"The poem has stayed with me": Continued processing and impact from Shared Reading experiences of people living with cancer

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ABSTRACT

Encounters with literary texts can lead to deeply cherished memories, some of which readers may ascribe powerful and enduring functions to in terms of acquired life insights, behavioral changes, consolation, and well-being. The present article charts how texts relate to readers' experiences and how these text-experiences are related to how they are remembered. In the context of a Shared Reading group for people living with cancer, a multiple-case study was conducted, tracing examples of enduring impressions and how these are perceived as transformative and valuable resources for the participants in coping with their disease. Qualitative and quantitative data from four readers were collected at different points in time and were analyzed through the grounded theory method and a temporality framework. The results clarify how, in the long run, literature, and in particular Shared Reading, can affect personal growth and resilience.

1. Introduction and background

A steadily growing amount of research and scholarship focuses on how reading literature affects readers' well-being (Andersen, 2022; Billington, 2020). For a comprehensive understanding of that impact, we will here argue that we need to bridge the available research on experiences *during* the reading and how these experiences are *remembered* weeks, months, or even years later (Bortolussi & Dixon, 2015). Relations between experiencing and remembering may be less than straightforward (Kahneman & Riis, 2005), idiosyncratic and contingent on the context in which individual readers read the text (cf. Larsen, 1996), and what particularly resonated with them at that time in their lives (cf. Sikora et al., 2010). In the longer run, these may be the aspects that readers treasure and perceive as affecting their lives, attitudes, behavior, and happiness. We will here refer to these memories connected to reading experiences as 'echoes', be it that those memories may not be an 'accurate' representation of the text, nor the actual reading experience. The present article aims to set out mapping such relations. For that purpose, we analyzed data collected during and after a Shared Reading (SR) project for people living with cancer, specifically focusing on transformative reading experiences (TRE; see e.g., Fialho, 2019) in the time of reading and in the time of remembering. The paper presents six examples distributed from four participants about how an SR experience of a story or a poem became a support in their lives with cancer.

Apart from affecting physical health, a cancer diagnosis can have a wide-ranging impact on mental health and the overall quality of life. Specifically, it can profoundly impact people's life stories (Yang et al., 2010) and self-concept (Curbow et al., 1990; Foltz, 1987). Arthur Frank describes a life-threatening disease as a disruptive event that leaves many people feeling dislocated because the "present

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is not what the past was supposed to lead up to, and the future is scarcely thinkable." (Frank, 2013, p. 55). The experience of a threat to our existence, which we cannot control, transforms the abstract knowledge of human mortality into a "constant, gnawing awareness" (Frank, 2009, p. 187). Facing mortality, people instinctively search for meaning and narratives to reconstruct their sense of self and identity (Frank, 2013; Henriksen & Hansen, 2010; Kernan & Lepore, 2009; Lee, 2008; Martino & Freda, 2016). For these reasons, the participants' way of processing the SR experiences in this study might not apply to a general population but reflect the unique life situation they find themselves in.

The assumption that we need narratives during challenging times is in line with recent studies on the transformative effects of literature, where researchers have found life crises to increase the likelihood of TRE (Koopman, 2016; Kuiken et al., 2004; Sikora et al., 2010) due to a "readiness" to be transformed (Colaizzi, 1978; Swaton & O'callaghan, 1999). Thus, the search for life meaning very likely moderates responsiveness to a literary text (Carney & Robertson, 2018), and it can be assumed that cancer patients, who have undergone significant life and self-changes, are likely more prone to TRE.

Previous studies of life-changing, significant, self-altering, healing, and therapeutic reading experiences (Bruneau & Pehrsson, 2014; Colaizzi, 1978; Fialho, 2012; Kuiken, Miall et al., 2004; Sheldrick Ross, 1999; Swaton & O'callaghan, 1999; Tangerås, 2020) and bibliomemoirs (McMillan, 2019) have emphasized the reader's connection to the text: "They read themselves into the story and then read the story into their lives, which then becomes a part of them." (Sheldrick Ross, 1999, p. 793). This process, known as self-implication (Kuiken et al., 2004), occurs when there is a connection between the reader and the text, and this can be in terms of personal relevance (see review in Kuzmičová & Bálint, 2019), or a personal resonance (Seilman & Larsen, 1989). In addition, self-implication has been studied as an underlying mechanism for meaning-making (Whiteley & Canning, 2017), responding to the appeal of the text, and filling in the blanks (as Iser, 1975, hypothesized about "the implied reader") utilizing our experiences. Thus, to understand the phenomenon of TRE, it needs to be studied in the context of readers' lives and not isolated from it (Sheldrick Ross, 1999).

However, self-implication alone does not necessarily lead to transformation. One of the processes that is believed to restructure the understanding of the text and simultaneously the reader's sense of self is *self-modifying feelings*: "Readers commonly *recognize* (…). But, at times, they also find themselves participating in an unconventional flow of feelings through which they *realize* something they have not previously experienced – or at least not in the form provided by the text." (Kuiken et al., 2004, p. 175). Furthermore, the lasting impact of reading experiences is often attributed to the experience of *being moved* by the text (Menninghaus et al., 2015), a reading mode that Tangerås (2020) has termed *Reading by Heart,* where readers are both reading with their hearts and, when realizing the meaning of the text, learning by heart (Tangerås, 2020, p. 197). Thus, in addition to a personal engagement, an emotional engagement in the text seems fundamental in TRE.

Although literature-related TRE as a phenomenon has probably been known for centuries or even millennia (cf. Hakemulder, 2000), research is still in its early stages with only a few studies available (Djikic et al., 2009; Fialho, 2012; Kuiken et al., 2004a, b; Loi et al., 2023; Tangerås, 2018, 2020). Previous research either studied online experiences directly after reading (Koopman, 2015; Sikora et al., 2010) and readers' retrospective self-reports about their experiences. Thus, the studies lacked data from the actual reading experience (e.g., Loi et al., 2023), or readers' reading behavior (live-long print exposure) and proxies of TRE (Lenhart et al., 2023). To our knowledge, there has been no attempt to relate the reading experiences and how these are consolidated in readers' memories later. However, bibliomemoirs likely contain examples of these text-reader relations. In the present contribution, we formulate hypotheses about which aspects of the reading experience are associated with an enduring impact and start charting how the echoes of the reading experience evolve.

The transformative reading experiences in the present study are explored in a specific context: Shared Reading, a reading group practice developed by the UK charity The Reader (Davis, 2009; The Reader, 2019). The method is as follows: A group of people, one of them a certified 'Reader Leader' (RL), facilitate a 'live' reading experience of a short story and a poem; the texts are read aloud by the RL, who also guides an open discussion around the texts. Although studies have investigated therapeutic outcomes and benefits of SR (Billington et al., 2010, 2013; Billington, 2020; Davis, 2020; Gray et al., 2016; Longden et al., 2016; Kristensen et al., 2023; Steenberg, 2013), the therapeutic 'effect' or function of SR is unintended and indirect (Billington et al., 2013; Hodge et al., 2007, p. 102; Longden et al., 2015).

Several elements of SR are assumed to influence participants' encounters with literary texts. The crucial components are 1) the style of facilitating, including the questions asked and how the RL opens and *performs* the text (Steenberg et al., 2021), p. 2) the double modality (Skjerdingstad & Tangerås, 2019), that is, participants simultaneously reading and listening, 3) the social component thanks to which participants' perspectives become integrated into a collective meaning-making process, and 4) the context of the SR group: the physical room, the setting, and the atmosphere. Hence, the impact of SR is assumed to differ significantly from individual, silent reading.

Previous SR studies have provided empirical examples of moving or breakthrough moments during SR sessions (Christiansen & Dalsgård, 2021; Gray et al., 2016; Tangerås, 2022). However, the long-term and possible transformative effect of those moments is unknown. In some studies, the researchers have included observations and findings related to the impact of SR *outside* the group; for example, Davis et al. (2016) reflect on longitudinal effects (p. 51); Gray et al. (2016) investigated the reading group's impact on life and relationships through interviews; and Canning (2017) have studied how a prison SR group connect the literary texts to their personal experiences. Christiansen and Dalsgård (2021), propose the term 'reverberations' to cover experiences of a continued impact. However, the study does not go further into the phenomenology of these reverberations or look at them systematically in relation to the specific reading experiences that generated them. Despite the unexplored therapeutic potential of the cognitive consolidation of reading (Carney & Robertson, 2022), no SR study has yet investigated participants' continued reading experiences following the reading experience into the participants' lives.

Our approach to investigating the long-term impact can be captured in the concepts of 'resonances and echoes' (Andersen, 2022): studying how the literary texts resonate with the participants in the sessions and how these resonances from the sessions at times continue to 'echo' afterward. Thus, the reading experience is divided in two: during the session/reading (resonances; cf. Seilman & Larsen, 1989) and after the session/reading (echoes). The interest in the continued reading experience has previously been expressed, for example, in the study by Broek et al. (1999), where they looked at how text comprehension translates into mental representations that "linger far after the reader has put down the book" (Broek et al., 1999, p. 71). In addition, Mar et al. (2011) have argued that emotions do not simply disappear after reading but can have an impact long after and re-emerges when the book is brought to mind. Therefore, the concept of echoes introduced here builds on an existing body of literature.

The present study connects the resonances during the SR sessions to echoes after the sessions: how the participants responded to the texts themselves and remembered that experience at different time points. The purpose is two-fold: first, we will map possible ways in which experiences at one moment in time can reemerge at other moments and investigate what metamorphoses may occur in that process. This might add insights about how literature enters and reenters the lives of readers; second, considering the long term aspirations for a SR intervention (e.g., coping with a life threatening illness through literary experience), we need to know how the experiences reemerge, and in what way they may be experienced as support.

In each case, we have analyzed how the participants experience the text during the session, how the text is remembered and used, and what is remembered. In other words: We trace and examine the resonances and echoes in the reading experiences. Accordingly, the research questions applied to each case are:

> *RQ1: How did the reading experience evolve from resonances in the session to ongoing echoes in the participant's life?*

> *RQ2: What aspects of the text and reading experience were remembered at different time points; at the end of the session, in the following weeks, and 3–7 months after?*

> *RQ3: Why was the reading experience significant for the participant?*

In addition, with this study, we aim to answer the overall question of *how SR experiences can help cancer patients cope with their treatment and illness.*

2. Methodology

The present study is a multiple case study of TRE in two SR groups for cancer patients and a qualitative exploration of reading experiences that echo after a session. Qualitative case study research is an in-depth exploration of subjective and experiential ways of knowing and understanding and is primarily captured with qualitative methodology (Stake, 2010, p. 56–70). In addition, it is not method-dependent and can include mixed data sources. Therefore, a multiple case study was suitable to present the diversity and richness of individual reading experiences interwoven by different data sources.

The organization of the reading groups followed The Reader's SR practice (Davis, 2009; The Reader, 2019) to extend previous work in SR and health benefits. A session consisted of approximately 1 hour of reading and discussing a prose text and 30 min of reading and discussing a poem with a 5-min break in between. The RLs were librarians who had certification and experience in SR. The RL chose the texts, read them aloud, and facilitated the group discussion. The researcher (Andersen) and the RLs met beforehand to discuss what type of short stories and poems the participants might recognize themselves in, considering themes related to personal transitions, change, and uncertainty. However, we kept a broad text selection, and the curriculum represented a wide thematic and stylistic variety of Norwegian and international literature (see appendix 1). The texts were deliberately not about cancer to avoid limiting the talks to being centered around illness. Still, the participants created links to their illness, and these connections were often unpredictable for the researcher or the RLs. To give an example, one of the participants noticed that many of the story characters were lonely women who were home during the day, which she related to because she, at that moment, was home when her family went to work or school. The RL didn't consider that connection when she selected the text.

2.1. Role of the researcher

Andersen was an observing participant in both groups (31 out of 32 sessions) and participated in the discussions. This regular presence and active participation was necessary for the data collection. As one participant said, because she knew the researcher and trusted that she would respect her data, the participant was comfortable with being open and sharing personal information. However, when creating bonds with the participants, there is the risk that they tell the researcher what they *think* the researcher wants to know to help in the project. In case study research, one of the main concerns and strengths is personal involvement, where the researcher is the main instrument of data gathering (Simons, 2020, p. 682), so it is crucial to triangulate with multiple data sources to limit possible bias. Initially, Andersen took notes during sessions, but she soon realized it challenged her participant role and ability to follow the readings.

Finally, in this paper, we aim to tell the participants' unique and meaningful stories and make them accessible to the reader by connecting and constructing meaning from widespread data.

2.2. Participants

The present study is part of a larger study investigating SR experiences for cancer patients. In total, 12 participants provided their written informed consent to participate either in an online or an on-site SR group for 16 weeks in Norway (Onsite: $N = 8$, online: $N = 4$). The recruitment was primarily through cancer organizations (see appendix 3 for recruitment material). The selection criteria included adults (18+) with a cancer diagnosis who could understand Norwegian. It was stressed in the information that participation was voluntary, and informed consent, both orally and written, was given and signed in the first session. During the course of the reading groups, two participants withdrew from the study: one from each group. The present study is based on data from four of the participants (selected based on availability for a follow-up interview): on-site group ($N = 3$) and online group ($N = 1$). The names that are used in this article are fictitious. All four participants identified as readers, although some reported reading minimally since becoming ill (see appendix 2 for information about participants).

The participants who became the cases in the present paper received a draft of the article for member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

2.3. Data collection

What follows is a description of each data source, collected by Andersen, that has enlightened the reading experiences and the participants' stories:

Background questionnaire: The participants filled out a background questionnaire (see appendix 4.1) to collect demographic data, information on cancer diagnosis, reading habits, and motivation for signing up.

Audio recordings: The sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Written response: After each session, the participants engaged in a 10 min. free written response to the prompt: "Empty your mind of thoughts, ideas, and associations that came up during the session".

Post-reading scales: A questionnaire (see appendix 4.2) was filled out at the end of each session to both the short story and the poem consisting of an open-ended question: "What do you remember most from the text?" followed by The Aesthetic Emotions Scale (version 2.0: AESTHEMOS, Schindler et al., 2018) and the Experiencing Questionnaire (EQ, Kuiken et al., 2012) to capture the participants' subjective emotions and experiences after reading and discussing the texts and to identify 'significant' reading experiences. After each scale, an open-ended question was added to invite responses not covered by the scales. The questionnaire has been back-and-forward translated into Norwegian (Tsang et al., 2017) and pilot-tested in existing SR groups. AESTHEMOS 2.0 is generally related to aesthetic emotions, whereas EQ is linked explicitly to literary reading experiences. The selected factors from the EQ measure "extraordinary reading experiences" (Kuiken et al., 2012, p. 264). The online group was sent a link and filled out the questionnaire after the session, and the on-site group filled out a paper version at the end of the session. Sometimes, if time had run out or energy was low, they would fill them out at home.

Audio diary: The participants in the on-site group received an audio recorder to record ongoing thoughts about the texts and the session at home if they wanted to (see appendix 5). All four audio diaries were transcribed, providing, in one case, rich processual data on continued reading experiences.

Focus group interviews: A focus group interview (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2020) with each group was carried out shortly after the reading groups had ended. This method mirrors the dynamics of SR with a collective and vibrant discussion where the participants can build on each other's contributions. Thus, it was a valuable data source to get insight into a broad aspect of the collective experiences of participating in the reading group. The approach was open with semi-structured questions, so the participants could steer the conversation to what they found most important (see appendix 6 for interview guide).

Semi-structured individual interviews: Individual interviews added depth to each participant's experience to complement the group interviews. Andersen interviewed five participants (four of them became the cases in this study). Each interview was between 1 and 2 h. The individual interviews provided insight into the life context of the participant and significant reading experiences (see appendix 7 for interview guides).

The literary texts: To become more fully aware of how the texts could be interpreted, we conducted reading sessions with fellow researchers to discuss multiple interpretations and the qualities of each text.

Data were collected with a particular area of interest: the continued reading experience and application of literature to life in an illness process. To investigate this, data collection was at different time points (see table underneath for data collected in each group).

	During session	In the end of the session	Between sessions	Shortly after the end of the reading group	3-7 months after
On-site group	audio recordings and observation	post reading questionnaires written response	audio diary	focus group interview	individual interview
Online	audio recordings and observation	post reading questionnaires written response		focus group interview	individual interview

It is important to note that for each case, many data sources were available, thus allowing for triangulation and depth. However, not every participant contributed to every source, primarily because the study focused on people going through or recovering from cancer, and their availability and energy were limited at various points.

2.4. Procedure for individual interviews

Without the contextualizing narrative, we cannot know the particulars of the relationships between the text, the reader, the reading experience, and the outcome (Sheldrick Ross, 1999, p. 783). Thus, individual interviews were necessary to collect more in-depth data on a participant's life situation and reading experiences to understand why some reading experiences had profound significance.

The approach was largely exploratory and 'learning by doing'. Previously collected data informed the approach in each case and allowed for an individualized procedure. For example, in the first interview (Elena), the participant was asked to elaborate on her experience of the poem "Romanske buer" since she had identified it as significant in the focus group interview. Whereas in the fourth interview (Maria), Andersen brought recall materials to the interview, such as, written responses, transcript quotes, and paper copies of the texts. Petitmengin (2006) argues that using materials for recall in interviews is necessary to gain access to the experience. In a SR study, the researchers used video recordings from sessions to assist individual interviews with participants (Davis et al., 2016). However, in the present study the participants also had the opportunity to openly recall the texts *without* showing/playing recall material beforehand. Thus, it varied in the interviews how the reading experience was recalled (through an item of recall or an open question). Our recommendation for future research, based on these experiences, is to start the interview with an open question to allow the participant to identify their perceived significant reading experiences and then help the participant recall the experience with various types of material.

2.5. Selection of reading experiences and data analysis

In an open coding of interview transcripts, it caught our interest how the participants expressed significant reading experiences and how they often didn't remember the text or just remembered a feeling, an image, or the impact that the text had on their life – the 'echoes' of the reading experience.

From this initial coding and observations, we then selected six reading experiences based on three criteria: 1) the participant singled out the reading experience during the interview or in another post-reading data source due to a felt personal significance; 2) the reading experience was enlightened through rich data sources; 3) the participant connected the reading experience and the text to their illness/recovery process. Thus, we distinguished between texts they remembered due to personal significance and texts they remembered because they were the last ones they read or did not seem to have had much continued impact. Subsequently, we gathered all data sources that informed the selected reading experiences. We also checked in the data material if there were reading experiences not mentioned in the interviews that seemed to have had significance. For example, in this process, one reading experience was added to the selection (reading experience nr. 1) based on the participant's audio diary and high scores on the post-reading scales.

When we had identified and collated the reading experiences, Andersen reread the data material for each case. One of her observations was that the participants remembered their reading experiences differently in the various data sources. In that way, the different time points informed change over time. We analyzed the examples by making connections and visualizing relations in each of them. This process mirrored grounded theory methods (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012; Charmaz, 2014): a constructivist and iterative process shifting between the particular and the abstract in a pendulum movement. Accordingly, the case study is theory-generated (Simons, 2020, p. 683).

Some stages in this exploration and interpretation of the data included: making semantic maps of the session transcripts to visualize the topics discussed and internal connections in the conversation; reconstructing each of the reading experiences chronologically based on the data sources available, from the meeting with the text to the interview; creating a diagram for each reading experience visualizing data sources in different time points; and creating an overview for each case capturing relations between text, session, echoes, and life. These stages helped us to get an in-depth understanding of the content and core of each case and each reading experience.

During the analysis, we realized that the selected reading experiences were transformative, and the changes had a temporal direction. These discoveries led to including theory on TRE and possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are related to the future-oriented component of the self and constructed from past and future self-representations. Possible selves are, for example: "the ideal selves that we very much like to become (…) the selves we could become and the selves we are afraid of becoming" (p. 954), and they present specific hopes, fears, and fantasies for the individual. In that way, possible selves provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of the self (p. 955) and are dynamic and powerful drivers for developmental and personal transformation.

The construction of positive possible selves is significant in a life situation where the future is uncertain, as when living with cancer (Curbow et al., 1990; Pintado, 2017; Sweeny & Dunlop, 2020). There is a risk that a future self, associated with a negative outcome (a feared self), might take over (Sweeny & Dunlop, 2020). A life-threatening event like cancer can alter the self-concept and give people a need to gain a sense of capability and agency when adjusting to the illness. In this situation, positive possible selves projected into the future might support successful coping (Porter et al., 1984, unpublished manuscript mentioned in Markus & Nurius, 1986 p. 961).

We have read and constructed the cases within a temporality framework (past, present, and future). The approach is close to the study by Loi et al. (2023), where they carried out a quantitative content analysis of 543 qualitative responses of fiction readers' perceived TRE within a possible selves framework. However, we have approached the participant's, TRE through a qualitative study to gain a holistic understanding and explore not only which parts of the participants' self-concept were activated, but also the questions of how and why (the contextualizing narrative) and the changes over time.

2.6. Ethics statement

The study was reviewed and approved by the Norwegian Research Ethics Review Board.

3. Cases

The reading experiences are structured as follows 1) a brief description of the text, 2) the meeting with the text in the session, and 3) the echoes of the reading experience. For each case, we introduce the context for why the text(s) resonated and how the participant generally used the texts from the reading group. We decided to give both each case and each reading experience that is part of the case a title. Hence, it reflects the participant's reading experience or how the poem or story was remembered afterward. The reading experiences include five poems and one story (see appendix 8 for an overview).

3.1. Elena: a process of regained resilience and 'inner cleaning'

For Elena (see appendix 9.1 for data material and texts), the variety of literature in the reading group was a confrontation with parts of her unresolved past. Elena felt radically transformed after being diagnosed with cancer, and in this process of change, Elena had a particular need to 'clean out' past experiences. She found that the reading group was significant in this process. After a reading session, when a text resonated, she would further explore the 'therapeutic processes' that the reading of the text evoked in her. These processes were often related to episodic, autobiographical memories that 'popped up' during the reading sessions. She explained that she could immediately 'see' connections to her life through mental images constructed from personally important memories. Elena used the metaphor 'inner cleaning' to describe this therapeutic process:

> …And I was thinking about that on my walk today, that I wasn't happy last year when I got the diagnosis. Then I said to myself: "Okay, so is this what life will be?". Like… But all in all, this year has at least allowed me to clean out much stuff [mentally], and now I can say that life is good. (Audio diary, rec.7).

Elena told about how she was challenged in terms of rumination, finding motivation, and completing things she had started, and this anxiety came from the fear of cancer recurrence. 'Cleaning out' past experiences related to challenging life periods helped her place cancer as one life event amongst others; in this way, cancer took up less mental space. After processing evoked memories, she could 'let them go' so that the process led to acceptance:

I feel that I am calm in a different way, and I have a much clearer like… And that is because I have changed, right, but it is also that when you read this literature and these texts, you look at it and then let it go. Because you can't do anything with what has passed, and you can't do anything with others, you can only do something with your own experience. (Interview, 119:18)

The experience of letting go was also related to being moved by the other participants' sometimes very touching stories shared in the group and accepting that she can only do something with her own story. How this 'inner cleaning' unfolds can be illustrated through two of her reading experiences that we labeled: "Thinking about oak trees" and "Embraced by an angel". Both reading experiences activated reminiscences and became part of a larger narrative of resilience that gave Elena strength in her present life situation and hope for the future.

3.1.1. Thinking about oak trees

The text: "Eg stogger under den gamle eiki ein regnversdag" by Olav H. Hauge. The poem's narrator seeks shelter from the rain under an oak tree on an autumn day and reflects on the world and aging. On the one hand, the tree provides a feeling of safety. On the other hand, safety turns into finitude: the tree is not covering the person entirely from the rain. The poem is short and simple but sensuous and invites especially profound existential reflections about ephemerality.

The session: In the session, the participants mainly discussed how trees, and nature in general, can give us comfort in difficult times and have their 'own power':

Elena: And then there's something, I think, there's something with trees regardless of where you are in life, then they have such big roots… and the fall takes its course, nature doesn't get hung up on anything. There's something about trees, they stand there, you can walk by the lake, they stand just as strong and eiii… (…) And there's something about hugging trees, they have their own strength.
Alice: Yeah.
Susanne: It's good to go and touch a tree, there's no doubt about it.
Alice: But there is a feeling of safety… Like you get a… Then it is so rooted, there is something calm in that. (session 4, p. 2).

This conversation arrived from the line "It's not just the rain/that makes me stop/beneath the old oak". There is something more: "It's safe under the wide crown". Elena could relate to feeling safe under the tree and expressed a felt, embodied connection to the tree and the man: "It's safe under there safe and… [long silence] and there's something about being able to stand there and… be quiet. It's peaceful under the oak, and then he stops there… I can almost feel it…" (Elena, session, p. 2). Further on, Elena noticed a change in the poem: "Today I don't stand dry,/the leaves have started to fall" (line in the poem). Another participant, Tilly, imagined that, like the leaves are falling, the man is also getting thin-haired. The RL followed up on this idea and suggested that the man might be in autumn himself – _a life's autumn_: "The world is old, we think,/and we both age." (line in the poem). This part of the poem, and the discussion, presented autumn as a metaphor for old age, which Elena kept reflecting on afterward. At the session's end, Susanne said she wished to meet and greet the old man on his walk. The others agreed that they were more interested in meeting the tree.

Echoes: The poem led to ongoing reflections about oak trees and the _strength_ in their nature, which was also what Elena remembered best from the poem (see appendix 9.1.3). The poem resonated profoundly with Elena during the session, as the data sources show. Her post-reading scale scores suggest that the impact is past-related; she scored high (4–5) in the items "arouses nostalgic feelings" and "the text reminded me how the past is still with me" (see appendix 9.1.3). Moreover, in her written response, she wrote about an oak tree from her childhood home, which involved happy and sad memories, which she further unfolded in her audio diary in the following weeks. A central theme in her reflections is _life's autumn_ versus nature _that takes its course_: "Then there is something with that oak, yes, we humans come and go, and that oak tree is actually standing there in peace. And I think of all those that have passed by there of my relatives, both the ones that, yes, have been and the ones that are still here" (audio diary, rec. 4). This is a line of thought that was also present in the session. It was uttered in the focus group interview where Elena remembered the contrast between 'the strong oak' and 'the weak man' (focus group, 43:11). She related these existential thoughts about aging to herself by expressing an awareness, and maybe acceptance, of the 'seasons of life': "I'm only 50 or 49, but still feel that after cancer, I've become aware that I'm getting older and have an autumn ahead of me" (excerpt from the written response). Thus, the oak tree was, for Elena, an image of something that continues in her experience of mortality; the oak tree both became a symbol of resilience and strength, qualities she identified with, and it represented nature's 'own power' that made her aware of human mortality, herself included.

In the audio diary, Elena returned to the poem three times (rec. 4,5,5.2) over the two weeks after the session. She shared that she had become very focused on oaks: She had been thinking about the poem and oak trees every day and started to notice oaks in her surroundings, for example, on a walk (audio diary, rec. nr. 5.2). In addition, every time a text involved an oak tree, she would comment on it, laughing: "Now it is an oak tree again" (session 10, 00:00). The increased awareness of oak trees seemed to be associated with the oak tree's _resilience_ and the difference in life cycles (human vs. nature). In the interview, she wondered whether the poem would have had the same effect on her if it had described a different tree. She believed it would not have. Thus, the oak tree in the poem functioned like a 'cue' word that activated and retrieved episodic memory structures (Kintsch, 1998) of personal significance connected to oak trees.

In sum, in the echoes of Elena, we can discern past-oriented personal connections, reminiscing, and nostalgia. However, the poem also helped to understand her future. The oak tree's resilience and the metaphor of 'life's autumn' stayed in Elena and unfolded in the cognitive-affective consolidation.

3.1.2. Embraced by an angel

The second experience described here is also Elena's.

The text: "Romanske buer" by Tomas Transtrømer. The poem's narrator is standing inside a cathedral with other tourists when being embraced by "an angel without a face" that says: "Do not be ashamed of being human, be proud!". In the end, everyone is pushed out, and "vault after vault" opens endlessly inside them. The poem's construction of an inside (the church) and an outside (the plaza) strengthens the narrator's transcendental experience in the cathedral.

The session: The poem opened a conversation around self-exploration and personal development. The image of the "vault" described with the words "opened [gapende]", "endlessly" and "no overview" was principal here, and it gave associations to an inner exploration:

> Elena: (…) But "you will never be finished, and that's how it should be" means that there can be both development, that is, we constantly open up rooms within ourselves. And then I think, "now I'm finished, now…" But you will never be finished, that's just how it should be."
>
> RL: So you find a new room=
>
> Elena: =and that… Yes, you find a new room and…
>
> RL: A new vault
>
> Elena: Yes
>
> RL: Inside yourself
>
> (Session 10, 59:39).

We also discussed how standing in a church with "endless vaults" might feel overwhelming and give a sense of something 'greater': "There's a presence and something that's not…"; "..you become quite over…. [overwhelmed]" (Elena, 59:39). This sacred feeling gave Elena an experience of recognition which led to a reminding of a previous church experience:

> It is something so… Yes. Big and… I think it was in Copenhagen we were because I can picture it that there were these angles around on some pillars, I think it was there. Or something with a name… or was it in Prague. A big church. It is just like I see it in front of me… (Session 10, 6:59).

In the quote, Elena first referred to the church experience: "It is something so… Yes. Big and…" and then connected it to her memory: "I think it was in…". The church from Elena's past came back to her as a mental image ("I can picture it"). During the discussion, Elena connected to this church experience several times from the poem's words and imagery. Hence, the poem and our discussion activated new parts of the memory: the exact church, who she was with, why she was there, the weather, and her feelings: "…Because now I remember it was that one [the church], so how it… I felt that there was something… It was something so special that you cannot put into words." (Elena, 67:46). In that way, the poem and the church from her past seemed to blend, and in a way the poem almost 'transported' her, letting her 'relieve' her memory and the feeling of something inexpressible connected to it. What we see here is a vivid example of how literary reading-induced mental imagery (Burke, 2011) is constructed from memories from readers' own lives rather than entirely from the content in the text.

Echoes: This reading experience is particularly interesting in the present study of echoes, because after the session Elena continued to reconstruct the memory that came to the surface during the session. Being reminded of the church visit is what she remembered best (see appendix 9.2.3). The poem's impact is related to an insight into her past self, which the high scale scores in past-related items and insight also indicate (item 22 AESTHEMOS: see appendix 9.2.3). Elena said that during the session, she started to connect the poem's description of a felt experience of something 'greater than yourself' to the church memory:

> Yes, it was bizarre, because, well, I remember we were in Prague, and I remember… But I had forgotten that story about the church, even though it made such a big impression on me. But when we read it [the poem], some of it fell in place, and then I thought I, yes, yes. All the way until I got home and then I started to think… aha. Then I started to go through this story [the memory] for myself. (Interview, 72:49).

The line: "an angel without a face embraced me and his whisper went all through my body" from the poem induced a recognition through an *embodied identification*. Billington and Steenberg (2021) describe embodied identification as being driven by a fundamental, primary, and kinesthetic mechanism, which is not limited to matching specific themes or problems of the reader (2021, p. 404). In Elena's case, it is an embodied identification because she felt she had experienced this physically herself. She also felt the poem was about her since she was, at that time, going through a mentally challenging period. An aspect she unveiled in her written response:

> …I remember when I entered that church. The others went up to the tower, and I wandered around alone while I had a lot on my mind at the time, and I was going through a rough period after hitting the famous wall [expression for burnout after stress]. And I felt something greater than myself as I wandered around there… (Excerpt from written response).

Remembering this important life moment made her reflect on her past self and evaluate it in the light of her present perspective and position (her current recovery from cancer): "You can't compare stress and cancer, but the side effects I got from stress were just the same [as from her cancer treatment]." (Interview, 38:59). Thus, it gave her strength being reminded of her resilience and her recovery from stress, and it supported her process in re-imagining a future after cancer, constructing a hopeful possible self: "Yes, but it is like

cancer is just one part of the long life, right. I feel that I have lived very long, and I am almost 50, but I feel I have lived 100 years. Like, there are so many things, right, so cancer is just one part of the whole in a way" (interview, 111:17). The quote appears to be influenced by some of the thoughts from the oak tree poem, which indicate that they were both part of Elena's overarching narrative of resilience.

In sum, Elena's memory of the church visit seems to have been the 'driver' in the continued impact since the echoes were centered around reconstructing it. The poem connected her to an overlooked, and perhaps partly blocked significant memory. It helped her to understand and express a past experience through the embodied identification of 'being embraced by an angel'. The echo seems to have facilitated an overall coherent process of meaning-making in her life.

3.2. Molly: finding a form to think about legacy, life priorities, and mental space

In Molly's case (see appendix 9.2 for data material and text), a poem opened a new way to think about legacy through an image of a house. This theme resonated deeply with Molly because her cancer diagnosis had caused an "almost existential crisis" (interview, p. 4), so, long before encountering the poem, she had thought extensively about her existence and meaning in life. Thus, the poem had a personal relevance and reminded her of her priorities, for example: "to put a time limit to being sad" (focus group, 58:39).

However, the poem also brought something new. The poem was, for her, the most significant text we read in the group because it had really "opened space in her" and "opened a door to… something" (focus group, 62:42). What the poem exactly opened to seemed difficult for Molly to express, but looking at the session and the echoes might give an idea of this *something*.

3.2.1. Which house will remain after me?

The text: "Konkylie" by Olav H. Hauge. The poem creates a simile between "soul's house" and a snail that "strides proudly with the conch on the back". This simile becomes a metaphor for life and legacy: building up a life – "a soul's house" where the house will remain to reflect "your soul's beauty". The poem has positive valanced words, but then there is a "sea of loneliness, in the end" which is difficult to place.

The session: In the beginning, the RL, Rachel, and the researcher took part in the discussion, and Molly was listening. We experienced the poem, on the one hand, to be very concrete with lucid images that the RL helped us to sense and see: "the snail that walks with the house on its back" and the "conch that whistles when you put it to your ear". On the other hand, the poem seemed abstract and difficult to grasp with unusual word constructions such as "soul's house", a foregrounded experience (Van Peer & Hakemulder, 2006), which made us dwell on it:

> Rachel: I think it is a very beautiful poem with very beautiful language. Big word. But… I find it difficult to sort of concretize it.
>
> (…)
>
> Rachel: Yes because it is big things. Like it is not like you build your soul's house, like. The soul is like… it is everything we have in a way or what is soul?
>
> R: Maybe identity
>
> RL: Yes. Yes, but that is like these words we use, like soul. But do we think about what a soul is? I don't know if any of you does that. Sooul. Sooul.
>
> Rachel: I think like it is that you said that it is… the soul is actually everything we are and everything we do. Like that is… Everything that will be gone when you die then.
>
> RL: Yes
>
> Rachel: But that it still must be reflected in this shell that shall remain or the house that will stand by then.
>
> RL: Yes. And what is this house like. Is it what we do in life?
>
> Rachel: The memory about us or what it is.
>
> RL: Yes. That we leave behind ourselves.

At this point, Molly spoke and synthesized the poem for herself into one concept:

> …And that is 'which house remains after me'. It is like that… If I have to, like, boil it down to one line, then it is that. And then I think about which house stands by and what remains. Then I think it is a rumor after me or something people will remember me for. The memory, well, not everything will stay, but some will. It is like what this poem tells me. More I don't get out of it. (session 1, 18:48).

The quote indicates that Molly was focused on the part with the remaining 'house' (the legacy). At the end of the session, Rachel, who participated from the hospital while receiving chemotherapy, shared with us that she thought about her 'soul's house' every day because of her poor prognosis, and her wish to give her family happy memories. Rachel's sharing moved us all, which might have been another reason for Molly's increased attention to *her* house after the session.

Echoes: Molly remembered best her personal synthesis of the poem (see appendix 9.2.3). After the session, and in the following weeks, the poem echoed in her mind in the way that it kept 'coming back' to her, which anchored the feelings the poem had evoked. She felt inspired to read it aloud to her husband and discuss the poem during that time. In the following session, she shared with us that

she had started writing about the insights she had discovered through the poem. In the interview (one year after the session), Molly no longer thought about the poem. She could not remember the title or the content of the poem, but a feeling had stayed in her long-term memory:

> I think it was a poem about a house and which room we are in (…) Well… it has stayed with me, that exact feeling that… that is about… It was a nice image of where we are, like 'where' is like… one thing is physical, another is mental, which house, which room. Ehh that one I remember especially well. (Interview, p. 2).

The image of the house increased her awareness of her mental space (which room we are in). It is the poem we read furthest back in time. Still, Molly remembered this one best. After she mentioned the poem, and to help her recall more from the experience, the researcher shared it on the screen and played the recorded session where the RL read it aloud. Molly started to remember the sadness in the poem and believed that might be her feeling when we read it. This feeling of sadness is, in fact, reported in her scale data: Molly scored 4/5 on sadness (item 31, AESTHEMOS). In contrast, she scored relatively low in the *pleasingness* factor, except in "I find it beautiful" (item 7, AESTHEMOS). In the EQ, she scored high in the factor *finitude* and *wonder* (except item 16 on happiness). These data indicate that the poem moved her, but not in the way it gave her a joyful feeling; instead, it was associated with sadness and beauty – an existential melancholy.

When we started to talk about the poem in the interview, the image of the house sparked a new creative energy that made her want to reread and draw the house:

> …that I see this house. Is it physically…building your soul's house…so I see like a picture of a house, and then I see many rooms in that house, and then I see that those rooms are filled with different things. Um…and when I'm not here anymore, those rooms that I've created in this house will remain…but what do I want, in a way, to…I mean, which of those rooms or who gets to stay, and what should it contain? (Interview, p. 6).

She realized that the poem's extension in her life had been 'waves' of a creative process related to thinking about 'building her house'. She added that this image would not have come to her without the poem, since the text led her mind to continue and created "the next wave that carried her further" (Interview, p. 6). Molly mainly focused on the house, although there is another image in the poem: the snail. Nevertheless, the snail is not relevant to her because she is focused on *her* house: "…the creature crawls into the hard shell of the house. Yeah. What will the rooms inside that house be like? How should my *safe* space look like?" (Interview, p. 6). Hence, Molly applied one part of the poem to herself and left the rest.

The poem offered Molly imagery she could use and expand to approach existential questions already familiar to her. However, that became accessible to her in a new and more tangible way where she could imagine and 'furnish' the rooms in her mental house. This might be the *something* that the poem opened for. The echoes are future-oriented personal reflections about legacy, but at the same time also present-oriented in the sense that she's reminded of her priorities.

3.3. Maria: recognizing, understanding, and reframing the present

In Maria's case (see appendix 9.3 for data material and texts), she used a 'cleaning' metaphor, like Elena, when explaining how the reading group and the texts had supported her. However, in Maria's case, this 'inner cleaning' process was directed toward the present, not the past: "…what you are occupied of here and now, I think, and then and there, that I was a bit occupied with this about being a bit open-minded, and this about being in chemotherapy, and I am like… a new start in a way" (interview, p. 9). Maria's present-oriented approach is also reflected in her scores in the post-reading scales, where past-related items had a low score overall. The literature we read helped her see things 'in a bigger way' by introducing new perspectives, thoughts, and ideas. She talked about how some of the texts had 'formed' her and sometimes guided her in present issues in her life. This will be demonstrated with two examples: "The boy in the honeysuckle" and "Felling trees to become an open and light place".

3.3.1. The boy in the honeysuckle
The text: "Kaprifolium" by Johan Borgen. The short story is about a boy that climbs up a honeysuckle. The story goes from harmony and togetherness in the boy's observation and feeling of being part of nature to disharmony, where existential despair and loneliness seem to come in. At the end of the story, the parents find the boy cold and shivering with a fever in the honeysuckle, and he wakes up in bed.

The session: In the session, our perception of the text was mixed. In the beginning, the participants had a positive experience with the boy; he chose to climb up the honeysuckle and enjoyed the time alone. He is curious, an observer, adventurous, and maybe alone, but not lonely. As we read on, we experienced a change in the text: the boy is, for example, compared to a "fish in a net" lured into the honeysuckle by its pungent smell and "captivated with no escape". Thus, the joy of the climb is replaced by anxiety. We also started to notice an ambivalence in the descriptions. It was mainly the line: "He was a victory on the brink of a defeat he longed for" (p. 62) that changed the participants' positive perception of the climb to become an expression of loneliness and a cry for attention. Maria was aware of this ambivalence:

> Maria: But it is a bit ambivalent, I think. Because, in a way, he is incredibly curious and sees all these nice things in nature.

> Susanne: Yes. Yes.

> Maria: At the same time, it sounds like this planned climbing trip is a call for attention.

Susanne: Yes:

Maria: Right. So, it was…It was both beautiful and sad (session 15, 49:15).

The story's ending, where the boy is found in the honeysuckle and put to bed with a fever, steered the conversation to revolve around self-harm, loneliness, and possible psychological issues the boy might have. This part of the discussion opened for another participant (Amber) sharing her feeling of a 'deep loneliness' that she had experienced as distinct from merely social isolation. She felt that the boy also knew about this existential loneliness:

I know this loneliness the boy feels (…). One can experience this loneliness that I think not many can understand, right. You go through a lot alone even if you have many people supporting you; he had that, right. And they were worried about him like they were looking for him and wondering where he was (session 15, 51:59).

She had experienced the feeling of a 'deep loneliness' when being ill, a loneliness the other participants could relate to as well. The session ended on an unresolved note, with many possibilities and theories but no final answers.

Echoes: Maria particularly remembered this short story in the interview four months later. The text stayed with Maria a long time after the session, but not in the way that she had consciously been thinking about it. Instead, it was due to a mental image of the boy in the honeysuckle that had popped up occasionally when her mind wandered. She connected the image with a feeling of melancholy and ambivalence:

That ambivalence comes in again, melancholia but at the same time free feeling. It is melancholic, I feel he is a bit lonely that boy, but at the same time, I think he will be fine. He has his own thoughts. But just at this point there is some melancholia. (Interview, p. 8).

The text moved Maria deeply. In both scales, her scores are high; she got, for example, a 100% score in the factor _inexpressible realizations_ (EQ), which might be linked to the ambivalence she experienced. The ambivalence and melancholia seemed to be central and were also part of her written response:

Fantastic description of sensory impressions from nature. / It brought back memories of sun-filled summer days exploring nature. / The story gave ambivalent feelings. / Beautiful and sad. Loneliness and despair. Need for love and belonging. / Admirable ability to discover, notice and take in nature's magical scents and colors. (Excerpt from written response).

On the one hand, she was fascinated by the sensuous descriptions of nature and the boy's ability to explore and observe. On the other hand, she felt loneliness and sadness. She associated the image of the boy in the honeysuckle with a feeling of 'being on the sideline of life', a position she could very much relate to: "And that was maybe a bit what you sometimes felt when you had cancer and had to wait a bit, you were like a bit on the sideline of your own life and observed things happen but without being part of it, right." (Interview, p. 3). Thus, the image echoed in Maria's mind because of a recognition [gjenkjennelse] of a feeling she had experienced when being ill.

In this reading experience, it was a mental image from the text that echoed in Maria's mind. Unlike Elena and Molly, Maria does not act on the echoes or go through the 'therapeutic processes', but the image helped her recognize and understand a latent feeling. We propose this is an example of _boundary crossings_ (Kuiken et al., 2004b, p. 177)_,_ i.e., connecting two very different situations which are nonetheless similar in the feeling tone, which can lead to _self-modifying feelings_ as discussed in the introduction. In this case it pertains to the ambivalence that Maria kept mentioning, and which seems acknowledged through her memory of the story, and, simultaneously, remains unresolved.

3.3.2. Felling trees to become a light and open space

The text: "Jeg vet ikke" by Antonia Pozzi. The poem is short and simple. It uses metaphors and similes from nature or artifacts to describe the merging or compromising in a relationship, where a person's 'trees' are felled to make space for the other person's voice and smile to create a future together. The poem is a reframing: from negative to positive, although the title "I don't know" could be interpreted as a hesitation.

The session: In the session, the poem was read as a metaphor for a meeting between two dissimilar people. We discussed whether it might be a new relationship or an established one that is rediscovered. In this meeting, there is a wish to change: "to cut down trees". We discussed the poem through the latter's imagery and our associations. Some perceived the trees as negative: prejudices and inflexibility. Others related it to something positive – identity, values, and our way of doing things. This also led to two different readings of the poem: one being optimistic: "it is good to cut down my trees for another person" and the other more hesitant: "maybe it is much to cut down all the trees. Maybe let some of them be". The second reading was supported by the title "I don't know" and the word "maybe" in line 6. Nevertheless, the positive reading resonated more with Maria during the session:

For me, it's thoughts one has that reflect on a meeting or a relationship. And thinking that maybe this relationship is good for me, that I need to start something new. That I need new impulses, togetherness… That we are together. And that, right, that new alley, the new garden is the way from now and forward. (Session 13, 71:12).

She thought it was good to "become a bright and clear place" [en lys og åpen plass] by taking in new perspectives and creating a future together. Thus, Maria took the positive aspects of the poem with her, which can also be heard in the echoes.

Echoes: The poem gave Maria many associations, which she shared in her written response, and these associations particularly sprung from the image: 'cutting down trees to become a light and open place' which was applied to thinking about her own

relationships.

> I must become a «light and open place» with my partner. From now on, we must become two that «draw the avenues» in our lives. We have discovered each other again…
>
> Maybe it was the cancer? (Excerpt from written response).

Maria's written response is a concrete example of how a text influenced, formed, and fueled her thoughts. Furthermore, the poem's images offered her an alternative way to think about her illness process: "…instead of thinking that the body is now broken, and the body is worn down [because of chemotherapy], then I think that I am now completely fresh, a new, light and open place where everything can grow again." (Interview, p. 11). However, the poem seems to have affected her less emotionally than "Kaprifolium". Maria's scores from the poem are lower in positive and negatively valenced emotions and experiences except in the factor *self-perceptual depth*, and these insights appear to be directed towards her present self. The general low score could be why she first remembered the poem only after seeing it in the interview. Thus, it may be that strong emotions and feelings elicited through the reading determine whether a reading experience echoes and becomes integrated into long-term memory.

The poem offered her new words and perspectives for something she was dealing with and trying to find a solution for. In general, Maria was very visual in her meaning-making process. In this poem, she liked the visualization of something indescribable, for example, feelings. Maria believes literature does that in the way it is "drawing with words":

> But when you have literature, then you can draw with words, right, so it can describe it like this one [refer to the poem] this you could have painted – an open and light place. (…) This could have been a beautiful picture of (…) it is how I feel it inside me when… Here shall there grow (…) and that feeling that… so I like the way that it is described… (Interview, p. 6).

In the case of the poem "Jeg vet ikke", the combination of personal relevance, motivation for change, and imaginative language resonated in Maria and became the driver in the continued impact.

3.4. Susanne: balancing the darkness

Susanne (see appendix 9.4 for data material and text) described her cancer as an experience of "being in the darkness", which involved a feeling of not knowing how long she would have left to live. In this situation of uncertainty, dark thoughts can take over:

> …what is happening with my life? What is happening with my husband? Will he get a new girlfriend? No, he must not. So you get these strange thoughts when you are in that situation. That is the darkness for me in that situation. And for me, that is the dark situation because it takes away a future I have envisioned for myself, that I would grow old with my husband. (Interview, p. 6).

Susanne expresses how cancer disrupted her life and her envisioned future. Susanne used the texts that, in her view, touched upon themes related to life and death to "balance" the darkness in her. When we read and discussed these texts, she could carefully approach possible future scenarios and selves: a hopeful or a dark future. Susanne felt it was safe to do so since the multiple perspectives presented by the other participants in the discussion helped her not to 'stay in the darkness' in the way that it eased her sometimes dark thought patterns. One of the texts that helped Susanne construct a hopeful self was the poem "Betring"[progress/recovery] by the author Gyrdir Elíasson.

3.4.1. Stepping into the light
The text: The poem consists of a simple image and movement: laying a torch lamp on a rampart on an autumn evening and stepping into the light. It can be interpreted openly, but the title guides the reader towards recovery, and the image of stepping into the light beam might describe an experience of, for example, physical or psychological recovery. The autumn and darkness in the poem give it some discord, whereas the poem may have been more one-dimensional if it had been on a summer day.

The session: When we read the poem, we did not have a unified understanding. One participant understood the image of walking into the light as a symbol of death, the others as walking into life. Nonetheless, we were very focused on the act of stepping into the light: what it means, how it feels, and how it changes the perspective going from darkness to light. We discussed how "going into the light" seems like a conscious choice that involves a loss of control since you must "put down the torchlight". Hence, it is an action that requires courage. The poem's description of an autumn night makes the element of choice more prominent because one must also choose what one wants to light up in the darkness.

It was already immediately after the RL had read aloud the poem the first time, that Susanne focused on the act of "walking into the light":

> Susanne: It was incredibly cool, at least, it has to be said.
>
> LL: What did you find remarkable about it?
>
> Susanne: The idea of just walking into the beam. It was utterly magical. Mmh.
>
> (…)

Susanne: It's like, the way I see it, **you** have to know something to get better. Like... Yes, experience, in a way, right? And here **you leave** behind a flashlight, maybe the things **you** carry, and take the good you have and shine it forward. So **you** step into your own good experience, choose the positive, and then move forward in its light. It was... (Session 12, 72.46, bold added).

Susanne uses the inclusive third-person pronoun 'you', which can be interpreted as a language marker that indicates a shift in perspective from I-centered discourse to discourse more concerned with others (Davis et al., 2016). It offers Susanne a middle-ground for the exploration of relations between the text, herself, and others (p. 32)[1]. In the discussion, the group approached the poem openly and did not relate it directly to their process of illness/recovery (despite this being implied in Susanne's response above).

Echoes: In the interview, Susanne remembered the poem's title as "lysning" [lightening], which seems to be the essence of Susanne's meaning-making of the poem. Susanne related significantly to it because it became an image of stepping out of the darkness and into the light – of hope – and a reminder to not let the dark thoughts about an uncertain future, a negative self, take over. Thus, she recognized her experience with "balancing the darkness" in the poem's images.

Susanne remembered the poem as a symbol of 'new life', and the choice to 'walk into the light'. This perspective of the poem was discussed in the session and is also reflected in her written response:

(…) However, the poem was definitely something I liked, light vs. darkness, new possibilities and choices based on experience. / Exciting to discuss with such different views/interpretations. (Excerpt from written response).

Sometime after the session, she found the poem again and reread it. She shared the poem with friends whose child got cancer because she thought it might comfort them in this challenging time, as it had comforted her. Thus, the reading experience was also other-oriented. On the one hand, Susanne's reading experience is present-oriented because it resonates with her experience of 'being in the darkness'; on the other hand, it is future-oriented in being aware of not letting the darkness take over and imagining a possible future.

4. Discussion

4.1. Transformations and possibilities: synthesis of the cases

This study aimed to examine how four readers, participants in SR groups, experienced literary texts during the sessions and how that experience reemerged as echoes afterward and played a role in their lives. In the discussion, we will first synthesize the presented cases and then continue to answer the four research questions posed in the introduction.

In all four cases, the readers experienced profound _recognition_, which in some instances might also reflect an _identification_. Previous research on therapeutic reading experiences (Cohen, 1994) found _recognition of self_ to be vital. However, that particular study concerned prose fiction, and recognition was mainly connected to story characters. In contrast, our cases mainly include poetry, and instances of recognizing something in the text and connecting it to their own life were not exclusively related to characters/narrators but also to, e.g., a familiar theme, perspective, location, a feeling, resonating image, or an inanimate object. The experience of recognition also brought insight: the texts opened for new words, perspectives, images, and thoughts – novel ways to express and understand latent thoughts and feelings connected to past experiences.

In all cases, mental imagery played a central role. The texts are all written in sensuous language, drawing up an image the participants can position themselves in, continue to think in, and expand on through their personal and lived experiences. Skjerdingstad and Tangerås (2019, p. 10) have called this aspect of embodied identification for "lucidity of imagining". For example, Molly imagined the house in the poem, an image she could explore by thinking about rooms and what to put into _her_ house. In Susanne's case, the image of "stepping into the light" expressed her struggle not to let the darkness take over. Although these two images are diverse, they both communicate an awareness of their 'energy' and priorities: their mental space. The RL helped in drawing up these images by eliciting the multisensory and experienced aspects of the text. Thus, the meeting with and interpretation of the texts also depend, to a certain degree, on the RL's focus on the text (Ohlsson, 2022; Steenberg et al., 2021). The imagery might be a guideline to find texts that can open profound conversations around illness experiences and existential questions, but also to lived experiences in general.

The literary texts involved in these cases themselves seem to involve transformations – related to ephemerality, transcendence, and legacy. There are changes in perspective and insight, atmosphere or feeling tone, and movement. In addition, the poems are all relatively short and written in a rich language that elicits images. The short story too stimulates images of the boy's climb. Moreover, the storyline is limited to one day, and the story progresses very slowly as the main focus is the boy's observations and thoughts during the climb in the honeysuckle. In that way, the story seems to have some of the same qualities as the poems, with one movement or action and one overall image. Furthermore, many of the texts are about nature experiences, one of the themes that resonated strongly with the participants: nature had become a comforting place where they could seek wordless comfort and be reminded about life's continuation in the experience of finitude.

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[1] In a different example, and reading experience, the participant Lisa identified with a poem's description of a primal force in old women, which was visible as linguistic traces in the following quote where she went from using the third-person "they" to an inclusive "we":But still, they have that... They have a mission they experience in their existence that **we** old women are essential. So **we** live, even if it's a boring life, **we** live, and **we** dress ourselves, and **we** sit there with our handicrafts, and **we** are there because **we** are a primal force. (session 12, 105:25, online group, bold added)

4.2. How are the texts remembered and re-enacted over time?

In the presented cases, the participants' reading experiences show how the texts continue to live in a participant's mind, how they are remembered, and how the memories of the texts and the reading experiences are adapted and re-enacted as they are integrated into their lives.

4.2.1. How did the reading experiences evolve from resonances in the session to ongoing echoes in the participants' lives?

One main finding was that during the reading sessions and in a continuous personal meaning-making process, parts of the participants' self-concept were activated, evaluated, and changed: while the participants revisited past selves, of which the text reminded them, they reflected on their present selves or envisioned their future feared or hopeful selves.

In the study by Carney and Robertson (2022), cognitive consolidation includes reflection and discussion of the reading. However, in our cases, the continued reading experience was, apart from reflection and discussing the text with others, characterized mainly by latent and non-verbal phenomena: a gut feeling, an image, or a creative energy that inspired and 'anchored' the text, so that it kept echoing. In that way, the echoes were more affective and emotive than cognitive; the echoes seem to be unconscious and uncontrolled, which distinguishes them from a more logical way of processing and making sense of a text. In addition, the echoes were *self-implicating*. However, during the sessions, the self-implication was not always visible (although sometimes it was implied through linguistic traces with the use of inclusive nouns). Even though personal connections were not articulated in the sessions, they were often expressed and further explored in the echoes, sometimes consciously (as in the case of Elena and Susanne), other times unconsciously and unintentionally where the memory of the text returns to their mind (as in the case of Maria and Molly).

To sum up, one could say that how they continuously processed the texts as part of cognitive-affective consolidation was in line with the idea of "reading and learning by heart" (Tangerås, 2020).

4.2.2. What aspects of the texts and reading experiences were remembered at different time points?

It was noteworthy that participants still remembered 1 or 2 texts after a period ranging from 3 months to 1 year. However, *how* they remembered the texts was even more intriguing. First, they often remembered very little of the text's content, the genre, or the title. They often referred to the text with a new title that represented the essence of what they remembered from the text (but they did not realize this). What did stand out firmly in their memory was the text's significance in their lives – the echoes and the larger, highly personal narrative the reading experience became part of.

The recalled memory or emotion during or after reading is not necessarily an accurate mental representation of the actual experience but is constructed and situated in the person's present condition (Schacter, 1998). Thus, the memory likely says more about the person's current situation than the past. This is especially apparent for Elena, who reevaluates her past church experience from her present situation. In addition, recall of autobiographical memories is critical to mental health, and research has found that people with depression often are challenged in recalling specific memories (Williams, 1988).

Interestingly, there is only one short story in the cases, since they remembered the poems best. There can be various reasons for this: one explanation could be the poems' brevity and centered layout (often occupying one side of a page), which makes it easier to get an overview. Participants may have re-read the poem several times during the session. In addition, a poem is often condensed in its meaning, inviting in-depth reading of single lines and words. The language is also often more concrete and imaginable and might be better connected to text recall and memory (Sadoski et al., 1993). However, it might also be due to the experience of encountering a poem in which the discourse deviates from daily language and life; a defamiliarization of the world (Miall & Kuiken, 1994). Most participants especially enjoyed the poems we read in the group, although they had not read many poems before. They felt the poems were more open to various interpretations. Susanne found that the poems connected her to her present situation, whereas the short stories elicited more past experiences. However, this was not the case for Elena, since she was generally past-oriented. Such variations in response might depend on the participant's individual need (that is, whether they are more past, present, or future-oriented in the reading moment).

The instruction for recording ongoing thoughts for the audio diary might have directed the participants' attention to think more about the texts and session afterward which is important to be aware of. However, an audio diary was not included for the data collection in the online group, but they still shared instances of 'echoes'.

4.3. Why were the reading experiences significant for the participants?

The cases also present various ways of applying literature to life (Pettersson, 2014) as a support and a way of creating meaning in times of uncertainty. Although reading literature can be a way to cope with life (Billington, 2016; Davis, 2020; Gold, 2001) and the four participants identified themselves as readers, their ability to concentrate in silent reading was challenged due to side effects from cancer treatment. The SR group was, therefore, also an opportunity for the participants to have literature in their lives.

Being diagnosed with cancer has set the participants in a situation where their future has become difficult to imagine. Many participants expressed *a feared self* (a negative possible selves concept) concerning this uncertainty and the ongoing worry that cancer would worsen or reappear. The social aspect of the SR group might also have strengthened their construction of possible selves through meeting and being together with people who understand and have felt in their bodies that human mortality is not an abstraction but a reality. This might also be a part of what Elena referred to when she said she had become calmer and was 'letting things go'. Her gradual change happened partly, as she said, through meeting the stories and poems, but it might also have been through encountering the other participants' stories or experiencing the stories and poems with the group.

It might be expected that, as compared to a non-narrative genre like poetry, prose would be more conducive for reconstructing meaning and forming a life narrative. It was not. The mental imagery the participants and the group formed together, which sometimes stayed with them afterward, became meaningful in their lives and something that the participants could hold on to. Thus, one might say that these images helped the participants process what was important to them; they became cognitive and affective *holding grounds* "for exploring the contents of [personal] experience" (Davis, 2020, p. 14, brackets added). This is especially essential since the participants' life situations had caused a deep need to construct meaning and understanding.

In addition, each participant in the selected cases had more or less a subconscious motivation, a lens that was determined by personal relevance; the participants read the texts informed by their self-schemata (Markus, 1977), and the texts that resonated the most were the ones which related to their focus in life at that moment (for example, seeking guidance on present issues or words to express past experiences). The reading experiences became part of a larger narrative for each participant related to their current life situation.

In SR, reflection and discussion is integrated with the reading and might increase TRE's therapeutic value and potential. Thus, the transformative effect of literature is not something static situated within the text itself but happens in the transaction between the readers, the setting, and the text (Fialho, 2019). In the context of SR, the RL's facilitation and group dynamics are added.

4.3.1. *How did the Shared Reading experiences help the participants cope with their treatment and illness?*

Coping with illness is about learning to live with lost control (Frank, 2013, p. 30). The reading experiences enabled participants to construct positive possible selves, approach feared selves in a safe context, and evaluate past selves in the reconstruction of a disrupted life narrative. More specifically, this reconstruction process included becoming aware of or being reminded about life priorities, regaining energy, strength, and resilience in their recovery process, and an 'inner cleaning' of either the past or present to make new mental space for the future. In addition, the texts helped the participants to process their illness experiences by offering new ways to express and understand aspects of their experiences (with new words and imagery), and the texts functioned as guidance that helped the participants to find solutions in their lives. In these ways, the texts and the reading experiences became resources and a support in their lives with cancer.

5. Limitations and recommendations for future research

The present study supports the idea that literature can be healthy. The cases studied show how the participants find their way of using the texts for their benefit. In addition, it highlights the importance of taking the time after reading into account when studying the personal significance of reading experiences. In empirical reading studies, the retrospective experience is often regarded as a reduction or compromise means to recall the reading experience; how reliable are memories as time passes? Here we argue that retrospective data might have a separate value for learning more about how we process texts in the time *after* the reading. To us the results of the present research seem to suggest a new perspective on the study of eudaimonic experiences (i.e., the feeling readers can have that they gained a profound insight about themselves, others or the human condition; cf. Bartsch & Oliver, 2017; Oliver & Raney, 2011). It may be that the impact of literary texts lingers in readers' minds longer *and* in different form than expected, where the memory is related to the text in a way that to others can appear indirect and idiosyncratic. However, it is exactly this 'afterlife' of the reading experience that seems to be one of the keys to our understanding of the long-term and personal impact of literature. Tracing the memories back to their origin *in* the texts, in a larger sample, could be a valuable effort for the empirical study of literature as well as for the practice of SR, e.g., by investigating how the memories relate to certain text aspects (e.g., type of metaphors, specific narrative structures, or the moment when characters gain insights in themselves.)

While we have suggested an approach to capturing the dimension of the 'afterlife' of reading experiences, the study is based on a small sample ($N = 4$). Future research would ideally enlarge the sample to work on a more comprehensive typology of how resonance transforms into echoes, which types of echoes, and how the latter enduringly impacts readers. Extending the sample and including a wider population would be necessary since the sample in this study is very specific. Still, we believe that the concepts can be applied to the general reader, but the content, intensity, and depth of the echoes may vary from the readers in this study since their life-situation very likely has influenced how they processed and remembered the texts and reading experiences. In other words, every target group we would have focused on would have been unique and therefore incomparable to others; however, we realize that the present sample, in their coping with a life-threatening illness, is unique in an important way: their appreciation of, example, images they associate with strength and resilience might be higher than we might find among other readers. Still, future research could explore whether such functions of the echoes are a more common phenomenon.

Second, extending the sample could also investigate the relation between the type of echoes and the situation in which they originate. Here we have investigated echoes of reading experiences in a SR context, but the approach can be applied to all reading contexts, such as bibliotherapy, book clubs, and private reading. There might also be a difference in how participants remembered the texts in the on-site group compared to the online group. The on-site group was able to take the text copies home with them, save them and bring them up again for rereading, whereas in the online group, the RL e-mailed the texts to them afterward. We did not explore this aspect, but it would be interesting to see if the continued processing and the attachment to the texts differ when receiving them on print versus screen.

Considering the potential relevance of the continued processing for well-being, future research could benefit from more data collection points (e.g., between the sessions, and at intervals after the sessions), as well as more detailed analysis of session transcripts to illuminate the complex dynamics and collective meaning-making processes (see, for example, Kristensen et al., 2023) as part of the continued impact. The present study has focused on individual experiences and incorporated the 'essence' of the group discussions;

thus, the representation of some processes has been reduced for clarity. Furthermore, the data pertain to participants' *perception* of their reading experience and the impact it may have had on them. It needs to be stressed that there might have been other forms of impact which remained outside their awareness. However, future research may attempt to find a way around this, for instance with the use of implicit measures (for example physiological measures) for well-being. Finally, this research bears a possible educational implication, as it highlight the stark disparity between how literary texts are traditionally taught in schools and how readers actually engage with texts in their everyday lives. SR's personal and experience-based approach has the potential to show students the profound personal relevance that literature can have.

6. Conclusion

To understand the multilayered ways in which literature can be meaningful in readers' lives, it is necessary to study the reading experience as an ongoing process rather than a predetermined outcome. After the interviews, we left the four readers, Elena, Molly, Maria, and Susanne, but their reading experiences might still feed their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and associations and influence their future actions. They might come into a situation where they recall a text and regain new meaning from it. In that way, their reading experiences have become their life companions, integrated into their self-concept and part of their life narrative. The six reading experiences exemplify how the personal meaning of SR experiences exceeds the limited time participants spend together during sessions and goes beyond the limits that literary scholars might see in the justified interpretations of a text. But more importantly, during the trajectory of this study, these readers found hope, energy, and resilience through their reading experiences that became meaningful at a time in their lives when they were deprived of energy, motivation, and meaning.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101847.

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