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Editor's Introduction

As the end of summer approaches and we look forward to the second biblio/poetry therapy conference in Jyväskylä, Finland, we have completed the second issue of the European Journal for Biblio/Poetry Therapy and continue to publish edited and reviewed versions of the theoretical presentations and practical workshops of the 1st European Biblio/Pietry Therapy Conference held in October 2024.

The balance between the theoretical and practical parts of the second issue clearly shows that biblio/poetry therapy is more practice than theory. But I believe it is important to have the appropriate theories and methodologies in the background to help us work more effectively and to examine the results and positive effects as well as challenges. This issue includes several studies that propose novel theoretical frameworks for approaching the mechanisms of biblio/poetry therapy and meaning-making processes of reception and creation. The theoretical section includes studies that present the fundamentals, possible approaches and steps of developmental and clinical work that can be carried out through expressive and narrative approaches of biblio/poetry therapy. The second part presents colorful and rich examples of practical implementation from a wide variety of countries. The presentation of these practices is important because the authors share their experiences and provide inspiration for professionals working with biblio/poetry therapy, offering insight into the many different approaches and methodologies of biblio/poetry therapy applied in community and institutional settings.

In this issue Victoria Field's (United Kingdom) keynote speech will be followed by theoretical papers and bibliotherapeutic interpretations by Torsten Pettersson (Sweden), Manca Marinčič (Slovenia), Dimitra Didangelou (Belgium), and Tamara M. Trebes (Austria), and then by insights into practical applications as approached by Fani Giannakopoulou and Ruth Bezzina (Greece and Malta), Tamar Kichli Borochovsky (Israel), Deborah Burns and Anne-Marie Smith (United Kingdom), Efrat Havusha-Feldman (Israel), Maja Cvjetković (Croatia), and Kvetoslava Kotrbová (Slovakia).

In addition to the excellent work of the authors, as always, special thanks go to the anonymous volunteer reviewers who invested a lot of time and energy to ensure that this issue is a high-quality publication.

Wishing you an inspirational and flourishing reading experience,

Judit Béres

(Editor-in-chief)

This Being Human

Dr Victoria Field

Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom
victoria.field@canterbury.ac.uk
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2982-4826

Abstract

This article summarises a keynote talk given at the 1st European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference, held at MagNet Közösségi Ház in Budapest on Saturday 5th October 2024. As this was a talk, the article is written in a conversational rather than academic style. The Introduction outlines the process of devising the talk. The account of the talk itself includes the writing prompts given on the day, and the Conclusion puts the talk into a wider context. The talk used "The Guest House" by Rumi, in a translation by Coleman Barks based on a version by John Moyne (Barks, 1996, 109) as a frame for discussing what it means 'to be human'. Three themes were explored: how biblio/poetry therapy is an example of hospitality, especially in the way the arts offer meaning in a troubled world; questions relating to translation; and the importance of connection. The talk included references to models of biblio/poetry therapy suggested by Mazza (2017) and Alfrey et al. (2022). The Conclusion extends the idea of the 'symbolic' in biblio/poetry therapy.

Keywords: biblio/poetry therapy; expressive writing; poetry; poetry therapy; Rumi; therapeutic writing; translation

Introduction

This article is based on the keynote talk I gave on the morning of Saturday 5th October 2024 at the 1st European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference held at MagNet Közösségi Ház in Budapest. That Saturday was the second day of the conference. Old friendships had been consolidated, new ones made, and delegates had enjoyed generous hospitality at the conference dinner. The atmosphere in the auditorium was relaxed and friendly. So, this talk was given in a specific time, place and cultural milieu, and I have attempted to reflect those elements in this article.

My intention in devising the talk and its content was to invite a 'feeling response' in the audience. Rather than 'talk about' biblio/poetry therapy, I wanted to give members of the audience the experience of being in a poetry therapy group. This intention echoes the much-quoted line attributed to mythologist Joseph Campbell that people 'are not seeking the meaning of life as much as a sense of being alive'.

I submitted the Abstract of the talk some months in advance of October. In order to write the Abstract, I selected the poem which I would be using as a frame well in advance of writing the rest of the talk. There is an under-theorised transpersonal aspect to poetry therapy where synchronicities, hunches and intuitions are as important as more rational approaches (Field, 2020). Thinking ahead from January 2024 to a gathering in October, I had to imagine myself in Budapest, and the likely audience and atmosphere, whilst having no idea of how these would be in reality. As I imagined the forthcoming conference, the notion of hospitality rose to the surface of my

consciousness, among many other possible themes for a talk. In a world that is increasingly commercialised and transactional, one of my values has become what Robin Wall Kimmerer (2024) calls 'a gift economy.' The welcome afforded by a poem, or a poetry therapy group, is analogous to hospitality elsewhere in the world.

I had also been thinking a great deal about poetry in translation. I have been engaged in translation for many years and the process excites and interests me, especially its analogies with biblio/poetry therapy. I question what exactly we are reading when we read a poem in translation from another language (Bukia-Peters & Field, 2016). Even a so-called literal translation, is a different entity from the original. This concern has become more pressing to me as more poems in translation are reproduced without attribution on the internet. As the delegates in Budapest would be speakers of many languages, I chose a poem in translation.

In addition, I wanted to use an accessible poem with a clear metaphor and concrete imagery. Whilst the conference was to be conducted in English, there would be a wide variation in the audience's familiarity with the language. I therefore selected a translated poem that is immediately comprehensible and also has a rich hinterland of metaphorical potential. The most effective poems in biblio/poetry therapy are those which are 'richly ambiguous' (Chavis, 2011, 40).

Finally, none of us, at the conference, nor in our lives elsewhere, can ignore the tragedies of current world events. I wanted to acknowledge the all-pervasive sense of anxiety generated by world news, especially the horrors perpetrated in Gaza, the Middle East generally, Ukraine and other places of conflict, alongside concern about increasingly authoritarian governments in Europe and beyond.

My talk was 'in the moment' and I invited the audience to interact with each other and to reflect on what they had heard both privately and in writing. These directions are given in italics in what follows.

My keynote talk

Being human

Good morning everyone. Here's a slide showing a 'word cloud' of good morning in various languages. *Please turn to someone to whom you haven't yet spoken, and say 'good morning' in your own language or your own languages – and to someone else – and to someone else.*

What a joy to hear the cacophony of voices in the room. And yes, this is indeed a good (goed, iyi, bon, bueno, dobre, kali etc) morning. Let's reflect for a moment on why this morning, in this space, can be considered 'good.' I argue that it is because we are here, together, in person, in our shared humanity.

There are many ways in which we are different from each other. There are at least twenty different nationalities at this conference. We are of different genders, ages, social class, ethnicities, educational experiences, sexual orientations, religion or faith traditions. We are variously married, divorced, single, home owners or renters, parents or child-free. We may have large extended families, or few relatives. We may seek them out or avoid them. We may love animals and keep pets, enjoy gardening and being outside, or we may lead a mostly urban existence.

We may be employed, working freelance, unemployed, or retired. We may have had major illnesses, surgeries or treatments. We may have disabilities, visible or hidden. We are probably all suffering from the simple effects of getting older. We may be financially comfortable or struggling to make ends meet. All of us will have experienced losses including bereavements, disappointments, or loss of a sense of self. Most of us will have found at least a little joy in life. Some of us might lie awake at night burdened by secrets, regrets, or worries. Others may sleep soundly. All of us have a dream life that is ours alone, yet mysteriously connected to a larger consciousness.

This is being human. We bring that full humanity into the work of biblio/poetry therapy, as participants and as practitioners. The complex web of our different personal and demographic characteristics can seem difficult to disentangle. One visual representation, the so-called 'Rainbow Model' devised by Dahlgren and Whitehead in 1993 offers a way of conceptualising the impact of different elements on our wellbeing in the world.
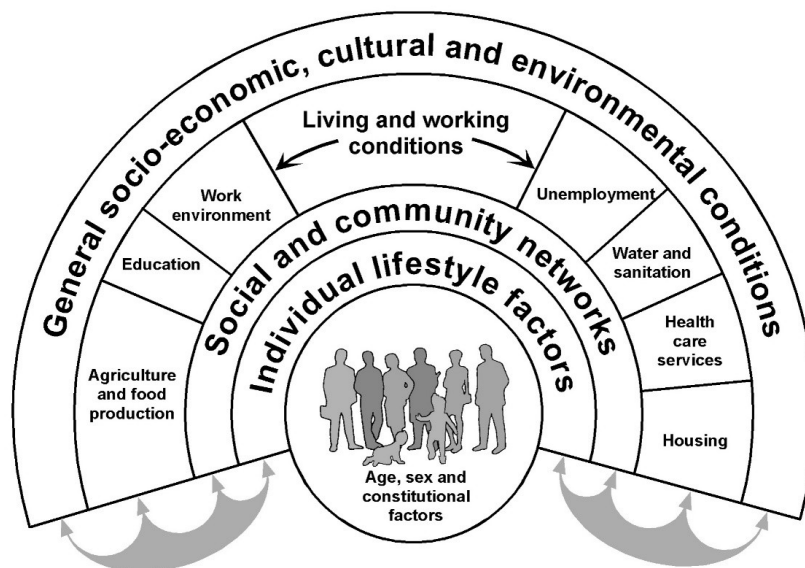
Figure 1. The Main Determinants of Health (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 1993)

It was first developed by Dahlgren and Whitehead (1993) in their work on health inequalities and shows how individual health is determined not just by our personal characteristics, but by where we fit into our communities and cultures.

At the centre of this diagram are people as individuals. That is us, you and me, with our constitutions, our personalities and our individual lifestyles. Rippling out from our individual selves are our human identities as social beings, in relationship to our families, communities and neighbourhoods. Then, come the conditions of our lives such as work, education and housing, our economic and social position. Finally, all of us are influenced by the wider culture of our countries, world affairs, the physical environment and the age we live in. All of us have different versions of this diagram, overlapping with those of others to a greater or lesser extent.

Dahlgren and Whitehead (2021) reflect on why this model has been so widely adopted and conclude that it is because it is holistic, relatively simple and intuitively correct. It also focuses on determinants of *health* rather than of disease (my italics). It offers 'interconnected layers of

influence' (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 2021) which in turn can suggest action to improve health outcomes. Thinking of our own lives, we may be aware of which of our own 'layers of influence' promote our health and wellbeing and where we might be lacking.

So, we are unique in our humanity but something brings us together here. All of us, I assume, believe that poetry, literature, reading and expressive writing are forces for good, that connect us at a human level, beyond demographic details. A poem is a way of framing the paradox that our common humanity exists alongside our human uniqueness.

The poem

So let's go to the poem I have chosen as the frame for this talk.

Everyone in the audience had a paper copy of "The Guest House" by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne (Barks et al., 1996, 109). The poem is widely reproduced on the internet.

I will read it first. As I read, think about these questions which I often use in biblio/poetry therapy sessions.

Pay attention to where in your body you feel the poem? Can you name those sensations? Are you different after the poem than from before?

I read aloud "The Guest House" (Barks et al., 1996, 109). Now let's read aloud all together, chorally.

We all read "The Guest House".

When I introduced the poem, I used the word 'frame', a metaphor. A poem can also be a window, a ladder, a friend, and many other things.

Take a minute to write down what poems can be for you. What are your metaphors for a poem? Your answers to that question will inform your way of working with biblio/poetry therapy.

There are many themes in *"The Guest House"*. For today, I'll take just three and hope that they may act as doors and windows opening into your own ideas.

Hospitality

First, both a guest house and biblio/poetry therapy work with the idea of hospitality. That is certainly true of a long-running community group in my local library in Canterbury, Kent, where anyone can walk through the door.

The picture below shows a writing for wellbeing group themed on geology. Here you can see a variety of people absorbed in writing about earth processes. Some know something about geology and/or poetry, many don't. There are different ages and social backgrounds in the group. It is in a space that is wheelchair accessible in a public library. It is in many ways, hospitable, a guest house for exploration and interest.

*Figure 2. A geology-themed writing for wellbeing group held in Canterbury Public Library
at the Beaney in October 2023. Photo by Victoria Field.*

Figures 3. and 4. below show participants in a poetry and film project called 'A Few Words About Me', aimed at people with a diagnosis of dementia. Not everyone was able to write independently. So, in order to make biblio/poetry therapy more hospitable, we worked collaboratively with volunteers 'scribing' poems and editing them in partnership with the poems' authors. In another group, Zest, also for people living with dementia, we worked with poems orally, and included other art forms such as singing and painting.

Figures 3. and 4. Participants in 'A Few Words About Me', a project based on poetry and film for people with a diagnosis of dementia, 2017-2018. Photos by Victoria Field

A poem can be hospitable like a guest house, and we can also organise our biblio/poetry therapy groups to be as hospitable as possible.

So far, so upbeat. Poetry therapy contributes to the common good, it's a good thing. But let's look again at the factors that impinge on our health and wellbeing in Dahlgren and Whitehead's (1993) Rainbow Model. I would like to draw attention to the outer arc of the rainbow, that is, the general conditions. We are mostly powerless to, or can only indirectly, influence the political and environmental circumstances of our times. In many countries of the world, there is unspeakable suffering through the violence of war and armed conflict. Even at a distance, these circumstances impinge on us individually causing private trauma and distress.

British Somali poet Warsan Shire (born 1988), ends her poem "What They Did Yesterday Afternoon" (Shire, 2020) as follows:

> later that night
> i held an atlas in my lap
> ran my fingers across the whole world
> and whispered
> where does it hurt?
>
> it answered
> everywhere
> everywhere
> everywhere.

Put your hand on your heart. Where does it hurt?

Suffering is not new. To that word 'everywhere', we can add the word 'always'. Always, always … In the Rumi poem we have just read, there is the image of a 'crowd of sorrows' who violently sweep our houses empty of its furniture. Rumi lived and wrote in the thirteenth century and the challenge to remain hospitable in the face of sorrow is perennial.

My late stepfather, who was in the Indian Army, was taken as a Prisoner of War when Singapore fell to the Japanese in 1942. He spent the rest of the war working on the Siam-Burma Railway, the so-called Death Railway, experiencing beatings, and near starvation. He would sometimes wake to the corpses of his friends, fellow soldiers, lying either side of him. Liberation came in late 1945 with the final defeat of the Japanese when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, unleashing more horror. No one wins a war. One of his friends and fellow POW was the artist Ronald Searle (1920–2011) who made drawings of their experience. Examples of these can be widely found online.

Like poems, like writing, visual art bears witness to experience. In the camp, Harry and his fellow prisoners performed plays, wrote revues, and decorated menu cards for their Christmas dinner of many courses. They ate rice, followed by rice, followed by rice. These documents and drawings are now part of the collection at the Imperial War Museum. Bearing witness and transforming experience into art or humour is part of being human.

My second example of remaining hospitable to all experience comes from the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966). During the time of Stalin's Great Purge, she queued daily to deliver food to her son, a political prisoner. This led to a sequence of poems called 'Requiem' on which she worked for three decades. The poems first appeared in Munich, without her knowledge, in 1963, and in the Soviet Union not until 1987 (Thomas, 2006, 246). The work includes the following "Instead of a Preface":

> In the fearful years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day, somebody "identified" me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, had never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): "Can you describe this?" And I answered "Yes, I can". And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face. April 1, 1957, Leningrad (Akhmatova, 2006, trans. Thomas, D., 183)

Whatever the horror, can we describe it? It will never be easy but using the model of biblio/poetry therapy, we can at least open up the possibility. We can read the poets of war, conflict and trauma, and in doing so, find a human response with our own writing.

What might we say to the woman with blue lips standing in the prison queue?

My step-dad Harry was always cheerful and had a zest for life. When I asked him about that, given his early experiences, he would reply, 'Because I'm here, darling, because I'm here'. This is the miracle of being human. Whatever we have been through, we are here. And, in terms of deep time, here not even for the blink of an eye. The task of this being human in our biblio/poetry therapy groups, is to look, really look, at that question of what it means 'to be here'.

What are we allowing into our personal guest house? And what do we keep out?

I would never say of Harry's experience, nor Anna Akhmatova's, nor that of anyone who has been through the depths of suffering, that a crowd of sorrows might be clearing a space for a new delight. Delight may or may not materialise. Nevertheless, one of the paradoxes of this being human, is the way sorrow and joy can coexist in the direst of circumstances.

Translation

Let's move to the second aspect of "The Guest House" I wish to talk about today: the fact that it is a translation.

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, or simply Rumi, was a thirteenth-century poet, writing in Persian. He was born in Balkh in present-day Afghanistan, and died in Konya, in present-day Turkey (Barks, 1996, xi). In translation, he is one of the best-selling poets in the United States (Gooch, 2017).

The translation we have read is by Coleman Barks. Barks (1996, 290–291) has written movingly of the many synchronicities that led to him working on Rumi. These included meeting a Sri Lankan saint who had previously appeared in a dream, and being nicknamed Cappadocia as a boy. He says he cannot explain these phenomena but nor can he deny them. Part of the success of Rumi's poetry in Coleman Barks' translation is that they are in the tradition of American free verse, not the dense, musical metre of the Persian originals. For me, this exemplifies the way a poem can proliferate through new translations and interpretations. Translation keeps a text alive, allowing it to shapeshift into new languages and cultures. Shakespeare or Chekhov are recreated afresh every time they are translated into languages other than English or Russian. It is important to remember, that whatever the memes say on social media, that the words we are reading are those of twentieth-century US poet, Coleman Barks, not Rumi himself. In her provocatively titled book, 'Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability', Emily Apter (2013) questions many of the assumptions underlying the revival of World Literature in institutional settings. She writes (Apter, 2013, 3) that she has 'been left uneasy in the face of the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources' and invokes the idea of 'untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavours' (sic). I would argue that the Persian of several centuries ago is both translatable *and* untranslatable, and the result in English is a co-creation, and provisional and that this must always be acknowledged. Coleman Barks (1996, 291) himself, referring to Rumi, asserts that "a poet of such astonishing range and depth needs many translators and interpreters. Mystical poetry tries to reveal the apple orchard *within* the mist of language (Rumi's image). I hope these translations do not thicken that fog; I hope they burn it off!"

So what is the relevance of translation to biblio/poetry therapy? It can be argued that reading is always a kind of translation. Bibliotherapists work with the way a text is recreated anew by each reader, and by the same reader at different times. I am regularly surprised in my groups when participants offer a new response to poems with which I am familiar. We are back to the rich ambiguity of literary texts (Chavis, 2011, 40). To return to Coleman Barks' metaphor, responding to a poem and discussing these responses in a therapeutic group can be seen as analogous to revealing the apple orchards of our psyches within the mist of language.

Think about what kind of apple orchard is hidden by the mist of language in your own world. Take a second to close your eyes, visualise, smell and listen to it. Perhaps a poem will emerge from that mistiness. Make a note.

We heard yesterday from Juhani Ihanus about Nick Mazza's RES, Receptive, Expressive, Symbolic model (Mazza, 2017). Another, complementary, model was developed by Abigail Alfrey (Alfrey et al., 2022) after close analysis of interactions in poetry therapy groups in the UK in Canterbury and London. She identified the following kinds of activity as being intrinsic to the biblio/poetry therapeutic process, operating iteratively throughout the session.

- Engaging
- Feeling
- Exploring
- Connecting
- Transferring

For me, these modalities are at work in translation and in biblio/poetry therapy.

Reading poetry from other languages and cultures, and consciously 'Engaging, Feeling, Exploring, Connecting, and Transferring' adds depth and breadth to the experience of being human.

Poet Sarah Maguire (1957–2017) founded the Poetry Translation Centre as a way of democratizing translation and bringing poets from other languages into English to encourage a wider readership. In a lecture given in 2008 (Poetry Translation Centre) on Poetry and Conflict, she argues that translating poetry is the opposite of war. I would add that every biblio/poetry therapy group is a forum for enabling us to be human in the face of difference.

Connection

Biblio/poetry therapy, literature, and the arts in general are predicated on making connections. Whilst the medical tradition tends to atomise by isolating causes of disease and treating specific ailments or body parts, biblio/poetry therapy works to connect us into a more consciously whole person, connected to others and the world. In their survey of art, healing and public health, Stuckey and Nobel (2010, 261) assert that the 'Use of the arts in healing does not contradict the medical view in bringing emotional, somatic, artistic and spiritual dimensions to learning. Rather, it complements the biomedical view by focusing on not only sickness and symptoms but the holistic nature of the person.'

This being human is a guest house, and Rumi invites us to welcome and entertain all comers. We might consider ourselves to be a space or a guest house for making new connections. I am showing you an arresting image of a human form by British sculptor Antony Gormley (2012) called 'Transport' which, along with the artist's statement, can be accessed at https://artandchristianity.org/ecclesiart-listings/anthony-gormley-transport. The piece hangs in the medieval crypt of Canterbury Cathedral and is constructed of hand-made iron nails retrieved during the repair of a nineteenth century roof. Gormley's (2012) artist statement echoes Rumi's Guest House.

> The body is less a thing than a place. A location where things happen. Thought, feeling, memory and anticipation filter through it, sometimes sticking but mostly passing on like us in this great cathedral with its centuries of building, adaptation, extension and all the thoughts, feelings and prayers that people have had and transmitted here … We are all the temporary inhabitants of our body. It is our house, instrument and medium. Through it all come

impressions of a wider world and all the other bodies in space, palpable, perceivable and imaginable.

We are 'temporary inhabitants' in many ways. Specifically, we've been welcomed as guests to this conference, our temporary house for two days, in this beautiful city, where many of us are staying in literal guest houses. I want to thank Dr Judit Béres and her team for this warm hospitality.

I now invite you to think of the homes, houses and institutions that we can now enter as guests and indeed, our own biblio/poetry therapy homes and whom we might invite in.

I particularly want to highlight Lapidus International (Lapidus International, 2024), which was established in the late 1990s and is going from strength to strength. Much of its hospitality is online so accessible to people all over the world including its biannual conference, taking place in September 2025. It's a guest house that I've always found comfortable and inclusive, so please do knock on the door. Mel Perry, co-chair is here at this conference.

So as we leave Rumi for the rest of the conference, let's reflect on who or what we wish to welcome into our personal guest houses.

Conclusion

Mazza (2017) has long proposed a Reflective-Expressive-Symbolic model of poetry therapy. These descriptive terms refer to reading the work of others (reflective), writing in response (expressive), and then doing something with the emergent writing (symbolic).

In my own thinking about the mechanisms of poetry therapy, I extend the notion of 'symbolic' to include the context of any piece of work or practice. Context, with its roots in the Latin, *texere* to weave, is a holistic notion in which no one strand can act independently.

At a talk at a conference, or in a group poetry therapy session, the room, the nomenclature, the style of address, the arrangement of chairs, the technology, the preceding sessions, the weather, all combine with the particular mood, demographic and experiences of the audience to create a holistic experience. Everything, every single detail is 'symbolic' of something, and this 'something' will vary between individuals.

Here in Budapest, the Danube, the castle, the cathedrals and synagogues, the many bridges, the mansions along this street, our hotels, the wine, the opera house, the wars and historical upheavals, the joy of human contact after Covid, the bullet holes, all feed into our experiences of biblio/poetry therapy at this rich, immersive conference.

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The Moon Is a Silver Coin
Let Poetry Stimulate the Transrational Potential in Children and Adults!

Torsten Pettersson

Department of Literature and Rhetoric, Uppsala University, Sweden
torsten.pettersson@littvet.uu.se
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6199-7292

Abstract

This is a theoretical paper aiming at enriching biblio/poetry therapy with a new framework. It consists in a vindication of a "transrational" world view, defined as "perceptions developed and combined in ways that are rejected by an empirical-rational world view". Such perceptions are frequently dismissed as "magical", "animistic", or "superstitious"; frequently denigrated in children; and submerged in adults. Yet they harbor a great potential, worth cultivating purposefully, for personal growth; for a sense of coherence counteracting malaise and promoting resilience; as well as enhanced self-esteem in children.

Children suffer from being constantly reproved for their deficiencies in the adult world, including their supposedly wrongheaded transrational mode of perception. Instead of confining that mode to the preserve of children's literature, it should be displayed to children in prestigious adult poetry where it occurs in abundance, sometimes with explicit links to childhood. This can engender in children a fellow feeling with adult role models, thereby boosting their self-esteem shaken by the adult world's fault-finding.

As for adults, they have learnt since their early school years to suppress and belittle the transrational – including their own nocturnal dreams – in favor of empirical rationality. This may cause mental malaise and/or stunt personal growth. However, such conditions can be counteracted in poetry therapy by systematic and attentive exposure to freely metaphorical and associative poetry.

Having established these basic goals, the paper calls for more research into the specific features and potentials of the transrational world view in adults and in young people of different ages.

Keywords: poetry therapy; transrational world view; anxiety; subjugation of children; metaphors; children's literature

Introduction

A main aim of poetry therapy is to foster mental resilience and alleviate negative feelings such as malaise, anxiety, and depression. Such feelings may, on the one hand, be triggered by specific individual causes – traumatization, physical illness, bereavement, divorce, economic hardship. On the other hand, as Viktor Frankl (2008 [1946]), Irvin Yalom (1980), and Emmy van Deurzen (2012) have made clear, they may also arise from the more general existential predicament of failing to find meaning and purpose in life. This paper focuses on a societal area between these two extremes: a predicament that is collective but due, not to human existence and mortality in general, but to a feature peculiar to Western societies in late modernity.

This is a world view that is secular and empirical-rational, i.e., based on observations made through the senses, sometimes reinforced by man-made instruments, and on rational conclusions drawn from these observations. This is useful in everyday life and it has yielded remarkable scientific,

technological and medical achievements in the last couple of centuries. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the empirical-rational world view is a universal given; in fact it constitutes only one possible paradigm for a collective perception of life. Both historically and in other present-day cultures there are many alternatives which in the dominant Western context of today are described and frequently denigrated as "magical", "animistic", "superstitious", or just "wrongheaded". These alternatives occur in our nocturnal dreams – usually dismissed as "just a dream" – and are embraced by children. Theirs is a "transrational world view", which I define as "perceptions developed and combined in ways that are rejected by an empirical-rational world view".

Some classics of education such as Friedrich Froebel's *The Education of Man* (Froebel, 1891 [1826]) and Maria Montessori's *The Discovery of the Child* (Montessori, 1967 [1950]) are keen to vindicate mental traits peculiar to children. Their influence has been salutary but insufficient to counteract adult condescension towards the transrational world view of children. If, for instance, a child says a creaking door is speaking angrily, he or she may either be corrected or smiled at for fertile powers of nonsensical invention – based on the presumed privilege of the empirical-rational paradigm to define what is genuinely real and true.

Growing up, children are programmed to embrace that paradigm and give up their transrational perceptions, or at least fashion them as hypotheses that can be tested against that which counts as real in the adult world. This spells pragmatic efficiency but also impoverishment since a wide spectrum of spontaneous human experiences and perspectives on the world is devalued and suppressed.

This, I maintain, is one neglected aspect of the cultural malaise described by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 2002 [1930]). More specifically, it can be seen as one instance of the anxiety caused by not achieving the "sense of coherence" which Aaron Antonovsky, in *Health, Stress, and Coping* (1979), rightly identifies as a basis of mental wellbeing.

A major function of all art, I argue, is to open up the spectrum of available human world views stunted by a one-sided application of the empirical-rational stance. In this, poetry plays an important part and one that can be developed systematically by poetry therapy. This can enrich our adult lives and counteract the mental imbalance, malaise, and anxiety that may result from society's systematic suppression of the transrational side of our personalities. In children it can, in addition, strengthen their sense of self-esteem undermined by recurrent denigration, explicit or implicit, of their transrational perceptions as well as their behavior in general.

In what follows I exemplify forms of transrational perception characteristic of poetry, also citing the fellow feeling with children and their world view expressed by some writers. As a further indication of this connection, I bring out some neglected parallels between poetry and children's literature.

Poetry as a Resource for Cultivating a Transrational World View

The First European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference, *Encounters, Paths and Challenges in Troubled Times*, was held in Budapest in October 2024 under the epigraph: " … we do not feel at home / in our interpretations of the world". It is taken from the "The First Elegy" in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* where, after an introductory expression of despair and vulnerability, the speaker goes on to reflect:

> Alas, whom then
> can we turn to? Not to angels, not to people,
> and the animals full of insight cannot but notice
> that we are not quite reliably at home
> in the interpreted world.
> (Rilke, 1987 [1923], 685; *all translations in this paper are mine*)

Our "interpreted world", i.e., the interpretation imposed on the world by adult human beings, is thus presented as stultifying and conducive to a feeling of homelessness in the world. The idea is later developed, particularly in the "The Eighth Elegy", where we are told that animals see an open world whereas the fashioning of our eyes prevents us from seeing what really *is* on the outside. A child, on the other hand, according to this elegy, can lose itself in calm contemplation of "the pure, the unsupervised" but is "shaken" out of it by an adult – "for even the young child / we turn around, forcing it to see formation ['Gestaltung'] / backwards, not the openness which / is so deep in the countenance of an animal" (Rilke, 1987 [1923], 714).

Like Rilke, I see the world view typical of adults as limiting and as conducive to the malaise which he describes as homelessness. I also agree that children are free from this until, at a certain point in their upbringing, they are forced to toe the empirical-rational line. Rilke, however, moves on a very high existential level of abstraction where the condition he describes is due to our awareness of death and our immersion in contrastive thinking which he describes as "never nowhere without not" ("niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht") (Rilke, 1987 [1923], 714): rather than conceiving of phenomena in their pure form here and now, we always perceive them as what they are *not*, as a contrast to something-else located in a different place and/or a remembered past or a projected future.

Like our awareness of death, this, for Rilke, seems to be inevitable, a sort of Kantian existential category of the adult human experience. My focus, as I have indicated, is on a somewhat lower level of abstraction, the empirical-rational paradigm of a historically given Western society. Thus I can also specify more than Rilke does what is lost in our perception, in our "interpreted world". For Rilke this remains ineffable beyond the point that it is pure and open whereas I describe it as transrational connections, i.e., observations made of, and links established between, phenomena which in the light of the rational paradigm are invalid as an account of reality.

What, then, can art do to alleviate the rigors of the empirical-rational paradigm? The answer is twofold. Firstly, art offers alternative ways of structuring external reality. They can take the form of expressionist projections such as the cry of despair which refashions the whole landscape in the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. Alternatively, they can consist in generically specific transrational possibilities such as warp speed in science fiction and potent magic in fantasy.

Secondly, and more importantly, art invites us to explore the human inner world, untrammeled possibilities of experiencing reality and our own personalities beyond the pale of strict rationality. This is literature's forte: the use of linguistic signals to activate our imagination concerning both external phenomena and above all our own inner world (see further Pettersson, 2015).

However, literature in the form of narrative fiction is not very useful for this purpose. Even when it takes transrational liberties such as warp speed and magic, its dominant focus on a coherent story links it to chronology and causality – which in turn are linked to the empirical-rational paradigm.

Poetry, by contrast, resists this pressure. Of course it can tell stories, as it does in the ballad genre, but its core area is that which in some languages is indeed given appellations such as "the center of poetry" ("Zentrallyrik"): the development of a lyrical speaker's thoughts and emotions liberated from the normative narrative logic of chronology, causality and rationality. Thus poetry can typically move freely between the external and the internal world, between observation and reflection, between reason and free-wheeling imagination.

In poetry therapy it is, then, all very well to cull a transferrable substance from poems: feelings, thoughts, attitudes that can interact with the mindsets of the participants. My suggestion in this paper is that in addition to that, poetry therapy should be more alive to the formal aspect of poetry which provides beneficial breathing space for the transrational side of our personalities suppressed by society in an unhealthy way. It can heal the split between the social norm of rationality and our transrational inclinations – submerged but not entirely quenched by that norm, as witness their resurgence in both thought and behavior in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005).

Take imagery, for one thing. Similes and metaphors can of course occur in many kinds of texts but are particularly frequent and well-developed in poetry. One example is a "Moon Poem" by the Swedish poet Harry Martinson: "In quivering night clouds a path is cut / by the white doubloon of the moon" (Martinson, 1997 [1934], 154). Here the perceptual analogy works well: yes, the full moon at night resembles a shining silver coin, and through its movement it seems to be slowly cutting its way through the clouds. In the reader this image induces a nod of recognition, it gives us a little kick. This is not due to any insight into the workings of reality; clearly, this is not what the night sky is "really" like. Instead the metaphor unveils new possibilities of combination in the human mind and in our cultural consciousness. It allows us to make a discovery inside ourselves: our ability to see something in this way, to take something from the external world and make it our own, to enjoy the human freedom of viewing the world in this way – transrationally.

Poetry can do this despite being potentially handicapped by its medium of language. In the form of everyday prose, written or spoken, language is society's main instrument for upholding and cultivating the empirical-rational world view. Poetry's answer to this is to develop special signaling techniques such as lines that stop before the margin of the page, division into stanzas and/or a markedly poetic level of style. What is more, poetry goes beyond other kinds of texts in employing what Roman Jakobson (1960) called "the poetic function": that which projects the similarity principle of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic axis. In other words, poetry systematically cultivates analogies and contrasts, be they phonetic such as rhythm, alliteration and rhyme, or syntactic. The latter includes anaphoric repetition at the beginning of phrases and chiastic patterns such as complement-subject/subject-complement in "Spring was the bride, the bridegroom autumn".

By means such as these, poetry defines its own space separate from various kinds of prose. It signals its freedom to cross the boundaries of prose and, concomitantly, those of our rationally governed world view: to intertwine empirical observation of the world with free associations forged by the human mind.

An interesting consequence and indication of this is the following. In narrative prose we are careful to define the rules governing its world view: we speak of "realism" when the rational paradigm is fully observed; "magical realism" when there are some departures such as bicentennial longevity; and of "fairy tale", "fantasy" or "science fiction" when the departures are more pervasive. In poetry there are, historically speaking, generic labels such as "idyll" or "pastoral". However, during the last century the categorization of poetry tends to be one of form and style – we refer to "traditional", "modernist", "postmodernist", or "colloquial" poetry – rather than one which would position it in

relation to the rational paradigm. In other words: we do not speak of "realism" or "fantasy" in poetry – apparently because poems typically move constantly between realism and a more freely associative, dreamlike attitude which allows the vast potential of the human mind to come into its own.

Another area where we tend not to distinguish between realism and fantasy is children's books because, analogously, we accept their fusion of the two. It is only later, in books for young people above the age of eight or ten that we start to apply the distinction – for round that time socialization into the rational paradigm has set in and the child's holistic experience has started to move towards the adult dichotomy of rational and "irrational".

This illuminating analogy between poetry and children's books emerges with particular clarity when the associative imagination in a poem triggers little stories. Here is how the Swedish writer Tomas Tranströmer's poem "Epilogue" renders the sounds of a storm:

> A tone of bagpipes breaks loose!
> A tone of bagpipes marching forwards,
> liberatingly. A procession. A forest on the march!
> (Tranströmer, 1984 [1954], 26)

The metaphor, then, is this: the whistling sound of the storm constitutes bagpipes, but then that metaphor, "liberating" in itself, is taken further in the form of a procession of bagpipe players – whose tall figures in their turn become a second metaphor as a marching forest.

Here is what happens in "Elegy", another Tranströmer poem:

> One summer's morning the farmer's harrow is caught
> in dead bones and shreds of clothing. – He
> was left here, back then, when the peat bog was drained
> and now he stands up and walks off in the light.
> (Tranströmer, 1984 [1954], 23)

Thus when the remnants of a corpse are thrown up by the tilling of the soil, the speaker of the poem projects from his inner world into the external world an imaginative little story where the corpse is transformed into a live body strolling off in the sunlight.

The sliding associative movement which in these two cases produces the embryo of a story often engenders a fully-fledged story in children's literature. What happens is that the vehicle of the metaphor – which really exists only in the mind by which it is fashioned – is moved into the external world; once there, it starts to lead a life of its own, as do Tranströmer's bagpipes. And so, in a recent Swedish children's book, when the grandmother of a little girl says that "[g]randchildren are the dessert of life" (Karinsdotter et al., 2023, 128), a longer narrative is triggered when the girl becomes seriously concerned that her grandmother is literally going to eat her!

If poetry and children's literature share this projection of metaphors into the external world, it is because they also share a transrational perception pitted against the rationalism of adult society. A beautiful description of poetry in these terms was once penned by the Swedish writer Stig Dagerman: "As a child you are always a poet. Then you are weaned, in most cases. Thus the art of being a poet is not letting life or people or money wean you of that" (2014 [Dagerman, 1948], 291).

In keeping with this, children's literature finds its point of departure in the child's spontaneous experience of the world as a fusion of what adults call "reality" and what they call "a fantasy world". Poetry in turn – to develop Dagerman's observation – may be seen as an attempt to recover this holistic experience of childhood and keep alive the transrational world view. A poet is a child who has survived: a person who, having gone through the process of socialization, functions as a normal adult in everyday life, all the while retaining the child's experience of life. By extension, the texts produced by the poet may help others cultivate or resurrect that experience, thereby broadening their mental spectrum that has been narrowed down by the rational imperative.

From the point of view of children, this means that they can easily relate to, and find sustenance in poetry written by adults primarily for adults. For once, they may feel, the adult world validates their perception of the world rather than dismissing it as a silly fantasy.

This is illustrated in the poetry of the Norwegian writer Jon Fosse. His poems constantly move back and forth between things that are visible in the everyday world and mystical, "religious" phenomena which are invisible but equally real; in my terms he interlaces the empirical-rational and the transrational. What is more, Fosse frequently ascribes this dual perception to a child, for instance in his poem "Child song":

> A child stands watching with his heart
> and he sees that the stone is good.
> A child stands watching with his heart
> and he knows what you never understood.
> (Fosse, 2021 [2009], 291)

This kind of reflective child, mostly described as a little boy, is a recurring figure in Fosse's poems. On one occasion he sings like this:

> these
> innermost days, these
> long years, these distant
> sounds
> while the dog walks and walks
>
> the dog has my thoughts
> while God has my soul
>
> my heart is with the dog
> where an angel bade me kneel
> (Fosse, 2021 [1990], 56)

Endowed with this deep vision, a child may also be lost and in need of help:

> who is it now who needs help
> not the dog, not the angel
> but perhaps the little boy
> the one with the large hands
> the one with the clear thoughts

the one with a grief
like the sound of bells
and water
over the old landscape

He looks towards the house and the lake
and he thinks twice before he smiles
He is now the one who needs help
The one with the stupid words
that never express
what he thinks and feels
He is now the one who needs help
(Fosse, 2021 [1992], 139)

What we are reminded of here is this. In addition to many other psychosocial conditions, it is not easy being a child in terms of philosophy of life: to live for years and years in a cultural no man's land between the child's freely transrational experience of life, suffused with imagination, and the stricter rational adult world view which frequently dismisses that experience as wrongheaded nonsense. In that predicament a child can really need the help of adults with a more flexible attitude to life, open to transrational perception.

For older children and teenagers who have largely been socialized into embracing the rational world view as a norm, as well as for adults, this is a question of a reasonable balance, as a variety of Antonovsky's "sense of coherence" (1979). What we need to achieve is a chance of functioning rationally in society while avoiding the Freudian "discontents" (Freud, 2002 [1930]) partly resulting from the empirical-rational ban on transrational perception and personality traits.

As an example of a balance between the child's and the adult's point of view, I take the liberty of quoting one of my own poems (as yet unpublished). Having written it a few years ago, I now realize that its poetical practice adumbrates and exemplifies some of the ideas which I have developed discursively in this paper.

The speaker of the poem is a small boy, aged round five:

Going alone for the first time
to the milk store is stepping into an abyss.
Will the hanging bridge of the street support me?
Does it know that I am here right now?
I stretch my toes as I do into cold water
and carefully allow my foot to land. Step
by step the street is black, but no abyss.

Sometimes I look up. Someone places a house
next to a colorful house as I creep onwards.
Like the street, someone knows that I am walking here.
My sign is perhaps the glistening grey milk can.
Swinging it with my arm I make it to the store.

The milk store is shining white, its walls and floor
made of frozen milk. They could melt and come
crashing down like a waterfall so that we are all
struck down and drift off on the waves.
I stand quite still by the jingling door.

"Well hello there! Come in. You're from the Petterssons?"
She stretches her arm towards me. A few brown tiles
form a bridge over all the whiteness.
I step on them to give her the can.

A see-through machine sucks up milk.
Then a pillar is pressed into the can,
white and frizzling like waves on sand.
"Were you given money?" No.
"We'll put it on your account. To the end of the month."

I walk back lopsided. The handle of the can
cuts into my right hand. The houses are
also lopsided and placed in the wrong order.
But I trust the street and make it all the way home.
The can drools froth, but only a little at the lid.

Afterwards I feel a coin in my left hand,
pressed hard. It has kept me safe on my journey.
A lucky coin! I hide it under my mattress.
But then I sneak it back into Mummy's tin box
'cause stolen things bring bad luck.

Here we witness the child's transrational perceptions in action: objects like the street which we consider inanimate are endowed with powers of observation; the metaphorical perception of a white wall as congealed milk is projected into the external world as a risk of melting and flooding; a coin or a stolen object is seen as a source of influence over one's life; and the placing of houses along the street is attributed to the ongoing activity of some kind of large-scale intelligence.

The grown-ups' rational terms for this would be "animistic", "magical", "superstitious", and/or "religious". On this occasion, however, the voice of the grown-up poet merges with the experience of the child. It offers an attempt to reconnect with the perceptions of childhood as well as an employment of poetic resources, designed to invite readers to open up to these perceptions. In printed form a division into stanzas immediately denotes visually a realm of poetry beyond the rational imperative. The reader's entrance into this realm of reflection is then facilitated by rhythm and by the repetition of lines of more or less equal length, both engendering a mildly trance-like contemplative mood. Furthermore, the child's perception is merged with literary conventions, particularly that of the metaphor. The black asphalt street seen as an abyss between high buildings and the white wall viewed as a congealed waterfall of milk are at the same time spontaneously

childlike and proficiently literary. Thus in appreciating the aesthetic quality of the metaphors, teenage and adult readers familiar with literary conventions are concomitantly pulled into a child's frame of mind; this also allows them to access submerged transrational elements in their own personalities. As for younger children reading this, I would hope they relish a sense of recognition and perhaps reassurance in noting that an adult writing like this can side with them in their experience of the world, rather than dismissing it as misguided and silly.

Conclusions

So, in the light of all this, what do I recommend for poetry therapy? Firstly, to be aware of the suppression of transrational personality traits as one possible source of maladjustment, malaise and anxiety. This will no doubt take different forms for therapy participants of different ages, a rough estimate being as follows. In the youngest children the rational imperative induces confusion and insecurity when for instance someone living in their house is dismissed as an imaginary, nonexistent friend that must not be taken into account or even mentioned. A little further on in age is what I have called the no man's land of children who are old enough to start comprehending the rational world view but still young enough to embrace the transrational as well. At both stages the children's experience of the adult world's constant censure and correction of their perceptions no doubt undermines self-confidence and may induce dejection or anxiety. This may be a serious, partly or largely unacknowledged mental problem. Further on, when the rational stance has increasingly supplanted the transrational one, there may be a sense of loss counteracted at times by bouts of regressive, surprisingly childish behavior. Alternatively, in a more benign manner, older children and teenagers, as well as adults, may play with very young children, using their transrational games and attitudes as an alibi for reconnecting with suppressed aspects of their own personalities.

Secondly, in poetry therapy we should be more aware of the transrational aspect of poetry and more prepared to pay attention to it over and above the identifiable psychosocial substance of a given poem. Therapy participants may also be encouraged to devise adventurous metaphors of their own, separately or as one element in their composition of poems.

Thirdly, we need to develop the best possible use of these tools of transrationally focused reading and writing to foster balanced personalities: people who thrive in the rational everyday world but are also able to cultivate their transrational potential.

And fourthly, we need more research into the phenomenon which I have addressed. In children, how does transrationality function more specifically in various age groups? How does the adult world's suppression and correction of it interact with its concomitant constant correction of a large variety of attitudes and behavior in both children and teenagers?

So here, for the theory and practice of poetry therapy in the future, there looms a large field of endeavor and discovery.

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

Manca Marinčič

Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
manca.marincic@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8820-7206

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 bibliotherapy. Unlike clinical bibliotherapy, which is carried out in a clinical environment, literary

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[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 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 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

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[2] Original text: "določeno manifestacijo 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*.

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 interpretation[5]. 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 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

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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 person[6] (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

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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).

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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From Nature's Wisdom to Personal Growth
through Mary Oliver's poem "Swan"

Dimitra Didangelou

Expressing Myself Institute, Belgium
dimitra@expressingmyself.org
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-9403-4441

Abstract

Ecopoetry blends artistic expression with ecological awareness, exploring how nature impacts human well-being, development and behavior. Connecting with nature, often referred to as "nature connectedness," can lead to personal growth and change, positively impacting both individual well-being and environmental stewardship. Reading can be an effective intervention to foster nature connectedness and its associated benefits. Mary Oliver is one of the most well-known poets drawing inspiration from nature. Her poem "Swan" connects readers to the natural world through vivid depictions, challenging them to think about their own lives and journeys of transformation. The poem was selected for bibliotherapy using the Hynes and Hynes- Berry (2012) criteria and it was analyzed through their model which offers a structured pathway to deepen the therapeutic engagement with the text. The poem's structure mirrors a dialogue, creating space for diverse interpretations and personal meaning, and its themes encourage readers to integrate new perspectives, prioritize moments of awe and actively seek growth and purpose. "Swan" can act as a catalyst for self-reflection, emotional processing and personal growth, serving as a valuable tool in various bibliotherapeutic contexts.

Keywords: nature writing; ecopoetry; bibliotherapy; Mary Oliver; "Swan"; Hynes and Hynes-Berry model

Introduction

> *"Nature and Books belong to the eyes that see them."*
> *(*Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Nature literature serves as a bridge between human experience and the natural world, offering vivid depictions that awaken our senses and imagination. Through the words of poets, novelists, and essayists, readers are immersed in remote wilderness, verdant forests, and majestic mountains, allowing themselves to vicariously experience the beauty and wonder of nature.

From Hermann Hesse's "trees as sanctuaries" to Henry David Thoreau's "need of the tonic of wildness" and Mary Oliver's "sacred home," nature through the book pages invites readers to develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of the natural world, fostering a connection that enriches the relationship with the authentic self.

Nature writing is a multifaceted – both fiction and non-fiction – genre that blends artistic expression with ecological awareness, encompassing a broad range of works that focus on the natural environment. It explores various aspects of how nature impacts human well-being, development, and behavior, as well as how humans interact with and perceive nature.

The "New Nature Writing" in Britain and Ireland has emerged as a contemporary form that combines innovative stylistic elements with ecological awareness and conservation practices (Smith, 2017).

Nature poetry, a subset of the genre of nature writing, has long been a source of inspiration, with poets drawing connections between the natural world and human soul (Ryff, 2021).

In recent years, climate change has emerged as a dominant theme in literature, including poetry. Ecopoetry emerged from growing ecological awareness in the late 20ᵗʰ century, sought to integrate human experiences with the natural world, offering insights into the complex relationships between nature and culture. Modern ecopoetry exhibits ecological awareness and engages with current environmental degradation issues (Johns-Putra, 2016). It goes beyond traditional nature poetry by adopting an eco-centric view and addressing contemporary ecological concerns (Karaaslan Özgü, 2024).

The prefix *eco-*, from the Greek *oikos* (meaning "house"), carries three contextual meanings: home (as in *economy*), living environment (as in *ecology*, *ecosystem*), and ecological reduction (as in *eco-sustainable*) (Bulfaro, 2022). According to Tania Haberland (2022), ecopoetics invites us to ask how a poem can function as *prattein* – an act of making (*poiesis*) – rooted in the concept of dwelling.

Ecopoetry encourages readers to engage with ecological issues at both the micro and macro levels, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of the environment (Ledesma, 2024). It is characterized by its emphasis on balancing human interests with the needs of nature, recognizing that humans are not at the center of the natural world (Scigaj, 1999).

Interestingly, ecopoetry challenges the notion of humans as external observers, positioning them as active participants within the biosphere. It aims to evoke an emotional response through the creation of an "atmosphere" between environmental attributes and human experience (O'Loughlin, 2023).

Research on nature connectedness

Research on nature poetry and ecopoetry reveals their significant role in shaping our understanding of the natural world and their influence on human emotions and experiences.

The rise of ecopoetry and climate change poetry initiatives in the media has led to increased engagement with environmental issues in literary studies, particularly in the field of ecocriticism (Johns-Putra, 2016). This trend reflects a growing recognition of poetry's power to foster empathy, understanding, and advocacy for environmental causes (Poindexter, 2002).

As the field continues to evolve, it offers new perspectives on the interplay between spirituality, well-being, and the natural world, drawing inspiration from indigenous wisdom that sees spirit in everything (Ryff, 2021).

Scientific studies have consistently supported the idea that connecting with nature, often referred to as "nature connectedness," can lead to personal growth and change. This connection has been shown to have positive impacts on both individual well-being and environmental stewardship (Chawla, 2020; Arola et al., 2022; van Heel et al., 2023).

As our understanding of the underlying mechanisms grows, it opens up possibilities for designing more effective interventions and spaces to foster nature connectedness and its associated benefits (Sheffield et al., 2022). Reading can be one such intervention. Research has demonstrated that any form of exposure to nature – even through reading or virtual experiences – can have positive psychological impacts on individuals. Several studies have explored this phenomenon, revealing interesting findings and potential mechanisms.

Tillmann et al. (2018) highlight that nature positively influences mental health outcomes, including emotional well-being, attention deficit disorder/hyperactivity disorder, self-esteem, stress, resilience, depression, and health-related quality of life. While this research primarily focused on direct exposure to nature, it suggests that nature experiences, in general, can be beneficial for mental health (Tillmann et al., 2018).

While direct immersion in nature provides various psychological benefits, as noted by Frost et al. (2022), there is growing evidence that virtual or indirect experiences of nature can positively impact well-being. This includes reading about nature or viewing nature-related content.

Yang et al. (2022) suggested a novel account of the benefits of nature on psychological well-being through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. Their research found that exposure to nature scenes, including digital ones, led to higher levels of positive affect, life satisfaction and meaning in life. Even indirect exposure to nature, such as only viewing images, can have positive psychological effects as well (Yang et al., 2022). However, more research is needed to fully understand the mechanisms and extent of these effects, particularly in comparison to real-world nature experiences (Frost et al., 2022, Yang et al., 2022).

Examining the poem "Swan" for bibliotherapeutic use

Mary Oliver's nature poetry

Different poets have employed nature and tackled its natural aspects for various purposes, resulting in the rise of nature poetry. Mary Oliver is one of the most well-known poets drawing inspiration from nature. Her poetry encourages a deep connection and a sense of communion with the natural environment (Sunny & Narayana, 2024). She is an American poet who has received the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize among many other awards (Beacon Press). Her poetry can be seen as a form of literary mindfulness practice, encouraging readers to engage deeply with the natural world (Hasan, 2024; Bazregarzadeh, 2023).

Oliver's poetry often encourages readers to observe nature closely and attentively, aligning with the concept of "perceptual sensitivity" identified as a key mechanism of mindful engagement in nature (Macaulay et al., 2021).

Her work frequently invites readers to step outside themselves and immerse in the natural world, mirroring the process of "decentering" that allows individuals to observe their thoughts and emotions as transient phenomena (Hanley et al., 2017). Hence, this approach can help readers "get out of their heads" and into the surrounding environment, fostering a deeper connection with nature. The spiritual dimension in Oliver's nature poetry resonates with findings that spirituality can mediate the positive effects of nature exposure on psychological well-being (Kamitsis & Francis, 2013).

Her work often portrays nature as a source of transcendental experiences, echoing the American literary tradition of encountering an "unseen, transcendental presence within the natural world" (Gatta, 2004). This spiritual aspect of nature engagement through poetry may contribute to increased connectedness to nature and improved mental health outcomes, as observed in nature-based therapy studies (Joschko et al., 2023). Overall, by reading Oliver's poetry, individuals may experience benefits similar to those observed in nature-based interventions, including increased mindfulness, connectedness to nature, and mental well-being (Choe et al., 2019; Ray et al., 2020; Swami et al., 2020).

Swan by Mary Oliver[*]

Did you too see it, drifting, all night on the black
   river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery
   air,
an armful of white blossoms,
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of
   lilies,
biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees,
   like a waterfall
knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds—
a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet
like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light
   of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained
   to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is
   for?
And have you changed your life?

Mary Oliver (2010) uses the image of a swan to motivate readers to think deeply and connect with nature. She chooses a swan, an element of the natural environment, to effectuate a transformation in one's life by contemplating this exquisite creature soaring in the skies.

Metaphors play a vital role in helping us understand our experiences and the world around us (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Metaphors not only enrich the narrative but also serve as powerful tools for introspection and connection, helping individuals to articulate and navigate their emotional landscapes more effectively. This poem, rich in metaphors, uses the figure of a swan to serve as anthropocentric viewpoint of the human experiences (Sunny & Narayana, 2024).

A swan is a central symbol of grace, freedom, and transformation, challenging readers to explore complex themes of transition, beauty and purpose in a relatable and emotionally resonant manner.

[***]Mary Oliver: Swan. In Oliver, M. (2010). *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (p. 22). Beacon Press. Used with permission of The Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency, Inc (Editor's Note)

Swan's journey mirrors the human quest for meaning and the possibility of renewal. Other natural components are included in the poem, contributing to a comprehensive depiction of nature that aims to evoke readers' imaginations.

People often overlook this scene of the swan, failing to pause and reflect upon it. Oliver offers the opportunity to halt, examine, and appreciate, thus altering one's perception and instigating internal change (Al-Zubbaidi et al., 2020).

The poet asks a series of questions to encourage the reader to observe and experience the beauty of the swan and its surroundings. By focusing on the sensory details like sight ("Did you see it...") and sound ("Did you hear it..."), she invites the reader to be present and attentive to the natural world. The existential questions in the end make this a valuable tool for fostering self-awareness and transformation.

Overall, the themes of the poem challenge readers to integrate new perspectives, prioritize moments of awe, and actively seek growth and purpose.

Criteria for selecting the poem for bibliotherapeutic use

Bibliotherapy aims to promote mental health, personal growth, emotional healing and psychological well-being through guided reading of literature. The primary goals of bibliotherapy include helping individuals cope with psychological issues, promoting personal growth, facilitating self-actualisation and developing effective coping skills (Hynes et al., 2012; De Vries et al., 2017; Lenkowsky, 1987). From the perspective of bibliotherapy, the poem "Swan" can serve as a catalyst for self-reflection, emotional processing and personal growth.

The poem was selected for bibliotherapy using the Hynes and Hynes-Berry (2012) criteria for choosing bibliotherapeutic material. The key dimensions considered for evaluation were as follows:

Thematic Dimensions

Universal experience or emotion: The theme can be readily identified and connected to by the participants.

Powerful: This theme is presented in a way that has a strong, vital impact on the participants.

Comprehensible: The theme is easily grasped by the participants, without requiring too much abstraction or metaphorical understanding.

Positive: The work offers hope and affirmation, rather than being overly negative or despairing.

Stylistic Dimensions

Compelling rhythm: Strong, appealing, impactful rhythm.

Imagery: Striking, concrete imagery.

Language: Simple, precise vocabulary and clear diction.

Complexity: Quite short, succinct and not complex work.

Themes and bibliotherapeutic potential of the poem

Hynes and Hynes-Berry's (2012) model emphasizes the use of literature in the psychotherapeutic context through four key steps: recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and application to the self. Each stage focuses on how literature can evoke personal meaning, lead to realization or insight, and connect readers to themselves, others, or the world. Using this model, Mary Oliver's "Swan" was analyzed to uncover its bibliotherapeutic potential.

The recognition step involves identifying the key themes, images, or emotions in the text that resonate with the reader.

Oliver's vivid descriptions evoke strong sensory responses, engaging readers emotionally and imaginatively. The themes recognized at this poem are the beauty and transience of nature, transformation and transcendence, the capacity of beauty to inspire personal change.

Contrasts can be used to engage the reader. Darkness vs. light: The "black river" contrasts with the "silvery air," representing movement from obscurity to clarity. Stillness vs. motion: The swan "drifting all night" becomes dynamic as it "streams across the sky," symbolizing growth or change.

Regarding imagery and mood, vivid images such as "an armful of white blossoms" and "a white cross streaming across the sky" evoke a sense of awe and respect. Mood alternates between calm observation and spiritual intensity, inviting the reader to pause and reflect.

Regarding emotional response, readers might feel wonder, hope, or even longing as they engage with the swan's journey from the dark river to the open sky.

The second step of the Hynes and Hynes-Berry model (2012) is examination, which encourages a deeper exploration of the text, examining the concept or feeling of the self, focusing on personal meaning.

This poem presents beauty as an essential transformative force. The swan's journey – beginning in the darkness of the "black river" and ascending into the "silvery air" – mirrors the reader's own potential for growth and self-discovery. The imagery invites readers to ask themselves: *What moments of beauty have profoundly affected me? How have they influenced my choices or perspective?*

The swan's movement, described as "a perfect commotion of silk and linen," might evoke a personal memory of witnessing something equally graceful and awe-inspiring. This encourages readers to reflect on how encounters with nature have affected their emotional well-being, perhaps serving as a reminder of life's interconnectedness and resilience.

The poem's existential questions nudge the reader to examine their own journey of transformation: *What inner "black rivers" have I navigated? What has helped me rise into the "silvery air"?*

Focusing on the personal meaning of the poem, the black river is an image that can represent personal struggles or times of uncertainty. Readers might reflect on periods in their lives when they felt "adrift," identifying parallels between the swan's flight and their own search for clarity.

The white cross in the sky, the swan's ascent, is a powerful metaphor for transcendence and liberation. Readers can explore how they find meaning or hope in life's challenges; what gives them the strength to rise above difficulties?

The final provocation through the direct question "And have you changed your life?" challenges readers to consider how they respond to moments of beauty or inspiration and take the poem's themes personally: *Have I embraced opportunities for transformation? What beauty have I ignored or overlooked in my daily life?*

This examination invites readers to find parallels between their own lives and the swan's journey, focusing on personal meaning and the role of awe, beauty and transformation in shaping their paths.

During the third step, juxtaposition, the reader compares the themes and emotions in the poem to their own experiences or perceptions. The swan's journey can be juxtaposed with the reader's own experiences of overcoming challenges or finding clarity after a period of struggle.

The questions in the poem invite reflection on the universal human response to beauty and its potential to inspire change across time and cultures.

The final step, application to the self, focuses on how the reader integrates the poem's insights into their personal life. In this last step, readers are invited to bridge the gap between insight and action. The transformative potential of nature and beauty, as expressed in Swan, challenges readers to align their lives with what inspires and uplifts them.

The poem suggests that connection with nature and beauty can awaken a deeper sense of purpose. Readers might ask themselves: *Am I living in alignment with what moves me? How can I bring more beauty, mindfulness, or reverence into my daily life?*

The poem teaches that beauty has a purpose -to inspire and uplift. Readers might integrate this insight by cultivating a habit of gratitude for beauty, whether through journaling, creating art or sharing these experiences with others. By recognizing beauty's power to provoke transformation, readers might integrate these insights into their identity and values. For example, reframing challenges as part of a journey toward growth, much like the swan's ascent, viewing beauty not as an escape but as a guide to living a richer, more meaningful life.

Bibliotherapy motivates readers to identify with characters or situations, allowing a narrative reconstruction. Through reframing, individuals reinterpret their own stories, often seeing adversity as a source of strength rather than just suffering. This narrative shift helps to rebuild a coherent sense of self after difficult experiences such as trauma (Jain, 2024).

The swan's graceful flight might inspire readers to seek a balance between groundedness and aspiration, finding ways to "rise" above life's difficulties while staying connected to their core. It's ascent from the "black river" to the "silvery air" represents the possibility of rising above struggles. Readers may integrate this by committing to embrace change in their own lives, perhaps by setting new goals, addressing challenges, or seeking personal growth. Readers might ask themselves: *What small step can I take to transform a part of my life that feels stagnant or unresolved?*

Inspired by the swan's grace and transformative journey, readers might decide to spend more time in nature, practicing mindfulness to notice beauty in their surroundings. This could involve intentional walks, journaling about natural encounters, or simply pausing to appreciate the sky, rivers, or birds.

The last questions of the poem invite readers to reflect on whether they have allowed moments of awe, like encountering beauty in nature, to influence their choices and worldview: *When have I experienced something so beautiful or profound that it shifted my understanding of life? Have I*

acted on those moments of clarity, or have they remained fleeting? This reflection helps the reader identify opportunities to make meaningful changes inspired by such moments.

The final question "Have you changed your life?" challenges readers to consider how beauty, nature, or transformative moments have influenced their lives. It is an invitation for the readers to consider whether they are living in alignment with their values or whether moments of beauty have inspired them to seek transformation. The reader can integrate the insights and themes from the poem into their personal life, focusing on their actions, mindset, or perspective.

The poem suggests that encountering beauty is not a passive act—it has the potential to reshape perspectives and inspire action. *What specific change can I make in my life today? What have I learned from moments of awe or connection with nature that I can apply to my relationships, work, or personal well-being?*

For some, this might mean taking concrete steps to simplify their lives, pursue passions, or deepen their connections with others.

Overall, analyzing Mary Oliver's *"Swan"* through the Hynes and Hynes-Berry model offers a structured pathway to deepen the therapeutic engagement with the text. Each step – recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and application to self – guides the reader from an emotional and intellectual connection with the poem to a personal integration of its themes.

Population the poem can be used

The poem can be used in a bibliotherapeutic context with various populations, including:

Individuals Experiencing Life Transitions: People facing major life changes (e.g., career shifts, relationship changes, or moving to a new place) can resonate with the theme of transformation and become inspired to embrace new beginnings.

Grief and Loss Support Groups: The swan's journey from darkness to light can provide comfort and hope for individuals processing grief or mourning, encouraging them to find beauty and meaning amidst loss.

Adolescents and Young Adults: Teenagers and young adults exploring their identities or navigating personal growth may connect with the themes of self-discovery, beauty and the call to change their lives intentionally.

Individuals Seeking Purpose or Motivation: Those feeling stuck, uninspired, or searching for meaning can use the poem as a catalyst for introspection and motivation to make transformative life changes.

People in Nature-Based or Eco-Therapy Programs: The poem's focus on the natural world makes it especially relevant for individuals in therapeutic programs centered around environmental connection and mindfulness.

Burnout Recovery Groups: Professionals recovering from burnout, particularly in health or caregiving roles, may find inspiration in the poem's themes of renewal, beauty, and re-centering one's life around moments of awe.

Spiritual or Existential Therapy Clients: Individuals exploring spiritual or existential questions may find the poem's reflective tone and emphasis on the meaning of beauty and change resonate deeply with their process.

Applications of *Swan* in bibliotherapy

This poem serves as a compelling bibliotherapeutic tool, aligning with Hynes and Hynes-Berry's (2012) concept of literature as a catalyst for action. Through its exploration of the natural world as a metaphor for personal transformation, the poem inspires not only reflection but also the courage to take meaningful steps toward a renewed sense of purpose.

The poem's structure mirrors a dialogue, addressing the reader directly with repeated questions. This conversational tone can encourage active engagement, making readers feel personally invited into the poem's reflective journey. The questions are open-ended and nonjudgmental, creating space for diverse interpretations and personal meaning.

In group bibliotherapy, Swan can be used to prompt dialogue about life changes, moments of beauty and the transformative power of art and nature.

The poem's focus on the swan's grace and movement encourages readers to cultivate mindfulness, observing their environment with a fresh perspective.

Journaling or creating personal rituals around nature, beauty, or being present in the moment could be a practical outcome of engaging with the poem.

Individual readers may use the poem as a journaling prompt, exploring how encounters with beauty have shaped their lives and whether they feel inspired to embrace change.

The repeated sensory and emotional appeals immerse readers in the immediacy of the experience, making the final question "And have you changed your life?" both provocative and urgent. This question can be used as a journaling or dialogue prompt to challenge the readers to assess their own lives, values, and priorities, encouraging them to act on insights gained from their encounters with beauty and awe. This closing question is not just rhetorical; it's a call to action and it can be used as a catalyst and commitment for change.

The poem can be utilized in bibliotherapy in alignment with Nicholas Mazza's Tripartite Practice Model for Poetry Therapy (2003), which incorporates receptive/prescriptive, expressive/creative and symbolic/ceremonial modes (RES). Building on the themes of the poem, participants can engage in expressive or creative activities, such as crafting their own poetry, journaling responses to the poem's existential questions, or creating visual representations of the swan's journey. Group rituals, ceremonial or art activities can help anchor the transformative insights gained during the session.

Conclusions

Mary Oliver's "Swan" demonstrates the power of nature literature to evoke emotion, spark realization and inspire transformation. Through this poetic exploration, Oliver demonstrates how engaging with the natural world, even in simple moments, can lead to a deeper emotional awareness. The poem's themes of beauty, nature, and personal change aligns with core principles of

bibliotherapy, encouraging readers to engage with their emotions, reflect on their lives and find inspiration in the world around them. The poem's vivid imagery and probing questions guide readers through a therapeutic journey, helping them explore life's experiences and deeper purposes. By bridging introspection and action, the poem fosters resilience and a renewed perspective, helping readers navigate life's complexities with greater clarity. In a bibliotherapeutic context, "Swan" can be a powerful tool to facilitate self-awareness, personal growth, emotional expression and a sense of interconnectedness.

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The Triad of Triangulation Mechanisms in Poetry Therapy
Or: What cannot be said might still be written

Tamara M. Trebes

Faculty of Psychotherapy Science, Sigmund Freud University, Vienna, Austria
Tamara.Trebes@sfu.ac.at
ORCID ID: 0009-0000-7296-0674

Abstract
Psychotherapists are confronted with the fact that patients often lack words for their inner world and their experiences. Yet, studies suggest that the healing process requests verbal expression. It is the task of the therapist to guide and accompany their patients to find a way to express what is inside them or what has happened to them, which sometimes is indeed almost unspeakable terror and dread. But "the grief that does not speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break". Shakespeare knew to poetically capture how remaining silent about pain not only leads to isolation, but ultimately to psychological death.
In this regard, expressive poetry therapy offers unique opportunities for the endeavor of coming to language and thus can play an important role in the process of transitioning to verbal expression, entailing a triad of specific, unifying features that facilitate the progression from speechlessness to speech. The triangulation mechanisms include 1) *contentual triangulation*, in which lyrical language and symbols serve as a transition between the non-verbal and verbal expression in social communication; 2) *spatial triangulation*, which addresses the constitution of a transitional space and 3) *temporal triangulation*, which addresses a retrospective reappraisal level, the current level of the here and now, as well as a prospective level. The respective mechanisms will be illustrated by presenting practical examples of poetry therapy.

Keywords: poetry therapy; triangulation mechanisms; metaphors; figurative language; psychodynamics; verbal progression

Introduction – Poetry and the Path to Language

> *"Give sorrow words: The grief that does not speak*
> *whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it*
> *break."*
> (William Shakespeare: Macbeth)

William Shakespeare already knew to poetically capture a knowledge that has – more than 400 years later – found its way into academia and is now considered valid. It might also confirm Sigmund Freud's observation that "psychoanalysis is better understood by writers and artists than by doctors" (Papini, 1934). These days, Bessel van der Kolk, a contemporary psychiatrist and researcher, illustrates in his classic about trauma *The Body Keeps the Score*, that indeed, remaining silent about pain not only leads to isolation, but ultimately to psychological death. Especially regarding trauma, we are confronted with speechlessness and silence; oftentimes

images instead of words; unspeakable terror and dread, which are not translated into words but are re-enacted and re-lived, through flashbacks or symptoms for example, and become a persisting time loop, preserving overwhelming feelings of fear, panic and paralysis.

Van der Kolk (2021, 276) postulates in his book, that "visual art, music and dance [could] circumvent the speechlessness caused by horror". These non-verbal forms of expression are indeed used in specific therapeutic settings like music, dance or art therapy (Van der Kolk, 2021). However, as Pennebaker and Krantz (2007) found, the mere expression of trauma is not sufficient for therapeutic processing. In order to recover, patients must translate their experiences into verbal form. Healing, in this view, depends on verbal articulation—it is about *naming, voicing, phrasing, disclosing*, and thus: acknowledging.

"While the trauma leaves us speechless, the path out of it is paved with words that, carefully put together piece by piece, finally result in a communicable story." (Van der Kolk, 2021, 277) As psychotherapists, it is our task to guide and accompany our patients to their expression of what is going on inside of them and/or what has happened to them. Poetry therapy offers unique opportunities for this endeavor and thus, can play an important role in the process of transitioning towards verbal expression. I have come to find that this transition can be characterized by three specific linking features, that assist in the triangulation process of the patient, each on a different level. They will be outlined in the sections that follow and are summarized below as the Triad of Triangulation Mechanisms in Poetry Therapy (*Figure 1*).

The Triad of Triangulation Mechanisms in Poetry Therapy

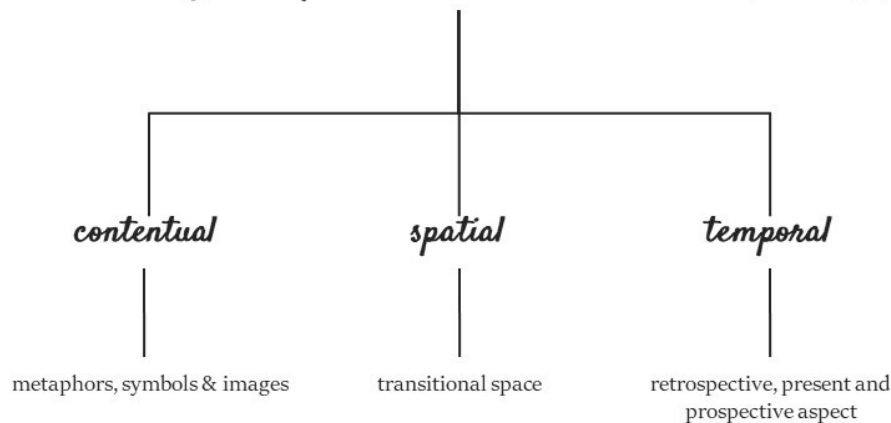| contentual	spatial	temporal
metaphors, symbols & images	transitional space	retrospective, present and prospective aspect

Figure 1. The Triad of Triangulation Mechanisms in Poetry Therapy

The Architecture of Triangulation: A Prelude to Poetic Mediation

Before these features are introduced, the technical term *triangulation*, which was first established by Ernst Abelin (1980) and is now commonly used in psychoanalysis, depth psychology and developmental psychology, shall be explicated.

The fundamental idea of triangulation is that a relationship between two is expanded by a third. The most prominent example in psychotherapy is probably the triangulation of the mother-child relationship by the father, as described by Sigmund Freud (Grieser, 2017).

Thus, triangulation indicates an opening and with it, a development and a helpful expansion; it signifies recognition, mediation and regulation, stabilization and therefore security.

Triangulation also creates space and enables movement, it grants the possibility to move back and forth, and hereby, it includes the ability to regulate proximity and distance. Finally, triangulation facilitates the ability to take an eccentric position and change perspective, thus enabling creative reflective thinking (vs. black and white thinking) and the ability to see and reflect oneself and relationships from the outside, which is also known as mentalizing (Grieser, 2017).

In that way, triangulation opens new options for perception and action by designing alternatives between which someone can choose, which ultimately means more freedom, but it also allows for different positions to stand side by side, thus enables the ability to endure contradictions. Nonetheless, it can also indicate a possible threat *because* of the fact that it enables critical thinking (e.g. second opinion) and that it might limit immediate wish fulfillment. In sum, it represents the expansion of the psychic space, but also the consideration of the limitations of one's own possibilities (Grieser, 2017). A simplified sketch of this core concept is provided below (*Figure 2*).
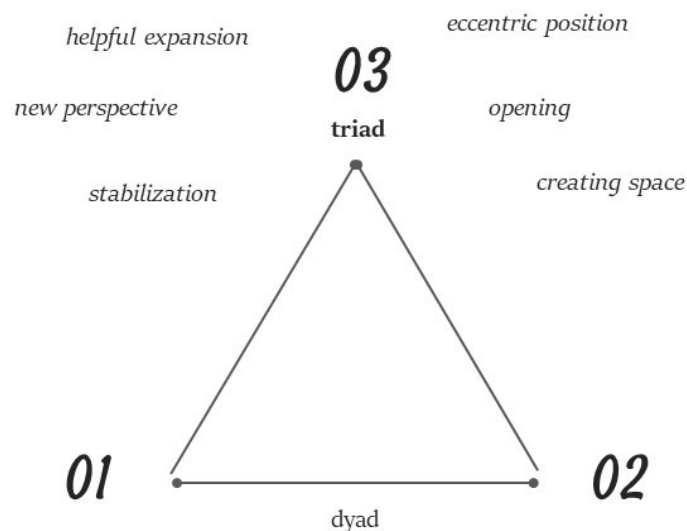
Figure 2. Triangulation

There are many possible third parties—not just people or representations of them, but also symbolic elements such as laws, norms, cultural guidelines —and language (Grieser, 2017). With that background information, I'd like to present the three specific triangulation mechanisms in poetry therapy, which facilitate the progression from speechlessness into language and accompany each of them with examples out of the practical field of poetry therapy.

Contentual Triangulation

According to Freud, there is a close connection between poetry and psychotherapy because both use preconscious and unconscious material to explore inner feelings, and both attempt the resolution of inner conflict while also using words to give it form (Mazza, 2022). As we have heard, it's ultimately important to put things into words, but using figurative language, metaphors, images and symbols while writing poetry is not nearly as threatening as directly and concretely voicing and talking about *real* incidents. In that way, it is possible to break resistance or rather, circumvent the reality principle and defense mechanisms through the nature of the *primary process* —where the libido flows freely from one imagination to another, without the censorship of the secondary processes (Shaddock, 2020).

The primary process is oblivious to the constraints of the laws of time, space and logic. Instead, it implies an all-connecting logic where contradictions coexist (*as well as* instead of *either/or*). Early childhood is filled with those primary processes, as the secondary processes are not yet established, later they are mostly found in dreams, fantasies and daydreams (Leichsenring, 2024).

So, one could claim, writing poetry is like *dreaming onto paper* —in a lucid way. And indeed, we do find the same mechanisms in both: *symbolization, displacement* and *condensation*. The poem has the advantage of not leaving one passive though —as might be experienced in a dream or a nightmare, in a memory or a flashback. It preserves self-agency and autonomy, and in that sense, the feeling of control and safety. Certain topics can be hinted at, without being fully disclosed. They can linger in the air and take an effect—which can be shared. They can invite to associate to them, to draw a little closer. Or they can insist on staying under the veil—for now. In that kind of way, figurative language and metaphors create space and can serve as a third in a triangle with the patient and their experiences, but also in a triangle with the patient and the therapist (Grieser, 2017).

Acting as a third, poetic symbolization exerts an organizing and structuring effect within the psyche, quietly unfolding beneath the surface. As David Shaddock states, "metaphors […] are adhesive: they draw meaning to them" (Shaddock, 2020, 7).

Practical Examples – Poems from Psychotherapy Practice

what the time machine revealed
(give me your hand for a split second & you'll see everything)

i'm in the making—
an arrow sent forth
to be reversed

forge me strong
so i can contain heavy
so i can endure ages

of rage and desperation and loneliness

i'm 2 years old
and exchanged for 16:
long hair, great ass, good at giving head
this
is how i learn—
i catch the tears of my mother
she smothers me differently than you will do later

i'm 4 years old
and i don't belong

i'm 4 years old
and i'm a stranger

i'm 4 years old
and very alone

and i forget how it feels to be frightened
for it turns into white noise ever present
and i learn how to leave my body
while it magically keeps breathing to the static
(a ghostly metronome
that conserves it in time
and somehow
keeps it alive)

i'm 6 years old
when i learn i can't catch all of your tears
can't suck in all of your pain—
i learn i'm a faulty vessel
i leak and lack and lose

i'm 7 years old
someone looks at me and nods
when i raise my hand and say something smart
someone nods and smiles
when i pay attention
and repeat the things i've learned—
i think i like it

i think
i want more of it
i think i may become ever hungry for this:
nod at me
smile

i'm 9 years old now
this is too close
you are too heavy
this is where i learn men who smell of beer are dangerous
this is where i learn men who cry need to be sheltered
this is where I learn
about you
on the floor

i'm 10 years old
when i write my first poem about the red
drained from my body
my teacher looks at me in silence for a long time
i'm used to being a stranger now
i can sense his sadness
like i was trained to do
but he hides his tears from me
and from himself
only cries inwards
which means
he will drown himself in drinks tonight—
like you, father

i'm 13 years old
and about to leave.

make the full stop
a semicolon;
cause they pump the poison out of me
(not the red for a change)
i don't understand why they wouldn't let me go
and why they're mad
and scream words I cannot comprehend

i'm 13 years old

replaying
the scene
too heavy
on top of me
heaviness muffles the screams
they are sent inward
like arrows
and confirm what i know

i'm 15 years old
an arrow out of control
lost bow and lost target
the emptiness festered
i learn to fill it with trash
i learn to swallow up front
& vomit behind your back

i'm 18 years old
car crash stops time
i become a loop
of crashes
a broken record
noise replaying
and forever repeating:
stranger, too heavy, can't leave

i'm 19 years old
black bird keeps visiting
it's my job to keep him at bay
can't leave—
neither can you, father

i'm 20 years old
and drunk driving on the highway
look at me and nod, dad
i learned from you
i payed attention and repeat
we don't talk
but i wish you would nod at me
and smile

i'm 21 years old
and about to vanish—
if i do it *softly*
maybe they will let me dissolve -
starvation feels like home
she says i'm perfect
for the first time I don't feel faulty
but i'm about to disappear, mother—
so i learn
about the sweet spot
of disintegration
about edging
about the fact that who is about to leave
is loved the most

Comment: This poem displays topics like emotional and sexual abuse, self-harming behavior, suicidality and disordered eating, or rather, it hints at them, without fully disclosing them. It almost sounds like we witness the described scenes from the perspective of the child, the teenager or the young adult, in the way the language is used here. The symbols and metaphors are representations for her experiences, narratives, conclusions and emotional processing. The patient had extensive psychotherapeutic experience, where she had worked through those topics. The poem almost gives an overview of the critical life events of her past, which patterns had formed and why they might have formed.

untitled

the moment you realize
that your lover
is not your lover
but the repetition of abuse;
a symptom

it makes perfect sense to me:
broken people
accidentally
cutting others
who come near
their shards

but what does that make *me*?

an incurable romantic?
seeing patterns of roses in blood stains
a starry-eyed idealist?
refusing to give up on the idea of love
even at post nuclear bleakness

where does the line
between hope and denial blur?

on the other side of hope
I am just a pointless martyr
a blind fool
a futile victim
a desperate masochist
an infinite loop
or
an unteachable child
handing you the whip
and kneeling before you
morphing
into a punching bag
turning each and every eye blind
to forever objectifying herself

repeating the same patterns
over and over
spinning in circles
like a passionate dancer

See, I never thought this could be true
but apparently
hope
has always been
my biggest mistake
and self-worth
my greatest lack

Comment: This piece of poetry insinuates the topic of domestic abuse. In therapy, it has become clear, that the relationship the patient was in, was not a happy nor a healthy one. For a while, she wasn't able to talk about the fact that she experienced not just verbal violence from her partner,

but also physical violence. This experience brought about a deep sense of shame and also denial. The patient brought this text into the therapy session to let the therapist know—without actually having to nominate the physical abuse or being too specific about it. The poem spoke for her and implied physical violence, using metaphors, figurative language and analogies. With the shared knowledge and the therapist carefully modeling words and expressions, it became possible to gradually work towards voicing the unspeakable for her and in that manner, acknowledge her experience.

Spatial Triangulation

The spatial dimension of the triangulation triad takes us to the so-called "transitional space", a term that was characterized by Donald Winnicott (2005). This transitional space (also called potential or intermediate space), creates a third sphere between the inner and outer world, between fantasy and reality (Mazza, 2022); it is the place where the metaphor exists and performs its task, which can be derived from the original meaning of the word, as the Greek *metapherein* means *to transfer*. It's also an intersubjective field, because it opens up a communal world based on shared meanings.

According to Winnicott, the existence of this intermediate space, is required for the development from absolute to relative dependence of a child. It facilitates the illusion of being the creator of one's own experience (a feeling of healthy omnipotence), which is necessary, in order to be able to allow the gradual differentiation between self and non-self (object). The transitional space thus has a bridging function, allowing a step by step development towards an autonomous self, and in that way also building and finding meaning in the relationships to the outer world and others. The opportunity that lies within the opening or re-opening of that space through poetry therapy is a form of re- or post-maturing in that transitional space, together with the therapist (Winnicott, 2005). *Figure 3* illustrates this transitional space as conceptualized by Winnicott:
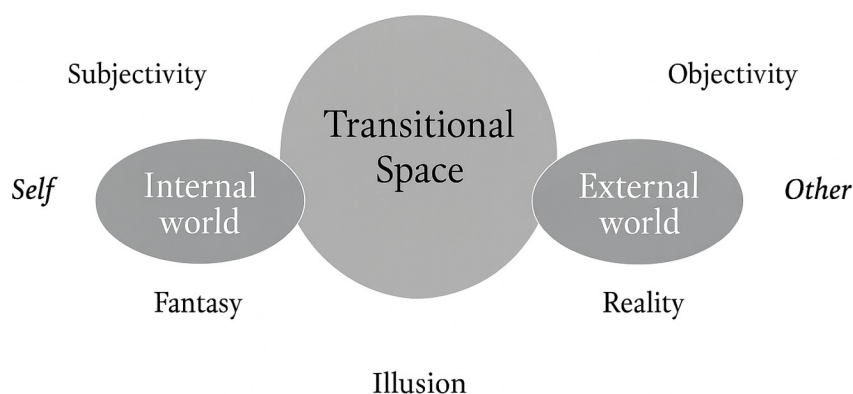
Figure 3. Transitional Space (Image created by the author based on Winnicott, 2005)

In addition to that, the writer, who listens to their own poetry or reads it out loud, is provided the opportunity to relate to themselves from an outside perspective, which creates a certain distance that can make it possible to see or feel certain aspects that might have been invisible or inaccessible before, and in that way improves self-awareness. This aspect ultimately entails a strengthening of the relationship to the self. In therapy it can also support the identification with the therapist's view of the patient.

The poem itself might also work as a transitional object, when new thoughts or perspectives from the therapy sessions find their way to be represented in the poem. The spatial dimension finally allows for a space where one can accept or reject the written word, as it doesn't have the pressing and distressing character of the spoken word due to its immediacy.

Practical Examples – Poems from Psychotherapy Practice

I/II
look at me, don't look at me

the wound
trying to cover itself

to
overgrow
the shame

the rawness
the nudity
the vulnerability
of its flesh

me
stubbornly fierce
unveiling
uncovering
ripping skin
disclosing
what's underneath

until
the wound
gives up

remaining
raw
red

mark of a whiplash
on display

witness
to the cruelty

resigning:
let us be seen

i win
we both lose

Comment: The topic of this poem is self-harm. We read about the patient and the wound, thus enter a dyadic scene. The poem is an illustration, a statement and a confirmation. The patient tells us that she was hurt and there almost seems to be a reassurance in the display of her open wound. She externalized the wound, which can be seen as a psychological dynamic of the symptom of self-harm itself, which is represented in the externalization in the poem as well. The wound becomes an interlocutor, which she can address, and which mirrors her struggle with hurting and healing. The wound also seems to be a metaphor for herself: she displays how she treats the wound and tells us, in that way, how she was treated herself. She repeats this harm- and hurtful treatment and there's almost something like a triumph in these lines, when she talks about herself about being "stubbornly fierce" and how she "wins", although they both lose with her victory. The triumph might entail that she has become even crueler (to herself) than any culprit ever was or ever might be. And herein might lie the reassurance – in the illusion of control by the identification with the aggressor and by narrowing the world down to her and her wound, hence shutting others out, which could be understood as a protective precaution.

II/II
untitled

I find a longing in me
to stop by
at your place
and cry in your company

cry on your floor
and tell you

how sometimes
I feel like a wound that will not close

how sometimes I feel
I lost so many years to sadness
and self-torture

how I ridiculed my culprits
by becoming worse than them
how I felt powerful at first,
how I felt lifeless later

Will you witness
my being-all-wound
will you hold it in your presence
without attempts of stitching,
cleaning, closing, covering—

let me be
bright red tonight
wet and open
in absence of wishes and world and word

will you
give me the grace
of being wound in the open
shepherding the pain out
just by being
in its company

for me to discharge the agony
without masking it
without being sent off into the corner
without means to fix or resolve or soothe

will you allow me
to be wound
here

until I'm not

Comment: The second poem was written by the same patient several months later, after the first poem was discussed for a while during therapy sessions (which already created a triangulation). We can see a clear development out of the dyadic state – now, the patient addresses her therapist, thus, reaches out. This illustrates that she can utilize helpful relationships and is able to ask for help at this point, instead of staying isolated in her pain. She integrated her wound. Henceforth, she speaks of herself and of "feel(ing) like a wound that will not close". It seems like the patient has realized the underlying function of the self-harm and is now capable of talking about her emotions in a rather tangible and soft way, instead of numbing her emotions or externalizing them.

Temporal Triangulation

The temporal aspect of the triangulation triad contains three levels of time. There is an exploration, perception and expression of what *is*, as a result of what *was*, determining what *will be*. Which means, there is a

- *retrospective aspect* to it, where experiences, events, encounters, recollections and memories can be looked at, from a distance – where they can be replayed, paused, rewound, digested, worked through, rephrased or rewritten;

- *present aspect* to it, being in the here and now, expanding awareness, establishing a connection to one's own feelings, emotions, thoughts, fantasies, images, reveries, establishing or reinforcing a relationship to one's own self and being attentive to what rises up and what wants to show itself;

- a *prospective aspect*: what is written can serve as a prophecy and the writer can write himself into a new reality, thus construct it with his words – almost like a magic spell. Here we are touching the constructivist and narrative approaches to therapy (Brown, 2007; White & Epston, 1990).

The interplay of past, present, and future – and their transformative potentials – is illustrated below (*Figure 4*):
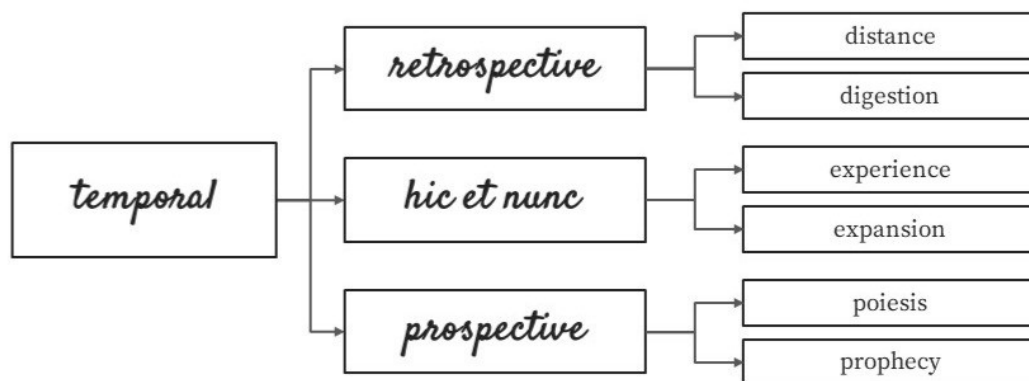
Figure 4. Temporal Triangulation

Poetry therapy not only offers a great chance for the introduction of new perspectives but in fact, to a *range of possible worlds* for the writer. In this way, it becomes possible to reauthor lives and relationships. *But* it is not as simple as just *retelling* a story; the existing stories need to be unpacked first, in order to be able to rewrite more helpful ones, pointing to the need for a deconstructive process before a reconstructive process can follow (Mazza, 2022).

For language is more than a representation of our thoughts and feelings, it's part of a multilayered interaction, and as Drewery and Winslade state: "The words we use influence the way we think and feel about the world. In turn, the ways we think and feel influence what we speak bout. How we speak is an important determinant of how we can be in the world. So, what we say, and how we say it, matter." (Drewery & Winslade, 1997, 34)

Practical Examples – Poems from Psychotherapy Practice

The Odyssey: A prophecy

I.
"*Bulimia is an act of disgust and an act of need.*"[1]
The disgust and the need are the same.

II.
On the other side of my double life
the self-torture has transformed into a full-time job.

Forever crouching over the toilet
(a sink, a bucket, a trash can
or whatever your own personal hell hole is at the time).
Head down.
Always down.
(This disease teaches you to bow your head just right.)

The symbol of
the abyss
always
staring right back at me.

Two-faced imposter,
doll-faced monster;
flushing your true self down the drain.

---

[1] Hornbacher, 2006, 93.

III.
Mirror Mirror on my wall, when I grow up I wanna be small,
Mirror Mirror, tell me the truth: is this my lifeline or is it a noose?
Mirror Mirror, your blessing's a curse,
beauty is pain and your embrace is my hearse.

IV.
Mother,
your heritage
is a poisoned apple
is the forbidden fruit
is the bottomless pit
is the never-ending hunger
and the sickness to my stomach.

I'm fed up with you;

still
always
empty.

[…]

VI.
The mother wound

The womb is a wound
and the (w)hole world is mother.
And yet, mother is never there;
mother is unreal,
mother was denied,
thus, I deny me myself
evermore -
for how could I exist?
How can love exist if pain is forbidden?
How can pain exist when nothing is real(ly here)?

[…]

XIV.
And isn't it ironic

that the end of this journey

was

losing hope,

was

a punch to my stomach,

(because a punch in the face was not enough anymore)

was finding my sense of ENOUGH,

was giving birth to my anger

from inside of my belly,

was taking the risk

of being empty

and hungry,

was not swallowing,

was regurgitating,

was spitting out

the toxic waste

the anger

the burden

the heritage

the past

the suffering

was taking the risk

of hurting

someone else

and setting a sign

for the newborn truth:

I love myself

more

than you.

Comment: This poem was written over the course of two years. In the beginning, the patient who suffered from bulimia, read a book on the subject matter and was haunted by a quote from it, which she said, "repeatedly echoed" in her thoughts. She felt the need to add a sentence to that quote, which was how "The Odyssey" started and with it, the examination, analysis and confrontation with her symptom. As can be seen in the progression of the text, she developed from borrowing words from someone else with the same symptom (Marya Hornbacher's book "Wasted" is a memoir about Hornbacher's own eating disorder) and building onto that, to the description of her symptomatic behavior, almost like an observer, displaying the scene for the reader (and/or herself) – to be looked at and to be confronted with the emotions it evokes. She

then continues to dive deeper into the meaning of the symptom, of her own inner world, of the representations and dynamics of her relationships, especially the relationship to her mother, which wasn't digested at that time. Through psychoanalysis and her writing throughout the process, as well as discussing her texts in therapy, the patient gradually worked through her topics. The last section of the text (XIV.) marks her prophecy – at that point in time, she knew what she had to do to heal. Even if she hadn't been at that "end of the journey" yet, in her mind she knew what it would look like and she wrote herself into it. The knowledge was there and by that time, the disorder lost a lot of its distressing quality, the feelings of hopelessness and despair gradually subsided, even if it still took approximately another two years for her to really process it emotionally, to practice new behaviors and to internalize them. In the end though, the prophecy ultimately became true for the patient.

Turning Toward Language: Concluding Thoughts

This paper has introduced a theoretical model for understanding the transition from silence to speech in poetry therapy, framed by three interrelated triangulation mechanisms: *contentual*, *spatial*, and *temporal*. Each of these dimensions offers a unique way of mediating the movement from inexpressibility to articulation, from inner experience to shared language. Through the analysis of poetic texts written in therapeutic contexts, the triadic model demonstrates how symbolic language, transitional space, and temporal re-narration can support emotional processing, agency, and psychological integration.

These mechanisms do not replace traditional psychotherapeutic methods but offer an additional framework for working with patients whose inner experiences dwell on the threshold of language, particularly where trauma has disrupted symbolic expression.

Outlook: Future Research & Clinical Implications

Future research may explore how these triangulation mechanisms can be operationalized in clinical studies, especially with patients suffering from complex trauma, dissociative symptoms, or severe verbal inhibition. Further investigation could examine the therapeutic outcomes of structured poetry therapy interventions within diverse clinical populations. Additionally, the model could be applied and refined across different psychotherapeutic schools to evaluate its integrative potential. From a clinical perspective, the triangulation model may offer a valuable approach to facilitate verbal emergence in patients whose experiences resist direct narration. In such cases, poetry becomes more than a medium—it becomes a bridge: between silence and speech, between wound and word.

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Encounters of Being
Unearthing Power in Personal Narratives for Connection and Healing

Fani Giannakopoulou

Department of Archival, Library and Information Studies, University of West Attica, Greece
fgiannakopoulou@uniwa.gr
ORCID: 0000-0002-7550-1964

Ruth Bezzina

Founder of Common Routs; Department of Social Wellbeing, University of Malta, Malta
ruthless@commonrouts.com

Abstract

This article examines the healing potential of personal stories in a bibliotherapy workshop tailored for professionals. Integrating narrative therapy with philosophies like Kintsukuroi and the Wild Woman archetype, participants engaged in storytelling, guided meditation, and reflective exercises to foster self-discovery and emotional resilience. Techniques such as the Tree of Life exercise and positive affirmations enabled participants to reframe life challenges, highlighting their strengths. Findings reveal that this combination of narrative, literary, and mindfulness elements supports emotional well-being, connection, and empowerment. The study calls for further research into the long-term outcomes and cultural applicability of such therapeutic workshops.

Keywords: narrative therapy; personal narratives; bibliotherapy; mindfulness; storytelling; self-awareness

Introduction

> *"We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time."*
>   (T. S. Eliot: Little Gidding)

Inspired by Clarissa Pinkola Estés' *Women Who Run with the Wolves* and the Japanese philosophy of Kintsukuroi, this workshop highlighted the transformative power of personal narratives. Combining mindfulness, art, and storytelling, participants explored personal stories to build emotional resilience, foster self-awareness, and reframe challenges.

This combination of guided meditation, myth, and narrative techniques has been used in an attempt to empower participants to raise self-awareness and alter perspectives. The Tree of Life exercise and

philosophy of Kintsukuroi have both been used to promote emotional resilience and self-awareness, showing that storytelling highly influences emotional health, empathy, and creativity. Therefore, during the workshop the facilitators used storytelling as a way to enhance and introduce a sense of empowerment. Creating a personal mythology allows for the repositioning of life challenges into epic adventures and, as stated by Rubin (2009), provides an avenue to develop mastery and a sense of power in one's life challenges. This also links to the idea of cultural narratives, those traditional stories which help in personal conflicts whilst also allowing one to negotiate societal norms, enabling self-reflection and growth (Remmers, 2022). The facilitators wanted to work on and touch upon the elements of emotional resilience and self-awareness, which is the reason for employing meditation and mindfulness, which work hand-in-hand and reinforce emotional regulation and self-awareness naturally, along with the Kintsukuroi philosophy which focuses on the beauty of imperfection. All this allowed the participants to consider their experiences and perhaps shortcomings as stories in themselves (Kranke, 2020).

Narrative therapy has much in common with Constructivist Learning and Experiential Learning, insofar as it puts foreground the construction of personal meaning and the role of embodied experience. However, in contrast, Task-Oriented Learning (TOL) and Inquiry-Based Learning are centered on task-based and skill-building activities. Narrative therapy and bibliotherapeutic methods, however, encourage individuals to deeply explore their own stories. With this method, it is possible to engender emotional sharing, self-exploration and the feeling of being empowered and as such it better fits the objectives of the workshop.

For a workshop on personal narrative, narrative therapy and bibliotherapeutic techniques the procedure is optimum, as they highlight the power of personal stories to create the self and to drive change. In contrast to Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), which seeks to change unhelpful thought-patterns, narrative therapy invites one to engage with and to re-author their life story. This method enables them to learn more about themselves and to develop empowering stories (Guilfoyle, 2014). In this paradigm, people are considered to be authors of their own lives, allowing them to look back on their life to detect themes between different events, and to alter their viewpoint. It is not so much an exercise in following defined steps, as one of self-exploration, narration and meaning-making activities with a personal feel.

Bibliotherapy uses reading and exposure to literature as supportive therapy for therapeutic treatment of mental health and emotional conditions (Peterkin & Grewal, 2018). It mainly employs books, stories, and other writing forms that help the individual identify, understand, and overcome thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Bibliotherapy is enhanced when done in conjunction with other practices, such as narrative therapy, in order to encourage the process of healing. These techniques have been incorporated into the narrative approach in this workshop to provide a fuller and engaging therapeutic experience. Participants were able to read about characters and situations similar to their own, developing new insights into personal issues. Thus it was experienced how literature can foster empathy by placing the individual in "someone else's shoes", improving their connection to their own emotions and those of others by relating back to themselves. Engaging with literature can be soothing

and therapeutic, serving to reduce stress and provide relaxation (Bentley et al., 2023; Hazlett-Stevens & Oren, 2016; Rowe, 2018). Integrating bibliotherapy into the workshop allowed participants to make deep connections with literary texts that resonated with their personal experience, enhancing emotional processes of healing and growth. The combination of narrative therapy and bibliotherapy provides an elaborate framework through which participants identify experiences, process feelings, and construct more solid relationships.

Personal narratives have always been believed to be mighty tools of therapy, standing for those aspects of human experience and the voyage towards self-realization. This paper considers the place of personal narratives within therapy, focusing on their connection to fostering connection and self-discovery. Personal narratives are thus fundamental constructs of identity, emotional processing, and humanity (Pasupathi & Adler, 2021). This process has been widely practiced through bibliotherapy and poetry therapy to nurture the emotional healing process in one way or another (Gu, 2018).

This interactive workshop challenged dominant narratives by shifting the spotlight from shared stories to powerful influences of personal experiences. Through this journey, participants came to know how personal narratives can reflect common experiences and link disparate backgrounds. This article finally attempted to indicate the possibility of personal narratives enabling transformation in therapeutic contexts and hence offering useful insights for both practitioners and participants. In conclusion the workshop offered the merging of personal storytelling, creatively integrating practices that offered an empowering journey of self-discovery by combining creative practices with guided meditation, placing the participant within a mythological theme.

Problem Statement

Despite the established therapeutic values of personal narratives, there is a critical lack of structured workshops that integrate narrative therapies with the use of literary elements (Abkhezr, 2024). This is an avenue which could offer meaningful opportunities for individuals to be introspective and communicate well (Goldstein et al., 2013). Their development will continue to further the depth of emotional healing and the facilitation of better relationships with one another for all types of participants (Nash, 2004).

The problem statement identifies two important issues: the integration of narrative therapies and the effectiveness of personal narratives within therapeutic settings (Kottler, 2015). Such workshops could provide ample opportunities for people to reflect on themselves and communicate better with others. There is also the fact that not everyone will warm up to narrative interventions based on experiences and cultural contexts (Davis et al., 2018). This is important as it denotes sensitivity to different backgrounds and a need for unique approaches, especially in therapeutic settings.

The creation of unique approaches will lead to deeper emotional healing. This would align with the findings of this workshop, allowing participants to be more self-conceptualizing and emotionally

innovative with one another (Pasechnik-Lyle & Kharkhurin, 2024). Considering these issues is crucial for improving the therapeutic benefit of personal narratives as well as ensuring workshops deliver successful outcomes for a wide range of participants.

Objectives

The workshop aimed to address two main objectives:

1. To demonstrate how personal narratives reveal shared experiences and foster connection across diverse backgrounds;

2. To equip participants with tools to use personal storytelling in therapeutic practices.

As practitioners within the realm of bibliotherapy there is an appreciation that it is literature and the arts which allow us to access our deepest intuitive wisdom. It is literature which relates humanity's story and the arts which express it – together combining and allowing for our senses to re-experience anything in our own unique ways. Cousineau (2001) argues that it is myth and poetry which relate the why to life, and science which reveals the how. Literature plays a crucial role in this concept, as Brodsky (1995) put it 'we must somehow maintain that literature is the only form of moral insurance that a society has; that it is the permanent antidote to the dog-eat-dog principle; that it provides the best argument against any sort of bulldozer-type mass solution – if only because human diversity is literature's lock and stock, as well as its *raison d'être*' (Brodsky, 1995, 21).

Case Presentation

The workshop included 11 female attendees, all professionals within the specialty of bibliotherapy. By nature, the workshop was quite open and allowed these professionals to engage in a voluntary manner, thus enabling them to share experiences and various perspectives within the session. Each participant was given a booklet containing a detailed overview, along with prompts and information to support their practice and healing journey. As the aim of the workshop was to explore personal narratives for their therapeutic potential and build connections and self-discovery, the facilitators believed that providing a booklet would facilitate this and make the participants feel more at ease (Gilligan & Dilts, 2009).

The workshop provided a specially designed interactive and experiential learning environment informed by the principles of narrative therapy and bibliotherapy (Matousek, 2017). Its structure included a welcome and an explanation of the session, the setting of guidelines, a guided meditation, storytelling, narrative exercises, and group discussions (Parkhurst, 2020). Every task or phase was thoughtfully constructed to ensure self-discovery and a sense of safety, as well as foster emotional introspection and healing. Narrative therapy and bibliotherapeutic techniques were chosen for this

workshop because they focus on personal storytelling and the re-authoring of life narratives, which are particularly effective in self-exploration and emotional healing. These approaches align closely with Constructivist Learning and Experiential Learning, which emphasize creating personal meaning and real-life experiences. In contrast, TOL and Inquiry-Based Learning focus on building skills and structured tasks. These terms will be explored in more detail below.

Narrative therapy, devised by Michael White and David Epston, is a form of psychotherapy that considers the way people construct their identities through stories (White, 2007). According to Riessman and Speedy (2007), it allows people to re-author their life stories and, in so doing, gain new insights into their experiences, emotions, and relationships. In therapy, the development of a common space of understanding is indispensable; sharing personal narratives brings out a peculiar bond between the therapist and the individual. Once people feel safe and heard, they are willing to venture deeper into their emotional territories and show vulnerabilities and well hidden aspects (Pennebaker, 2012). The sharing and witnessing of one another's stories forges a powerful therapeutic alliance of empathy, trust, and mutual respect. In a workshop environment, participants share and re-author their narratives, thus allowing for the possibility of transformation. This process enables them to identify and articulate their strengths and resilience, redefining adversities as opportunities for change. The approach in narrative therapy, done through personal stories, fosters a sense of connection and community among participants, which can be appreciated in this workshop. The emotional connection arising from this process plays a crucial role in self-discovery and healing, making narrative therapy highly relevant for this personal storytelling workshop. Bibliotherapy uses literature to promote mental health and emotional well-being. When combined with narrative therapy, bibliotherapy enhances the therapeutic process by providing new perspectives and insights into personal issues.

Constructivist learning emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. Experiential learning involves learning through experience and is more focused on the process of learning rather than the outcomes. Both modes of learning align with narrative therapy's emphasis on self-exploration and storytelling, allowing participants to engage deeply with their personal narratives and derive meaning from their experiences.

On the other hand, TOL focuses on developing specific competencies through directed and structured activities. While this is effective for practical skills and task completion, it does not look into the emotional and relational aspects of healing. TOL often prioritizes efficiency and measurable outcomes over subjective participant experiences, which can lead to the neglect of deep emotional exploration and personal connection that are crucial for transformational healing in a storytelling workshop. This rigidity can limit the potential for participants to engage meaningfully with their life stories and explore other possibilities. To give some context, CBT is based on the idea that cognitions lead to certain behaviors and seeks to change these cognitions when they are harmful. While effective for treating anxiety and depression, CBT operates on specific psychological issues and is mainly cognitive and

restructuring-oriented. It does not delve deeply into personal narratives and the meaning derived from experiences, lacking the emotional connection and self-discovery found in narrative therapy.

In conclusion, the workshop allowed for a form of therapeutic alliance, wherein a common space of understanding was created. Sharing personal narratives created a unique bond between the facilitators and the individuals, fostering empathy, trust, and mutual respect. This interactive workshop challenged dominant narratives by focusing on the powerful influences of personal experiences. Participants learned how personal narratives can reflect common experiences and link disparate backgrounds, highlighting the potential of personal narratives to bring transformation in therapeutic contexts. Narrative therapy and bibliotherapeutic techniques were chosen for their ability to facilitate deep emotional connection, self-discovery, and empowerment, aligning more closely with Constructivist Learning and Experiential Learning.

Workshop Design – Methodology

The workshop incorporated narrative therapy, bibliotherapy, and mindfulness. The activities were designed in a way that they encouraged self-reflection and emotional connection among the participants. To present a complete picture of the steps involved in its implementation, a flowchart has been presented (*Figure 1*).
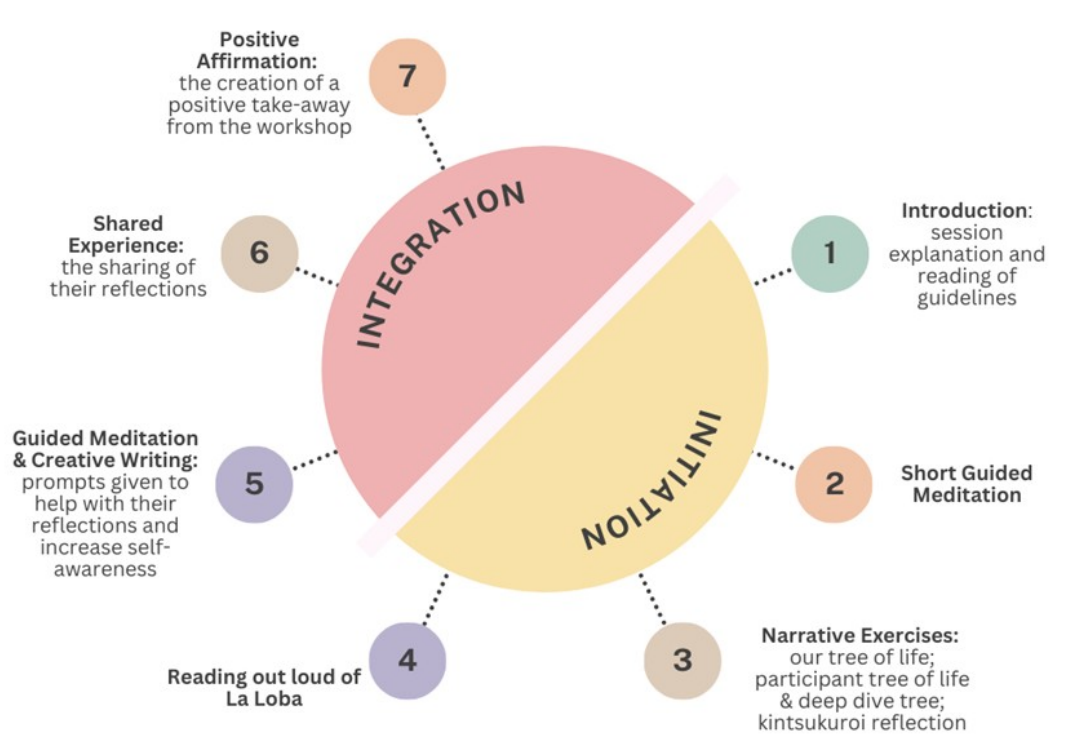

Figure 1

The workshop was divided into two parts, the Initiation phase (Steps 1–4) introduced the themes and set the stage for self-discovery; the Integration phase (Steps 5–7) helped participants apply and make sense of insights, promoting personal growth and empowerment.

Initiation (Steps 1–4)

1) To initiate the participants, the facilitators revealed the purpose of the workshop and also touched upon the outline of the session. This was followed by an explanation of the conduct guidelines to assure a safe and supportive environment (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015). As maintained by Yalom and Crouch (1990), the therapeutic alliance is a determinant of effective therapy, and this phase sets the tone to make participants comfortable and aware. The facilitators reinforced the importance of these guidelines in creating a safe space where people could share their stories without judgment or fear of confidentiality breaches (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Rudolf et al., 2014). Thus, the guidelines were read out loud together. 2) The participants were guided into a short meditation to relax and become more present (Verhaeghen, 2017). Research has shown that meditation can have a significant effect on sharpening mental clarity, thus helping participants engage deeply with the material and each other (American Psychological Association, 2019). Meditation is a way of being mindful -being in and with the moment. The point of meditation is inner transformation through the training of the mind (Ricard, 2010). As Ricard (2010, 4) continues "each of us possesses the potential needed to free ourselves from the mental states that perpetuate our own suffering and that of others – the potential to find our own inner peace and contribute to the welfare of others". The ability to stay within the moment and then visualize experiences, perceived experiences at times, from a distance is also crucial in creating a safe space. This is so that they do not feel the temptation to enter the memory and re-experience it in its totality anew but to simply observe it, without judgment. This short meditation and focus on breath was also important to set the mood and allow the participants to settle into the workshop without the baggage of what the day brought before or the thoughts of what would happen later. Mindfulness and breathing practices within such a narrative framework can further Improve emotional regulation and well-being (Hazlett-Stevens & Oren, 2016).

3) The Tree of Life exercise followed as the facilitators shared their own trees, introducing themselves and certain life stories. While serving as an ice-breaker, it also allowed space for the participants to relate and empathize, making it easier for them to then create their own trees once prompted. The participants were given art materials to symbolize and bring life to their life stories. They were led through a process where they had to identify their roots (their origins/foundation), trunk (their growth – career path, major life events, etc.), branches (their symbolic reaching out – significant relationships, challenges, achievements), and leaves (their perceived outcomes – aspirations, goals, etc.) (The Social Life of Trees, 2021). This exercise enhances resilience and self-awareness among participants (Coholic, 2010; Ncube, 2006). They were invited to share their creation with the group to get to know each other on a deeper level. This first tree provided the starting point for self-exploration.

Then, the participants were asked more profound questions to get at the hidden aspects of their narratives and create a second tree. Questions included: "What are some of the challenges that have shaped you?" and "What fears or limiting beliefs hold you back?". Each part of the tree was catered for by such prompts. Comparing the two representations, the participants were asked to notice interesting aspects, links, or even negative narratives and limiting beliefs that might have appeared. This reflective process allowed participants to recognize patterns in their stories and consider how these beliefs might be reframed or transformed, fostering a deeper understanding of their personal journeys (Hardy, 2020; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2018).

Building on the tree metaphor, the workshop incorporated the Japanese Kintsukuroi philosophy, the practice of repairing pottery with gold, to encourage participants to visually represent their emotional scars as sources of strength. Kintsukuroi is part of the wabi sabi philosophy and way of life, which is an intuitive response to beauty that reflects the true nature of life; it is, in short, an acceptance and appreciation of the impermanent, imperfect and incomplete nature of everything (Kempton, 2018). It is this philosophy which teaches one "to accept that the past was then, and it was what it was. This is now and it is what it is. Your life is happening right here, and every day is the beginning of the rest of it" (Kempton, 2018, 88). This is why it was important for the participants to reveal/write and then embrace their imperfections, to see the beauty within the cracks (which are a symbol of their experiences), reframing perceived failure transforms the experience of it. Bulfaro (n.d.) writes, "the inner scars that are created in the reunion of the shattered pieces become repositories of wisdom". As a way of life such philosophies provide an integrated approach to the ultimate nature of existence (metaphysics), spirituality, emotional wellbeing, behaviour (morality), and the look and feel of things (materiality) – it is thus an aesthetic system (Koren, 2008). Interestingly, the wabi sabi state of mind is often communicated through poetry. By experiencing the practical and symbolic path of kintsugi repair through first breaking an item facilitates the immersion into therapeutic writing (Bortini & De Donatis, 2020).

4) To deepen the reflective process, the story of *La Loba* was read aloud. According to Campbell (2008), mythological narratives serve as a kind of collective map for dealing with life's challenges, providing symbolic means for reflecting on one's self and growth. Reading the story of *La Loba* from Estés' work was a powerful metaphor for reclaiming one's true self and embracing inner strength. As Estés (1995) asserts, storytelling is a therapeutic tool that facilitates an individual's connection with their inner wisdom and resilience. Along with myth, the importance of using fairy tales or folk tales is that they stem from and develop the collective unconscious, functioning as initiation rites, offering archetypal symbols to help individuals find their way back to themselves through awareness – and awareness is protection (Estés, 1995). Reading *La Loba* aloud emphasized the power of mindful reading and deep listening.

La Loba was selected due to its profound symbolic significance in understanding human nature. The narrative serves as an allegory of restoration and renewal, illustrating the potential to reclaim lost or dormant aspects of the self. It is a form of resurrection story (as are Isis and Osiris; Demeter and

Persephone; Christ and Lazarus) – and in each case, the cycle of loss and recovery facilitates personal and collective transformation. This story highlights the role of nature in fostering an appreciation for mystery, evoking a sense of awe and wonder reminiscent of childhood curiosity – this becomes a ritual of gratitude. This ritual is also one imbued with mindfulness – the ability to pause, to reflect between action and reaction (Frankl, 2006). This resonates with the idea of phosphorescence explored in Julia Baird's book of the same name. Furthermore, this idea links back to meditation, as in Buddhism the knowing aspect of the mind is thought to be luminous – "because it illuminates both the external world and the inner world of sensation, emotion, reasoning, memory, hope, and fear" (Ricard, 2010, 13).

Integration (Steps 5-7)

5) Participants were guided through a meditation exercise with creative writing prompts. The facilitators invited the participants to visualize a comfortable place where they could feel secure and inspired. After the meditation the participants were encouraged to engage in creative writing (free of self-censorship) from prompts, reflecting on the experiences and insights gained throughout the workshop. By engaging in this reflective practice, they engaged in the creation of personal mythologies, summarizing their current stories while envisioning new, transformative narratives. This process helped re-frame their life stories and envision a more empowered future (Denborough, 2008).

6) Then the participants were prompted to share any of their insights and reflections. Participants listened actively and practiced empathy in order to increase their level of comprehension of others. The sharing of experience also allowed for the participants to feel at ease through the understanding that although the emotions connected to particular experiences are uniquely personal, those same emotions are expressed and shared by others too.

7) To conclude the participants were invited to develop a personal positive affirmation based on experiences and insights gained from the workshop. Participants were asked to reflect on the strengths they had found within themselves and the new narratives they had created; thus creating an empowering statement. This aimed to provide something tangible, reminding them of the strength to bring change into their lives.

Findings

The workshop fostered emotional healing, self-awareness, and connection. Participants described an unusually deep connection to their own and others' experiences. Most of the participants reported a strong increase in self-confidence and enhancement in the art of communication. This was articulated when relating their story in great awareness of their emotions and through the clarity of their expression. The reflective processes enhanced self-awareness as well as self-acceptance. All in all, the interactive workshop on personal narratives demonstrated the therapeutic effects of storytelling and

self-awareness. The secure environment allowed participants to share their stories, ultimately facilitating emotional healing, personal growth, and strengthening their sense of community.

Key outcomes included:

1. Enhanced Emotional Awareness: the participants developed a more profound awareness of their emotions , linking past experiences with their current sense of self. Reflective activities, including the Tree of Life and Kintsukuroi facilitated emotional connection and self-awareness;

2. Rediscovery of Personal Strength: structured activities enabled participants to identify and articulate their uniqueness, reinforcing self-worth and fostering empowerment;

3. Improved Cognitive Functioning: reflective exercises stimulated memory recall allowing participants to access and process experiences forgotten or overlooked;

4. Empowerment through Storytelling: participants reframed challenges as growth opportunities, fostering self-confidence. Facilitators acknowledge that participants will continue to integrate their insights both consciously and subconsciously after the workshop, resulting in long-term personal development;

5. Therapeutic Potential of Bibliotherapy: literature promoted empathy, self-reflection, and healing;

6. Community Building: sharing stories created bonds among participants, emphasizing shared human experiences.

Conclusion and Further Research

This workshop demonstrated the power of storytelling in therapeutic contexts, fostering emotional resilience, self-awareness, and community connection. Future research could explore:

1. Longitudinal Studies: measuring the long-term impact of narrative workshops on emotional well-being;

2. Cultural Adaptation: modifying workshops for diverse populations and cultural contexts;

3. Digital Integration: using online platforms to increase accessibility and provide ongoing support;

4. Interdisciplinary Collaboration: combining insights from psychology, literature, and art therapy to enhance methodologies;

5. Structured Programs: developing comprehensive frameworks with measurable objectives to guide practitioners;

6. Feedback Mechanisms: incorporating participant feedback to refine workshop designs;

7. Personal Mythologies: the concept of personal mythologies and an in-depth analysis of how the mythopoesis shapes identities and resilience might allow for a deeper practice in therapy.

The integration of narrative therapy technique with the literary elements showed the therapeutic potential of bibliotherapy through the works of Clarissa Pinkola Estés. Participants engaged deeply with the literary text which allowed them to gain insights that may not have been provided by traditional therapeutic approaches. This connection of literature to personal experience proved to be a powerful tool for emotional healing and personal growth.

The long-term impact of such workshops and their generalizability across different populations and cultural contexts are issues that would require further research. A review of the literature and existing studies on the topic could yield some useful insights and give a direction to further research. Some examples of related efforts to the existing one should be reviewed; their findings explored for further guidance on future research (Zanal Abidin et al., 2021; Chow & Fung, 2021; Lees-Maffei, 2010; Remmers, 2022; Rubin, 2009). Overall, the workshop reminded all participants of the transformational effect of storytelling in creating connection among people from diverse backgrounds by fostering self-discovery, self-awareness and emotional resilience.

> This is what the wildish nature offers us: the ability to see what is before us through focusing, through stopping and looking and smelling and listening and feeling and tasting. Focusing is the use of all our senses, including intuition. . .If you've lost focus, just sit down and be still. Take the idea and rock it to and fro. Keep some of it and throw some away, and it will renew itself.

> (Estés, 1995, 361)

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The "Family Unconscious" and the "Family Instinct"
as reflected in the bibliotherapist work

Tamar Kichli Borochovsky

The Hebrew University, Israel
tamar.kichli@gmail.com

Abstract

The family serves as a common thematic thread linking mental health therapy and literature. This connection underscores the importance of exploring familial themes within bibliotherapy, a therapeutic approach that integrates literary works into psychological treatment. Literature, by portraying various aspects of family life, provides valuable insights into familial dynamics and unconscious processes. By examining how different literary genres depict family relationships and norms, bibliotherapy can enhance our understanding of these dynamics and their impact on 1individuals. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how family themes are reflected in literature and how they can be utilized to address psychological issues in therapeutic contexts.

The article is divided into two main sections: the theoretical discussion of bibliotherapy and the family, and a practical case study of a decade-long treatment of a mentally ill, childless Holocaust survivor, referred to as Yitzhak Meir. This case, submitted as a case study in a competition for treatment descriptions at the Tamir Institute, is analyzed alongside David Grossman's novel *One Horse Walks into a Bar*. This analysis illustrates how working with a person's life narrative and literary texts can aid in emotional processing and therapy.

The paper argues that both literature and psychoanalysis explore family themes, though literature often does so indirectly. Literary works offer reflections of cultural and familial unconsciousness, analogous to the therapeutic process of dream interpretation. Psychoanalysis and literature are interwoven, with psychoanalytic concepts frequently derived from literary phenomena.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; family therapy; Open Studio model; biblio/poetry therapy; Holocaust survival; life story therapy; severe mental illness (SMI)

Introduction

The family serves as a central theme in both mental health therapy and literature. This thematic connection highlights the potential of exploring familial issues within the framework of bibliotherapy—a therapeutic approach that integrates literary works into psychological treatment. Literature, in its diverse forms, provides significant insights into family dynamics and the unconscious processes that shape individual lives. By examining how literary texts portray family relationships, bibliotherapy allows for a deeper understanding of how family structures and unconscious family influences shape the psyche of individuals.

This article is divided into two key sections: the theoretical discussion of bibliotherapy in relation to family dynamics and a practical case study of a mentally ill, childless Holocaust survivor named

Yitzhak Meir. This case study, which was recognized in a prestigious competition for therapeutic treatment descriptions, will be examined alongside David Grossman's novel *One Horse Walks into a Bar* (2017). The analysis of these two works allows for an exploration of how working with a person's life narrative and literature can facilitate emotional processing and therapeutic healing.

This article posits that both literature and psychoanalysis address themes of family, though literature often does so in an indirect and metaphorical manner. Literary works reflect unconscious family patterns, paralleling the therapeutic process of uncovering unconscious material, such as through dream analysis (Kichli, 2014). The interplay between psychoanalysis and literature is not coincidental; many psychoanalytic concepts have been shaped by literary traditions. Furthermore, bibliotherapy is a way of integrating literary texts in therapy, offering patients an opportunity to explore family themes and address unconscious issues within the context of psychological treatment (Berman, 2007; Sagi, 2009).

In conclusion, the integration of literary analysis and psychoanalytic principles provides a profound understanding of family dynamics and individual psychology. This interdisciplinary approach offers therapists valuable insights into unconscious family influences and enhances therapeutic practices by considering the role of family narratives in shaping personal identity and emotional well-being (Sagi, 2006).

Theoretical Framework – "Family Bibliotherapy"

Family is an essential component in psychoanalysis, not only as a real-world social unit but also as a vital part of the individual's unconscious world. In psychoanalytic literature, family dynamics and their impact on the individual's psyche are frequently explored, particularly through the lens of transference and projection. As patients bring unconscious family dynamics into their therapeutic encounters, they often recreate relationships with their parents and others within their current experiences. Bibliotherapy, which utilizes literary works as therapeutic tools, parallels this process. Through literature, individuals can engage with their own unconscious material, including family patterns, without direct confrontation with family members themselves.

The concept of the family unconscious, a key theme in this article, is a core idea developed in my doctoral research. Along with related concepts such as the family instinct and the couple unconscious, these terms delve into how individuals internalize family dynamics and carry these influences into their lives. These ideas will be further elaborated in my forthcoming book, to be published by Carmel Publishing.

Literature and psychoanalysis share a symbiotic relationship, where literature often precedes and influences psychoanalytic theory. Many psychoanalytic ideas, such as the Oedipus Complex or the concept of the family unconscious, were inspired by literary motifs and symbolic narratives. By engaging with literature, patients can identify family-related conflicts and address these issues within the context of therapy. Through bibliotherapy, patients are given the opportunity to explore their inner lives, access unconscious material, and work through unresolved family-related issues.

"Open Studio": How to Access the Family Unconscious Through Bibliotherapeutic Group Work

After a brief explanation of the common outlines between the fields of literature and therapy, and between bibliotherapy and family therapy, participants are introduced to work materials placed in front of them on the table. The presentation of the writing materials follows the approach of art therapy, specifically the Open Studio model (Orbach, 2020). On the table, there will be various types of paper, torn sheets, pages with framed edges, papers of different thicknesses ranging from thin paper to parchment paper. Pens, markers, glue, staplers, feathers, ink, as well as charcoal and drawing markers will also be provided. Participants will be guided to choose a sheet and a writing tool for each family member, based on the language of their connection with that person. For example, if my mother was fragile and would scream, I might choose parchment paper and a red panda ink pen, as for me, parchment represents delicacy and the red panda color represents rage, and so on.

Participants will be given the means to glue and change the size of the page according to what they write. After selecting the sheets for each family member and for themselves, the participants will write a few spontaneous and automatic sentences by hand, in their mother tongue. Family members can be connected as one work on a single page after writing, or remain separate, or some can be connected while others are separated, depending on the writer's choice. In a single workshop, this work can be presented. During the presentation, participants can receive a reflection of how they perceive their family members and the relationships between them. In a longer workshop, after the family members are selected, the family story will be written week after week on papers with different writing tools. This will create a 'family journal' written in the unique way shared by the creating family member and the family's character as perceived by them.

One can also add the extended family, family fantasies, the family the person has created, and so on. In addition, the "Bibliotherapeutic Open Studio" can be used for general therapeutic writing work, unrelated to family. Handwriting is gradually disappearing in modern times, but it is tied to early childhood and using it can connect to both early and later childhood, to the handwriting of mother, father, grandparents, etc. Working with different writing tools and papers of various textures can help unblock familial creativity and connect individuals to their family's creative powers.

In the second part of the workshop, the participants select one of their patients. They select a page and write a few spontaneous sentences about the patient. They then select additional pages and appropriate writing tools for the characters from the chosen patient's family life for work. They then arrange family relationships as they understand them from their sessions with the patient.

The third part of the workshop is related to examining the transfer relationship between the therapist and the patient through the family and the therapeutic writing work. The fragments written on notes have become a narrative, and the narrative of the patient and caregiver's family are openly written. The family correspondence, hidden until that moment, receives a place and possibility to interpret, find the similar and different and make the necessary separations.

An examination of the similarity and difference between the family concepts of the therapist and the patient can shed light on the therapeutic relationship, the implications of the patient and expand the place that the therapist can give the patient through awareness of different and similar concepts between them. The family is an entity that connects the individual to society, like language. This connection to the family through spontaneous writing can illuminate personal family processes that constitute

the therapeutic relationship and illuminate unconscious shades of it. This enlightenment can help the patient become aware of past patterns and help him establish a benevolent relationship that relies on the strengths of his family ties and process the difficulties of complex family bonding.

The "Family Unconscious" and the "Literary Unconscious": Mutual Influences and Interactions

The overlap between family themes in psychoanalysis and literature is striking, as both disciplines delve deeply into the unconscious. The family unconscious, as I conceptualize it, operates beneath the surface of daily life yet profoundly shapes how individuals experience relationships and understand their world. Literature often mirrors these unconscious family dynamics through overt or symbolic representations, providing a unique avenue for patients to confront hidden influences in a therapeutic setting.

Bibliotherapy enables patients to explore these dynamics through literary characters and narratives that may resonate with their own familial histories. For example, David Grossman's *One Horse Walks into a Bar* and the life story of Yitzhak Meir provide two such narratives. Both delve into the family's ongoing presence in the psyche, even when physically absent, making them powerful tools for uncovering and processing unconscious conflicts.

Monologic and Dialogic Forms: Literary Monologue and Therapeutic Dialogue

> *"The temptation that is so hard to resist – the temptation to peek into the hell of the other"*
> (Grossman, 2017, 85)

> *"Advantage and disadvantage in all, good and bad in all"*
> (Yitzchak Meir)

This discussion focuses on two forms of monologue: the literary monologue of Dovaleh, the protagonist in David Grossman's novel *One Horse Walks into a Bar*, and the monologue within the life story of Yitzhak Meir during therapy. Despite the absence of their families in their current lives—Dovaleh's parents are deceased, and Yitzhak Meir lost his family in the Holocaust—the family remains an active presence in their consciousness. This underscores the enduring influence of the family unconscious.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theories such as those of and family therapy approaches (Boszormenyi-Nagy et al., 1991; Bowen, 1974 etc.), this article explores how internalized family figures, or an "internal family," influence an individual's behavior and psyche. These influences become particularly evident during moments of emotional or psychological significance, highlighting the role of the family unconscious in shaping individual experiences.

The discussion below will focus on two types of monologues from two different types of discourse: Alongside Dovaleh's literary monologue, the hero of David Grossman's novel One Horse Walks Into a Bar, the discussion will revolve around the parts of a monologue in the life story of Yitzhak Meir (pseudonym),

a childless, severe mentally ill holocaust survivor, during psychological therapy. In both cases, we are dealing with two individual speakers describing themselves as alleged; the family is no longer present in the reality of their lives in the present – both of Dovaleh's parents are not among the living, and Yitzhak Meir lost his entire family in the Holocaust – but it remains in their consciousness, memory and experience.

The trauma of the Holocaust and its consequences are shared by Meir and Dovaleh in Grossman's book, Son of Parents of Holocaust Survivors, and the subject of the Holocaust connects the two stories openly and covertly. The monologue nature of the texts makes it possible to examine the intensity of the hold of the family unconscious in the soul life of the individual and the degrees of freedom of the individual in the face of the power of the family. The discussion will move between the conscious and unconscious individual, his dreams and fantasies and his conscious and unconscious family: its existence in reality and in his imagination. In *One Horse Walks into a Bar,* Dovaleh recalled his trip to the funeral as a child, not knowing which of his parents had died, and all along his anxiety increased when he tried to guess. Meir described during the treatment, every meeting, his family members who had been separated from them seventy years earlier.

Both stories make it possible to test and demonstrate the theory of the existence of the family unconscious, and the realization of the innate mental family potential in the face of the family living reality. Both according to psychoanalytic theories, for example by Bowen (1974), and according to theories from family therapy, the individual assimilates in his soul the characters of his parents and creates unconsciously any inner family. These are internal voices that have been assimilated, experienced as family objects, and they affect the conduct of the individual in his adulthood. This influence of assimilation of the parents' figures is expressed in central junctions throughout the life of the individual, in his observation of himself in his consciousness and in his reference to his choices, his actions and life events.

First-person reporting and the family unconscious In order to examine the inner family, it is necessary to separate the perceptions assimilated by the individual from the actual family. This requires a reporting style that is closest to what represents the individual's soul world. Such a writing style is first-person writing – monologue and internal dialogue; these forms are closest to a direct description of the human experience, and have great value that helps to understand how much the individual assimilated his family, why and for what purpose. Ostensibly, the genre of the monologue is far from dealing with the family dimension; however, I claim that the individual's family instinct – the part that is represented in his consciousness even when his actual family is absent – may exist even when in fact the family ceases to exist, allowing the family to be treated even in texts that it is not their main interest. I shall examine this both through the long monologue in Grossman's book and through the words told by Yitzhak Meir in the treatment.

The "family instinct" is an innate structure that exists in the depths of the definition that the individual defines himself. The conscious and unconscious family scenario affects the individual. The private unconscious, which is extensively discussed in psychoanalysis, by its very nature is not exposed, as is the family unconscious in the individual psyche – it is also invisible and is revealed, as Freud believed, in art, humor, oral exhaustion, dreams, fantasies and more (Freud, 1967). All these serve as a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious. The humor side is indeed prominent and blatant among the comedian in Grossman's book, and it is also evident in Meir's developed humor, whose discourse was full of aphorisms and complementary in an unplanned or semi-planned manner. At the height of both monologues is a catharsis experience: it appears with Meir when he exposes in therapy the burning of his father and brother in the synagogue in his native Romania, and in Grossman's book – when the trauma of the boy's ignorance is ex-

posed, which of his parents died. In both cases this stage of the monologue is an important tier for the individual in familiarity with his family unconscious.

The depiction of Dovaleh's gigs in front of his mother as a child, behind his father's back, and their relationship to his appearances as a stand-up comedian in adulthood, demonstrates the influence of the inner family on him. He describes how in his childhood his mother would laugh when he would appear to her in the dark, in the light of the electric boiler lamp, and how she would suddenly stop the show. As an adult, he puts on a comedy show designed to be funny, as he used to make his mother laugh; he performs in a dark club, and the bulk of the audience also "stops" the show – people get up and go out in disgust at different stages of the show. The offensive outing of the audience is also a reconstruction of the abuse Dovaleh underwent as a child by a group of his peers.

His current stand-up show is a subversive sideshow in relation to the prevailing relaxed laughing culture. The world outside the show is the Father's Voice, representing authority and boundaries. Dovaleh's show is a show in the company's backyard, a unique fringe show, similar to the show held at Dovaleh's house behind his father's back. Both occurrences move through the dark expanse of humor, taking place in a dark atmosphere in a dim red light. In his appearances before his mother as a child there is a grotesque aspect. He uses everything in the house to make her laugh. Dovaleh also uses everything he encounters on stage in a method typical of a stand-up show. Both in the stand-up show and in the show at his home in his childhood it is unclear who is the object of humor or ridicule.

The whole situation is grotesque and peculiar and the line between the laughing and the laughing, between the audience and the performer, blurs: " 'What about some red-headed jokes?' Reading something, and another man growling, 'We came here for the jokes!' And a woman who answers to the snorting sound of the two men yells, 'Can't you see that today is itself the joke?' "(Grossman, 2017, 79). Dovaleh himself testifies: "I do not know where it came from, and in fact do know, I did a show for my mother, where it began, I would sketch her like this in the evening, before Figueroa would return home and we would become state" (Grossman, 2017, 78–79). Thus, the family of origin, the family in which the family instinct was developed, accompanies the individual throughout his life, even in situations of family conflict, as with Dovaleh, and even in extreme situations in which no trace of his family remained in reality, as with Yitzhak Meir (Kichli, 2020).

Conclusions

Grossman's book, along with the case description, both illustrate a "family-end" scenario: a person who has lived his life without a family. The patient's focus on his family, and the family history depicted in Grossman's work, demonstrate the profound role that family plays in shaping the individual psyche. Naturally, a person whose life is accompanied by a family will also define his identity in relation to that family. This work aims to clarify why the family is so essential, even for someone who lost their entire family in youth. What is the mental and neural structure of family that prevents a human story from being told without reference to family?

The work leaves the reader with significant questions: Is the family a brain structure, perhaps hinted at by the concept of a "family instinct"? Is the family encoded in various regions of the brain and human psyche—spanning from sensory experiences and memory, to the language of history, human geogra-

phy, and physicality? This would help explain why it is impossible for a person to exist without it. These extreme examples—those of Grossman, Yitzhak Meir, and Shelly—reveal the centrality of family in individual life, both consciously and, more importantly, unconsciously, as both a couple and as a familial unit. Much of this remains hidden from view.

Through the use of family bibliotherapy workshops, therapists can explore the nature of their own families, as well as the families of their patients. This exploration allows for an investigation of unconscious family dynamics, including the roles of the couple, siblings, and the family as a whole. Such an investigation can deepen the understanding of the unconscious roles of the family in therapy and healing. Further research into family bibliotherapy is needed to uncover the family genome, which, for now, remains largely in the dark.

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No Free Containment

A case study written by Tamar Kichli Borochovsky

The Japanese believe in multiple gods and that ordinary people can become gods after death. They maintain a shrine for their deceased family members at home and maintain prayer relationships with them. If Yitzhak Meir had set up a shrine for his deceased, he would have needed more than his small room in the shelter for mentally affected Holocaust survivors, which he shared with another resident, Rami. He was born into a family of rabbis with numerous uncles, nephews, cousins, and children, but upon reaching the age of eighty-three, when he departed from this world, Yitzhak Meir had no living family member from his family of origin, and he left no children to carry on his fathers' name. Such an asymmetrical fate, that a person carries his fathers with him and maintains a daily conversational relationship with them, but not a single person remains to set up a shrine for Yitzhak Meir, or to cherish him in their heart. Even his roommate, who lived with him for ten years, said after his departure that Yitzhak Meir ate like a pig, opening a jar of pickles and taking them out with his hands while standing. "Those whom God loves, he doesn't kill," said the roommate, "and our God doesn't love pigs." With this, he sealed the fate of commemorating Yitzhak Meir as a person in his heart. "This is not a story of individuals, it's a story of a generation," Yitzhak would remark to me when I tried to begin and probe how a person experiences such a burning asymmetry of the living and the dead in his life cycle.

I treated Yitzhak Meir for over a decade and was a friend to his emotions. From his stories, I knew his family, from birth to strange death, to the last of the distant relatives who perished. I heard about their customs so that I could accompany his family thoughts as if I had been with him in joys, sorrows, and community life. The journey without leaving traces left me to carry in my heart and mind the path descending from the village, and his mother calling to him in her voice, for the last time before he left, which was lost. When he passed, he remained in my shrine of the dead, along with his family members and other deceased.

His height was over one meter ninety. His eyes were slanted and small like a mole's, and like it, his other senses were sharp. His aquiline nose was prominent on his face, and together with his narrowed eyes, the viewer felt as if he was beholding a giant, a combination of the ruler of the permeating earth and the king of the heavens. A satiated and bat-like bird of prey. His legs and arms were thin, his face elongated, his belly and cheeks round with satiety from when we met until he fell ill. His cheeks were permanently flushed, and he exuded a plump old age, relaxation, and a slow, confident step.

When Ehud, the shelter manager, would call me on Friday or Saturday, I didn't want to answer, and all the names of my friends of the hour passed before my eyes as if moments before death. I thought about who might be hospitalized or dead. My first terrifying thought was that it might be Yitzhak Meir. After all, I had last seen him at the Masad Ledach Hospital a few days ago, and he had said goodbye to me with a sudden embrace that I wasn't prepared for and hadn't happened before or after that outburst. I erased the thought that he could die; a protective thought said he was excited that I came to visit him, after all, he had been very healthy until the disease was discovered. Potzner? I thought to myself.

Maybe Clara? Just not Rina. Thus, images of each of them passed before me as I had seen them in their typical behavior before I called them to the room, week after week, year after year. A decade. "Are you sitting?" Ehud asked. He knew I was more attached to Yitzhak Meir than I knew myself. "If I sit, he will rise," I answered. In the evening at friends' house, I started crying and had no consolation. When he lay on the stretcher in the cemetery, his happy belly distinguished him; one could identify the body without seeing the face. Even together with the women, there wasn't a minyan. Only I knew Yitzhak Meir, and therefore only I cried over his corpse. I wanted to approach and hug, maybe now the rules of ethics, on the border of the world, stretch like a womb.

I called him Yitzhak-Meir for the purpose of this treatment description, a pseudonym that corresponds with his name, and I collected from the names of my grandfathers: Yitzhak Bar Abba and Meir Boru‑chovsky. It seems to me that the choice to add him to the names of my fathers will be explained later. Supposedly for reasons of confidentiality, I cannot write Yitzhak Meir's real name. But the truth is that I cannot write his name because I cannot bear the fact that I will write his name and no one will recog‑nize him, except perhaps a few strangers who treated him over the years like me. I feel an urge to write his name and thus give the right to whom at least half of this treatment description belongs. Perhaps my desire to commemorate him in this description also stems from my own desire to free myself from be‑ing a shrine of the dead myself, carrying the memory of a person and family that was erased. If I were to write his name, in my fantasy, I could supposedly perpetuate what was lost forever, to correct the distorted. But the distorted cannot be corrected. I knew Yitzhak Meir and as he would say again and again, this is a story of a generation, and the true story is of a generation from which individuals and families were erased without a trace or memory left.

Yitzhak-Meir was a resident in a shelter for mentally affected Holocaust survivors. I treated him from the first hour I received payment for my work, after finishing my studies, until he passed away a decade later. Hence, I conducted novice experiments on him, and he, with all the flaws of the relationship he carried as if his limbs were separated to the point of disassembly, did not give up on our shared hour, and neither did I. But even when he arrived, it wasn't he who held the organs of the generations that ex‑ist in capsulation and emerge as spirits in the treatment room, accompanying my nights. He, unlike me, could erase, and so he did every meeting. After he filled me with quick and dense words about syna‑gogues burned with their inhabitants, children's swollen and hungry bellies, green potato fields, a cir‑cumcision and great joy for his barren sister Pnina who gave birth after fifteen years of infertility and named the son Samuel, and then the war broke out, the babies were taken first. Samuel the prophet, his mother gave up, for the sanctification of God's name, his sister said. And after all these stories, always before he stepped with a heavy step with his back to me, he turned and did not give up on the tradi‑tional sentence he said. Lifting his leg before the flat silver strip of the entrance to the treatment room's shelter as if it were a step, turning his gaze to me in slow motion and saying, this time slowly, word not meeting word, 'It's not important, why are you listening to all this, it's not a story of individuals. It's a story of a generation.'

Through Yitzhak Meir, I came to know a Holocaust without resurrection, a kind of Holocaust that is not related to me. I thought then that I was really talented and successful in my omnipotent ability to con‑tain, as an act of altruism. I didn't know my family then as I know it today... Forgive me, my readers, for the misinterpretation, if it had remained alone this case description would not have been worth read‑ing, a description of a young and ignorant therapist. I won't spare you, and in the next paragraph you'll read that I thought Yitzhak Meir was a Holocaust without resurrection and I was with the resurrection,

meeting at the intersection of the Holocaust and parting in the selection, he to death, I to life. Maybe I can teach merit about myself and say like Yitzhak Meir that this is a story of a generation, my genera-tion, generation X, Y, Z, the generation that is diminishing, finishing the letters and after it the flood, disconnected and self-centered simultaneously. But Yitzhak Meir didn't let me stay protected, from him and thanks to him I learned my lesson on the subject of containment – the unconscious speaks to the unconscious and there are no free containments.

Nevertheless, for the sake of honesty, let's return to the consciousness from which I treated Yitzhak Meir. The Holocaust in my family, as I separated it, was a Holocaust with resurrection. From the age of sixteen, I researched and obsessively turned over every stone in the field of my family's Holocaust space like a snake catcher. To know what to ask, I read the Holocaust book cabinet in the school library, in my grandfather's library, and in the city library. I remember that during Book Week in the year of my trip to the camps, I returned with bags full of new Holocaust books that came out that year. I went on the Holocaust trip in 11th grade to photograph my grandfather's house, Grandpa Yitzhak. He left Poland at the age I was when I photographed his house and had not set foot there since. As if he had thus destroyed the land that took that family who sat shiva for him when he left with the pioneering training. On the train, the rich uncle gave him money to buy land in Israel, my grandfather bought books with it. The uncle said to him, "Yitzhak, I think you were right," and he replied, "I think you're too late." "Maybe I exaggerated in my answer, it's good for a person not to know his end," my grandfa-ther told me in one of our conversations on the subject. Then he wiped a tear for the uncle whose money the murderers inherited, and told me, "It's not good to awaken the dead," but I couldn't do other-wise.

The journey to Poland ended with the delegation that was supposed to pass through Lodz, the city of my fathers, not passing through there. My arguments with the tense guide and the Bible teacher Eti who broke her arm didn't help me get to Lodz. The five free hours in the Warsaw market did help. I took a taxi to the gray city and photographed the pants-shaped house at Piotrkowska 88. I returned late and no one knew where the earth had swallowed me. I lied and said I had gotten lost. My grandfather identified the pictures of his house, and called me a personality, and so to this day they call me in my family with humor. When I returned, I told Zeev Degani, the legendary school principal, and he told me that if it doesn't come out, he turns a blind eye. To this day I don't know who snitched to the Bible teacher. The pleas of Shimon Ahara z"l, the great history teacher who educated me, didn't help, she forced the principal and I lost two grades in behavior.

Yitzhak Meir's passive acceptance of the Holocaust was foreign to the family resurrection I knew at that time. With us, we do, we don't sit and cry. There's no time to waste, we need to prove to the Nazis. My grandfather started a family and despite the guilt of the survivors lived a full life, and my grand-mother who was a Holocaust survivor herself functioned emotionally better than him and me and was full of action, joy of life and inner fullness more than many non-Holocaust people I knew. Her children would cry at the stage when she told about her parents being taken from home, but I continued to listen to the sound of gunshots heard from inside the house, to the gaze that froze in front of the two bodies, to the moment when she realized that the hand in the snow would no longer embrace and the mouth lost its words. To work in the factory, to the brother who was shot in the ghetto, to the death march and the rape after the war, all these were known to me. And yet, when my grandmother and I sat, after the last time I dragged her to see the sea, she looked at the orange tree visible from the kitchen window where she spent most of her days and said, how the oranges will turn orange and I won't see. I didn't

see at all that there were orange blossoms and only her green eyes showed me the circles that grew to orange and I placed on the soil of her grave instead of flowers.

Yitzhak Meir would always say before he explained his desire for a Holocaust without resurrection, that "A satiated lion sleeps. In the Jewish state there are enough children, mine are not needed" and once he added "and I couldn't." "Did you want to?" I asked. Sometimes we had the same conversation over and over again, week, month, year. He doesn't remember that we talked and I listen to what occupies him without interrupting. Thus, I thought, I am with him in a Holocaust without resurrection, in reconstruction without repair. In alpha materials without processing. "In the streets in the orchards she wanted," he answered, "but before we managed I was hospitalized and those who don't provide for their children are hungry, and hungry children I knew. Not for hunger should one make children." The hungry children arrived and filled the room. Two infant sisters for whom the mother had no milk left in her breast, they didn't have time to scream, they had to be silenced. The child who saw from the forest sneaking to the pasture and drinking milk from the udder. The neighbor's child, the fat one, was the first to go. The girl who stole from the field and a German officer shot her, and then stepped with his boot on her face and spat. "Her hair was yellow like an Aryan's, at first I thought he would come to help her, but when he approached he saw a Jewish nose by the torn clothes, he cursed in German that he just dirtied the boots for nothing, he could have shot her from afar like a rabbit." He added and said, "The children came to pray in the synagogue, it was before the war, I was sick that day, the food was already burned and father didn't return, he remained the father of these children in heaven when the synagogue burned in the pogrom and for me and my five sisters mother remained. To bring hungry children – it's not worth it."

Sometimes he would tell me "There's an advantage and disadvantage in everything. Good and bad in everything." I thought this was a classic sentence to describe the depressive position, and I was surprised then in my arrogance how well he phrased it, for he hadn't read Melanie Klein's writings... It seemed to me that he was translating the words from Yiddish. The comfort in this sentence, round and funny from his mouth, sounded to me as if spoken in a language that had been emptied of its speakers. He would always say the same sentence with the same smile that managed to calm me anew each time, as if consoling me for the fact that I'm hearing stories of another generation, the generation of the desert. Of another family, a family from Holocaust to Holocaust.

My grandmother also wanted to protect me, and said "I wanted to take this (the rape she went through in the Holocaust) to the grave," when I asked her if she had a secret she hadn't told anyone, because I read that you get cancer because of secrets and she had ovarian cancer. I wanted to save them and I didn't succeed. Shame on Ferenczi for the false hope he planted in my wounded heart, for salvation. I was a girl when grandmother's cancer started, she underwent chemotherapy treatments and I slept next to her in the hospital to support her. But once she got up to vomit at twelve at night, didn't want to wake me up and fell. I lifted her from the floor and there was such closeness between us, body to body, the smell of my sleep and the chill of my split dreams mixed with the sound of the air conditioner, my grandmother's vomit and the vapors of cleaning materials from the shower. I said to her "Grandma come" and put my shoulder under her hand. I grabbed the side and with some strength I lifted and when she lay in bed I told her Grandma, it's not your fault. A million and a half he raped, the Holocaust. "You won't tell," she answered. "Scout's honor" I said and she smiled, but after she died, forgive me my grandmother, I told. I didn't want to be like her, sick because of secrets. I remember some words that fell apart from the sentences or that she added afterwards, when she cried that she wanted to take it

with her, to the grave. The things that have shame in them. "He came at night." "I was really like (stressed on the first syllable) a stone." "Blood. Virgin." "Pregnancy. Abortion." "In an apartment of brothers after the death march and when the Germans fled we worked in cleaning, a friend from home, from our shtetl, we gave him a bed. I told him that at least he should marry but he decided - for abortion. It's good this way otherwise you wouldn't be. I wouldn't have compromised on grandpa, he was half a portion." And then she started crying. And I heard for the first time that there is good in bad and that we too are from Holocaust to Holocaust.

Valentine's Day, said Yitzhak Meir as he entered, and the scent of flowers filled the expanses of the connection. You asked once, so here now I'll tell you in answer, "Twenty years after the wedding that was cancelled because I couldn't provide, there was another one, there was once a woman here, Manya." He said. "Manya Boruchovsky. A good friend. Twenty years have passed since she left and I still see her wandering to my room in a nightgown. Hair like yours, yellow and curly, and a nose like yours and mine, French. We would sit together. She would embroider and I would look at her fingers and at the thought she put into the threads she connects. I was a mensch, opening the door for her, pulling out the chair, buying her chocolates and cigarettes. Close." The unknown strikes the known and bypasses logic. I skipped over the name. Coincidence. Surreal. Perhaps my name was mentioned before the wedding and Yitzhak Meir connected what doesn't connect. My father's mother was called Manya Boruchovsky, she died when he was five. It took me a few months during which I was sick twice, and every arrival at the shelter was accompanied by fatigue and a blatant and uncharacteristic lack of desire. I brought up in guidance with Bruckner that I want to leave Beer Yaakov. That I'm tired of all the Holocaust stories, I want to work with children and not with mentally affected people and start living and not be buried in Holocaust stories. I don't know how she did it but Bruckner connected the dots and sent me after the guidance to call my father and for him to give me a photocopy of his ID card and a waiver of confidentiality for the hospital archive. He said it's not worth digging and that 'they murdered my mother there'. The truth destroyed the place of imagination. "It's a pity, we didn't keep a picture," she said, and "The archive burned down. Doctor Weiss, the deputy director, wants to talk to you about what to do with such sensitive information, maybe you should see him first?" "Well, it will only cost you eighty-three shekels, not much left, three pages and a referral for surgery, a medical summary after she returned, yes a common surgery then, lobotomy. Here's another page left but you don't need to pay, it's a few lines of consent from the husband, Meir Boruchovsky who signed consent in Russian."

I left the archive dizzy and called my father. A few words and a lot of silence were enough. My soul was shaken and I thought I had lost my sanity and he vomited and had a high fever for a few days. In meetings with Yitzhak Meir after the unknown became known, I refrained from asking about Manya, but he told about her again and again the same things from that meeting until he passed away a few months later. Perhaps he saw some resemblance between her and me and waited until I was ready to know and then he could part. Yitzhak Meir turned from a stranger to whom I throw a few altruistic coins to a harbinger, who gave me the reason why I insist on coming there, walking unknowingly in the footsteps of my grandmother in an attempt to stitch the lobes into a clear insight. I learned that there are no free containments and no connection without explanation to place and person. There are only landmarks on the way that were lost and there is no other way but to discover them.

(This story is dedicated to the memory of my father's mother, my grandmother, Manya, whom I did not know, but the injustices of her life seeped into my childhood.)

Reading and Writing the Self
Bringing biblio/poetry therapy into university spaces

Deborah Burns

Liverpool John Moores University, UK
d.a.burns@ljmu.ac.uk
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-3405-2971

Anne-Marie Smith

Liverpool John Moores University, UK
a.smith3@ljmu.ac.uk
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8917-0644

Abstract

This report offers reflections and insights based on our collaborative experience of introducing and delivering a 'staff and student wellbeing' programme of bibliotherapy and writing for wellbeing workshops at our university. These include monthly reading workshops using self-help texts, and monthly writing workshops which use a blend of approaches from therapeutic journaling and poetry therapy practice. Our report offers examples of the kind of workshops offered, and some broader context around the wellbeing initiative at our university. We reflect also on the benefits and challenges of inviting people to talk and/or write about the self in the context of the output-driven environment of Higher Education in the UK. Whilst our project centres on personal development and the non-clinical practice of bibliotherapy/writing for wellbeing, we also share our personal experiences of the therapeutic value of 'writing the self', and how these inform our practice. Finally, we look towards the next phase of developing and enhancing the project, alongside student interns.

Keywords: wellbeing; poetry therapy; bibliotherapy; higher education; writing the self

Introduction

Wellbeing in higher education in the UK is central to university policies and strategies (UUK, 2022), reflecting a vital need to address mental health struggles faced by both students and staff at universities (Lewis & Stiebahl, 2024).

A study by Brewster et al. (2022) explores staff and student perspectives on mental health and life at university, highlighting the increase in stress and burnout levels amongst staff, and pressures on student wellbeing caused by academic as well as financial and psychological pressures. The authors argue for a shift in culture in universities, one where emphasis would be on compassion and community, approaches that could mitigate against the dominance of the competitive academic environment.

We are a student counsellor (Debbie) and a lecturer (Anne-Marie), both with a personal interest in journaling and writing for wellbeing, recognising that this personal interest is what motivates us and our commitment to this project that exists within our professional work context. Within the context

of broader university pressures (as outlined above), we both believe in the importance of quiet safe spaces that support non-product-oriented practices, like reading a book or exploring the self through journaling or expressive writing. The latter is anathema to many in academia, where output tends to be what receives acclaim.

A Bibliotherapy project was set up at our university in 2022, and since then it has grown in success and recognition. The project is an ongoing collaboration between Education, Student Counselling/Mental Health and the University Libraries. Our report describes the project and its aims whilst discussing the rewards and challenges we have found along the way. Finally, we will outline our hopes for the project moving forward.

Readers of this journal will be well-versed in the history, process, and application of bibliotherapy and will be aware of the benefits of reading and writing as tools to access personal insights and understanding (Mazza, 2022; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Chavis, 2011; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2012; Williamson & Wright, 2018).

In relation to student wellbeing, several studies report on clinical interventions using bibliotherapy to measure stress and anxiety (Ahmadipour et al., 2012; Hamdan et al., 2021) however, less is known about the non-clinical use of biblio/poetry therapy for personal development within university settings. As explored elsewhere, wellbeing in the university context tends to be situated in relation to positive academic performance and achievement (see for example Brewster et al., 2022; Baik et al., 2019). Our project seeks to promote wellbeing spaces and activities without emphasis on any direct academic impact; in this sense, the focus is on process rather than product of any kind.

Our project is made up of three strands, which we describe in the next sections:

1. *Reading for Wellbeing* (monthly workshops based on self-help books, e.g. mindfulness)
2. *Writing for Wellbeing* (monthly workshops centred around key themes for personal growth, e.g. resilience, balance)
3. *Bibliotherapy book collection* and wellbeing spaces in the two university libraries

Echoing arguments about the vital interconnection between student and staff wellbeing (Brewster et al., 2022), our workshops are offered and open to both staff and students.

Reading for wellbeing

At the heart of the project is a range of books relating to mental health and wellbeing, and which are available in our Bibliotherapy spaces within the university libraries. As mentioned above, the positive effects of literature for healing and self-understanding are well documented, with books being referred to as 'silent therapists (du Plock, 2005). The right book at the right time can bring feelings of normalisation, identification as well as self-compassion and hope. Being at University where students are encouraged to read for a degree, books can often be associated with study, assignments, and deadlines. Yet, what we wanted to show is that books can be a fantastic way to manage emotional wellbeing and that books can be just as important to the student experience, as traditional subject texts.

As a university student counsellor, I (Debbie) noticed that students would often talk about books within their counselling session. I found that students benefited from using literature to describe how they are feeling or sharing a personal insight from something they have read. For that moment

both client and counsellor have a shared understanding and a way of mutually unpicking further thoughts and feelings of the client. Often, I would suggest books for students to read and I created a list of my favourite titles.

Over time the book list was further developed by staff within both the counselling and mental health teams as well as colleagues from the wider University. The list is mainly made up of traditional self-help books but also contains a variety of fiction books. We wanted to include books based on the common student issues that are seen in the counselling room. We also wanted to include a wide range of issues such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and from a variety of approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy to mindfulness. We wanted to include something for everyone. We also wanted to include books that we hoped students can identify with. For example, books relating to the pressures of academic life and the student experience. The list is available to staff and students and is located online on the counselling pages of our university's website.[*] The list is useful for students themselves but also for staff within the university. For example, personal tutors can use this not only as a personal resource but as a place to direct students to.

The reading for wellbeing groups are hosted by staff members from across counselling, mental health and wellbeing teams and each group focuses on a particular book or subject area. Some groups are attended by the authors themselves and/or local organisations. Although each group differs in terms of the way it is presented, they all offer a way of encouraging students to talk about difficult subjects. Most groups also promote organisations external to the university as well as advocate services within the university. An example of this is a recent group held at the university is on gambling. This group was facilitated by a member of the money advice team and a mental health advisor. The group was also attended by a representative from a local gambling charity. Students who attended were provided with a safe space to discuss gambling as well as learn about the support available in terms of the local organisation and within the university. Students were also given information on the relevant bibliotherapy books relating to this topic. Another example of a recent group was a talk by the author Hope Virgo who presented her book *Stand Tall Little Girl: Facing up to Anorexia* (2018).

Bibliotherapy book collection and wellbeing spaces

The books are housed across our university libraries and located in their own area. This section also contains a selection of leisure reading books and is known as the Wellbeing Area. Books can be read in comfortable chairs which are surrounded by furnishings that aim to promote relaxation and wellbeing. At the same time books can be loaned in the same way as traditional subject books. We hope that the central location of the bibliotherapy books will help to reduce any stigma surrounding mental health and wellbeing.

We have found the books and groups to be a helpful addition to the student advice and wellbeing services that are already available. On our Bibliotherapy website space we have also included an opportunity for staff and students to review the bibliotherapy books. Our libraries also advertise our reading and writing groups within their wellbeing areas. We also have posters to promote books that may be relevant depending on the time of year. For example, books on exam stress are always popular during assessment times.

[****]https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/discover/student-support/health-and-wellbeing/counselling-and-mental-health-service/bibliotherapy

Writing for wellbeing

Monthly 'Writing for Wellbeing' workshops were added to the university's Bibliotherapy initiative in 2021. These workshops use the interactive model of biblio/poetry therapy as advocated for example by Hynes & Hynes-Berry (2012), based around the tripartite interaction between participant-stimuli-facilitator. Sessions may be themed, e.g. 'resilience', 'balance' with materials chosen to enable personal creative explorations of ideas and emotional responses to images, poems, or prose. For more insight and detail about the writing workshops see Smith et al. (2024).

Workshops are open for students and staff; attendees have been a mix of undergraduate, postgraduate students, academic and professional services staff (e.g. counselling team, student international office).

Informally, during sharing of reflections at the workshops, participants have noted that their writing has been *liberating, surprising, and cathartic*. Some participants attend as people who are already regular journal writers, or writers of poetry; for others this is a completely new experience, and clearly very different to the usual output driven writing that university demands (of both staff and students).

Writing the self in the university context: challenges and opportunities

Moving forward we are always looking at ways to continue to develop and improve the project. One challenge has been attendance at the reading and writing wellbeing groups. We question to what extent students are aware of the benefits of non-curriculum activities alongside meeting their assessment deadlines. How do we encourage students to find space for them? At present both staff and students are able to attend the groups and we wonder if that may hinder a student's intention to take part. We are a large city centre campus, and it can be difficult to highlight activities amongst all of the other information students are expected to retain.

Over the past three years of the project, we have noted usually low attendance. As we prepare to embark on a formal evaluation of the workshops, we question whether 'writing the self' may be regarded by some as an indulgence, and not as important as the kind of writing that gets a grade or a star rating. For example, academic staff may likely prioritise writing for recognised output and publication, rather than writing just to focus on the self. If mental health is to be considered a strategic priority for universities (Hughes & Spanner, 2024), we believe there must be a focus on informal spaces and a recognition of their value. As evidenced in previous work (Smith et al., 2024), finding safe and non-judgmental spaces where students can focus on the self, develop greater self-awareness, and attend to their personal wellbeing, is valued by students who often feel the pressure of assessment and grade achievement. "It was a different space to my other 'student' spaces – there were no right or wrong answers, no pressure to say something; just a kind of 'if it's there and you want to share, go ahead' mindset." (Smith, Padt & Jones, 2024, 6)

Alongside the monthly workshops, Anne-Marie also offers *Writing for Wellbeing* workshops for postgraduate courses internally and externally (e.g. Social Work, Counselling). Interestingly, amongst these students for whom reflexivity and reflection are central to their studies, there is often trepidation and even suspicion when invited to "write the self". Informal feedback includes comments such as "this is uncomfortable. I don't really do this kind of stuff," reflecting an absence of self within traditional university writing. In this sense, some participants imply that this focus on the self through writing is somehow superfluous or "extra" to university learning processes. This

makes a focus on 'process' difficult to transmit in the way that our writing workshops endeavour to achieve. Students also of course have assignment deadlines, many are also working alongside their studies, so the idea of spending an hour on wellbeing activities can sometimes seem like an added commitment that they don't have time for.

Conclusion

Within the context of day-to-day university life, we wonder if the expectations of academic achievement results in students metaphorically 'leaving themselves at the door' when entering the learning space.

Our "reading and writing for wellbeing" initiative is part of the wider wellbeing support mechanism in place for students at our university; as facilitators, we both also strongly believe in the importance of creating "non-graded" spaces to counter the pressures experienced (by students and staff) of output expectations. By inviting participants to "unload on the page", without pressure of grade or output, can bring catharsis and "meaning making" (Chavis, 2011). Interestingly, over the past year of the Writing for Wellbeing workshops, I (Anne-Marie) have been struck by the fact that more staff than students have attended; a frequent reflection after the workshops has been about the recognition that they (staff) do not give themselves enough time and space to just attend to the self.

Looking ahead, the project has secured funding to work with three student interns (Jan-June 2025) as participant-researchers to develop creative ways of gathering feedback and insights from workshop participants, tutors and librarians. It is our hope that this collaboration with students, based on their own experiences of being at university, will enhance the project and lead to greater engagement and awareness of the value of the process of reading and writing for wellbeing.

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How to heal a wounded story
A bibliotherapy model for working with painful narratives

Efrat Havusha-Feldman

Ha-Mila – The Israeli Bibliotherapy Center, Israel
Efrat@ha-mila.org
ORCID ID: 0009-0005-6935-758X

Abstract

This article presents a bibliotherapeutic model for working with wounded stories through writing, utilizing the framework of the picture book *How to Heal a Broken Wing* by Bob Graham (2008) to guide the healing process through writing. The model emphasizes the importance of narrative construction in promoting emotional well-being and consists of seven stages: 1) Noticing the wounded story, 2) Creating a safe space, 3) Acknowledgment and validation, 4) Compassion and empathy, 5) Expanding and reframing, 6) Fostering hope, and 7) Letting go. These stages, including guided writing techniques and sharing, encourage participants to reflect on and transform painful experiences, gradually shifting from a place of suffering to one of healing, growth, and renewal. The therapeutic benefits of bibliotherapy, such as emotional catharsis, meaning-making, and narrative coherence, are highlighted, illustrating how bibliotherapy can support individuals in reclaiming agency and resilience. This model not only offers a structured approach to healing but also fosters a deeper connection with the self and others, enhancing therapeutic outcomes in individual and group settings.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; expressive writing; meaning-making; narrative reframing; group therapy

Introduction

From a very early age, human beings are occupied with making sense of and finding meaning in their life occurrences. What Antonovsky (1993) termed *Sense of Coherence* (SOC) represents the universal human need to find order, predictability, and meaning in life, inherently driving people to make sense of their experiences. This drive is fundamental for navigating life's challenges and maintaining resilience in the face of stress.

"Self-making is a narrative art," states Bruner (2002, 65), emphasizing that narratives are the structures through which order, predictability, and meaning are shaped, ultimately constructing one's sense of self. As White and Epston (1990, 10) explain:

> In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. Specific experiences of events of the past and present, and those that are predicted to occur in the future, must be connected in a lineal sequence to develop this account. This account can be referred to as a story or self-narrative.

However, constructing a narrative involves activating filtering and selection mechanisms, guiding individuals to omit aspects of meaning that conflict with the dominant stories they or their environment uphold. Over time, certain experiences and perspectives remain un-storied— amorphous, lacking organization, meaning, and form (White & Epston, 1990).

The narratives people live by shape their interactions, perspectives, actions, and behaviours. Therefore, while the process of creating meaningful narratives is essential and natural, it does not always promote well-being. It is a multi-layered process, influenced by the environment, relationships, and the other stories people hold about themselves and others. In some cases, individuals actively participate in creating and maintaining stories that are unhelpful, unsatisfying, or dead-ended.

These stories, referred to here as *wounded stories*, carry negative emotions such as guilt, anger, shame, or remorse. They are painful narratives that individuals revisit repeatedly in an attempt to make sense of and validate them. Wounded stories compromise well-being and self-concept, negatively affecting the quality of relationships. They limit the ability to trust, dare, let go, and embrace authenticity.

Research in narrative psychology suggests that reconstructing life narratives can positively influence self-concept and well-being. For example, Adler et al. (2015) found that individuals with more coherent, meaningful life stories tend to experience better mental health trajectories. These individuals often exhibit greater resilience and adaptability to life stressors. The study highlights the importance of redemptive themes, where adversity is framed as leading to personal growth, and suggests that altering one's life narrative can promote emotional well-being over time. As Bruner (1993, 93) explains, "Through narrative we construct, re-construct, in some ways re-invent yesterday and tomorrow. Memory and imagination fuse in the process".

Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic approach that uses literature and storytelling to support emotional, psychological, and personal growth. It involves the guided reading or discussion of texts—such as books, poetry, or short stories—to help individuals explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a safe and reflective way. Bibliotherapy also incorporates writing as a dynamic process, encouraging active participation and personal interpretation. This empowers individuals to become co-creators of their healing journey, utilizing metaphorical space and literary elements such as shifting tenses, plotlines, and points of view. These techniques expand individuals' contact with their inner world, reaching hidden or unconscious aspects of the mind. Bibliotherapeutic writing also facilitates meaning-making, enhances insight, and promotes emotional catharsis.

This article presents a bibliotherapeutic model for working with wounded stories, enabling clients to reveal, explore, validate, and reconstruct painful narratives. The goal is to foster a sense of relief, facilitated through processes of acknowledgment, acceptance, and the discovery of new meaning.

Method

This model for working with painful stories draws inspiration from the picture book *How to Heal a Broken Wing* by Bob Graham (2008). The book's portrayal of the healing process serves as a framework for the writing prompts and techniques used in this model. Participants are guided

through various writing exercises designed to help them engage with and transform their wounded stories. They are invited to notice, care for, validate and re-frame their stories in a way that provides the strength and expanded freedom of movement, much like the character in the book who nurtures a wounded bird back to health. The following section provides a detailed description of the bibliotherapy model for working with wounded stories. Stages 1–4 of the healing process focus on constructing, observing, and validating the wounded story, while stages 5–7 focus on expanding, reframing, and reconstructing it. This model is well-suited for use with therapy groups and can also be effectively applied to individual clients in a therapeutic setting.

Healing the wounded story – A bibliotherapeutic model

In the picture book "how to heal a broken wing" (Graham, 2008) we follow Will, a young boy who discovers an injured bird in the bustling city. He is the only one noticing the bird and the only one to take it home to recover. The story describes the various actions Will, with the help of his parents, takes in order to help the injured bird recover:

1. He *notices* the bird - "No one looked down… except Will" (p. 6).
2. He takes it to a *safe place* - "And he took it home" (p. 10).
3. He *acknowledges* what can't be changed and what can be done – "A loose feather can't be put back… But a broken wing can sometimes heal" (pp. 11–12).
4. He nurtures and takes care of its basic needs – with *compassion, patience and empathy*, as he puts it in a padded box and feeds it gently.
5. He encourages it to *expand* its motion to get stronger.
6. He holds on to *hope* – as he lets the bird watch the open sky out the window.
7. He accepts *setting the bird free* and allows it to spread its wings and fly away.

The symbolic space of children's books serves as fertile ground for exploring social, mental, and emotional situations, often embodied in metaphors. Imaginary stories incorporate images, objects, and symbols that connect us to the universal structure and archetypes of the human mind (Campbell, 2008). In this context, the story of Will and the broken-winged bird reflects a healing process that encapsulates basic human needs for recovery and renewal.

Considering the need to create meaning through narrative construction—and the possibility that these narratives may become "wounded," serving as sources of pain that hinder growth and well-being—we might explore how they can be noticed, cared for and transformed using bibliotherapeutic writing techniques.

Selecting the wounded story

We all carry wounded stories within us—those events, memories, or life experiences where things went wrong. We were hurt, we hurt someone else, or something broke, leaving cracks that still ache. These are the stories that call for care and attention.

Selecting a wounded story to work with requires thoughtful consideration of several key factors, such as:

1. The setting: Where is this intervention taking place? Is it in private therapy or a group therapy setting? Is there enough time to work with the story in a gradual, attentive way?

2. The relationships involved: How well do the individuals know one another? Do they feel safe and comfortable sharing sensitive material?

3. The participant's readiness: What is the overall state of the participants? Do they have the mental, emotional, and social resources to face painful memories and engage in the process of constructing and reconstructing them?

4. Timing and perspective: Has enough time passed since the occurrence to provide a reasonable distance and perspective? It is important to ensure that the individual is not in the acute phase of a difficult situation and that there is sufficient grounding before revisiting a wounded story.

Getting started

Participants are invited to reflect on an occurrence from their lives that they consider a 'wounded story,' as described above. They are encouraged to write it down as they remember it, without overthinking or planning—simply as they would naturally tell it to themselves or others.

Healing Step No. 1 – Noticing

Noticing is a foundational and crucial step in the healing process, as it invites participants to focus their attention on a specific life event, the way it is formed in their mind as a narrative and the effect it has on their well-being. The initial written story serves as both the starting point and a space for observation and discovery. The noticing stage consists of two parts:

a. Participants are invited to read their story to themselves and reflect on the following questions:

- What do you notice?

- Is there anything that stands out—a new detail, a word, an emotion, or a mental state?

- Are there any gaps—between timelines or points of view?

- Is there anything missing?

Participants can jot down their observations in a separate note, while keeping the original story intact.

b. Participants are then invited to give their story a title. Afterward, they are encouraged to come up with another title, and then another.
Choosing a title requires participants to reflect on the core of their story: What is it truly about? The

invitation to explore additional titles encourages a deeper, reflective process that moves beyond the obvious, helping them uncover the fundamental, subjective meaning of their story.

Healing step no. 2 – Safe place

In order to care for the bird, Will needed to take it to a safe place first. Safety is a fundamental condition for recovery and growth. Psychological safety refers to the extent to which individuals feel comfortable taking positive interpersonal risks, such as trying something new, without fear of being blamed, shamed, or ignored. When individuals experience psychological safety, they are empowered to exercise their agency and engage fully in various experiences and interactions in life (McClintock & Fainstad, 2022).

Writing provides a safe space for participants, as it allows them to express their feelings, thoughts, and ideas on paper, giving them the time and space to process, articulate, and refine before sharing with another person.

Therapists and group facilitators play a key role in creating and maintaining this safe space for participants, fostering openness, acceptance, and tolerance for the diverse voices shared. However, facilitators can encourage participants to take on a more active part for ensuring their own psychological safety by inviting them to reflect on and write down what constitutes their subjective safe place.

Participants are thus invited to write down a detailed request for their listener, focusing on what they need in order to feel safe sharing their wounded story. This request can be shared within the group to establish a common understanding, and help identify potential witnesses to their story from their own environment.

Healing step no. 3 – Acknowledgment and validation

The act of testifying has been shown to be a vital part of healing (Felman & Laub, 2008; Greenspan et al., 2014). Behind the need to testify lies the desire for recognition and acknowledgment from another individual. Herman (1992) emphasizes that creating a self-narrative of a traumatic event requires it to be heard, accepted, and acknowledged by a trusted individual, and by society, for healing to occur. This process helps individuals reclaim agency over their story and integrate fragmented memories into a coherent narrative. Being heard and validated affirms the individual's reality and counters the isolation and disbelief often surrounding painful stories.

Writing can be the first step in testifying to a wounded story: when words are written, they are validated and perpetuated, becoming an existing entity. Writing allows the story to be revisited, edited, and refined to ensure the subjective experience is described as fully and accurately as possible before sharing it with others. Revisiting the story to enhance its accuracy is a way of reclaiming control over the narrative.

The next step in validating the story is sharing it with a trusted witness or group. Once a safe space has been created and the story is ready to be shared, the act of testimony can occur. The listener

plays a crucial role: they must bear witness, accept, validate, and acknowledge the story. It's important to note that what the witness validates is not the objective truth or the facts, but the narrator's subjective experience.

Story Validation Steps – the role of the witness:

1. The listener is open and attentive, ensuring everything is fully understood by asking the narrator to repeat when necessary.

2. The listener reflects the narrator's personal experience by connecting to its core emotions while avoiding adding content or interpretations.

3. The listener responds with acknowledging statements, such as:

    -   "Thank you for sharing this story with me."

    -   "Your experience is important."

    -   "I can sense how profoundly this event has affected you."

    -   "You are brave for sharing this story."

Healing step no. 4 – Compassion, patience and empathy

Bion (1962) proposed that human experience involves processing overwhelming emotions, often symbolized as the "contained" (emotions, thoughts, anxieties). These need a "container"—a space or relationship to hold and process them without becoming overwhelmed. The therapist helps transform these emotions into manageable, symbolic forms, allowing integration and understanding.

The page where a wounded story is written can serve as such a container, enabling individuals to pour their subjective experiences and emotions. Selecting words, phrases, and perspective in the writing process becomes a meaning-making act, where subjective experience is contained and being processed within the realm of language and symbolism.

Literature and poetry can also offer a creative and delicate space for offering empathy to a wounded story.

Once the story is written and acknowledged, the facilitator or therapist can offer an empathetic echo through a literary or poetic text that mirrors the theme or emotion, what Sherman (2013) described as "The textual container." A poetic or literary text presented to a participant in response to their wounded story serves not only as an echo and validation of their subjective experience but also as a means to deepen their engagement with it. The vast and indeterminate nature of the literary and poetic space allows for exploration and expansion. Consequently, such responses offer participants a profound sense of being held, seen, and accepted.

An additional empathetic response can come from asking witnesses to think of a metaphorical gift they would offer to the storyteller: a symbol, line from a poem, or song. Using poetic resonance creates a more flexible, intuitive dialogue that enhances compassion and empathy, freeing participants from the pressure of direct discourse when dealing with wounded stories.

Healing step no. 5 – Expanding, broadening & getting stronger

Once the wounded story is written, shared in a safe space, and acknowledged with empathy, the next step involves exploring whether the narrative can be made more flexible, expanded, or transformed. Rottenberg-Rosler, Schonmann, and Berman (2009) analysed adolescents' diaries to identify components that make journaling therapeutic—facilitating transformation and catharsis. Their findings suggest that self-narratives should incorporate three distinct types of writing to foster transformation:

1. *Descriptive*: Providing an external description of events and outlining the chain of occurrences.

2. *Expressive*: Engaging in intense emotional and cognitive release, including expressions of mentalization and insights into the inner world.

3. *Reflective*: Incorporating meta-cognitive contemplation, expanding perspectives, and finding relief. This type of writing often requires aesthetic distance from the experience.

Facilitators can guide participants in reviewing their wounded stories to assess the extent to which these three types of writing are present. Participants are then encouraged to expand on any missing or underrepresented type to ensure all three are integrated into their narratives.

Once this expanded writing is complete, participants are invited to reflect on their stories by exploring questions such as:

- How did this form of writing make you feel?

- What new insights or observations do you notice about your story?

- Was there new information added that may have been left out initially?

- Did new emotions or perspectives arise during the process?

- Has a new meaning emerged?

Finally, participants can revisit the titles they initially assigned to their stories and consider whether they would like to modify or add to these titles, reflecting the evolved narrative.

Healing step no. 6 – Hope

Hope can be understood as the capacity to envision a better future and the agency to strive for it. In *How to Heal a Broken Wing* by Bob Graham (2008), Will lets the wounded bird look out at the open sky through the window, symbolically offering it a vision of a horizon where it might once again spread its wings and fly. This act reflects the power of hope, imagination, and symbolization as tools for fostering healing. By shifting the focus from present pain to a vision of freedom and strength, these elements transform the experience of adversity into a potential catalyst for growth and resilience.

After delving into their wounded stories, participants can be invited to use writing to create a textual picture of this hopeful horizon. The writing prompt at this stage could be framed as follows:

- Imagine your story as a seed. It will grow, expand, and branch into various paths in the future. Where will it lead? What will it become?

- As you write, use the present tense, as if this imagined reality is already unfolding.

This exercise enables participants to engage with their capacity for hope, connecting their narratives to a future shaped by possibility and renewal.

Healing step no. 7 – Setting free

Working with wounded stories through writing creates a space for exploration, reflection, and discovery. The act of writing empowers narrators to reclaim agency over their stories, enabling them to shape and articulate their experiences in a meaningful way. When witnesses acknowledge these narratives with empathy and offer poetic resonance, a new perspective may emerge.

As this new meaning emerges, some old perspectives may shift and sometimes even feel outdated. At this stage in the process, participants are encouraged to revisit their original wounded stories, written at the outset and to reflect on whether aspects of these stories are ready to be transformed or set free, creating space for new meanings and insights to surface.

Setting free does not mean forgetting the experience itself; on the contrary, just as Will accepted not being able to put back the loose feather, we encourage participants to accept and perhaps even make peace with what cannot be changed. In fact, this acceptance is what helps set some aspects of the story free—those aspects that are limiting or holding us back. But in any case, rather than being an external expectation, setting free should be a personal, subjective, and organic outcome of the inner work done with the wounded story.

Conclusions

Wounded stories which people carry hold painful emotions. As a wounded wing of a bird, these stories need care and attention to heal. This bibliotherapeutic model demonstrates how working with wounded stories through guided writing in gradual and attentive steps can facilitate meaningful transformation. By creating a structured yet creative space, participants can observe, validate, mold and reframe their narratives. This process of noticing, acknowledging, and ultimately expanding one's story opens pathways to deeper self-understanding and healing.

The structured stages of the model —from fostering safety and validation to nurturing hope and release—emphasize the profound impact of writing as a therapeutic tool. Participants are not only empowered to claim agency over their narratives but also encouraged to envision new horizons of growth and resilience enabled by the creative space of poetry, symbolism and narration. These evolving narratives, imbued with compassion and hope, reflect the enduring human capacity to transform pain into meaning.

The model invites further exploration into how bibliotherapy can enhance emotional well-being, encourage reflective practices, and foster a sense of coherence. In this poetic and symbolic space,

writing becomes an act of liberation—a way to let the wounded bird soar again, carrying the lessons of its journey into the future.

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Creative Literary Bibliotherapy – Examples of Good Practice

Maja Cvjetković

Civil Engineering High School Rijeka, Croatia
majacvjetkovic22@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper focuses on the field of creative literary bibliotherapy with special emphasis on the implementation of bibliotherapy methods in the school library.

The goal is to show the theoretical basis, application of bibliotherapy and its positive impact on the selected population. The paper aims to apply bibliotherapy tools, provided by targeted literary works, in the experiential-cognitive process. The selected literary works include contemporary short stories and a problem picture book, suitable for the application of the MED cycle method.

The progress of bibliotherapy workshops, examples of good practice, intended for high school, elementary school and preschool children are presented. The works were selected taking into account the criteria of the participants' age, potential interest in the topic, the expected development of the discussion, with the aim of potential implementation of the offered solutions to their own life situations.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; creative literary bibliotherapy; theoretical overview; MED cycle; library; workshop; examples of good practice

Introduction

Reading is a complex process that we learn gradually, through acquired strategies. It is a fundamental life competence that is crucial both for a child's success in school and for effective management of life situations. Reading comprehension enables the establishment of communication processes between the author's intention/realized text/competencies and the reader's experience.

In addition to being essential and useful for functioning, reading can also be healing. It is precisely this therapeutic, bibliotherapy aspect that will be presented in the work through selected basic and additional literature.

Bibliotherapy is a process of guided reading, a dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. The roots of bibliotherapy can be found in ancient Greece, but its definition and delineation of the scientific field began in the 19th century. The analysis of the theoretical basis of bibliotherapy will demonstrate its foundation in the scientific fields of literary theory and cognitive psychology. The paper will describe the tools used in the analysis of literary works, encouraging the development of empathy towards a literary character as well as insight into their psychological motivation, with the aim of gradually bringing about a change in the client's thoughts and actions and improving the quality of life.

As a professional school librarian, the author strives to find a way to implement bibliotherapy within the school library. The literature indicates that librarians generally accepted bibliotherapy and recognized their role in its implementation.

While public libraries sporadically implement bibliotherapy programs, as evidenced by the available literature, this is an attempt to include school libraries in such activities.

Defining the scientific area of bibliotherapy through a historical overview

Papers dealing with bibliotherapy in Croatia and in the world in the field of literature, psychology and pedagogy, mostly concern clinical or developmental bibliotherapy. This paper, as well as the selected literature, focuses on creative literary bibliotherapy, so this area of interest will first be defined.

Indications of bibliotherapy can be reconstructed and explored in the theoretical works of ancient authors. The task before contemporary theoreticians was to define the terminology and methodology of the scientific field.

The first definitions of bibliotherapy, the use of literary texts for the purpose of psychological help, can be found in the 19th century in the USA. Samuel McChord Crothers read parts of the Bible to the terminally ill, thus initiating the practice of applying literary texts to provide relief, comfort and help (Bušljeta & Piskač, 2018).

Libraries and librarians recognized and embraced bibliotherapy very early on, noticing the importance of choosing a good literary model, and bibliotherapy was officially confirmed by the establishment of the first expert committee, as part of the American Library Association, in 1939 (Sabljak, 2022, 78).

Bibliotherapy is defined as a process, an interaction between the reader and the text that has its own dynamics and is organized under the guidance of an educated guide. There are two different methods of applying bibliotherapy – clinical and developmental bibliotherapy, and in addition to the mentioned methods, Ivana Bašić mentions the method of creative writing (Bašić, 2021, 15).

This overview focuses on authors who make a distinction between developmental and creative literary bibliotherapy, so we can state that the scientific field is expanding with new schools and visions of development. Davor Piskač states that as opposed to the traditionally understood bibliotherapy, which uses any text, the creative literary bibliotherapy emphasizes exclusively the use of literary – artistic texts (Bušljeta & Piskač, 2018).

Literary bibliotherapy is carried out by teachers, librarians trained in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts, and on the basis of interpretation, they help readers to gain insight through identification and catharsis with a tool called the MED cycle. The MED cycle represents a synergy of the motivation of thoughts, emotions and events of literary characters. Such an approach to bibliotherapy ventures interdisciplinarily into the field of psychology. The task that the bibliotherapist sets before their group is to observe cognitive, affective and psychological processes and connect them with aesthetic functions.

Theoretical basis of creative literary bibliotherapy

Cognitive therapy is considered the theoretical backbone of creative literary bibliotherapy, emphasizing that thoughts, emotions and behavior are interconnected. It suggests that every reaction is mediated by a personal mental outlook that builds an emotional attitude, given the life situation. Information processing becomes distorted when we relive an unpleasant situation. In order to achieve a better or more satisfactory emotional situation, it is necessary to reconstruct one's own thoughts. The event that happened is preset and we cannot change it, but we can change our thoughts related to that event (Piskač, 2018, 38).

We distinguish an event in reality (the factual one) from an event described in a literary work which, although it is fiction, can be experienced as real. That is why we are talking about a *communication event* that is created in the communication between the reader and the literary work. Such communication integrates language, thought and emotion, or as the author states, it is a "confluence of thought, emotion and language". The MED cycle is launched, combining language, thought and emotion and interpreting them (Bušljeta & Piskač, 2018, 39).

Emotions play a big role in the communication event. Every society or culture treats emotions differently (Piskač, 2018). Today, we live in a culture of entertainment placing emphasis on positive emotions that are fueled by the ubiquity of technology and social networks, the publication of the imitation of life. True emotion is suppressed, while emotions on the "negative" spectrum are not acceptable in our culture. Emotions are learned, first intuitively, and later independently, adopting the language of the culture to which we belong. They are triggered by an event or stimulus responsible for their manifestation, external or internal. External manifestations are evident and easy to read. Internal ones are much more difficult to detect because they are fueled by thoughts and stimulate internal events. By imagining a situation, we enable our thoughts to experience it as real. However, without language it is impossible to gain the emotional experience. The development of language and communication sheds light on the thought and encourages the emergence of emotion.

Literary texts precisely use imagination to realize the process of reviving emotions. One of the fundamental theses of bibliotherapy based on this is that every appearance of emotion in a literary work is preceded by a thought (Piskač, 2018).

In literature, we only have an imagined event that stimulates the development of certain emotions. The different strength of these emotions will resonate differently in the psyche of the reader. Once an emotion arises, we cannot eliminate it, but it can be replaced by another emotion. It is precisely here that the MED cycle tool can be utilized to allow readers to learn to think differently and manifest different emotions that will help them to either accept or change the situation.

It is a cyclical process within which we distinguish the phases of thought, emotion and event, and it is a process that will not automatically bring results (Piskač, 2018). However, it should be kept in mind that the MED cycle method is primarily intended for the analysis of literature, texts that should have high aesthetic functions, and as such is not used for client work, but speaks exclusively about a literary character and a literary work. The task of the bibliotherapist is to guide the group in the analysis of the text, and if the text is analyzed gradually, to stimulate emotions, while the experience of catharsis is possible, but rare.

The MED cycle allows the character's experience to be incorporated into the reader's life experience. The reader gains an insight into the way in which a literary character satisfied his needs and what he thought, felt and did in the literary text (Piskač, 2018).

Literary bibliotherapy encourages the development of empathy, in the sense of understanding emotions and situations, and prefers it over identification with a character. Empathy helps to understand the MED cycle because if the reader is encouraged to be tolerant of the imperfections of others, but also of their own imperfections, it encourages understanding of characters, their emotions, creates an atmosphere of safety and trust so that criticism or anger towards some of the characters' actions can be expressed, all with the aim of encouraging communication.

In this paper, we will present the realized workshops through selected literary examples using the MED cycle process as a specificity of literary bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy in the school library

Libraries, as the core of the community, are a safe and pleasant place that favors the development of bibliotherapy programs. According to the rules of the profession, the school library should be an information center, a place that encourages reading and learning in every school. At the same time, it is a place where users meet and exchange books and ideas, so as such it is suitable for connecting, responding to their need to talk about what they have read.

A professional associate librarian is a person who, depending on the interest and the age of the user, recommends literature, encourages reading and a positive attitude towards learning, using and searching for information. It is therefore not surprising that, after psychologists, it was librarians who practiced bibliotherapy to the greatest extent (Antulov, 2019).

Although it was once questioned whether a librarian can or should implement bibliotherapy programs, especially due to the specificity of the term itself, which implies therapy or treatment. Nowadays the opinion that the librarian's role is to create a self-help collection and to classify and catalog literature that will be displayed in a visible place for users is vanishing (Odiri, 2023).

It is important to highlight and perhaps encourage librarians to actively assume a role in designing workshops, selecting adequate texts with the aim of achieving benefits for their users.

A literary text used in bibliotherapy should be universal so that clients can relate and possibly identify. It is recommended to avoid materials that are disheartening and feed confusing negative emotions. Text metaphors should be built consistently and coherently (Bašić, 2021).

Literary works provide us with an insight into characters, their lives and actions as sometimes completely different from our own, but by reading, we try to identify with them. It might be better to develop empathy instead of identification, because complete identification makes it impossible to objectively distance oneself from the literary character, and thus we are not able to offer new solutions that could lead to a more successful realization of the selected problem.

Literary theorists disagree on whether or not literature increases empathy. Some are of the opinion that literature is indeed written about us, but that we do not live long enough to experience all these

different lives. Others are of the opinion that human nature is selfish, and that reading turns us away from empathy, detaches us from the world (Bukvić Pažin & Ott Franolić, 2023).

Regardless of which point of view you take, the fact is that reading good books makes us more aware of the world around us, other personalities and perspectives, making us more prepared for the relationships we build in real, non-literary life.

Examples of good practice

Taking into account the stated theoretical assumptions, we tried to implement bibliotherapy workshops for high school students, primary school students that are clients of the UZOR Association, and preschool age attendants of educational rehabilitation at the LogoSens centre.

There are several key steps in the preparation of workshops. It is necessary to define the time and place of the workshop.

The selection of a literary text is a fundamental prerequisite for a successful bibliotherapy workshop. It is necessary to choose a literary text that is both complex and contains a problem that can be discussed and new solutions proposed. Selected literary texts are read in depth. Deep reading is a slow and complex process that changes the nature of our thoughts, teaches us patience in discipline, offers us aesthetic and ethical experiences.

The selected texts are in the form of short stories. This form is believed to be suitable for workshops that do not have continuity of meetings because they are short and complete enough. Also MED cycle can be applied and an alternative solution offered, which represents the therapeutic segment of the workshop.

Ivana Bodrožić, Fikcija (*Fiction*) (Bodrožić, 2024)

The story was selected because it was written by an established author and because of its current topic that could be stimulating for discussion among fourth-grade students. We read the text in the workshop because students usually do not read the given text. The first layer of reading is literally the detection of a communication event without involving the interpretative level. It was observed that the narrator is the protagonist of the story who will be in the focus – a writer who narrates a factual story in a fictitious environment. The central thesis of the short story was detected, which the students interpreted as a woman's fear and discomfort in the world of men. By the end of the story, through each fragment, the narrator chooses one communication event in which she places herself or her daughter in the center of a situation that will cause a feeling of discomfort, fear and caution when a man is involved in the interaction. The author chooses a policeman who stops her in the evening, a gynecologist who addresses her inappropriately during a pregnancy check-up, or a random passer-by during exercise. The students were asked to express what the mentioned professions mean to them, when we turn to the police or the doctor. The goal was for them to notice that the narrator felt threatened by those we turn to in moments of vulnerability and fear for our own

lives, and that they failed her expectations. Then the focus was on the dominant metaphors and answering questions about their function in the body of the text.

The students were encouraged to verbalize the emotions revealed by the narrator and which confirm the initial thesis about a woman's insecurity in a man's world and about unauthorized entry into her private space. The therapeutic moment of the meeting comes with the attempt to offer alternative solutions and reach a common conclusion that greater involvement of all members of society, especially the silent majority, is needed in order to reduce violence and the consequences of violence to a minimum, and to make the world safer for women and their daughters.

Olja Savičević Ivančević, Lijepa glad (Savičević, 2020)

Before reading the short story, the workshop began with a sequence of associations related to the meaning of the title. The students tried to write possible meanings of the oxymoron in the title by considering in what context hunger can be beautiful. The unexpected meaning revealed after reading the short story. We defined the key communication event of the main character – the struggle with anorexia. Furthermore, through guided reading, the students noticed a number of underlying issues that were verbalized because they were important in understanding the context in which the main character was found: the death of her mother who held the family together, the non-existent relationship with the father, father's dysfunction and lack of communication.

The students concluded that the father's marginal appearance in the text is a counterpart to his role in his daughter's life. This raised the problem of lack of communication in the family. The idea of involving all family members in decision-making, as opposed to making one-sided decisions, was encouraged.

In addition to family issues, the selected literary text was suitable for questioning the relationship with oneself and the perception of one's own body. The students listed the descriptions that the main character used to describe food, thus showing her distorted perception (disgust, contempt, hoarding food as an example of emotional hunger or refraining from any morsel).

The therapeutic moment of the session emerged from a conversation about ways to improve relationships, the mistakes that could have been avoided, but as a key conclusion, it was emphasized that in the case of serious mental or physical illnesses, we cannot make decisions on our own, but must accept the help of experts.

Raymond Carver, O čemu govorimo kad govorimo o ljubavi (Carver, 2003)

Since the workshop was limited in time, only the first part of Carver's short story was selected. The group session began with a series of associations. The students were given a worksheet on which they had to answer the question "What I talk about when I talk about love?".

After a short discussion about what love means to them and the showing their associations, we read the text that the students encountered for the first time. The group verbalized the theme – two couples, at different ages and in different relationships, trying to define love.

The students were encouraged to find parts of the text that explained different emotions, thoughts and actions that resulted from different attempts to define love, ranging from the scientific one that the main character Mel insisted on, to the romantic love between Nick and Laura.

The known facts about Mel were linked to the way he approaches the debate (cardiologist, divorced and back in a relationship). An interesting fact was pointed out, that he as a cardiologist is a doctor "for the heart" and so probably considered himself relevant in the discussion about the secrets of the heart.

Interacting with other characters, the students noticed emerging topics, such as the difference between marital and romantic love, expectations in a relationship, violence in a relationship.

It was concluded that love contains both rational and emotional elements and cannot be defined unambiguously.

Nika Kovač, Pisma tebi (Kovač, 2023)

The workshop was held at the UZOR Association in Rijeka, organization that carries out activities aimed at helping, supporting and protecting vulnerable groups. The workshop was attended by 7th and 8th grade elementary school students (a group of 10 students) and psychologists who normally work in the association with the participants.

Since the participants of the workshop were students transiting from elementary to high school, which is a dynamic period that brings numerous challenges, we decided on the topic of friendship, more precisely, breaking up friendships, outgrowing relationships. The focus was on the question of how to be a good friend.

After reading the short story/letter, it was found that departures were an integral part of life, so the participants were asked what emotions are associated with departures. Since it was difficult for the participants to verbalize the range of emotions, the emotion of sadness was broken down: at what moment do we feel abandoned, helpless, unfulfilled, lonely. What can be manifestations of sadness? What if we decide to leave – a friend, a relationship?

Different variations of the basic feeling that the students recognize were emphasized, but it was also necessary for them to recognize nuances, both in emotions and in relationships.

Interacting with the text, it was concluded that the main character was changing her attitude towards her friends – from the elementary school period when she had a whole class of friends with whom she lived in the neighborhood, in the community. It was noticed that she clung tightly to her friends and identified with them, with the group. The students were asked if they agreed that friends are like family.

The participants concluded that the author was afraid of losing her class, community, familiar relationships, conversations and topics, with an underlying fear of abandonment and fear of rejection.

In the second part of the text, the author talked about the friendships she made in high school and the changes in relations with old elementary school friends. She made a decision about who she would hang out with.

The moment of making the decision was recognized as a key moment in her growth. It was concluded that the older we get, the better we have to manage our time, and that we face and accept that we do not have space and time for everything, but only for some people.

It was very important that the students realized that the fear of abandonment or the fact that we will be alone at some point should not hinder or influence us to stay in bad relationships. This was considered important for the moment when friendly relationships are replaced by loving ones so that the students realize they sould not remain in relationships which make them dissatisfied.

The participants finished the workshop by writing letters to friends with whom they had some unfinished situations. The idea of such a form of directed writing was that they analyze the letters with a psychologist in case they wanted to discuss relationships that have remained unfinished and created certain emotional problems.

Tamara Vučković, Mirko Bjesomirko (Vučković, 2019)

The workshop was held in the therapy and education centre LogoSens for children with developmental disabilities, which helps them develop attention and concentration, speech and communication, motor skills and sensory integration, learning and memory, and social skills. The participants were beneficiaries of the centre, aged 5 and 6 (five children). Along with the leader of the bibliotherapy workshop, the moderator was an educational rehabilitator.

Since these were children with autism spectrum disorders, it was extremely important that a fellow expert be present during the workshop, but also afterwards for feedback.

In cooperation with the educational rehabilitator, the topic of the workshop was chosen – anger. The workshop leader suggested the problem picture book Mirko Bjesomirko, which is part of a series of picture books about the development of socioemotional competences in children.

This is a story about self-control, the ability to manage thoughts, feelings and behaviors. The goal of the workshop was how to regain control after being in a state of strong emotional excitement.

We started the workshop by giving the participants a drawing of a child that had to be colored and finished. The task was to draw themselves when they are angry. The participants were encouraged to choose a color that would show the feeling of anger, but also to show with a drawing where is anger, as a physical manifestation of the emotion, felt in the body.

The children chose red as the color that best indicates the emotion of anger and rage. They also verbalized that they felt it in their body when they are angry, especially in their cheeks, stomach, arms and legs, as evidenced by their drawings.

After reading the picture book, it was important that the content of the text was comprehensible to everyone, that there were no unclear words or situations. Then we turned to the text itself, singling

out the situations in which the boy from the picture book felt angry. The boy's interaction with other children in the class and with the teacher was emphasized, trying to make them aware of how they felt in moments of emotional outbursts – some children were afraid, girls cried, the teacher was dissatisfied.

The children were invited to offer some solutions so that Mirko can calm down in moments of anger, and the children suggested that he start counting or do something that makes him happy. It was also suggested that deep breathing could calm down the excitement. All the suggestions were tested out with the children at the workshop. This was therapeutic moment of the workshop, because the children were given a tool that they could use when they lose control, in order to calm down and regain focus and attention.

At the end of the workshop, the participants were suggested to draw themselves when they feel happy, but the children refused this activity and wanted to read the story about Mirko again.

The feedback was received from the parents, the rehabilitator and the participants themselves, which positive and encouraging, and new workshops are underway.

Conclusion

Our aim was to consult selected literature that problematizes the field of creative literary bibliotherapy and the possibilities of its implementation in the school library.

At the very beginning of the paper, we emphasized the essential importance of acquiring reading skills, which are a prerequisite for understanding texts. Encouraging reading as well as reading comprehension is today, more than ever, in the center of interest because the approach to books and reading is rapidly changing under the influence of technology and lifestyle. It is interesting that such social circumstances, which have created the problem, also create the need for educational programs that will focus on the reader and the text so that the reader will rediscover the healing power of words.

The central part focused on listing the differences between the fields of clinical and developmental/creative/literary bibliotherapy. It was pointed out that creative literary bibliotherapy introduces only literary texts as a working template, focusing on the literary character. It thus makes literature a safe place through which the client can, if he or she wishes, talk about their own problems.

The workshops were based on the MED cycle, a tool that detects, understands and explains the character's thinking, explains how thoughts lead to emotions, and questions what affects the outcome of the event on examples of selected texts. The workshops conducted showed that the participants accept contemporary texts that are approached in a non-compulsory way, something they are not used to in the school system. The chosen topics were stimulating for the development of the discussion as well as for the therapeutic part in which the participants offered their solutions in order to change the established model of thinking, and consequently of action, and ensure more favorable life outcomes.

Libraries and librarians have recognized the value of bibliotherapy and, especially in public libraries, guided therapeutic reading workshops are conducted. We aim to open space for this kind of work with users in school libraries. For this reason, we found and consulted literature that refers to the role of librarians in conducting workshop activities.

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Bibliotherapy as Part of Therapeutic Education in Slovakia

Kvetoslava Kotrbová

Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia
kotrbova@fedu.uniba.sk
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4098-1822

Abstract

The paper offers a brief overview of the contemporary history and current state of university education in bibliotherapy as part of the undergraduate curriculum in therapeutic pedagogy at the Faculty of Education of the Comenius University in Bratislava. The author addresses also the significant contributions made by individuals who played a pivotal role in shaping and advancing this field of study. The document provides information regarding the present content and structure of the study programme, which is oriented towards therapeutic pedagogical bibliotherapy. The paper also mentions some experts who contributed to the development of bibliotherapy in professional practice in Slovakia. Furthermore, it provides an overview of the possibilities of further education in the framework of approved recommended standard preventive, diagnostic and therapeutic procedures of the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic, international recommendations of the Council of the European Commission on the key competences in lifelong learning and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which affect bibliotherapy practice.

Keywords: therapeutic pedagogy; bibliotherapy; curriculum; guidelines; health

Introduction

In accordance with the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union of 22nd May 2018, the EU published a recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. These include the ability to face feelings of insecurity and stress, the ability to promote one's own physical and emotional well-being, resilience and self-confidence, the ability to make good decisions not only for own´s benefit but for the benefit of the whole too, the ability to respect others and their needs while respecting one's own needs, the ability to show tolerance, to gain trust and to feel empathy. These should be developed at all levels and in all forms of education (EU, 10).

In accordance with the aforementioned recommendation, EU Member States are encouraged to facilitate the implementation of novel and innovative pedagogical approaches within the educational sector. This is with a view to addressing the challenges inherent in competence-oriented training and learning. In addition, the EU Council has identified several practical skills, including problem solving, collaboration, creativity, self-regulation and resilience, as being of particular importance in maintaining health in our rapidly changing society. In this context, it is therefore particularly important to talk about inclusive approaches in education of school-aged children. Vodičková, Mitašíková (2024, 96–97) defined external and internal supporting school factors of

inclusive education, which include social-emotional, academic, environmental and others, whether from the school's internal or external environment.

The aforesaid and the necessity for a university-level therapeutic study programme, which would equip professionals with the requisite skills for therapeutic pedagogical work in practice, as well as scientific research or managerial orientation, was identified by eminent experts in Slovakia as early as the beginning of the 1970s. As a result of the contributions of the individuals referenced in this paper, Slovakia has a history of over 50 years in the field of therapeutic pedagogy, which is comparable to that of other European countries such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Hungary within the Internationale Gesellschaft Heilpädagogischer Berufs (International Federation of Therapeutic Schools and Associations). Additionally, Slovakia has a 30-year history in the field of bibliotherapy, which was incorporated into the curriculum of therapeutic pedagogy in the 1990s.

Failure prevention and resilience-building strategies is a common feature incorporated into the therapeutically focused educational programmes designed and practiced by therapeutic pedagogues. Such programmes include a variety of bibliotherapy interventions that are supportive, stimulating and developmental in nature. The programmes facilitate the development of competencies that enable individuals to live their lives and to solve their problems. They focus on the development of self-awareness and self-knowledge, with the objective of promoting coping strategies. They facilitate the ability to reflect on one's own progress and encourage continuous self-care through creativity. Additionally, they encompass other competencies that naturally fall within the range of metacognitive skill development.

The building and development of such competencies is usually incorporated in therapeutic programmes designed for medically vulnerable or fragile persons in order to promote their mental or physical health and prevent relapse. However, when adapted for the general population, they can also inform the development of preventive health promotion education programmes for all age groups and all forms of education, including adult education. Their essential component is the development of creativity, the expansion of interests and reflective skills and the realisation of an individual's potential through autonomous activity as important competencies for the living a meaningful life.

Historical overview of the development of bibliotherapy teaching in Slovakia

Although bibliotherapy has long been used in medicine and psychology in Slovakia, it only began to be taught as an independent university study subject in the post-revolutionary period of the 1990s, following the so-called Velvet Revolution. In the wave of liberalisation of the whole society, after more than 20 years of socialism, the university master's degree in therapeutic pedagogy was re-established at the Faculty of Pedagogy of Comenius University in Bratislava and the study of bibliotherapy was also started within it.

Exactly in 1993, bibliotherapy was incorporated into the revised Master's degree II programme in the field of therapeutic pedagogy and lectures on bibliotherapy began to be offered alongside core

subject in medicine, psychology, pedagogy, social sciences, philosophy and methodology, as well as extra-curricular subjects such as music therapy, art therapy, psychomotor therapy, play therapy and occupational therapy.

The preparation of the first pedagogical documents, lectures and seminars was started by the special and therapeutic pedagogue Associate Professor PaedDr. Katarína Majzlanová, PhD. who created the first structure and content of the subject of bibliotherapy for this study program. She taught bibliotherapy at the Department of Therapeutic Pedagogy of the Faculty of Education of the Comenius University until 2012. Her publications *Poetry Therapy* (2014) and *Foundations of Bibliotherapy* (2017) she wrote are now used as basic university bibliotherapy textbooks. The structure and content of the course have been developed over a long period of time in search of the best way to implement the therapeutic-pedagogical concept of bibliotherapy.

Therapeutic pedagogy is a distinct pedagogical scientific discipline. It was defined as a science that complements the space between general and special pedagogy and borderline medical, psychological and social sciences (Horňáková, 2007, 20). It also deals with education in difficult circumstances (Horňáková & Janoško, 2017, 65–68). Its content touches on all of the specialised pedagogies, as well as prenatal pedagogy, early childhood pedagogy, primary and pre-primary pedagogy through andragopedagogy and learning and life orientation support for seniors.

The interdisciplinary character of therapeutic pedagogy allows for the integration of bibliotherapy within the therapeutic-pedagogical concept proposed by Majzlanová (2018, 193), defined as "*deliberate, systematic and purposeful therapeutic-educational action by individual components of literary expression on endangered, sick, disabled or disturbed individuals so that through the adjustment of the momentary state it helps to objectively improve or adjust their overall state (survival) and as a method of communicative character, which can serve as an interactive agent and stimulator of emotional, ethical and social development*". Bibliotherapy has the potential to facilitate development (Valešová Malecová, 2021, 2022; Bubeníčková, 2024) and act as a preventative too, as evidenced by its efficacy in the domain of psycho-hygiene and personal growth (Kotrbová, 2022a).

In this definition of bibliotherapy from a therapeutic and pedagogical perspective Majzlanová highlighted some new views in contrast to previous conceptualisations of bibliotherapy. The activities of Majzlanová were followed at the faculty by another younger colleagues.

Among the experts currently or previously engaged in the practice of bibliotherapy in their counselling, clinical pedagogical, psychotherapeutic or psychological practice in Slovakia, we may cite the therapeutic pedagogue Mgr. Katarína Šurdová (outpatient clinic Bratislava), the therapeutic pedagogue Mgr. Ing. Vladislav Babka (outpatient clinic Martin), special pedagogue Assoc. Prof. PaedDr. Barbora Kováčová, PhD. who has been engaged in the teaching and research of bibliotherapy in early childhood care at the Catholic University in Ružomberok (Kováčová, Valešová Malecová, 2018), clinical psychologist, Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Miloš Šlepecký, CSc. (in collaboration with colleagues O. Číková and J. Lehotský at the Specialised Therapeutic Psychiatric Institute in Predná Hora and Psychiatric Department of the Hospital with Polyclinic in Liptovský Mikuláš), clinical psychologist Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Vojto Haring, CSc. (Psychiatric hospital

Sokolovce - Piešt'any district), clinical psychologist, Professor PhDr. Ondrej Kondáš, DrSc. (Psychiatric hospital in Veľké Leváre) and Prof. Dr. med. Jozef Kafka, DrSc. (Psychiatric Clinic of the University Hospital with Polyclinic in Košice).

At the present time, there is considerable interest in the subject of bibliotherapy, both among those engaged in therapeutic pedagogy and among psychologists and psychotherapists working in a variety of sectors within the national economy. These include the sector of education, for work with children in kindergartens and children's centres, schools, educational-psychological counselling centres, and centres of therapeutic-educational prevention. In the health sector, for work in ambulances, health clinics, early diagnosis and treatment centres, convalescent homes, sanatoriums, hospitals, and specialised treatment institutes. Similarly, in the sector of labour, social affairs and family – for utilization in work in children's homes, diagnostic and re-education facilities, social service homes, retirement homes, facilities for the elderly, sheltered housing, and sheltered workshops. Additionally, in the justice sector for work in penitentiary and post-penitentiary facilities.

Bibliotherapy as an essential component of the university curriculum in the field of therapeutic pedagogy

The course of bibliotherapy has been part of the portfolio of courses taught in the therapeutic pedagogy study programme for 30 years and it is still continuing. The course comprises a total of 168 teaching hours, consisting of theoretical and practical experiential teaching (seminars) distributed across the full five-year duration of the full-time study programme (three years of Bachelor's and two years of Master's). The course culminates with a possibility of state examination in the subject of bibliotherapy, which forms part of the state final examination for the Master's degree in therapeutic pedagogy.

Over the course of the six-semester bachelor's degree, students have the option of taking three semesters of bibliotherapy. *Appendix 1* illustrates the integration of bibliotherapy within the broader curriculum of the Bachelor's degree in Therapeutic Pedagogy, representing the first university degree. *Appendix 2* depicts the role of bibliotherapy in the subsequent Master's degree programme, representing the second university degree of the therapeutic pedagogy study program.

In the course of bibliotherapy, the students of the Bachelor of Therapeutic Pedagogy learn how to use literature for preventive, educational and therapeutic purposes. In particular, the students learn how to select and apply motivational literature, self-help books, aphorisms, poems, fairy tales, and other literary genres of fiction in therapeutic education. Further, how to incorporate reading and therapeutic journaling, therapeutic letters writing, and creative writing into promoting health, personal development, and addressing various developmental and health challenges in children and adults; how to help themselves and others in life with the use of beautiful literature; how to lead therapeutic-educational processes in self-help reading groups or other similar support groups for children or adults; also how to work together in teams of professionals to address health, educational, social and other similar challenges faced by patients or clients in the health, education, social services and justice sectors.

The student is provided with comprehensive support throughout the course of study. This encompasses free consultation and guidance on practice, discussions on examples of good practice, recommended practice and case studies, and access to study materials in the faculty and university library. The final state examination comprises a thesis defence, an oral examination in the subject of therapeutic pedagogy, an oral examination in the subject of psychotherapy and family therapy, and oral examinations in two selected activity therapies (art therapy, bibliotherapy, dramatherapy, music therapy, occupational therapy, psychomotor/movement/dance therapy or play therapy).

Upon completion of their studies, graduates should be equipped with the necessary skills to identify potential health risks, threats and opportunities for individuals in relation to the integration of health and educational efforts. They should be able to apply interdisciplinary knowledge in the education of individuals with developmental and health disabilities and at risk, to support educational efforts and the educational process where it is needed. By means of therapeutic-educational programmes that integrate therapeutic and educational efforts, the practitioner should be able to facilitate the development of competence in the individual (patient, pupil, student, senior citizen, etc.) to enable them to live their life meaningfully and to solve their problems in a creative manner.

Since 2018, the author of this paper has been teaching bibliotherapy at the Department of Therapeutic Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education CU in Bratislava. In this capacity, she has been contributing the aforementioned study materials designed for students of therapeutic pedagogy, created by Majzlanová, with jointly created papers *The significance of narrative in bibliotherapy* (Majzlanová & Kotrbová, 2019), *The therapeutic diary in bibliotherapy* (Kotrbová & Majzlanová, 2021), and the more recently written *Therapeutic letters in bibliotherapy* (Kotrbová, 2022a), *The journalistic genres in bibliotherapy* (Kotrbová, 2024a) and *Movement in bibliotherapy* (Kotrbová, 2024b), in addition to the online interactive study material (teaching texts) *Biblioterapia.sk* (Kotrbová et al., 2023b) were added.

In accordance with the recommendations of the NICE, an internationally recognised organisation dealing with quality indicators and recommended practices to ensure safety and quality levels of healthcare and health protection and promotion, the recommendations for the treatment of depression using literature were included into the teaching of bibliotherapy (NICE, 2022). In the light of these recommendations, educators have devoted particular attention to the integration of self-help books in therapeutic pedagogy oriented bibliotherapy. This is evidenced by the work of Kotrbová (2022b; 2023a, 21), who has implemented application of self-help books into the content of students´ learning.

The subject of how to utilise spirituality in bibliotherapy (as discussed by Kotrbová, Sturcz, Solárová, 2022; Kotrbová, 2023b) remains a developing area of interest, along with the now well-established practice of employing religious texts in bibliotherapy (hagiotherapy). An elaboration of the importance of adding sound to the encouraging and uplifting content by own patient/client´s voice like an important tool in bibliotherapy has commenced in *Script Writing in Bibliotherapy* (Kotrbová & Vašková, 2024). The forthcoming paper on the application of modern technologies of artificial intelligence and similar in bibliotherapy was added too (Kotrbová, 2025).

The study "Covid-19 and Therapeutic Diaries"

In order to support students' self-regulation and professional growth, a therapeutic diary was introduced, in which students were encouraged to record emotionally significant experiences. This initiative was implemented with three groups of therapeutic pedagogy students (n = 47) during the summer semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. This period coincided with a period of community-wide interventions in response to the global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

In accordance with the recommendations of Rainwater (1989) and Pennebaker (2013), students were instructed to identify or create a journal (in terms of size, format, material, graphics, etc.) in which they would engage in daily writing activities for a minimum of 15 minutes, over a period of at least four to five consecutive days (or non-consecutive days) in the first person singular ("I") within a selected, secure setting where they would have complete privacy. The writing should be as detailed as possible, while maintaining a focus on the emotional experience. The students were instructed to write in the preferred "pen and paper" technique, without concern for grammatical correctness, and to take 10 minutes after writing to reflect on their entries. They were encouraged to add creative elements to their notes, such as clippings, photographs, or drawings. They could choose to read their entries, noting changes or to discard them entirely. Additionally, the students were provided with written materials outlining the rules and principles of writing. Furthermore, students were afforded the option of seeking guidance and support (via online or telephone consultations) on matters pertaining to journaling, including any other journal-related queries or requirements.

A structured feedback collection about journal keeping was conducted at the conclusion of the semester. Two-thirds of the student cohort (n = 30) reported a markedly positive experience: "journaling has helped me not to go crazy", "I have found a place and time for myself and have someone to talk to", "it has helped me to find the negative feelings under the surface and see myself from a new perspective", "I have started to notice more things", "it helps me", "it has helped me to cope with the conflict in my family", "at first I didn't want to, but then I started to enjoy it", "I confirm that writing it really helps," "I stayed at home alone with my disabled child, I introduced it, then my daughter did too and it helps", "I am at home alone with my children and it helps", "I use the diary both privately and in my work with the children in the oncology ward and I recommend it." The 13 responses can be rated moderate such as "at first I didn't want to do it at all, but I tried it and got new suggestions", "it was depressing at first, but then I enjoyed it", etc. and only 4 answers were relatively negative: "I kept an electronic diary", "I prefer to draw", "I didn't feel like writing it myself so my boyfriend and I started a chronicle and then it was nice", "I started to keep a video diary and I found myself getting lost in my feelings."

The possibility of the offered consultations was used by students on only two occasions. In both cases, it was recommended that the processing/description be written from an alternative perspective, namely, a change of writing strategy. The use of the third person singular (from the position of the observer/narrator of the story – "this/that happened") is recommended for the problem of getting lost in feelings and return back from videodiary creating to the writing by hand

only. Similarly, the second person singular (from the position of the observer/narrator of the story – "this/that happened") is advised for the same issue. If the individual in question is better served by a non-verbal approach to processing their emotions, creative techniques such as dance, singing, drawing, painting and occupational activities can be applied as an alternative tools of expression. In such cases, writing is employed as a supplementary tool only to structure and comprehend the experience what was happened thanks to this experience in question (Pennebaker, 2013).
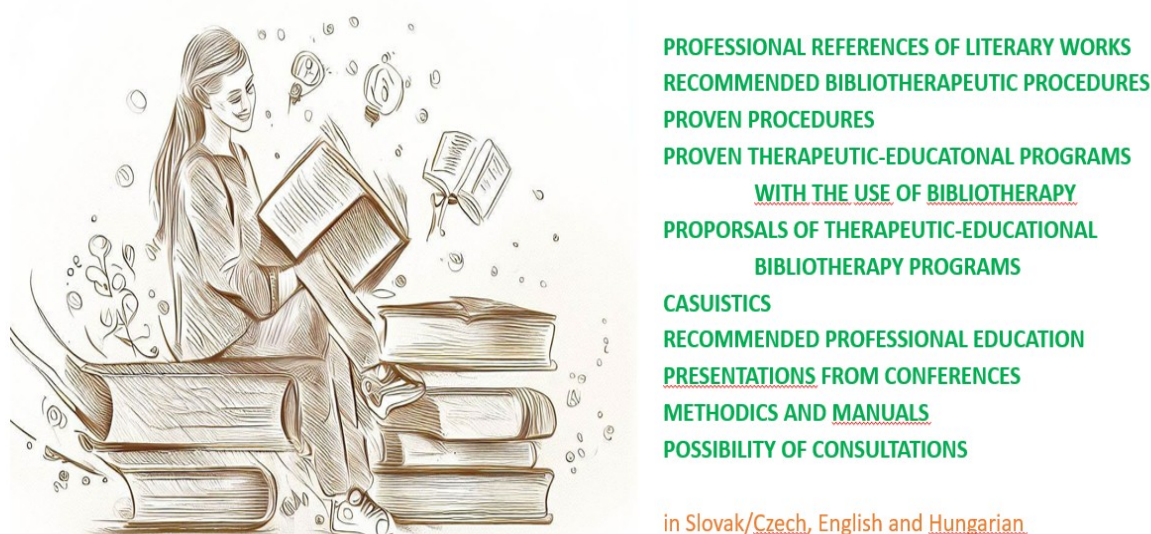
International collaboration

In addition to the national and international academic and authorial collaboration in the field of bibliotherapy which was initiated in the preceding period by Majzlanová frxmpl with colleagues in János Selye University in Komárno (SK), Catholic University in Ružomberok (SK), Palacký University in Olomouc (CZ – Assoc. Prof. Svoboda), Charles University in Prague (CZ), Teacher Training College in Győr (HU – Mária Kovács-Németh), and other institutions. The first public available teaching texts *Biblioterapia.sk* (Kotrbová et al., 2023) were created in 2023 in an international collaboration between Slovak, Czech and Hungarian partners, with the support of the Erasmus+ programme (see *Figure 1* below). In addition to the aforementioned university initiative, it is worth noting the international cooperation of the Slovak civic association EDUMA, which provides the most comprehensive methodologies and other materials for working with the topic of otherness in the form of storytelling on its website.

Figure 1. Available at: https://www.biblioterapia.sk/

The site's visitors of Bibliotherapy.sk will gain insight into the theoretical and practical aspects of paremiological therapy, poetry therapy, fairy tale therapy, narrative therapy, hagiotherapy. They will learn what are the professional recommendations for the use of self-help books, how reading aloud,

storytelling, recitation and creative writing as basic techniques of bibliotherapy help. The texts have been developed as an online interactive teaching tool for professionals with a therapeutic background and students preparing to enter the helping professions. They include expert reviews of recommended literary works, suggested and proven bibliotherapeutic practices, proposals for therapeutic educational programmes using bibliotherapy, examples of good practice, case studies, conference presentations, methodologies and guidelines, research results, a list of recommended professional and scientific literature on bibliotherapy and the possibility of professional consultations (see *Figure 2* below).

PROFESSIONAL REFERENCES OF LITERARY WORKS
RECOMMENDED BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC PROCEDURES
PROVEN PROCEDURES
PROVEN THERAPEUTIC-EDUCATONAL PROGRAMS
WITH THE USE OF BIBLIOTHERAPY
PROPORSALS OF THERAPEUTIC-EDUCATIONAL
BIBLIOTHERAPY PROGRAMS
CASUISTICS
RECOMMENDED PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION
PRESENTATIONS FROM CONFERENCES
METHODICS AND MANUALS
POSSIBILITY OF CONSULTATIONS

in Slovak/Czech, English and Hungarian

https://www.biblioterapia.sk/

Figure 2

The project involved the co-authoring of over 100 contributions of text (386 standard pages), 192 minutes of audio and 15 minutes were created. The project assets are accessible to readers in Slovak, Czech, English, and Hungarian (see *Figure 3*), and were made available at the end of August 2023. We extend our gratitude to all partners who have collaborated with us thus far and are looking forward to further continuing fruitful collaboration in the future too.

Figure 3

Audio recordings of some of the literary works recommended for bibliotherapy are also available to support work with children or adults who have reading difficulties. On 11 November 2023, the results of the international project were evaluated by the Erasmus+ National Grants Agency as an exemplar of effective practice. Since its inception, the website has attracted 243 regular users from across the globe, with an average time spent on the site of 2.3 minutes. On 16 February 2024, Biblioterapia.sk became the third official partner of the 1ˢᵗ European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference, which took place on 4–5 October in Budapest.

Discussion and conclusion

In the period following the global Covid-19 pandemic, numerous authors have observed a significant increase in mental health issues among children, adolescents, and adults. The international study Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children 2021–2022, which examines the social determinants of health, health awareness and behaviour, revealed an increase in emotional, concentration and behavioural problems among Slovakian adolescents. They found negative impact on both physical and mental health of this period to them (Madarasová Gecková et al., 2023, 107).

In its report on mental healthcare data in 2023, the National Centre for Health Information (2024) also observed that, over the long term, the most significant increase in hospitalisations has been among adolescents aged 15-19. Calculated per 10,000 population, the number of hospitalisations in this age group has increased by 55.6 % since 2008.

As stated by the authors of the study (Madarasová Gecková et al., 2023), there is a need for a change in the way school is viewed, moving away from previous perspectives and towards a focus on the development of well-being as an integral aspect of the educational process (ibid, 14). It is imperative that pupils and students are educated on the significance and utilisation of suitable coping mechanisms, encompassing intellectual, emotional and physical aspects, during their formative years in primary and secondary education. The application of bibliotherapy, which draws upon therapeutic principles, can prove invaluable in this context.

In the context of the Reform of Psychiatric Care in Slovakia (Izáková et al., 2022), which posits that the community constitutes an integral component of the novel system of psychiatric care, the author Polák et al. (2022) underscores the significance of prevention within psychiatry. As the author subsequently asserts, primary prevention encompasses a healthy lifestyle, sufficient rest and sleep, the planning of activities, exercise, the fostering of healthy relationships, and a balanced diet.

Polák et al. (ibid.) emphasize the significance of providing assistance to parents in the areas of parenting and education, as well as promoting an understanding of emotions, reducing loneliness, fostering relationships and offering comprehensive support to individuals. It is also crucial to provide education about mental disorders, as mental health promotion has been demonstrated to reduce a range of adverse outcomes, including physical illness and mortality, poverty, crime, suicide, and the burden on families. Additionally, it has been linked to increased stability, employment, productivity, and educational attainment.

One of the fundamental prerequisites for mental health is that children, adolescents and adults are able to understand their emotions, regulate them effectively and empathise with the emotions of others. As other authors state the most effective means of preventing the onset of mental illness is the establishment of a positive relationship. In their meta-analysis (2011), Durlak et al. found that therapeutic educational programmes had an immediate positive effect on emotional well-being, behaviour and school performance. Furthermore, Friedly and Parsonage (2007) demonstrated in another study that children with more severe problems benefited the most from such programmes.

The Slovak Republic currently possesses optimal prerequisites for the advancement of therapeutic-pedagogy programs now, thanks to the 50-year history of therapeutic pedagogy study program and the incorporation of bibliotherapy as a subject within it too. Except the existing of the mentioned university study program of therapeutic pedagogy, have been bibliotherapy, recently included in several recommended preventive, diagnostic and therapeutic procedures of the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic with reference to international recommended standards (MoH SR, 2022). In Slovakia, the therapeutic pedagogues usually work in collaboration with other professionals from a range of disciplines, including health, education, social care and justice, to address a variety of challenges. They are also members of support teams in schools.

It is evident that there is a necessity for further efficacious therapeutic and educational support for professionals, adults and youth alike, in order to facilitate the development of this potential. As demonstrated by Chekhov (1897) in his short story *At Home* (2010), reading or telling a story is often a more effective method of effecting change of behaviour than it would be lecturing only, particularly in the context of changing of health behaviour too.

Reading and storytelling, writing, reading and therapeutic diaries, the completion of stories, and other creative activities, in addition to therapeutically guided sharing, which are intrinsic to bibliotherapy, helps with the formation of the requisite experiences. If, with the support of all the aforementioned documents and auxiliary materials, this can be made available to the widest possible range of people who require such assistance, with a view to enabling them to flourish in their personal, family, work and wider social lives, we will be gratified to be able to state that valuable support has been provided, and that it is, moreover, worthy of emulation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Bachelor Therapeutic Pedagogy University Study Program profile (Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia) 2024

Degree	Compulsory courses	Mandatory optional courses Type A – therapy disciplines	Mandatory optional courses Type B – supportive disciplines	Voluntary courses (recommended)
Bc. 3 years of daily study	General Pedagogy	**Art therapy 1, 2, 3**[*]	Developmental Biology	Communication
	General Psychology	**Bibliotherapy 1, 2, 3**[*]	Inclusive Pedagogy	Professional Foreign Language
	Basics of Therapeutic Pedagogy	**Dramatherapy 1, 2, 3**[*]	Development and Health Support	Projects in Therapeutic Pedagogy 1, 2[*]
	Health and it´s Disorders	**Ergotherapy 1, 2, 3**[*]	Programs	**Social-psychology Training 1, 2, 3**[*]
	Philosophical Concept of Human	**Musictherapy 1, 2, 3**[*]	Social Pedagogy	Social work
	Developmental Psychology	**Movement therapy 1, 2, 3**[*]	Basics of Didactics	Academic Writing
	Neuroscientific Fonudations of		Developmental Speech Disorders	Students´ Conference
	Therapeutic Pedagogy	**Play therapy 1, 2, 3**[*]	Neurodevelopmental Disorders	
	Special Pedagogy		Self-advocacy and Participation	
	Social Psychology		Basal Intervention Strategies	
	Basics of Speech Therapy	**Notes**:	Social Patologies	
	Therapeuticpedagogy Diagnostics	Every therapy:	Substitute family care	
	Psychology of Personality	Theory: 2 hours	Introduction	
	Learning Disabilities	weekly/semester	to Therapeuticpedagogy Gerontology	
	Behaviour Disorders	Self-experiential practice:	Dependence on Psychoactive	
	Early intervention	3 hours weekly/semester	Substances	
	Psychiatry	+ homeworks, selfstudy		
	Basics of Psychotherapy	and semestral works		
	Family Therapy and Counselling	1, 2, 3 means 3 courses/3		
	School Therapeutic Pedagogy	semesters distributed into		
	Supportive accompanying	6 semesters of the whole		
	Casuistics Seminar 1, 2[*]	study		
	Therapeutic Pedagogy Practice 1, 2, 3[*]			
	State exams – bachelor theses			

APPENDIX 2

Master Therapeutic Pedagogy University Study Program profile (Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia) 2024

Degree	Compulsory courses	Mandatory optional courses Type A – therapy disciplines	Mandatory optional courses Type B – supportive disciplines	Voluntary courses (recommended)
Mgr. + 2 years of daily study	Clinical Psychology	**Artherapy in institutional care**	Psychology of Health	n/a
	Theories of Education	**Bibliotherapy in institutional care**	Nutrition and Behaviour	
	Disability and Participation	**Ergotherapy in institutional care**	Substitute Education	
	Alternative and Augmentative Communication	**Dramatherapy in institutional care**	Specific Dependences	
	Clinical Therapeutic Pedagogy	**Musictherapy in institutional care**	Chapters from Psychiatry and Pedopsychiatry	
	Social and Working Integration	**Movement therapy in institutional care**	**Therapeutic Pedagogy Gerontology**	
	Forensic psychology		**Programs for children with autism**	
	Neuropsychology	**Playtherapy in institutional care**	**Multisenzoric Therapy**	
	Psychodiagnostics		Neurogenic Communication Disorders	
	Crisis Intervention		Penitentiary and Postpenitenciary Care	
	Systemic Family Therapy	**Artetherapy in clinical practice**	Palliative care	
	Psychosocial Rehabilitation	**Bibliotherapy in clinical practice**	Migration in the Context of Education and Help	
	Psychotherapy and ChildPsychotherapy	**Dramatherapy in clinical practice**	Casuistics Seminar 1, 2	
	Legislative Frameworks of Therapeuticpedagogy Pactice	**Ergotherapy in clinical practice**	Professional Foreign Language 1, 2	
	Proseminar from Therapeutic Pedagogy	**Musictherapy in clinical practice**	Research Methodology	
	Diploma seminar	**Movement therapy in clinical practice**		
	Continous Practice under Supervision 1, 2	**Playtherapy in clinical practice**		
	State exams – master theses			
	State exams – therapeutic pedagogy			
	State exams – theory of psychotherapy and family therapy			
	State exams – therapeutic discipline 1			
	State exams – therapeutic discipline 2			