

## Biblio/Poetry Therapy in Dante's language

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### Abstract

In Italy, biblio/poetry therapy developed between the 1990s and the 2000s. While in the beginning it was a tool mainly used by psychologists, today, thanks to the work developed by the University of Verona, developmental bibliotherapy is also spreading in different areas: schools (both with students and parents), libraries, social and cultural associations, prisons. The most commonly used model is that of client-centred bibliotherapy adapted to the characteristics of the Italian population. With the establishment of the BIPO (Italian Association of Bibliotherapy and Poetry Therapy), the main currents of thought were brought together, giving rise to a series of training initiatives and the opening of the first register for Bibliotherapy/Poetry Therapy facilitators in Italy. This talk will describe the main ways of using biblio/poetry therapy, how the register of facilitators was set up and will illustrate the basic and specialist training model of the University of Verona.

**Keywords:** developmental bibliotherapy; client-centred model; person-centred bibliotherapy; university training; University of Verona; Dante Alighieri; BIPO

### Introduction

Dante Alighieri and his most famous work, the *Divine Comedy* (originally published in 1472, cited edition Alighieri, 1960), are well-known throughout the world. The journey into the afterlife narrated by Dante has already been employed as a metaphor for the bibliotherapeutic process because it speaks of the essence of humanity and human beings. Especially in the passage through *Hell*, readers can recognize themselves and learn to accept their own limits. Among the many similarities between Dante's journey and bibliotherapy, one concerns us all in particular. I will tell you about it at the end of my presentation.

### Bibliotherapy and poetry therapy in Italy

First, I wish to briefly introduce the state of the art of biblio/poetry therapy in Italy, its discovery in recent times, but also the rapid evolution it is experiencing.

Only in the early 2000s did psychologists start to discuss bibliotherapy in Italy. Poetry therapy, on the other hand, was introduced in the 1990s, and had its greatest development in the 2000s, although only around 2020 did it begin to enter into contact with bibliotherapy (Bulfaro, 2024). The encounter of the two disciplines was made possible by the creation of a specific Master's Degree by the University of Verona, which has now reached its fourth edition.<sup>1</sup> The programme includes all forms of narrative therapy: bibliotherapy, poetry

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.corsi.univr.it/?ent=cs&id=1047&menu=home&lang=en>

therapy, philosophy of narration, narrative medicine, and biblio-music therapy.<sup>2</sup> These opportunities for collaboration and networking allowed bibliotherapy and poetry therapy to merge into a single method and led to the creation of the Italian association of Biblio/poetry therapy: the BIPO, which I am representing today.<sup>3</sup>

But what does it actually mean to apply biblio/poetry therapy in Italian, the language of Dante? Some figures need now to be taken into consideration: in Italy, 6 out of 10 people do not read even one book in a year. According to the latest data from ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics), the percentage of people who read at least one book in a year is 39.3%. Of this, the percentage of female readers is 44%, while that of male readers is 34.3%.<sup>4</sup> Yet, 95% of users of biblio/poetry therapy are women, as well as most of the facilitators.<sup>5</sup>

Why is biblio/poetry therapy so predominantly used and practised by women? Based on my experience, my theory is that men don't enjoy discussion groups as much as women and are less willing to talk about books and emotions. Using biblio/poetry therapy to address issues that concern them directly – such as gender equality and domestic abuse – becomes, therefore, more difficult. In such settings as schools, male students participate in biblio/poetry therapy sessions only because required. We may wonder how strong their motivation is and, therefore, how effective biblio/poetry therapy is on them.

Italy also shows geographical differences in reading habits, which inevitably influence the practice of biblio/poetry therapy.

More in detail, the percentage of male and female readers is higher in Northern Italy than in Central and Southern Italy.<sup>6</sup> Cause/effect correlations aside, the first university that offered courses in biblio/poetry therapy, the University of Verona, is indeed located in Northern Italy. The first Italian Association of Bibliotherapy and Poetry Therapy, BIPO, was also founded in Northern Italy.

However, things are changing. Interest in bibliotherapy – particularly in developmental bibliotherapy – is growing throughout our country. Educators, teachers, librarians, counsellors, philosophers, nurses and social-health workers from all Italian regions are showing increasing interest. In fact, the students of the Master's Degree in bibliotherapy come from every part of Italy with a desire to acquire the necessary knowledge to use biblio/poetry therapy in their areas. This will eventually allow for a wider geographical diffusion, although it will take years to see the results.

How biblio/poetry therapy is taught and practised is another crucial aspect. At the University of Verona, the approach is person-centred (Béres, 2010; Brewster, Sen, Cox, 2013). Practitioners can analyse the geographical and social context and apply bibliotherapy and poetry therapy most effectively.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.corsi.univr.it/?ent=cs&id=1047&menu=studiare&tab=insegnamenti&lang=en>

<sup>3</sup>At the time of publication, BIPO has been dissolved. The experiment lasted two years and was suspended due to the difficulty of managing a growing project that required human resources that were not available. However, the future development of biblio/poetry therapy in Italy cannot continue without an association capable of supporting it. We must wait for the necessary people and energies to come together to continue along the rich path already traced. See more details in the article below:

<https://biblioterapiaitaliana.com/2025/07/12/bipo-fine-di-un-progetto-ma-non-dellidea/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/STATISTICA\\_TODAY\\_Libri\\_biblioteche.pdf](https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/STATISTICA_TODAY_Libri_biblioteche.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> This is a consideration of the author based on his own experience.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/STATISTICA\\_TODAY\\_Libri\\_biblioteche.pdf](https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/STATISTICA_TODAY_Libri_biblioteche.pdf)

Great interest also exist in how it is possible to involve so-called “poor readers”, people who do not read any book or read a maximum of 3 books in a year.<sup>7</sup> It is essential not to neglect such a population, especially in Italy. The promotion of reading often becomes part of the work of the biblio/poetry therapy facilitator, to ensure that even poor readers can enjoy the benefits of biblio/poetry therapy. Inmates, for example, generally have a low level of education and little propensity to read. Yet, some research shows that it is possible to use biblio/poetry therapy with them, too. Another example is the use of biblio/poetry therapy with teenagers from the most disadvantaged social groups attending professional schools. An adequate promotion of reading that prepares the ground for biblio/poetry therapy, will oftentimes engage their interest.

Another important aspect regarding the diffusion of biblio/poetry therapy in Italy concerns academic research. The University of Verona has founded, along with the Master's Degree programme, an interdepartmental research centre called Bibliotherapy and Shared Reading. Books for Well-being.<sup>8</sup> The goal is to bring together researchers from different departments to collaborate on biblio/poetry therapy research. In March, the research centre organised the first international conference on biblio/poetry therapy, especially focused on its application in libraries and schools (Dalla Valle, Greco, Monge, 2023). These are fields where researchers are experimenting, with processes on the one hand and with randomised control trial on the other, to develop an effective qualitative and quantitative research method.

Within these experiences, BIPO (Italian Association of Bibliotherapy and Poetry Therapy) was born. While universities are responsible for basic training and research, associations must guarantee high standards of application, continuous training, and extensive knowledge of the main international studies in the field. These three points are fundamental for the evolution of biblio/poetry therapy in Italy. We are now trying to establish a solid practice, like some of the associations represented here have had for many years.

After the foundation of BIPO, we created a register of biblio/poetry therapy facilitators to assess its members' level of expertise.<sup>9</sup> Beside the University of Verona, many private trainers provide an education in this field, but seldom interact with each other. No minimum or shared official programme exists. Therefore, our association requests applicants to present their educational background and the training courses they have taken to prepare themselves to use biblio/poetry therapy. In case their preparation appears inadequate, the judging committee assign a list of subjects to study in depth and of field experiences to be carried out before re-submitting the application.

While considering these topics, terminology issues also capture our attention. We wonder: is it more correct to use the qualification of biblio/poetry therapy facilitator or bibliotherapist? According to the International Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy, the difference lies in the professional background. A non-medical practitioner is called a facilitator, while a healthcare practitioner is a bibliotherapist, where “therapist” indicates a medical profession.<sup>10</sup> This is not a trivial issue considering the traditional distinction between clinical and developmental bibliotherapy, with the related differences in settings, users and legal implications (Hynes &

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/STATISTICA\\_TODAY\\_Libri\\_biblioteche.pdf](https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/STATISTICA_TODAY_Libri_biblioteche.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://biblioterapia.dcuic.univr.it/>

<sup>9</sup> The post reports that the idea of the register at the time of its establishment

<https://biblioterapiaitaliana.com/2023/10/13/nasce-bipo-associazione-italiana-di-biblioterapia-e-poesiaterapia/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://ifbpt.org/overview-of-training/>

Hynes-Berry, 1994, 13–17). Yet, the qualification of 'art therapist' is normally used in art therapies without necessarily implying a clinical practice.

This term exemplifies the often unclear professional boundaries of this term.

The application of biblio/poetry therapy in Italy also has other peculiarities that I would like to share, and that I believe in some cases resemble those that your associations deal with.

The first one I want to mention is the abuse of the term *bibliotherapy*. Often, more general cultural activities are labelled as *bibliotherapy*. In some cases, for example, a speaker explains the benefits of reading without ever interacting with their audience and this is referred to as *bibliotherapy*. This happens because biblio/poetry therapy in Italy is still so little known that many cannot tell a reading group from a bibliotherapy group. People tend to focus on the value of the book rather than the person's needs. In particular, the classics are considered the only books worthy of being used, while graphic novels, silent books, comics, and manga, which are particularly appreciated by younger generations, are excluded. Yet, we know well that the first criterion for a book to produce bibliotherapeutic effects is accessibility. If readers cannot understand the text, if they don't enjoy it, the pleasure of reading is not activated, identification fails, and bibliotherapy cannot reach its goals. At the Master's Degree in Bibliotherapy at the University of Verona, we teach a person-centred bibliotherapy approach using what Laura J. Cohen in the 1990s called the bibliotherapeutic process – not to be confused with the psychodynamic stages of bibliotherapy postulated by Caroline Shrodes (Shrodes, 1950). In particular, Cohen practised bibliotherapy applied to nursing. She concluded that the bibliotherapeutic process is the same as the nursing process, the decision-making tool used by nurses, and therefore, it shares the structure of a scientific process (Cohen, 1993). According to Cohen, the bibliotherapeutic process is a step-by-step procedure composed of:

- Data collection;
- Data analysis and goal setting;
- Intervention, planning and implementation;
- Review.

The bibliotherapeutic process thus allows the development of biblio/poetry therapy projects that value the person's characteristics, ability to access texts and needs. Choosing the right book, then, needs to consider all these aspects.

Another difficulty experienced by Italian biblio/poetry therapy researchers and practitioners is related to the available financial support. The term *bibliotherapy* is often misunderstood by institutions and authorities. Schools and libraries think it is a medical activity and thus reject every proposal. Things become even more difficult when talking to public institutions and politicians. Continue research and obtaining data on the benefits becomes, therefore, essential to the advancement of biblio/poetry therapy. We need to widely disseminate the results of such research and explain them properly to overcome preconceptions in social and scientific environments. To do this, universities and associations must join their forces. While academic research happens in universities, it is up to associations to bring its results to all practitioners and disseminate them in society. Therefore, it is necessary to create a synergy between the

two to spread biblio/poetry therapy more quickly in countries like Italy and others where it is only now taking its first steps.

## Conclusion

Finally, I would like to return to Dante. His works, and the *Divine Comedy* in particular, were considered of primary importance in mediaeval consolatory literature. For us, women and men of the twenty-first century who deal with bibliotherapy, this holds a new, special meaning. In the *Inferno* Dante meets Virgil, who guides him and helps him gain a deeper knowledge about himself and his life journey. He offers him the vision of those dark places and explains it to him. Think about it: isn't this what we, bibliotherapy facilitators, do when we accompany our clients along the narrative paths we create for them?

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