**Abstract – Bibliotherapy**

**Books can heal the mind**

**This paper is a discourse on the subject of bibliotherapy. It will argue that reading great literature can help one regain one’s balance when the mind is distressed or out of equilibrium, as a result of illnesses, disabilities or traumatic events encountered in the course of an ordinary life. It begins by referring to a seminal article on the subject by Blake Morrison, written in 2008, and proceeds with reference to a number of other writers, to enumerate the psychological benefits of reading poetry and prose fictions. It continues with an autobiographical narrative account of the author’s own experience of this healing power, and concludes with a suggestion on how further research is needed to support the thesis.**

**Morrison says that from earliest times writers such as Plato refer to the healing power of the arts. Plato says they bring ‘our soul- circuit when it is out of tune, into order and harmony with itself’. I know that George Eliot, who experienced her own period of mental turmoil after the death of her husband, wrote that ‘Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot’. The modern writer, Jay Griffiths, talks about how in Dante’s time books were sold in apothecary’s shops – literature as medicine’.**

**This view is supported by further books and articles I have found, such as an essay by Henning Mankell in *Quicksand* (2014), an article in *The Lancet* ‘The Art of Medicine – Books do furnish the mind; the art and science of bibliotherapy’, by Bate and Schuman, February 20th 2016, and a paper, A writer’s look at literature, fiction and mental health’ by Deshpande, S. from *The Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, Oct-Dec 2012.**

**Using such references the paper goes on to explore the idea through a semi-autobiographical narrative which provides data for the study. Here I discuss with an alter ego, whom I have called Rigby, how such ‘epiphanies’ as noted by, for instance, James Joyce in *Stephen Hero*, by Katherine Mansfield in *The Garden Party*, by Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, where people’s perception of the world is altered and their self-knowledge grows, enabled me to heal the divisions in my own mind caused by challenging events. This concept of epiphanies is linked to Peter Clough’s ideas on phenomenology in *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research* (2002, p88.) The auto-ethnographic element is provided by reference to Kim Etherington’s book, Becoming a Reflexive Researcher (2004), where she says that telling and retelling one’s own story can help a person ‘create a sense of self and meaning’.**

**The story continues with how my work as an adult education tutor helped me to develop the idea. The transformative nature of adult education, for instance, was confirmed by my reading of Themes and Variations of Transformational Learning (2012, pp27-28) by Elizabeth Tisdall, whose reflections on the agency of the burning bush put me in mind of these ‘epiphanies’.**

**The paper concludes by suggesting that adult students of literature could be encouraged to discuss whether the thesis that books can enlarge the mind in the transformative way that I describe is true of their own lives.**

**Peter Leyland 1/12/16**