

Journal of Poetry Therapy

The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tjpt20>

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To cite this article: Johanna Sandbäck Forsell, Linda Nyholm & Camilla Koskinen (2021): A caring science study about the understanding of life and creative writing, Journal of Poetry Therapy, DOI: [10.1080/08893675.2021.1951904](https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2021.1951904)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2021.1951904>



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Published online: 15 Jul 2021.



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A caring science study about the understanding of life and creative writing

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ABSTRACT

Creative writing is a known valuable aid for reflection on one's life and involves the human being in a holistic way. This article has a caring science perspective and focuses on the understanding of life when creative writing is used to tackle unforeseen change. The unsolicited narratives of three authors were analysed in a study. The included texts were published autobiographical works and creative writing guides. A thematic network analysis was used as a method of analysis. The analysis ended up in a global theme that shows the understanding of life as a humble stance towards its changefulness. This theme entails acknowledging the uncertainty in life, seizing of opportunities and transformation through suffering. Creative writing is found to aid the human being to handle the changefulness of life.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 20 November 2020
Accepted 15 January 2021

KEYWORDS

Caring science; creative writing; understanding of life; unsolicited written narratives; thematic networks analysis

This article is based on deepening the understanding of life, specifically when human beings going through hardship in their personal lives use creative writing as a key to understand it. Unforeseen change in life brings on a necessity for human beings to deal with it and creative writing is a known valuable aid for reflection on one's life.

Previous research has shown creative writing to involve the human being in a holistic way. The gain from writing creatively goes beyond just knowledge acquisition; writing can spark self-development and help a person mature. According to Sandbäck Forsell et al. (2021), creative writing can be a key to self-understanding and growth and aid a holistic development of a human being – human becoming. To write creatively can initiate a developmental process or spiritual growth. Epple (2007) describes epiphanies that emerge in writing which can bring a new view of life and new actions into the world. In a somewhat similar vein, Gladding and Drake Wallace (2018) describe creative writing as an aid for a person to see oneself and the world more clearly. In a later stage of a human's developmental process, creative writing is a possible way for dealing with one's maturing from a holistic point of view. Saunders (2006) found

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gerotranscendence to be a more prominent theme in the writings of the elderly amateur poets compared with the writings of professional poets.

For adult learners, Sabeti (2015) describes the intense crafting of language as a means for being in the present, giving them feelings of youthfulness and energy. Similarly, Sandbäck Forsell et al. (2019) have found the temporal aspect of caring in creative writing to involve experiences of pausing and being in the present. Wright (2010) also describes that the writing of a personal journal enables focusing on the present moment even when the thoughts and emotions are uncomfortable. Kazi et al. (2014) found that writers experience writing activity under such conditions as to last longer than the actual duration.

When dealing with loss, creative writing can support the development of a new self-identity. Berg Wikander et al. (2012) have found writing to be relieving and make reflections and memories clearer. Saresma (2003) notes that writing about personal bereavement can aid in the recovery from the loss and the construction of a new identity as a survivor of a sibling's suicide. Similarly, Den Elzen (2015) finds memoir writing to help facilitate the construction of meaning from the experience of loss, thus aiding in identity rebuilding.

Writing creatively can aid in the structuring of an illness experience, such as cancer, in which case Kohler Riessman (2015) have found creative writing to enable order and meaning. Brooks (2004) describes creative writing as giving meaning to illness as part of a person's life story. Furthermore, writing ones' story can be empowering and the most powerful narratives can transform a story of illness into a new one. Baker (2009) describes that writing may not adhere to historical facts and of greater importance is to be faithful to the emotional truths. To write in a form that is suitable for ones' voice and experience is of importance. Edmonston (2006) says that doodling can be a spiritual practice and Wright (2009) describes another form of self-directed writing for well-being – to write to oneself in a non-judgmental compassionate voice. For cancer survivors, Thomas et al. (2017) have found that creative writing in community-based workshops aids in focusing on oneself amidst everyday demands, thus facilitating self-care.

Research has uncovered creative writing to aid in identity building in a mental health context. Writing creatively can expand the view of oneself beyond being a user or receiver of care. Sagan (2007) has found it to be a process of coming to terms with a new self-narrative and Taylor et al. (2014) have described it as a process of restoring identity and personal growth. Somewhat similarly, Cooper (2014) has found that it enables cognitive change and provides possibilities to explore life experiences which improve understanding of self-identity. The language used during an autobiographical writing process has been found by Smorti et al. (2010) to change from being centred on memory to a narrative that conveys insight. Creative writing can target depression. Suhr et al. (2017) describe the writing of a resource-oriented diary after inpatient psychiatric care lowering depression and similarly, Mastel-Smith et al. (2007) have found that creative writing in workshops for community-dwelling older adults reduces depressive symptoms.

Purpose and theoretical background

The purpose of this study is to obtain a deep understanding about the understanding of life in the context of creative writing from a caring science perspective. From this perspective, we understand the active in creative writing to be caring. Wagner (2019) describes

that stored experiences can be released and brought into a larger perspective through reflective writing as caring moments with oneself. Additionally, Sandbäck Forsell et al. (2019) describe that caring in creative writing can be viewed as a movement that initially commences in relation to oneself and expands to a larger view involving the perspective of time in life and the world one lives in. As a result, it then concerns the understanding of life. The research found on creative writing from a caring science perspective appears to be scarce; hence, there is a need to deepen the understanding about creative writing as well as from a caring science perspective.

This caring science study has the concept of understanding of life as a springboard which describes the human beings' personal understanding of life. It is connected to ones becoming as human being; as one matures and develops, this will ultimately affect the understanding of life as well. With a wide span, it can be understood intuitively and consciously on a concrete level as well as abstractly or spiritually regarding one's life stance (Rehnsfeldt, 2005; Rehnsfeldt & Arman, 2005). A persistent and unbearable suffering can prevent a human being from growing and reflects darkness in the understanding of life according to Rehnsfeldt (2005). This means that the ontological or spiritual understanding of life is affected just like the understanding of everyday life.

Materials and methods

The method of data collection used in this study is inspired by O'Brien and Clark's (2012) description of unsolicited written narratives as a methodological genre. Unsolicited written narratives as material have previously been used by Peary (2014) and Whitney (2005), both focusing on self-help books on creative writing. Peary (2014) has used these books and describes creative writing as a holistic act that concerns the whole person and is a universal ability of humans. Whitney (2005) has analysed self-help books concerning creative writing as journaling, where the practice of writing creatively is described as a tool for discovering an authentic self, for self-construction and for dialogue with oneself.

The writers included in this study have chosen to share both their personal experiences of hardship in life and their knowledge about the possibilities of creative writing to handle life during pressuring times. All three writers included in this study have dealt with somewhat different distressing experiences through writing and then continued to write about creative writing. Diana Raab wrote about the sudden loss of close person at a young age and having breast cancer, Susan Zimmermann wrote about being a parent to a child with a neurological disorder and Patricia Tudor-Sandahl wrote about a difficult childhood. All these writers have written creatively about hardships they experienced and about writing in what might be described as self-help books on creative writing for a personal understanding of life. The material in this study consists of published autobiographical works and guides for writing creatively. The criteria for the material included are the writing and publishing of an autobiography followed by a creative writing guide.

The following published works have been analysed: *Regina's Closet* (Raab, 2007), *Healing with Words* (Raab, 2010) and *Writing for Bliss* (Raab, 2017), *Keeping Katherine* (Zimmermann, 2004) and *Writing To Heal the Soul* (Zimmermann, 2002), *Ett himla liv [A tremendous life]* (Tudor-Sandahl, 1996) and *Ordet är ditt [The word is yours]* (Tudor-Sandahl, 2010). Raab is the only author to have published two writing guides which are both included in

the material. These written accounts are unsolicited, narrator-driven accounts about distressing experiences in life and about creative writing. According to O'Brien and Clark (2012), they can therefore be understood to deal with issues that are of importance to the writers themselves. Still, the texts are seen to convey a meaning that goes beyond the writers' subjectivity; through hermeneutical interpretation, they can shed a light on questions about life according to Vikström (2005).

The material was analysed with the thematic networks analysis described by Attride-Stirling (2001) which uses a web-like network as an organizing principle. The analysis method consists of three broad stages, all involving interpretation: the reduction or breakdown of the text, the exploration of the text and the integration of the text. Thematic networks analysis shares the key features of any hermeneutic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and is well suited to analyse rich textual data (Hanington & Martin, 2019) such as the material in this study. The following research question was used as a coding framework in the data analysis: "how does the understanding of life appear?"

Familiarization with the material was done by reading through the texts. First, the memoir was read and then the author's creative writing guide. Thus, the works are read in the order understood to be written by the authors. This was followed by a coding of meaningful text excerpts that seemed to answer the research question and were grouped according to their similarities and differences. The texts in the groups were read through several times and themes were created to form six basic themes. A thorough read through and organizing of the basic themes was done, through which the themes were arranged and formed three organizing themes. The network was drawn and revised several times as the analysis progressed and was finalized with the construction of a single global theme from the three organizing themes.

Results

The result shows a global theme "a humble stance to the changefulness of life." The theme entails that the writers acknowledge an uncertainty in life, as it is viewed to have its own way of being that can be both unexpected and unpredictable. In this way, life has a continuous changefulness to it. The global theme also includes that the understanding of life is a humble stance because it encompasses conscious and active ways of making use of the possibilities. This means that human beings attempt to take care of the time in life while knowing that life itself cannot be captured. Furthermore, the humble stance entails the ability to influence things in life in some way but still embracing that the possibility to control the conditions of life are limited. The changefulness shown in this theme also spans the transformation that can come from change where suffering in some way has led to growth. This global theme, "a humble stance to the changefulness of life," encompasses three orienting themes: *acknowledging the uncertainty in life*, *seizing opportunities in life* and *transformation through suffering in life*.

Acknowledging the uncertainty in life

This theme shows that the writers acknowledge the uncertainty in life involving *continuous change* and a necessity to *orient oneself* in life. The issue *continuous change* shows that the writers think that there is nothing certain in life, other than that it involves a

continuous change. Change and impermanence are described as necessities that one needs to embrace with one writer stating that “we need to contemplate, and become comfortable with change” (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 105). Tudor-Sandahl (2010) uses a circle to illustrate the ongoing change in life, describing everything going in circles and nothing being eternal. Even though life is described as everchanging, it still is viewed as having a rhythm. There is an ongoing cycle where birth and death replace each other and death is understood to concern a literal death or crushed dreams and expectations.

It is the nature of nature. It is the nature of life. It is dangerous to get too removed from nature’s voice, a voice that can be benign as well as ruthless, full of beauty or destruction. It teaches us that while we have control over some things, others are beyond our reckoning. (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 72)

The writers describe life as everchanging, and this insight itself is something that a person can hold on to which can aid in handling setbacks and despair. This does not concern only the outlook on life itself, it also touches upon the inner emotional state. This will always resolve and change into another state of mind. Life has no guarantees, and one writer uses the metaphor of an adventure to describe a necessary approach towards life when nothing is certain.

If we can look at our lives as adventures, if we understand the outset that on an adventure nothing is certain and there are no guarantees, If we can persevere through the Arctic winds and desert heat, If we can move forward with our eyes and hearts open, If we can accept whatever is thrown our way, our lives become a beautiful song In a minor key. (Zimmermann, 2004, p. 134)

The issue of *orienting oneself* shows that the writers describe themselves in situations which force them to explore a path in life, thus get to know themselves better. They orient themselves in life like in a maze and this gives rise to contradictory experiences of sometimes not knowing which way to take and sometimes having found a way. One writer uses the metaphor of a labyrinth when describing the self-discovery brought on by life.

Inside the labyrinth, as in life, there are times when we might feel lost and other times when our path flows more easily. We feel free. We feel blissful. We feel as if we are headed toward enlightenment. (Raab, 2017, p. 43)

The observation shows a view of inner life where flexibility is necessary when facing the demands of life. One writer describes a draining stiffness as hindering, stating that “my rigidity had held me back and exhausted me” (Zimmermann, 2004, p. 89). The internal life is viewed as everchanging, spanning from experiences of durability towards challenges to an openness towards other people.

We have to allow the alchemy of sorrow to do its work: at times toughening us, strengthening us, showing us that “yes, we can survive any challenge;” at other times softening us, making us more aware of others’ pain, developing our empathy and sensitivity, which allow us to connect with others at a deeper level. (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 127)

Despite having other people around in life, and receiving love and help from others during hardship, there is a loneliness at the core of inner life. Sometimes one experiences an absolute closeness to a loved one but will always return to solitude. This understanding is gained in the process of maturing. One writer describes that “dealing with tragedy is a

solitary journey that drains and depletes. Other friends can help, lovers caress, faith support, but in the end, we have to find our way through the pain alone" (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 154).

Seizing opportunities in life

This theme involves making use of possibilities where personal choice-making is enabled and striving to be in the moment. The theme contains the issues of *possibility of choice* and *living in the present moment*. The *possibility of choice* illustrates that the writers view their life as involving continual choice-making. The choices that the writers describe concern the outlook on life and choosing how to respond to things around oneself. For instance, one writer stresses the importance of making a choice regarding the outlook on life as one of the most important decisions. "Either we conclude that there is order and purpose in the universe, or we concede that all is meaningless accident. We must choose which of these outlooks will guide our lives" (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 76). The context of life is viewed as grand which is why the opportunities to influence are small. Therefore, it is important to not let wonder stand in the way of what one can do to shape the small, personal world.

These writers stress the importance of taking an outlook on life where there is a possibility to make choices, despite not being able to influence and control everything around oneself. To make choices in life also concerns the choice of what one wants to support and cultivate; these writers stress that people have the freedom to choose their response to circumstances in their life. This is described by one writer as "we can be miserable, or we can decide that whatever our life situation – even if we are dying or someone we love is – we can choose to light a candle" (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 168). The metaphor of a train is used by a writer to describe life and illustrate the possibilities of choices by stepping off the train and enabling new possibilities.

Yes, it moves fast, but try to think of riding in a train and visualize how your life stretches out in front of you and behind you on the tracks. You are the passenger on the train, and you have the choice to get off at certain stops or to stay on the same track. (Raab, 2017, p. 151)

Living in the present moment shows that the writers describe a view on life where the thought of death functions as a reminder how one uses time; one writer notes that "one of the things I realized is the brevity of life" (Raab, 2017, p. 101). The writers describe a view of life where death is a reality and reminds us not to squander time. To contemplate death brings on an awareness to live more in the present moment, as one writer describes: "we focus more on what is important to us right now" (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 45). The issue of living in the present moment shows that the writers acknowledge a way of living where the surrounding things and people of importance are easily overlooked and bypassed.

We go through life in a daze of activity, rarely stopping in awe and wonderment, rarely slowing down long enough to take stock of the gifts that surround us. We understand too late what we had and then lost. (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 52)

The ability to be in the moment is described as a skill which is possible to learn and develop. The writers describe that some people who are good at what they do have understood the importance of being in the moment. They are viewed as mastering the

skill of being truly present, focused and open to the surroundings. One writer notes that “masters have lessons to teach us about living in this moment – the only moment we will ever have. They have lessons to teach us about focus and paring back to what is essential” (Zimmermann, 2002, pp. 114–115). Similarly, one writer describes the meaning of a proverb which only unfolds at a mature age, stating: “A wise old owl sat in an oak, the more he saw the less he spoke. The less he spoke the more he heard. Please try to be more like that bird!” (Tudor-Sandahl, 1996, p. 163).

Transformation through suffering in life

This theme shows that the writers describe a need to be courageous and confront their suffering. The theme also describes those hardships encountered in life are seen as possibilities to grow as a human being. It contains the issues of *confronting suffering with courage* and *tribulations of life as a possibility for growth*. *Confronting suffering with courage* shows that the writers have gained insight that suffering in life demands courage of them. They describe the necessity to face that hardship and suffering of life head-on; it is not just a question of accepting and just moving forward, as one writer describes: “we have to realize that true, gut-level acceptance is an act of courage” (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 34).

To have courage is viewed as a strength, when one can be weak and show emotions to others. This theme shows that there is knowledge to be gained about the demand for courage in life; the courage to face one’s fears can increase with age and experience about the complexity of life. Courage is seen as a necessity for a change of perspective and essential for change to take place. Another writer notes that “there might be a major shift in your attitude as you uncover a profound insight or make a deep revelation. It will take courage to notice and honor this insight” (Raab, 2017, p. 58).

This theme shows that hardship itself can be viewed as something that enables growth and moving forward even though it momentarily stops a person. One of the writers uses the metaphor of conquering a mountain to illustrate facing situations when courage is needed due to not being able to avoid them.

At some point in our lives, each of us has a mountain, a huge looming mountain that we will have to climb. If we have the courage and strength to go forward step-by-step, valley-by-valley, ridge-by-ridge, little-by-little, we will make it to the top and find it looks different from anything we’d ever expected. (Zimmermann, 2004, p. 37)

Tribulations of life as a possibility for growth describe a view on life where the focus is not so much on what has happened to oneself, but rather on what follows and the impact that the experience has had on one’s life. Tudor-Sandahl (2010) writes that a negative experience does not have to steer the direction of life after a hardship has been encountered. How one uses the experience gained from hardships in life is of greater impact on future development than the difficulties experienced. Life in future is not viewed as locked or determined by past experiences: “it is not so much the experience you had that matters but how you reacted to it and what its effect was on your life” (Raab, 2017, p. 99).

The writers describe a view of the trials of life where they are regarded as possibilities. To look back on the hardships encountered changes them such that they are viewed as possibilities that spur growth and development. This may not necessarily have been

possible to achieve without the suffering involved with dealing with them. This is described by one writer who states that “those blessings, often hidden beneath suffering and torment, bring out our true grit and force us to grow in unimagined ways” (Zimmermann, 2002, p. 65).

Discussion

The result of this study shows an understanding of life to be a humble stance to its changefulness. To be in the changefulness of life can be viewed as being a part of something grand that spans beyond oneself. Eriksson (2007) describes that the human being’s movement aims for an association with something larger and powerful than itself. Being part of something larger than oneself allows a human being to grow holistically but involves being in a changefulness that can foster and spur the human being to embrace life from a humble stance. Creative writing can aid this and make being in the changefulness manageable.

The result of this study shows the human being to be cognizant of the need to confront suffering from courage. This coincides with the Eriksson’s (2007) view that reconciliation and renewal demands courage of a human being. The understanding of life entails issues in life from a very concrete level to an abstract one (Rehnsfeldt, 2005; Rehnsfeldt & Arman, 2005). In this study, the understanding of life concerns issues of everyday life, like noticing people and precious things or choosing to light a candle. Furthermore, the results show that it also concerns the human being’s outlook on life.

Epple (2007) notes that creative writing can bring forth a new view of life. In this study, life is found to be changeful and described in different ways by the writers – for instance, as ongoing circles (Tudor-Sandahl, 2010) and as an adventure without guarantees (Zimmermann, 2004). Writing can also give clarity about the way to see oneself and the world according to Gladding and Drake Wallace (2018). Similarly, experiences are described spanning from being lost to heading towards enlightenment (Raab, 2017) and from rigidly enduring outer pressure to being flexible (Zimmermann, 2002; Zimmermann, 2004).

Both Sabeti (2015) and Wright (2009) have found that writing aids in focusing on the present moment. These are similar issues that the result of this study shows writers deal with, such as describing the brevity of life (Raab, 2017) and the present moment as the only moment one has (Zimmermann, 2002) as a human being. To write in a way that suits one’s experience is emphasized by Baker (2009) and all writers in this study make use of metaphors in their writing.

A critical examination of the conducted study shows that the research question used was broad and one global theme was identified. Using a narrower research question may have resulted in a somewhat different web construction. As the concept “understanding of life” has a wide scope, a broad research question was used to allow many different aspects of the understanding of life to be selected from the texts. The writers in this study are all women and this was not something that was intended and can be regarded as a weakness. The writers’ different experiences nevertheless strengthen the generalizability of the study. As a result, this study contributes to generally applicable knowledge grounded in the gain these writers get from practicing writing. The study is small but as the material is deep and the included writers were limited to three, it has enabled a

thorough deep analysis of the material. The themes were identified through the collaboration of three researchers, strengthening the interpretations of the material.

The study contributes to the knowledge about the understanding of life and creative writing from a caring science perspective. Nurses and other professional carers often encounter patients in distress. These professionals are aided with knowledge of the understanding of life after distressing experiences where creative writing has been found to be a valuable aid. It is not possible to eliminate all suffering from life, but it can become bearable through the use of creative writing. An understanding of life, which entails a humble stance towards the changefulness of life, can make suffering bearable and contains possibilities for human becoming. Thus, offering the possibility of creative writing in caring contexts is valuable. Further research could explore how creative writing can be incorporated in caring to aid patients experiencing forced change in life and striving to manage the suffering brought on by this. A future study could also explore the connective character of creative writing in the span of daily life and a broad outlook on life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Johanna Sandbäck Forsell has received funding from Victoriastiftelsen for PhD studies.

Author contributions

Johanna Sandbäck Forsell has been responsible for and contributed to research design, data collection, data analysis and writing of the manuscript. Camilla Koskinen and Linda Nyholm have contributed to data analysis, writing of the manuscript and supervision.

Ethical approval

Principles of research ethics were strictly observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was not sought for this research, since all the material in this study is published material. According to Finnish research regulations (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012), this type of study does not need approval from an official research ethics committee.

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