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Early Reflections on a Shared Reading Intervention in the Light of Postcritical Thought

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Published in:
Orbis Litterarum

DOI:
10.1111/oli.12380

Publication date:
2024

Document version:
Final published version

Document license:
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Citation for published version (APA):
Pihl, M.-E., Kristensen, M. M., Folker, A. P., & Simonsen, P. (2024). Approaching Literary Connectivity: Early Reflections on a Shared Reading Intervention in the Light of Postcritical Thought . *Orbis Litterarum*, 79(2), 145-153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12380>

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Approaching literary connectivity: Early reflections on a Shared Reading intervention in the light of postcritical thought

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Abstract

During recent decades, numerous studies have examined uses of art and literature in the context of health care and preventive interventions. In a recent, large-scale review of current evidence within the field, the World Health Organization (WHO) concluded that art and culture are vital resources for health promotion, and should be included in health care programs and initiatives to a greater extent than is the case today (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). This article zooms in on “Shared Reading,” a literature-based intervention developed by the Reader Organization. More specifically, we look at a Danish Shared Reading project for male seniors—“Read, Man!”—that aims to reduce loneliness and isolation among men in the age group of 65–75 in view of the fact that men of this age range have increased risk of developing depressive symptoms in connection with retirement (Noh, Kwon, Lee, Oh, & Kim, 2019). A systematic analysis of the project’s data has yet to be undertaken. During this early stage, however, we describe the project and tentatively approach its data and potential health benefits while drawing on the affordances of postcritical thinking and an analysis centered on what we call literary connectivity.

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KEYWORDS

arts and health, postcritique, shared reading

1 | INTRODUCTION: “LITERARY HEALTH”—AND ITS CRITICS

The blooming field of the arts and health encompasses a broad range of arts-based health interventions. Different art forms—in particular, music, dance, literature, visual art, and theater—have been closely examined in the light of mental and physical health benefits of either using art and culture, or by practicing cultural expression, that is, by participating in activities such as painting, writing, composing, and so on (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Some studies have also analyzed the effects of *combining* these two approaches (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Literature has been intensively studied as a medium for strengthening mental health in various parts of the population, in particular, among socially, economically, and physically vulnerable groups (see, e.g., Longden et al., 2015). “Narrative Medicine” is an example of a literature-based area of research as well as a clinical practice that focuses on bettering communication between patients and health care staff by drawing on the attention-sharpening and empathy-deepening effects of reading and interpreting literature (see e.g. Rita Charon’s *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine*, 2016). A different approach to the field of literature and health promotion has been developed and promoted by the Reader Organization in Britain. Since 2002, the organization has worked with “Shared Reading,” a literature-based health intervention. This method engages participants through group-structured meetings led by a certified guide in charge of selecting literary material and running sessions by alternating between reading poems and short stories or excerpts from novels aloud—and asking open-ended questions about the texts at hand with the aim of facilitating group discussion (Billington & Steenberg, 2021).

Narrative medicine, “Shared Reading,” and other approaches to the cross-disciplinary field of (literary) arts and health have been subject to debate and scrutiny. Suzanne Keen, a notable critic, has questioned the assumed link between reading and heightened levels of empathy that underpin most interventions and research within the field. Against such assumptions, Keen argues, “empathy may be better understood as a faculty that readers bring to their imaginative engagement with texts—a human default setting—rather than as a quality gained from or cultivated by encounters with fiction” (Keen, 2007, 70). Against interventions that emphasize the importance of reading “quality” literature as a remedy for empathy deficits, Keen also argues that “readers’ empathy may have little to do with the quality of fiction as affirmed by professionals, that is, on the distinction of serious from popular fiction (including the often-dismissed categories of ‘junk reading,’ ‘trash,’ ‘airport books,’ and genre fiction such as romances).” While not dismissing the idea of links between empathy, reading, and prosocial behavior, Keen duly reminds us that attempts to link reading and beneficial social interaction ought to be critically reviewed and, further, that the complex qualities of literary aesthetics that keep scholars up at night may not necessarily resonate with lay readers.

Although concerns have been voiced over the merit of literature-based health interventions, it is fairly well established that the arts—including engaging with literary texts—can offer *something* of value to health promotion and intervention. The Reader Organization, for example, has showcased promising empirical results; documenting that people who suffer from chronic pain can benefit from its literature-based intervention (Billington et al., 2017) and furthermore, that Shared Reading seems to be able to heighten quality of life for people living with dementia (Longden et al., 2016). In addition, the organization has shown that Shared Reading works to strengthen female inmates’ memory and ability to mentalize, that is, their ability to imagine other peoples’ feelings and thoughts (Billington et al., 2016; Fonagy et al., 2007).

It follows from these findings that Shared Reading presents a fruitful avenue for exploring the dynamics of literature-based health promotion. In line with this endeavor, we will tend to a Shared Reading intervention from

Denmark that seeks to reduce isolation and depression among newly retired men. Our approach is qualitative and descriptive and our guiding question amounts to *how can we describe the interplay between literary texts and social behavior in reading groups aimed at mental health promotion?*

2 | SHARED READING IN A DANISH CONTEXT

Based on the principles of Shared Reading, the Danish project “Read, Man!” has deployed reading groups across Denmark (Kristensen et al., 2020). The project engages elderly men (age 65–75) given that this particular group is exposed to experiencing mental health issues when facing retirement (Folker et al., 2020; Noh et al., 2019): elderly men are at risk of loneliness and a loss of meaning in daily life when withdrawing from work (Folker et al., 2020; Noh et al., 2019). In the context of empirical literary studies, emphasis has mostly been on reading habits among women (see e.g., Long, 1986, 2003; Radway, 1984; Taylor, 2019), rendering men's reading an understudied area of research. Only a few studies have looked into how and why men read (Reed, 2002), and none has drawn out and examined potential mental health benefits of collective reading for men facing retirement.

3 | METHOD

Shared Reading sessions in project “Read, Man!” were carried out as 8-week-long interventions facilitated by the Danish organization Læseforeningen (Eng.: The Danish Reader Association) based on the Shared Reading concept developed by The Reader Organization, in which meetings are led by a guide. During each session, a short story and a poem is read aloud by the reading guide, and breaks are introduced to allow for collective reflection and discussion. Texts are chosen in a collaborative effort between researchers involved in the project and reading guides, and both texts that reflect the participants' life situation (elderly males facing retirement) and other themes are included. The interventions consisted of a weekly meeting-day with the participation of 6–10 men per intervention. Recruitment took place via a Danish organization for elderly people called Ældresagen (Eng.: The Dane-Age Association) as well as advertisements in community centers and local newspapers.

Between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020, 6 interventions were carried out in various Danish cities, 4 of which had been concluded at the time of writing this article. The 4 concluded courses make up the empirical basis of the present study. Taken together, 30 men participated in the courses. Criteria for inclusion in the study were men in the age group (65–75) and a status of being near to or just having entered into retirement. Many participants came with an existing interest in literature and were active readers, some had read earlier in life and wanted to take up literature again, and yet others had almost never read, or only read very little throughout their lives. Participants had different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. However, the project has not yet addressed the issue of a potential bias of mainly recruiting resourceful participants—in social, economic, and cultural terms—which is something future research needs to pay attention to.

4 | TENTATIVE EXPLORATION OF DATA

Data was collected via participant observations of the Shared Reading sessions as well as group interviews with participants at the conclusion of the Shared Reading courses. In analyzing the material, a template analysis approach was applied using the qualitative data analysis NVivo to identify dominant themes in the material (King, 2012). Data excerpts included in this article are emphasized to exemplify these themes. We are conducting a systematic analysis of 53 interviews to evaluate the possible health effects of the reading sessions on

participants, but for the purposes of the present article's main interest in the interplay between the literary text and the social connectivity in the group, we offer a few examples of participant feedback to give an impression of the overall response.

Two dominant themes were identified in the material. Participants pointed firstly to the *articulation effect* of literary texts and secondly, to the *social* dimensions of the intervention. We are indebted for our use of the former term to the literary scholar Winfried Fluck, who defines it as the capacity of literary texts to offer “culturally accepted plots” for our existence (Fluck, 2013, 51). The act of reading about different characters in poems, novels, and short stories, Fluck argues, adds to our knowledge reservoir concerning possible ways to exist and act in the world, hence making it easier to compare and align one's own life with cultural characters. This process, Fluck further contends, can potentially help readers better understand other people in their surroundings as well as function as a source of comfort and support for readers who otherwise cannot find ways to articulate their identity or way of life (p. 51). In continuation with this line of thought, several participants express how reading helps them “sharpen their attention” and grapple with their own lives and surroundings. One participant, for example, pointed out that it has “become easier to understand what they say on TV, or what my daughter-in-law or the kids are saying.”

Others state that reading literary texts has made them appreciate other peoples' viewpoints, noting that reading literature makes it easier to think “outside the box” and ponder the fact that other members of the reading group hold different views: “Everyone has different experiences and thoughts. James [another reading group participant] experiences things in a totally different way compared to how I experience things.”

Yet others pointed out that reading has “revealed a new world,” “opened up his senses,” and “produced a variety of images,” that are “descriptive and important.” Statements like these all seem to highlight the articulation effect of literary texts, although they differ in the sense of being directed at participants' immediate life-world—that is, a renewed articulation of what is already known such as television programs and in-laws—and another form of articulation aimed at what is yet to be discovered; new “worlds,” senses one was not aware of, or the opinions of other reading group participants.

In certain ways, our results from the Shared Reading intervention seem to offer insight into the field of empirical literary studies that dovetail with accounts of individual readers' absorption, emotional attachment, and narrative practices. The empirical material yields thematic currents that run parallel to, for example, Rita Charon's account of literary texts as pathways to a more fine-tuned understanding of other people and the world via the deployment of narrative dynamics (Charon, 2006); that is, literary texts as mind-opening facilitators between the reader's life-story and narrative sense of self with literary characters, places, and feelings. When reading about people or milieus who are very different, or similar, to themselves, readers may—according to Charon—become increasingly capable of approaching other people (in the case of doctors: approach patients) so as to appreciate their life-stories in a non-reductive way (Charon, 2006).

In a related vein, Emy Koopman and Frank Hakemulder suggest that literary reading offers a space of “stillness” and suspension of judgment which affords readers a chance to reflect and build a competence for empathy (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015), and Kumschick, Menninghaus, and others have argued that literary reading may bolster emotional understanding and development among children by granting them access to the inner lives and feelings of different characters (Kumschick et al., 2014).

However, the scholars mentioned here have all primarily focused on individual reading and the possible beneficial, prosocial effects of what we may call “classic” forms of engagement with literature. While the Shared Reading format of the present study builds on similar insights concerning the value of literary texts for enhanced interpersonal understanding and competence for complexity and nuance via narrative devices, and though sharing literature through oral recitation before a group is as old as literary culture itself, it *adds* to these effects by combining the act of reading with a social experience; especially because the typical Shared Reading session combines looking at a text in print and listening to it being read aloud with pauses for social dialogue and inner,

personal thoughtfulness. This we believe combines salient effects of both silent/solitary and shared communal experience of literature. Our preliminary data shows that it is, in fact, the association of literary engagement with the social exchanges facilitated by the reading group and reading guide that constitutes the most important and—among participants—valued feature of the Shared Reading sessions. As Billington and Steenberg point out in their overview of state of the art for research into literary reading with focus on Shared Reading: “The humanizing presence of literature creates a small group community—almost an alternative mode of human society—in which the relation between private and public is closer than conventionally allowed and where ‘inner lives come out, and come together’ (Longden et al., 2015) to address complex and often painful meaning-of-life issues authentically and non-reductively.” And, they continue, this “group-ness’ of Shared Reading is an area ripe for further research” (Billington & Steenberg, 2021, 413), for both qualitative and quantitative research strategies. In the following section, we delve further into the social dimension of the format and how it contributes to what we argue is a distinct literary form of connectivity.

5 | THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

The second important theme that emerged from our initial qualitative gathering of data analysis concerns the social nature of the intervention. Participants noted that conversations at meetings “went beyond” the literary texts that were being discussed and that it was “really nice to get an impression of the different participants.” A participant reported that although he would “normally never cancel family gatherings, I have made exceptions to this rule to participate in the reading group,” and another noted that it is very “valuable and new” for men to have the opportunity to discuss important issues together. The latter participant also observed that this form of interaction could be “revolutionary,” and yet another expressed that he finds it quite rare for men to be able to discuss “important existential issues” with each other. Quotes like these all point to the importance of social interaction when analyzing the impact of the intervention. In this regard, the all-male structure of the group is described as a valuable aspect in the experiences of participants, providing a rare chance for them to discuss significant matters and interact with other men. Here, we would add that even though the status of gender and gendered norms are at the center of much critical debate and controversy in contemporary society, it remains crucial to acknowledge gender categories as real and lived-in for people everywhere. Along these lines, “Read, Man!” speaks to the weight participants ascribe to a masculine experience and identity, and their need for sharing this experience with people who are like-minded.

Interestingly, it seems that participants’ experiences of being able to share and relate to each other’s circumstances in life outweighs the importance of having something in common with the texts being read: one participant noted that it “is not only interesting to read about elderly men, although we are all elderly men. It is actually really nice to read about other aspects of life. We are all just young boys on the inside.” Another participant chimes in, observing that “in the beginning [of the intervention], all the texts we read seemed to be about elderly, or middle-aged, men. Luckily that changed after a while.” The experience of recognizing oneself in a text, in other words, does not necessarily hinge on a *formal* resemblance between reader and text.

Recently, this line of thought has received attention within more theoretical strands of literary studies that go by the term “postcritique.” In her publication *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), Rita Felski carefully unpacks the complexities of identification with literary texts, characters, and methods, a phenomenon which has long been denounced as conservative or romantic (see Felski, 2008, 27). Felski’s approach allows for a fine-grained understanding of the phenomenon of identifying with texts and characters, including an untangling of different *forms* of identification that often get lumped together in ordinary language as well as academic discussion. Felski argues that alignment, allegiance, recognition, and empathy are all different forms of identification—although they differ substantially in ways that are both formal and phenomenological. Alignment, she notes, has to do with the formal organization of texts in which a certain point of view is given privilege, rather than another. Some characters

receive extended space for interior monologues, action, and feelings while others reside in obscurity—which, unsurprisingly, leads readers to align more closely with some characters, rather than others. The concept of allegiance, Felski goes on to suggest, touches on matters that are both formal and rooted in ethics and emotions and has to do with “cheering” for characters (or other levels of the text); that is, investing ethical or emotional concern in certain elements of a novel or a short story; hoping that a certain character overcomes an arduous challenge, or, on a different level, wishing that a novel receives a favorable review. Recognition, on a different note, is a term that speaks to the experience of affinity between reader and text, the sense that a character resembles oneself, or that a literary “topos” resonates profoundly with well-known places or situations. Meanwhile, empathy does not need a further introduction—a term hailed in both ordinary language and theoretical monographs as having profound importance for our social lives, and the workings of literary works, and art in general (Johansen & Karl, 2022).

The important thing to note here is that while these forms of identification can indeed occur at the same time—readers may feel aligned, allegiant, and empathic towards a text or a character while also recognizing themselves in the text—they may also happen independently from one another. A reader might feel formally aligned with, for instance, the point of view of an infamous convict or murderer when reading a biography, but that does not necessarily entail empathy, allegiance, or recognition. Similarly, it is possible to experience allegiance with superheroes or crime-fighters without experiencing empathy. Felski’s postcritical analyses help us appreciate the complexities of identification and its various entangled, yet semi-independent elements.

From the perspective of our Shared Reading study, the conceptual work on identification presented by Felski allows us to grapple with forms of collective reader response by providing a theoretical lens that participants’ responses and interview statements may be seen through. While Felski primarily describes the affects and effects of reading via an analysis of her own individual response as a reader alongside other first-person accounts of reading, she also emphasizes collective reading practices, for example, in the case where she describes women organizing around foundational feminist texts (Felski, 2008, 33ff.). Based on this, her approaches and concepts can shine a light on both individual and collective reading processes, making her work suitable for describing individual engagement with texts as well as social interventions, like “Shared Reading.”

As several participants in “Read, Man!” emphasize the importance of reading about literary characters and historical periods that are removed from themselves, that is, texts that allow them to travel in time and space, they do nonetheless maintain a certain emphasis on different forms of identification. With Felski’s concepts in mind, we might say that these participants are eager to recognize *aspects* of themselves that time has rendered distant—being a young boy again, for example—and to experience alignment, allegiance, and perhaps also empathy, or any combination thereof, with these characters and texts. Identification, we might say, comes in many shapes and forms, but rarely presents itself through a binary identification-or-no-identification matrix but, rather, as a layered, integral part of readers’ experiences and responses: reading literature without the slightest sense of alignment, allegiance, recognition, or empathy is hard to imagine.

In continuation of this, it is our observation that the different forms of identification that unfold between readers and texts make up a foundational aspect of Shared Reading interventions. They are the pillars of the “articulation effect” described by participants as well as catalysts for the sense of community and sociality that participants describe as being particularly valuable about the format, in the sense that experiences of identification in many instances are what spark conversation and discussion.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: LITERARY CONNECTIVITY

Qualitative data from the Shared Reading sessions in project “Read, Man!” suggest, as noted, an intricate relationship between group reading, individual reflection and recognition, and social interaction. We suggest conceptualizing these particular dynamics of collective reader response as *literary connectivity*. By this we

mean a form of interaction sparked by a shared experience of an artwork; inspired by but not restricted to aesthetic experience. Going back to Felski is helpful for pointing out what we mean by this. In her reflections on teaching literary studies in the context of higher education, Felski observes that students of literature: “reflect on individual responses while also fashioning collective ones—shaped by the teacher’s guidance, to be sure, but also by the relay of affinities and antipathies, sparks and synergies, among the students themselves” (Felski, 2020, 156).

According to Felski, there is a link between experiencing a form of identification and the tendency to share this experience with other people in order to explore and compare modes of identification in a group setting. Like children who assign roles between themselves based on a favorite television show or film, adults too have the inclination to compare and contrast how their surroundings relate to a shared experience. In the context of “Shared Reading,” literary texts assume the role of a collective resource of identification around which unexpected connections and relations appear.

Our aim has been to describe what happens in the meeting of text and reader in a shared reading context and not to compare the effect of literary and non-literary activity. Therefore, we have no control groups engaged in other forms of meaningful activity to compare with to isolate the possible effects of literary reading. However, until such studies can be carried out, we maintain that literary texts, compared for instance to film clubs, cooking, billiards, or model building as group activities men often engage in and find pleasure in, seem particularly well suited for enabling this type of identification-based social interaction for two reasons. First of all, and due to their linguistic nature, they translate easily into the stream of human interaction and communication which to a large extent builds on language. Secondly, they provide access to the inner thoughts and feelings of characters—being forms of art which, above other art forms, can enter and describe minds with ease and thus offer insight into the lives of others—hence granting a platform from which readers can readily identify and reflect on their own inner thoughts and feelings. Compared to silent and solitary reading of longer formats discussed in traditional book club schemes, Shared Reading offers potential for spontaneous sharing of feelings and thoughts and it is not as dependent on cultural capital and analytical skills as literary activities that presuppose reading from home.

It is our suggestion that the Shared Reading format and the material we have gathered so far offer a form of connectivity that is distinctly literary; a type of sociality facilitated and enabled by texts in a way that stands out from other forms of human interaction, namely, a collective experience of literary art that fosters caring and sharing between people who, in this particular case, express a deep need for sharing their reflections and experiences with others. It remains to be seen if the literary nature integral to the Shared Reading format can, indeed, enhance mental health and quality of life among men facing retirement, and how shared literary reading differs from other social and cultural activities. Further studies into these questions are called for and anticipated. During the coming phase of project “Read, Man!” we will present systematic analyses of qualitative and quantitative data in order to address these questions. For now, we can conclude that participants in the intervention seem to be both receptive and positive towards the concept of Shared Reading, as well as the capacity of literary texts to provide identification and social connectivity, and—perhaps most importantly—that there seems to be a defining link between the two.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the initiation of data collection and all participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study as well as the implications of participation. All participants were pseudonymized and data was handled and stored responsibly. Procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. The study was registered and approved by the University of Southern Denmark in accordance with the Data Protection Regulation and comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU) 2016/679.

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How to cite this article: Pihl, M.-E. L., Kristensen, M. M., Folker, A. P., & Simonsen, P. (2024).

Approaching literary connectivity: Early reflections on a Shared Reading intervention in the light of postcritical thought. *Orbis Litterarum*, 79, 145–153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12380>