

# **The Symbolic Experiential Approach of Creative Improvisation through Literature Technique within the Unifying Personal Development Group – Case study –**

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## **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *Creative improvisation through literature is an experiential and creative-expressive technique which uses the spontaneous story-writing in order to help someone knowing himself better but also to overcome some existential jams, both in the personal development group and individual counseling.*

**Objectives:** *The aim of this paper is to harness the way of intervention within creative improvisation and in the same time emphasizing the diagnostic and symbolic-projective valences of this technique by presenting a case study of a group participant within a unifying personal development group.*

**Method:** *In this case study, we used the creative improvisation through literature technique, applied in an experiential way, but also combined with other creative-expressive and experiential techniques.*

**Results:** *One of the results we have seen is the fact that the participant from the case study made some important changes in her life as a sign that the intervention was successful. Another result we have made is a symbolic-projective analysis of the metaphors from her stories, mapping the usefulness of the technique in the experiential diagnosis and also the metaphors dynamics according to the changes she did in her life.*

**Conclusions:** *Given the positive results of the creative improvisation through literature technique, we propose to continue the study, using it in the unifying personal development groups and highlighting its positive results both by qualitative and quantitative measures.*

**Keywords:** *literature, expressive - creative therapies, personal development*

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## **I. Introduction**

Creative improvisation through literature is an expressive-creative technique, used within the personal development group, which can contribute to unblock awareness and the re-signification of some experiences, based on the concept of therapeutic metaphor. Thus, within the group, at each meeting, the participants have to write spontaneously a short story based on a certain theme. Those stories are, in fact, the challenging pretext, analysis and creative restructure of the participants' bottlenecks and some problems of their life, leading in that way to an increased level of self-knowledge and balance.

According to the Unifying Therapy paradigm, the development group works as a collective „womb”, which aims to validate, confirm, support each participant, and also to help them change in a creative way, with no imposed rhythm, because each participant acts in his own, specific way (Mitrofan, 2004). Moreover, the metaphorical group scenario has a diagnosis part, useful in the assessment process, but also a therapeutic role by emphasizing both individual and group problems (Mitrofan, 2005). For this reason, in the development and validation of the creative improvisation through literature technique, we used the participants' stories as a projective and experiential diagnosis tools.

Given the positive valence of literary metaphors, some therapists and researchers have used them, this thing being highlighted in many studies. For example, there are studies that reveal the effectiveness of therapeutic storytelling in treating some psychosomatic disorder (Silberman - Deihl, Komisaruk, 1985). Other studies had revealed the way therapeutic stories help some people – children, teenagers or adults – to be aware of their problems by using in the therapeutic space stories which are closely related to the themes of clients' life, even if we're talking about already famous stories, or expressly written stories for therapeutic use (Burns, 2012; Peseschkian, 2005).

As we said in a previous study (Constantin, Cardaş, Petreanu, 2014), creative improvisation through literature is an innovative and original technique. The reason of its originality is the different approach we're using as opposed to other approaches of the therapeutic storytelling. The literary improvisation is a holistic and unifying technique, in all psychological and behavioral variables: the person involved within the personal development process through spontaneous story writing is successively the author, character and observer of his story, in this way being activated the witness state which facilitates the

access of his internal resources. Moreover, by its projective and experiential character, the use of the technique can easier access some blockages or traumatic events, which once transposed in the story, will acquire new ways of accepting and integrating them, in order to unblock in a creative and experiential way, the person's positive resources.

This paper aims to show how the creative improvisation through literature works, through a case study of a participant from one of the personal development groups we led in the context of the validation of this technique. We will illustrate in this paper types of challenging exercises and also dialogue passages, in order to expose the working way with the creative improvisation through literature, but also some relevant results the participant gained within the personal development group. We will also present a “map” of the symbolic and projective metaphors along with their significance, as they are revealed in the experiential development process.

## **II. Method**

### **Initial evaluation of the case**

Annie is 28 years old, a journalism graduate and currently studies at a nursing post-secondary school. Her motivation to participate in the personal development group stemmed from a desire to know herself better and also to gain more confidence in herself, as Annie said at the initial interview. She says about herself that she is a fighter who doesn't give up unless she exhausted all the solutions to solve a problem. She is a balanced person and also a support for others (Annie says that there are moments when she takes on tiring responsibilities only for the sake of others). She is a demanding person, rigid, possessive and distrustful, but also compassionate, ambitious, loyal, resourceful, passionate and dreamy and sometimes, her vulnerabilities can turn into qualities and vice versa, depending on the situation, being the kind of person who, even when she falls into the abyss, she lifts herself up and moves forward, no matter how big the fall is. Her life was like a trip into a roller-coaster, as she puts it, but despite all those things, she is confident in a better future.

Regarding the trans-generational plan and the relationships with her family, Annie says that her relationship with her mother has always been a distant one. Her relationship with her big sister is also distant: Annie loves her, but there are many things that she prefers to keep away from her. So was the relationship with her aunt, cousin and grandmother: cold and distant. However, Annie declared that at the end of the personal development group these relations improved,

enjoying the presence of each member of her family in her life. On the other hand, the relationship with her younger sister is very close.

In her trans-generational plan, there were some negative events that marked her and her family: her father committed suicide when she was 16, her great-grand mother died when Annie was 9 years old, the death of one of her grandmother diagnosed with breast cancer, and several weeks of coma her mother went through, when Annie was 24, after she came in contact with a bacteria in hospital, the doctors claiming at that moment that there are no chances of survival. Following this event, Annie decided to become a nurse. Symptomatically, Annie suffered of hepatitis A, at the age of 10, and it recurred at the age of 24.

### **Intervention in the personal development group**

In the following, we will present essential aspects captured within a 12 weeks personal development group through creative improvisation through literature, showing how this technique takes shape in the therapeutic intervention concerning Annie, both at the projection and diagnosis level but also in the challenging and re-significant plan.

After the first meeting where the initial assessment and also a self-knowing exercise were performed for the participants, they attended the second meeting, where the focus was placed on group cohesion and therapeutic alliance. The theme of the meeting was “The Fortress”, the participants being invited to write a short story about a fortress, the way they see it.

Annie’s story is about a deserted fortress, a shadow of a great one (in terms of the experiential diagnosis, the hypothesis that appears is the dissociation between Ego and the Shadow, which takes over the existence of the girl. This is the first sign of the traumatic experiences she had lived, brought to light through a short literary improvisation). However, since the purpose of this meeting was not a deep self-analysis but the cohesion of the group – given the fact that it was only the second meeting – we only extracted some relevant hypothesis which, not only will be confirmed in the following meetings, but also helped us in the intervention process.

In the third meeting, the participants had to write a story about a character that they’re seeing in a mirror. Annie declared that she wrote her story in a chaotic way, motivating that she had a very bad week (*paradoxically, even if no one required her to read her story and also we told them in the beginning they don’t need any literary talent and nobody will criticize them, Annie apologized, as if she expected someone would*

*judge her for the story she had written. Our first assumption in this case was her need to be confirmed, maybe because of a gap from the family).*

She says that she found herself in another participants’ story, whose character is a great and good person who’s helping the others in order to be appreciated (*her need to be confirmed reappears, this time through another participants’ story – Annie is probably like that: she chooses to help other people thinking that’s the only way she will receive something back*):

*Annie: I have a problem with my feelings – with what I feel and also what others say;*

*Therapist: Ok, I understand that you are here (inside the story) just in the terms of the problem;*

*A: Yes! This week wasn’t that good for me. I was negativistic;*

(We observe Annie’s need to apologize, to find an excuse, as if she was a negativistic person in general she wouldn’t be accepted by the group, she says that her negativism is just temporary, based on some unhappy events she had that week).

*T: Actually, you said the same thing last week: that you cannot express your feelings...*

*A: Yes, yes, the feelings I’d rather trunk them in a bag and let them there. I repress them. And this week...I just wasn’t able to write anything, I don’t know what’s happening to me. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I can’t do more (referring to the creative improvisation the participants wrote). And in regards to looking in the mirror and writing a story...I can’t do that, I can’t look in the mirror (sense of denial, repression of her own identity – she doesn’t want to see herself in the mirror).*

In order to help un-phantasm her, and make her understand that nobody’s disappointed with her the therapist asks the other participants if they are disappointed with Annie. They say they’re not, and one participant in particular says that she has no reason to think like that because she didn’t heard his story, which is very ugly (the fact that this boy secures her, is a good sign of a good dynamic and cohesion of the group, which is very important for a client in order to relive in front of them some negative experiences and integrate them in a healthy way).

As a response to her colleagues’ statement, Annie answers:

*A: Actually, I am disappointed with me. Here is the PROBLEM;*

*T: Oh, so you don’t look in the mirror, you look at the others and you think they are disappointed with you. It’s like the others are becoming your mirror;*

*A: Yeah...this is my way of looking into the*

*mirror* (for now...sounds echoing the voice of therapist). *Although I'm sure I can do better than that. It may take time...and I always saw only the negative things the others say to me;*

In all that was mentioned above, we can see how a literary improvisation based on the description of a character seen in the mirror reveals the way Annie perceives herself and also her flee from expressing her emotions. In this case we are partakers of a concrete situation of the provocative and diagnostic valences of the technique.

In the next meeting, Annie says that she feels more relaxed and this time she had inspiration to write the improvised story (another sign of acceptance by the group). Although she wasn't available for a deep analysis, it's interesting the way she built the story, the metaphor of the mirror from the previous story, appearing again. We asked the participants to write a story about a planet (as a space of identity), and Annie wrote the story about two planets in the mirror, facing each other, one being sunny and green and the other being sober and sad. It's like two polarities – the good planet and the evil one lie within her, giving a constant battle for power. Probably, this powerful projection is a result of the analysis within the group, Annie beginning to realize the existence of these parts of her Ego. It is also interesting that she talked, in the second meeting, about two cities – one populated and cheerful, and the other wild and sober, as a symbol of the existing polarities.

The fifth meeting facilitates not only an awareness of multiple subcomponents of the ego, but also the need to unify them in a holistic, complete model. Annie wrote a story about a "human puzzle", about some lost parts of a person: "*...she was trying to figure out when she was scattered and lost parts of her, she realized she became more than one person, using masks for each moment and now she realized that she is broken in thousands of pieces. She would want to merge all these parts and to become complete again*", says Annie in her story. The projection value of creative improvisation is shown in this case – highly transparent and highly accurate – and how this technique aligns to the Unifying Therapy paradigm. As we already know, in the Unifying Therapy, the experiences felt as traumatic by a person, will block the experiential ball by "looping" itself, causing the breaking of some parts of the Self and disconnecting the person from her primordial seed. One of the Annie's traumatic experiences was the loss of her father, then the symbolic loss of her mother through her emotional unavailability and also the loss of her great-grandmother at the age of 9. In fact, this loss can

be considered Annie's primordial traumatic experience, considering the very close relationship she had with the great-grandmother when she was a child. After all these events, Annie started to dissociate herself, to feel unsupported by others and to observe only her negative parts.

The next two meetings aimed to highlight the relationship of the participants with their family members. In the first one, Annie wrote a story about a father-beaver, the head of the family, which was intended to protect and do anything for his family. Making a brief analysis, despite her high resistance, Annie testifies her father's suicide, her mother distance towards her daughters and the fact that she became a mother and a father for her little sister. With tears in her eyes, Annie confessed that it was very hard for her and she tried to understand her father. In the other meeting, Annie wrote a story about a less agreeable family member. This character was a child, a little girl who chose to run away, until she found herself in a storm where she lost several pieces of the "puzzle" (as we see, this metaphor returns). We are facing now the child-self revealing, a sign of personal growth, but placed in front of the father character from the previous story. Moreover, asking the participants to assume a role of a character written by someone else from the group, Annie chose spontaneously to be the father character, as if, unconsciously, she would want to pact with her real father, and to understand and integrate this unpleasant experience for her. However, being again reluctant to enter in analysis, we putted this thing to her fear of revealing herself too much in front of the group and we considered that an individual analysis could be more useful in this situation.

Since the client received a scholarship abroad in the form of three weeks of internship, she was forced to leave the group earlier than the others. In the tenth meeting – the last one for her – she allowed herself to enter into a deeper analysis. The exercise was to choose anything but humans or animals (plants, objects, planets) and to write the story about that character. Annie chose to write the story of a hurricane, which represents her, as she declares.

We will describe several passages of dialogue with Annie during this meeting, and how the creative improvisation led to analysis, awareness and an unrealized mourning of her great-grandmother:

*T: How is it to be a hurricane?*

*A: I don't know. I don't have time to realize...*

*T: ..you beat so hard that....*

*A: ....that I don't even have time to think.*

*T: but as much as I see, you are pretty calm for a hurricane* (challenging her in order to integrate

her repressed anger);

A: Yes, because in my case it is a chaotic calm;

T: I understand that you're calm on the outside but inside there's a riot...;

A: Yes, that's true, but I'm ok with that, because I'm in control. And, even if on the one hand I destroy, on the other hand I have the chance to redo everything, like cleaning a place;

T: So you, the hurricane, think this world should be cleaned. How does this make you feel? Where you pass through...you don't leave anything behind;

A: I have no remorse...

T: But what do you have?

A: I have nothing: no remorse, no feelings, no emotions (as we see, she still tends to repress her emotions);

T: What about your power? What do you do with it?

A: The power...I use it in a negative way, by destroying everything (destructive and self-destructive soft), and then I try to rebuild everything (rejection of identity and the desire to destroy and to rebuild a new identity).

T: And where do you stand in all this time?

A: Everywhere...

T: Oh, like you're in a continuous waiting. But tell me, how did you appear in this world?

A: God began to clean, got angry and created me;

T: So you are born in anger. Are you angry?

A: Yes, otherwise I wouldn't be able to do the things I do;

At that moment, another participant said that anger is an emotion, too. Thus, with the help of the group, we managed to de-fantasize and connect Annie with her emotions, whether positive or not. At this point, Annie says that this anger is something more native because she has had it since forever (*negative experiences led her to become angry as a self-destructive soft which she tends to repress*). I invite her to express her anger, but Annie – the hurricane, says she can't, because it's too difficult. I provide her a pillow, in order to use it as a way of expressing her anger, but she refuses, and she takes a sheet of paper, breaking it into small pieces (*even if the defensive mechanisms are still strong, Annie becomes a little bit aware of her unconscious aggressive instinct and projects it into that piece of paper*).

I invite the girl to come out of the role of the hurricane and we went into analysis, asking her in which way she identifies herself with a hurricane:

A: I'm just too afraid not to become a hurricane!

T: What makes you say that?

A: All my experiences. I had quite a destructive period (the girl starts to be aware of her feelings, even if she says she doesn't feel anything).

Annie starts to tell how, after her father's death in adolescence, she became a rebellious teenager who was smoking, drinking and not listening to anybody. She was alone, against the others.

Thus, in order to make her relive the experience, I asked Annie to close her eyes and to think that she is travelling, in a time machine, back to the age of 17, when she was a rebel teenager. Although if at the beginning she didn't wanted to do that, saying that time had passed and she had changed since then, Annie closed her eyes and regressed slowly to that age. My purpose was to put her in contact with a forgotten part of her, but which constantly appeared, projected in an empty planet, some lost pieces of a puzzle, a lost city and other metaphors written in her stories. This was a good opportunity to integrate her traumatic experiences in order to accept and unify them. Moreover, even if my intention was to put her in contact with the death of her father, Annie regressed spontaneously during this labor to the age of 9, when her great grandmother died. I realized then that she had an unrealized mourning with this woman, which may constitute the matrix traumatic experience for Annie. Thus, the integration of this experience can break the experiential negative chain, so the client will also integrate more easily other traumatic experiences, by generating new perspectives, meanings, solutions (Badea, 2013).

In the therapeutic space, Annie started a dialogue with her great grandmother, clarifying for herself some unresolved details at that time, giving a new meaning to their relationship and to her great grandmother's disappearance. This labor finished when Annie said goodbye to her great grandmother.

At the end of the meeting, I asked her to say a few words about her experience within the personal development group, following her first participation. Annie said that during her participation she started to gain more self-confidence and that she found her ability to integrate in a social group. She became calmer, more understanding and less self-critical. She also said that in her family, things improved, they now have a better relationship.

### III. Results

#### Aspects of the final evaluation

At the evaluation meeting, Annie is more enthusiastic and starts to share some stories from the

internship she had abroad. We asked everyone to write a self-analysis essay. In hers', Annie wrote that she realizes the way she acted in the past and for what reasons. She declares that during the personal development group, she acquired the ability to find creative solutions to her problems. A series of information emerged both from the self-analysis, but also from the evaluation made by us. We can observe in Annie an increased level of self-acceptance and an increased level of self-esteem. The feelings of inadequacy and her low capacity to adapt began to disappear, Annie herself saying that she's no longer afraid to relate with other people. In her case, the group had a significant role in her transformation, being supportive and giving her confidence and stability. We can assume that the personal development group worked for her as collective parents, who helped her grow emotionally. Not incidentally, the metaphor of the puzzle whose pieces are dissipated reappears at the end, this time in the form of a positive one: she stated in her essay that for her, the group itself was like a puzzle, and every participant put one piece in order to form a whole. At a symbolic level, we may say that for Annie, the group represented a base, where she herself had the possibility to gather some pieces, to unite them, one by one, and has integrated negative experiences, assumed her identity and accepted some shadowed parts of her. In other words, Annie allowed herself to experiment, to observe and to grant her Ego the opportunity to come in contact with the Self, in this way accessing the unification and increasing her autonomy as an adult.

#### **IV. Discussions**

##### **The symbolic analysis of the stories written within the group**

As we said at the beginning of this paper, within the personal development group Annie attended, we used the creative improvisation through literature as a challenging technique. Moreover, this group has been established in a research program aimed to harness and validate the technique in the Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy. We have assumed that the technique of spontaneous story writing emerges, not only as a personal development provocative technique, but also as a screening and experiential diagnosis factor. Within the symbolism present in each story, we can achieve a form of projective and experiential diagnosis, extremely important in any therapeutic approach of this kind. Therefore, the creative improvisations (the stories), become an extended map of the main themes of the client, which can reveal key issues and themes of life. We assume that using this map in the provocative

process will facilitate the awareness and restructuring process. In order to reveal the topics and themes behind symbolism, we will provide a brief overview of the main metaphors which appear in Annie's stories, and what are their meanings: Extremely common in Annie's stories are those metaphors which express cleavages, breakages or the existence of polarities – two or more – apparently not integrated.

Thus, since the first meeting, Annie writes the story of two fortresses: "Once upon a time there was a *desert fortress*, the shadow of a *great fortress* which disappeared". Looking at the intervention within the group, we can observe the way she projected in the story the Ego – Shadow polarity, which appears so frequently in her stories, as a sign of incongruity: who she is and who she was, or even better, who she allowed herself to be and who she refused to be. The same theme is emphasized through the metaphors "*a green and shiny planet*" and "*a gray and sad planet*" from another meeting.

We meet the dissociation symbol also by the metaphor of the "*puzzle*", the most frequent metaphor in Annie's stories all through the group meetings: from "*the scattered and lost puzzle*", to "*the pieces of the puzzle put in the right place*". We can also observe here changes of perception in the metaphor meaning, according to the changes that occurred in her life during her participation within the personal development group. Another common metaphor in Annie's stories is the one of "*the storm*". Whether it's a "*devastating hurricane*" or "*the child who woke up in the middle of the storm*", this symbol seems to have roots in the integration of the femininity – masculinity polarity, and also as a projection of the repressed anger. Also, another metaphor found in most of Annie's stories is that of "running": "people were constantly running", "her life didn't stop *running*", "she has no purpose, being always on the *run*". Symbolically, running can be correlated with Annie's continuous alert: the anxiety that something bad could happen and the repressed anger are resurfaced through this metaphor – running or jogging is a physical action which often acts as a catalyst for anger in a constructive manner and even for a healthy body. In her case, the lack of this activity, but also the repressed anger are projected in the stories as if it were be an unconscious need that would help her to break free.

The paternal symbol, The SUN, it is also present, reflecting the poor relationship and also an "unfinished" business with her father: "it's like a *flower and a sun* can look at each other, can touch each other, but they can't be together" (most likely, this metaphor is linked to the emotional deficiency the

flower (Annie) felt from the sun (her father). At the unconscious level, it is expressed by the need of the child to receive love from her father, to understand and to forgive him for a possible behavior which she perceived as more distant.

## **V. Conclusions**

Following all the information presented, we are able to see the usefulness of the literary metaphors within personal development programs using creative improvisation through literature. Obviously, the symbolism and metaphors must be linked to a person's life events and assumptions, which prevent an analysis of form, which does not have a stable and real background. This is only possible through intensive work using this technique in the personal development processes. That's why we intend to continue the research program, both to apply this technique on a larger number of participants, but also to validate and harness it in other ways yet unexplored.

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