University of Canberra

Nathan Smale

Cathartic crossovers: reader transaction theory and literature therapy

Abstract:

Reading therapy and writing therapy both use the written word as a tool to enhance empathy, self-awareness and acceptance in their clients. The therapies both have shown improved efficacy when there is a continued back and forth communication between client and text. Reader transaction can be used to explain the unifying features of both therapies, such as the guidance that a text offers to clients, the importance of literary merit on efficacy, and the interplay between self-identity and text.

This research will examine the role that reader transaction plays in explaining the way reader and text interact and how that can be used to explore the key components in writing therapy and reading therapy. The key features of each therapy will be investigated and then explored through the lens of reader transaction theory to articulate their commonalities. The driving question behind this research will then be: What does reader transaction theory offer as a way of linking bibliotherapy and writing therapy?

Biographical note:

Nathan Smale is an arts honours student at the University of Canberra, having completed his Bachelor's degree in creative writing and literary studies. He is interested in the interaction between literature and mental illness and plans to continue with further study in this field.

Keywords:

Writing therapy – bibliotherapy – reader transaction – self-identity – text

Introduction

Reading therapy and writing therapy both use the written word as a tool to enhance empathy, self-awareness and acceptance in their clients. The therapies both have shown improved efficacy when there is a continued back and forth communication between client and text (McLaine 2013, Neilsen & Murphy 2012). Employing reader transaction theory to explore its links between text and reader offers a way of understanding both therapies. Reader transaction can be used to explain the unifying features of both therapies, such as the guidance that a text offers to clients, the importance of literary merit on efficacy, and the interplay between self-identity and text.

This paper examines the role that reader transaction plays in explaining the way reader and text interact and how efferent reading is a tool that can be used to explore the key components in writing therapy and reading therapy. This essay will also investigate the key features of each therapy and how they are explained through the lens of reader transaction theory to articulate their commonalities and explore their cyclical nature.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy simply means therapy with books or therapy through reading. It has had an expanding presence within the field of psychotherapy over the last hundred years but has only started to make its way into Australia within the last ten years (McLaine 2013). Bibliotherapy is 'a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature – interaction which may be utilized for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth' (Russell & Shrodes 1950). Traditionally, bibliotherapy has used a process of recommending books to read that are relevant to the psychological issue being experienced (McLaine 2013). Usually this recommendation takes the form of a piece of non-fiction literature such as a self-help book to provide practical support as a strategy to deal with psychological issues, such as mild to moderate depression and anxiety (Brewster et al. 2012). However, within contemporary bibliotherapy, a different therapeutic model has started to be practiced. This new model is called creative bibliotherapy and will be the main focus for the discussion of bibliotherapy in this essay.

Creative bibliotherapy employs the use of imaginative literature such as creative fiction and nonfiction to allow the participant to engage their imagination to create meaning from the text. The use of literature in the therapy allows a client to explore their emotions without having to directly confront their trauma. This allows bibliotherapy to be a distancing tool for those who are uncomfortable expressing themselves or for those who are nervous about therapy (McLaine 2013). The main aim of creative bibliotherapy is to assist people to think about more creative ways to solve personal problems through reading and discovering how fictional characters 'similar to themselves confronted problems and solved them' (Pardeck 2006). This allows people to 'look at a problem, situation or state of mind in a more indirect way' (Hodge et al. 2007). This opens up new thought patterns that aid in gaining insight into possible ways of dealing with mental health issues (McLaine 2013).

Bibliotherapy has been shown to have a useful effect in a spectrum of mental illnesses from depression to anxiety to more-severe cases of mental illness. In 2010 Susan McLaine launched a pilot creative bibliotherapy group at St. Vincent Prague House in Victoria that included clients with varying social disorders as well as schizophrenia and alcohol related brain diseases. She noted that after multiple sessions over a three-year period clients were engaging more with others and were also better able to express their physical as well as emotional needs. The act of reading, McLaine suggests, had contributed towards the development of a more integrated sense of self, and increased self-awareness and acceptance (McLaine 2013). This development within the self has been shown to lead to decreased symptoms in internalising behaviours and externalising behaviours as well as increased prosocial behaviour (Montgomery & Maunders 2015).

Writing therapy

Writing therapy, like bibliotherapy, draws upon multiple theories of language, memory, pain, subjectivity, identity, creativity, and the unconscious (Murphy & Neilsen 2008). Various forms of writing exercises have often been used in conjunction with psychotherapy, such as diary writing and stream of consciousness. However, writing therapy, with the addition of narrative goes further than these more traditional modes of using written word as catharsis. Writing therapy seeks to enable clients to contextualise and deconstruct the stories of self that they live by, externalise their problems and then to 're-author their lives and relationships' (Murphy & Neilsen 2008). Therapy proceeds as: deconstruction of dominant problem stories; development and enrichment of preferred stories; and the living and witnessing of preferred stories (White 2007). The addition of narrative to trauma is a step in the process of recovery as the designing and telling of a life story is a 'purgative, reconstructive, integrative, transformative activity' (Chandler 1989).

In 1997 Mari Alschuler, an academic psychotherapist, worked with a group in East Harlem using writing therapy. Each member of the group had challenges including mental illness, drug dependency and homelessness. Alschuler asked her group to identify a specific incident, person or time period to write about. She then gave them basic narrative craft tools including point of view, dialogue and narrative flow. The group was also encouraged to make positive suggestions about each other's work. She claims that this writing developed the participants' sense of self, and confidence as well as connected them to important others in their lives (Alschuler 1997).

Within the context of grief counselling detailed, retelling of the event story can allow the client to recruit a witness in the therapist to what was previously a silent story, to articulate, validate, integrate and ultimately negotiate its meaning (Neimeyer 2012). Retelling assists with a more self-compassionate integration of the trauma into the client's self-narrative and affirms the challenged relational bond that at the core of many of grief's complications (Neimeyer 2012).

Being human involves creating meaning and using language to shape personal experiences into stories, or narratives (Angus & Greenberg 2002). For clients, by giving form to disconnected experience and memories, narrative offers a space for

self-reflection and self-construction, requiring us to interpret and make meaning of experience (Bruner 2002). This narrative, once integrated into the writing practice can form an unparalleled form of communication with the self, or later, the therapist (Bolton 2004).

Crossovers

In both of these therapies the development of self comes from a response to verbal symbols (McLaine 2013, Neilsen & Murphy 2012). In the case of creative bibliotherapy the responses occur when the client is invited to engage, and play with the experience of the words (Mackenzie 2013). Within bibliotherapy clients are allowed freedom of expression, without prejudice or pressure. Clients are encouraged within the practice to explore a broad range of their responses as this is the most effective way of conducting the therapy (McLaine 2013). The broad range of responses are possible due to literature's nature to be both complex and ambiguous, even hostile to preordained frameworks of thought (Martin 1977). After the text is experienced clients are encouraged to reflect and question their understanding of the literature (McLaine 2013). Once the response has occurred, understandings can form and the development of self begins.

Similarly, within writing therapy, health outcomes are part of the belief that once an experience has structure and meaning, it follows that the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable (Pennebaker & Seagal 1999; White 2007). To find this meaning a process of deconstructing and reconstructing of a memory is needed. This lets the client explore themselves, find important details to discard or keep, to then build a coherent narrative that explains past experience so that they may benefit from writing (Pennebaker 2000; Neimeyer 2012).

The back and forth between experience and documentation indicates a dialogue between verbal expression and understanding. A constructed story 'is a type of knowledge that helps to organise the emotional effects of an experience as well as the experience itself' (Pennebaker & Seagal 1999). The adding narrative to trauma shows that the writing, with cognitive processing, has been suggested to have therapeutic value. The writing process questions the author's understandings of self.

Because literature is said to 'militate against simple answers' (Martin 1977) a bibliotherapy client, like a client of writing therapy, is entered into a dialogue between text and self to try and find meaning. McLaine notes that the text provided for therapy should be one of literary merit, particularly the words of classic writers, but not discounting other works that are of high quality (McLaine 2013). For creative bibliotherapy the pieces read should be focused works that are simple, clear, brief and non-repetitious (Maich & Keen 2004). The story should fit with the relevant feelings, needs, interests and goals of the reader as well as demonstrate ideas such as cultural diversity, gender inclusivity and sensitivity to aggression. The text chosen should also show the characters coping with problems as well as the resolutions of those problems (Carlson 2001). Bibliotherapy clients are helped to 'understand the complexities of the individual, language and the world' (Martin 1977) and this in turn helps clients to understand themselves (McLaine 2013).

Writing has also been found to be more therapeutically valuable if it moves through developmental stages typical of writing designed for a readership (Bolton & Latham 2004). The developed nature of the writing refers to fundamental aesthetic conventions, including structure, avoidance of clichés, 'showing instead of telling' and general coherence (Linder 2004). This process of interacting with the writing for extended periods of time, fleshing out and editing for clarity is relevant to both literary and health assessments as it allows for better articulation of the trauma to self and others (Murphy & Nielsen 2012). This improvement is due to a client's ability to provide a larger dimension to their experience, allowing the potential for better situating themselves within a social context in which new relationships can be formed (Herman 2004).

This situation of self within a larger social context is seen within research carried out on previously traumatised students. It was shown that when these students wrote about someone else's trauma as if they themselves had lived through it their health outcomes were comparable to those achieved by people writing their own experiences (Greenberg et al. 1996). Imaginatively engaging with the lives of others aligns with the idea of bibliotherapy, showing that the writing topic need not be rooted in the individual's own life for benefits to occur (King 2002). This further suggests that other types of engagement with imaginative reading and writing may be as beneficial to health and wellbeing, and that focusing on imagined trauma and experimenting with various forms and genres could also be useful as a distancing device for some people (Murphy & Neilsen 2008).

Reader response theory and transaction theory

There are many similarities between each therapy, such as the quality of literature read and the quality of writing produced being beneficial to health outcomes, and the influence of the literary medium on the ability to use both therapies as distancing tools while still exploring the deeply personal and the increasing of self-awareness and community identity. This raises question: What is literature's place in the re-authoring, or reimagining of self within the therapies**?** There are many approaches that could be used to answer this question, however, as the focus of these therapies is within client's emotional response, a framework that implies a true reading of a text could limit the efficacy of these therapies by disregarding those responses. An approach that focuses on the reader would be useful as it promotes 'the value of the emotional in the reader's response' (Karolides 2000). Therefore to explain these similarities, reader response theory will be used as it focuses on what the reader experiences during and after the reading event.

Reader response makes the claim that the text is a passive piece of the reading experience and that it is within the reader that all meaning culminates (Barthes 1967). For reader response theory authorial intent is largely irrelevant because the reader has come to an understanding based on their subjectivity. For the reader, the text is an amalgamation of citations formed from the culture that they have consumed (Barthes 1967). The reader's response is to a piece of work that the author has produced by chance, built of words that can only defined or explained by other words that are tied

to each person and their time. The text for the reader then, is a space of many dimensions that within are embedded many kinds of writing, none of which are original (Barthes 1967).

Once reader response is applied we can explore the questions raised earlier: Why does quality of literature influence health benefits? Why are creative pieces different to self-help books? How does a text offer a guiding role within the therapies? A possible way to answer these questions is with reader transaction theory, a strand of reader response theory which is primarily concerned with the interaction between the reader and the text. Reader transaction explores the reader's contribution in the two-way, focusing on the reader's interaction with the text. It is within reader transaction theory that the concept of efferent reading, a way of reading focused on what is taken away from the text, occurs. Reader transaction theory and efferent reading are a way of answering the questions raised.

Reader transaction theory states that within a book the author's words direct where the focus is placed but it is the reader that assembles a meaning based on their experiences in their life. Life context is seen as the shaping force of understanding as 'one must draw on their past experiences with the verbal symbols, then select from various alternative referents that occur to them. To do this they have to find some context within which these referents can be related' (Rosenblatt 1978).

A text doesn't represent an absolute guide to its understanding but rather that a reader will bring multiple and equally valid interpretations to a text (Rosenblatt 1978). This is an idea that is echoed by Stanley Fish (1980), who argues that no matter how odd an interpretation of the text is, if it is within reason, it should not be ignored. He also states that we as humans have an innate understanding of what kind of interpretation is acceptable or not (Fish 1980). The 'concept of transaction emphasizes the relationship with, *and continuing awareness* of, the text' and that the reader must pay attention to all the words in their particular sequence and what they 'summon up for him', for if a literary work of art is to ensue, the reader must be as fully attended toward the transaction between himself and the text (Rosenblatt 1978).

What the text will evoke within the reader is based on what Fish describes as an 'interpretive community' (Fish 1980). Interpretive communities are what provides the basis for the understanding of a text as they incorporate the inherent strategies for creating meaning after reading. Interpretive communities are not natural or universal, but learned (Fish 1980). Therefore cultural interaction and awareness builds upon the understandings available to the text. These interpretations, Fish suggests, are always be subjective and suffer from an inability to be corroborated by another, as any understanding of a text shared will have to be interpreted as well (Fish 1980).

Within the classroom environment when exploring student responses to poetry, teachers Louise Harrison and Jean Brown (2000) often employ a line by line approach that highlights the continued awareness of the transaction, showing the potential for multiple responses as well as the logic process behind finding a final meaning. As each line is read and unpacked students write their responses down and share them then, in light of the following line read, will go back and start to question their responses. These responses are based on their life contexts and are varied from

student to student (Brown & Harrison 2000). Once all the lines are read and explored the students will have concluded meanings for the text based on a logical process of discarding responses unsupported by the text, however the most evidenced responses that the students are left with can still be completely juxtaposed. In response to the poem *My Papa's Waltz* by Theodore Roethke, Brown and Harrison observed their students were split into two distinct groups: Those who thought the poem was a positive depiction of a family, and those who thought it was a negative depiction (Brown & Harrison 2000). Rosenblatt notes this difference between understandings in a text, stating that historical context will shape understanding of a text. She refers to this as 'efferent reading'.

Efferent reading is used to describe a way of reading where the focus is placed on what the reader will 'carry away from the reading' (Rosenblatt 1978). Efferent reading sits opposite aesthetic reading, which describes reading for enjoyment, or appreciation. The two types of reading work together, but often not at the same time. Aesthetic reading allows the whole range of responses generated by the text to enter into our awareness. For a work of literature the reader will usually be cued to which type of reading to employ (Rosenblatt 1978), with an aesthetic reading usually being the first type of reading undertaken. However, efferent reading derives ultimately from what the reader does, the activities he carries out in relation to the text (Rosenblatt 1978). The reader 'concentrates on what the symbols designate, what they may be contributing to the end results that he seeks', drawing on their past to explore the information, concepts and guides that are left when the reading is over (Rosenblatt 1978).

Rosenblatt notes that the contrast between aesthetic and efferent reading derives primarily from the difference in the reader's focus of attention during the reading-event (Rosenblatt 1978). She gives an extreme example of the difference in readings when she says that a mother whose child has just swallowed poisonous liquid is not going to be reading the label of the bottle to pay attention to syllable sound or rhythm. She wants to read as quickly as possible and retain the information that will serve her practical purpose. She then continues to less extreme examples that are of the same nature, such as reading a history book, a cooking recipe, or various scientific formulas. Efferent reading however is not limited to only information-based non-fiction, as we saw earlier in the example of Brown and Harrison. When reading a creative piece the context changes and a different set of skills is employed, one that allows for the embracing of the nature of literature.

Brown and Harrison make reference to their student's ability to learn about themselves and their peers based on open sharing of responses to text (Brown & Harrison 2000). The process of responding in the classroom environment left students more respectful Fran Clagget, a teacher and academic, embraces this nature of literature within her classroom, employing reader transaction theory to assist in teaching her students how to draw meaning from a text. She notes that teachers must preserve is the value of individual interpretations, the same idea used in the practice of creative bibliotherapy. Within the classroom all of the elements involved in the process: reader, text, and context are examined with care and reading widely and deeply is encouraged. With this reading students are encouraged to then 'rewrite the

texts within the contexts of their lives so they may continually rewrite their lives in the light of those texts' of their peers, the diversity of their lives and the difference in opinion (Clagget 2015). The reader has the ability to learn indirectly about other's experiences with the text, and may come to see that their own was confused or impoverished, and then may be stimulated to call from the text a better reading. But this must be done with their own experiences in relation to the text and what they call up for them (Rosenblatt 1978). Through class discussion students are provided enriched opportunities to explore their experiences with the text so they may choose to re-examine their responses (Brown & Harrison 2000).

These examples of reader response in the classroom follows Rosenblatt's idea that there is a complex and subjective relationship to literature. Meaning is generated by the reader and experience dictates context (McAdams 2003). The influence of current social concerns manifests itself in significant ways within interpretation of a text. For example within the poem My Papa's Waltz, words like *battered* and *beat time* have different connotations than when Roethke was originally writing the poem. Readers respond from the perspective of their times and to those expressions that are familiar (Brown & Harrison 2000). These responses, when explored offer the ability to construct self-knowledge (Appleman 2000).

 The construction of self requires individuals to draw upon available symbols, myths, genres, discourse and narratives, to then pull these together and fashion a self that fits within the 'discordant cultural parameters that situate their lives' (McAdams 2003).This allows for the reforming of identity where, within each transaction new discoveries can build up until a new theory is arrived at, which later findings will fit (Martin 1977). The exchange with the text becomes for the reader a process of self-creation, where responding, correcting errors, searching for the sources of the response, speculating about the author's intent and weighing the author's values and ideas against their own forms a heightened sense of self (Probst 1987).

Within the context of writing, the self can be engaged with from the application of efferent reading. When the writer engages with their craft they produce a work imitated from the words and other writings they have consumed (Barthes 1976). In reading, the subject is the centre of activity, the mediator among the various structures that present themselves to consciousness (Rosenblatt 1978), the same is true of writing. When engaging with a text the verbal symbol activates something within the reader that is linked to the referent of the word (Rosenblatt 1978). This process allows a reader, or writer to find components of their narrative identity as new personal meanings are articulated in relation to the experiences of both self and others (Angus & Greenberg 2002).

A person's narrative identity is formed from the plagiarising of the many stories and images they find in culture (McAdams 2003). As Barthes (1976) and as Rosenblatt (1978) stated earlier, it is life context, a reader's narrative identity, that shapes the reading of a text as well as the writing. Within each therapy the engagement with culture, such as in the form of reading or the act of sharing writing with an audience, has contributed to an improved sense of self (McLaine 2013, Murphy and Neilsen 2012). This improved sense of self allows for more enriched readings and social

contribution (Angus & Greenberg 2002) further contributing to the cycle of self-improvement founded upon reader response and efferent reading.

Conclusion

Within bibliotherapy and writing therapy there are many crossovers, such as the effect of the quality literature on therapy results, the therapies interactions with the community and their effects on self-identity. To find a theory capable of providing an explanation for these similarities we have also explored the framework of reader transaction theory. Reader transaction theory has shown how it believes reader and text to interact and offered a tool for understanding the therapies: efferent reading. Finally, with the theory we have highlighted the cyclical nature of response and its relationship to self-improvement within the context of both bibliotherapy and writing therapy.

List of works cited

Alschuler, Man 1997 'Lifestories - biography and autobiography as healing tools for adults with mental illness'*,* Journal of poetry therapy 12: 2, 113-17

Appleman, Deborah 2000, 1992 '*I Understood the Grief: Theory-Based Teaching of Ordinary People'* in N Karolides (ed.) *Reader Response in the Classroom: Evoking and Interpreting Meaning in Literature*, USA: Longman, 123-134

Angus, Lynne E & Greenberg, Leslie S 2002 *Working With Narrative in Emotion-Focused Therapy,* Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 3, 45-46

Brown, Jean E & Harrison, Louise G 2000 1999 in N. Karolides (ed.) *Reader Response in the Classroom: Evoking and Interpreting Meaning in Literature*, USA: Longman 327-338

Barthes, Roland 1967 *The Death of the Author*.

Brewster, Liz, Sen, Barbara & Cox, Andrew 2012 *Legitimising bibliotherapy: evidence based discourses in healthcare, Journal of Documentation* 68*.* Emerald Group Publishing Limited

Bruner, Jerome 2004 'The narrative creation of self' in Angus, L & McLeod, J. (eds) *Handbook of narrative and psychotherapy: Practice, theory and research,* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Bolton, Gillie 2004 *Writing Cures: An Introductory Handbook of Writing in Counselling and Therapy*, London: Routledge

Bolton, Gillie and Latham, John 2004 *Every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome': the therapeutic role of poetry writing* in G Bolton, S Howlett, C Lago and J Wright (eds) *Writing cures: an introductory handbook of writing in counselling and therapy*, New York: Brunner-Routledge

Carlson, Roxannne 2001 'Therapeutic use of story in therapy with children' *Guidance & Counselling* 16:3, n.p.

Chandler, Marilyn R 1989 'A healing art: therapeutic dimensions of autobiography'*, Auto/biography studies* 5:1, n.p.

Claggett, Fran 2005 'Lessons from Louise: The Person, the Theory, the Practice', Voices from the Middle 12:3, 51-3

Fish, Stanley E 1980 *Is there a text in this class?,* Harvard College

Greenberg, Melanie A, Wortman, Camille B, & Stone, Arthur A 1996 'Health and psychological effects of emotional disclosure: a test of the inhibition confrontation approach'*, Journal of personality and social psychology* 71, 558-602

Herman, Judith 1992 *Trauma and recovery: the aftermath of violence - from domestic abuse to political terror*, New York: Basic Books

Hodge, Suzanne, Robinson, Jude & Davis, Phillip 2007 'Reading between the lines: the experiences of taking part in a community reading project', *Medical Humanities* 33, n.p.

Karolides, Nicholas J 2000 *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms,* Oxon: Routledge, 4

Kean Sharon, Maich, Kimberly 2004 'Read Two Books and Write Me in the Morning! Bibliotherapy for social emotional intervention in the inclusive classroom', *Teaching Exceptional Children Plus* 1: 2, n.p.

King, Laura A 2002 *Gain without pain? Expressive writing and self-regulation* in SJ Lepore and JM Smyth (eds), *The writing cure: how expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

Lindner, Vicki 2004 'The tale of two Bethanies: trauma in the creative writing classroom', *New Writing: the international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing* 1: 1, n.p.

Neimeyer, Robert A 2012 *Techniques of Grief Therapy: Creative Practices for Counseling the Bereaved,* Oxon: Routledge

McLaine, Susan 2013 *Books Mind & Wellbeing,* paper presented at Arts and Health Australia conference, 12-14 November 2013

Martin, Graham D 1975 *Language Truth and Poetry*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

McAdams, Dan P 2003 *Identity and the life story:* in R Fivush and C Haden (eds), *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self: developmental and cultural perspectives,* Mahway, NJ.

Maunders, Kathryn, Montgomery, Paul 2015 *The effectiveness of creative bibliotherapy for internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial behaviors in children: A systematic review,* Oxford, UK: Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention, Department of Social Policy & Intervention, University of Oxford

Murphy, Ffion and Neilsen, Philip 2008, *Recuperating writers – and writing: the potential of writing therapy,* Edith Cowan University and Queensland University of Technology

Pace, Steven 2012 '*Writing the self into research: Using grounded theory analytic strategies in autoethnography', TEXT Special Issue: Creativity: Cognitive, Social and Cultural Perspectives*.

Pardeck, John T 2006 *Children's rights: policy and practice,* New York: Haworth Press.

Pennebaker, James W 2000 'Telling stories: the health benefits of narrative', *Literature and Medicine* 19: 1, n.p.

Pennebaker, James W & Seagal, Janel D 1999 *Forming a story: the health benefits of narrative,* Journal of Clinical Psychology 55: 10, n.p.

Probst, Robert E 1987 '*Adolescent Literature and the Curriculum', English Journal* 76: 3, n.p.

Rosenblatt, Louise M 1978 *The Reader, The Text, The Poem,* Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press

Russell, David & Shrodes, Caroline 1950 Contributions of research in bibliotherapy to the language arts program', *School Review 58,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Seligman, Martin EP, Ernst, Randal M, Gillham, Jane, Reivich, Karen & Linkins, Mark 2009 'Positive education: positive psychology and classroom intervention', *Oxford Review of Education* 58, n.p.

White, Michael 2007 *Maps of narrative practice,* New York: W.W. Norton & Company