis and preparation enabled by the new literary bibliotherapy model, rather than to provide a detailed analysis of a specific text.

The short story “Apple Tooth” by Anja Mugerli revolves around a chance encounter between the narrator and an elderly woman. After finding the woman struggling in the hallway, the narrator invites her into her apartment, and they bond over a simple act of eating apples together. Through their interaction, the narrator reflects on her relationship with her fiancé, Matevž, and the growing distance between them. The old woman’s story about her late husband, who shared her love for apples, serves as a mirror for the narrator’s own unfulfilled dreams and dissatisfaction in her relationship. As the story continues, it becomes clear that the narrator’s unresolved emotional loss from childhood, when her father left her and her mother, has profoundly shaped her adult relationships. The symbolism of apples highlights nostalgia, loss, and tension, connecting her past abandonment to the current emotional void in her life. The story ends with the narrator’s realisation that the encounter with the elderly woman happened only in her imagination (Mugerli, 2020a).

In this short story, the protagonist unknowingly follows a recurring pattern that causes her to replicate childhood behaviours and, despite her desire for emotional intimacy, ultimately decides to live a life of solitude. This model is rooted in her childhood, especially in her relationship with her father. The narrative voice is personal and subjective, leaving the reader uncertain about the reality of events. The story blurs the line between reality and imagination, possibly reflecting the protagonist’s emotional strain. Therapeutic questions arise about whether the protagonist distorts reality intentionally or subconsciously and what she can do about it. This distortion of reality becomes a key theme in analysing her emotional state (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

I will now explain the concept of text analysis and preparation for literary bibliotherapy, as facilitated by the literary bibliotherapy model, using this exemplary paragraph from the short story.

After my mother and I were left all alone, we’d been living for about a year in the apartment that was still filled with my father’s things and his scent until one day my mother had had enough and packed everything into boxes, taking them who knows where. She didn’t ask me whether I wanted to keep anything of his as a souvenir, but in any case I didn’t. I didn’t need his things to feel his presence since my father was far from a memory for me. He was with me when I woke up in the morning, in the afternoon when I was coming back from school, and in the evening when I went to bed. He was even more present when my mother and I were eating at the kitchen table. She’d dispensed with all his things but did not think of getting rid of the third chair in the kitchen. And so I would gaze into an empty chair during each meal, having conversations in my mind with my father as if he were actually there. I needed this as much as I needed the food on my plate, but more important still were his answers, for I could actually hear him. The apartment we finally moved into was smaller, with only one bedroom, which was

⁵ A comprehensive bibliotherapeutic analysis and interpretation of this short story can be found in the book *The Emotional Life of Metaphors: A Bibliotherapeutic Perspective*, which is cited at the end of this article.

mine. My mother pulled out the sofa bed in the living room every evening. There were only two chairs in the kitchen. My father never again answered. It was as if he was offended that there was no longer room for him in our new apartment, or maybe it was only that I'd outgrown that empty chair. But for a while now I've felt as if that damned chair has come back. Matevž's promises pile up like apple peels in the compost, but there are so many peels I'm afraid they'll never decompose and soon they'll take over the whole garden. More and more I realize I want to tell him something but I can't find the right words. Instead of talking to him I bury myself more and more in the text in front of me, thinking about it even when I'm away from my desk. In my thoughts I move to different pasts, I see ritual bonfires meant to help the sun preserve its strength, and masked people dancing in the middle of the forest. Sometimes I don't realize where I am until I see I've taken a wrong turn, and now and again it happens that Matevž looks up in surprise when I enter a room, as if he's forgotten I'm still here. (Mugerli, 2020b, as translated by Blake, n.d., para. 11).

This paragraph delves into the emotional complexities of the protagonist, who struggles with intimate relationships due to emotional disconnects stemming from her past. The narrative examines the protagonist's emotional detachment, particularly with her father and fiancé, Matevž. Both men play pivotal roles in shaping her emotional world: her father's absence during childhood led her to create an imagined version of him, while Matevž, though physically present, is emotionally unavailable (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

When analysing such literary text, we use Symbolic Modeling to explore the complexity of human emotions by examining the conceptual metaphors in the text. We analyse the conceptual metaphors during the preparation phase to examine them further during the literary bibliotherapy workshop. In this particular short story, the conceptual metaphor of "an empty chair" – that it seems to her has returned with Matevž – serves to describe the protagonist's internal world and coping mechanisms. This concept of "imaginary communication" is a defence mechanism the protagonist develops early in life, allowing her to cope with emotional neglect by detaching and pulling away from reality. Her fantasies about her father during childhood are replicated in her adult life when faced with Matevž's emotional inaccessibility. This imaginary communication becomes a way for the protagonist to process her emotions and navigate difficult situations (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

As the protagonist attempts to reconcile her past with her present, her coping mechanisms become more apparent. The appearance of a mysterious old woman in her imagination serves as a projection of her inner world. The old woman's interactions with the protagonist are symbolic, representing a manifestation of her emotional struggles. This interaction allows the protagonist to indirectly address her feelings of isolation and unfulfilled emotional needs. The narrative also addresses the protagonist's struggle to break free from these emotional patterns. Despite being aware of her emotional blockages, she finds it difficult to alter her behaviour. The imaginary dialogues with her father and the old woman indicate a deeper need for emotional resolution, but the protagonist remains trapped in her habitual defence mechanisms (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024).

At the end of the literary-bibliotherapeutic reading, the participants could try to give the protagonist advice or suggestions on how to resolve this struggle. Of course, they could only do that because

she is a fictional literary character and not a real person⁶ (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024). By encouraging the readers to formulate advice or a suggestion, a bibliotherapist actually stimulates them to try and structure their thoughts related to the text and the emotional dilemma they discussed during the workshop. By doing so, the readers can formulate their own possible solution to a certain emotional problem. By hearing advice and suggestions that other participants (readers) give to the literary character, they can also rethink their own point of view and adjust it if they want to. Even if some of the participants do not decide to share their advice or solutions, this process can happen quietly in their thoughts.

If we were to formulate advice or a suggestion for this particular literary character, we might say something like this: Rather than seeking partners who evoke the same emotional dynamics as her father and Matevž, the protagonist might benefit from choosing someone who is emotionally accessible. By recognizing her patterns and making different choices, she could break free from the cycle of emotional detachment and create more fulfilling relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates the effectiveness of a new bibliotherapeutic model that integrates Systems theory, Symbolic Modeling of literary characters, analysis of emotional conceptual metaphors, and principles of Cognitive Therapy. Through the practical example of text analysis and bibliotherapy workshop preparation based on the short story “Apple Tooth”, we have shown how this model can provide valuable insights into the emotional and psychological dynamics within a literary text. By analysing the protagonist's thoughts, emotions, and behaviour, we illustrated how deeply ingrained childhood patterns can shape adult relationships, particularly in the context of romantic partnerships.

This bibliotherapeutic approach offers a unique way to engage readers with literature, encouraging self-reflection and emotional processing. As future research continues to explore and refine this model, it holds the potential to enhance the therapeutic value of literary reading, offering readers new paths for emotional healing and personal growth.

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⁶ Under no circumstances should anyone participating in bibliotherapy offer advice to other participants. Both bibliotherapists and participants must always express opinions “as subjective impressions, not as facts. Advice should be presented in a way that it can be understood as a perspective. Sometimes, advice may not even be necessary; the same effect can be achieved by asking questions that encourage other participants to reflect on possible decisions, the consequences of those decisions, and the thoughts of the literary characters” (Piskač & Marinčič, 2024, 255).

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