Literature: the Reader's Role

Louise M. Rosenblatt

Dr. Rosenblatt reminds us that "Literature equals book plus reader." Perceptive teaching of literature must avoid over-concern with either the work as such or the personal responses of the reader. Dr. Rosenblatt, author of the well-known Literature as Exploration, is a professor of English education at New York University. This article is based on an address given at the 1959 convention of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Having been assigned the general topic, "literature as communication," I am tempted to dwell on the wit, the wisdom, the beauty that imaginative literature can communicate: It brings to us the funded meanings of our whole way of life; it enables us to share the inmost lives of people distant in time and space; it leads us to join in the great visions of what human life has meant and of what humane life can become. But I shall resist the temptation to linger on what literature offers, and move on to ask how literature communicates. In the work of art, the "what" and the "how" are ultimately only aspects of one another, yet in current discussions about the literature curriculum, confusion and disagreements often arise from disregard of this latter question. Especially does there seem to be neglect of the reader's role in literary communication.

W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" describes, you recall, the "dark cold day" of Yeats' death, when "the current of his feeling failed: he became his admirers."

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities

And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections; To find his happiness in another kind of wood And be punished under a foreign code of conscience. The words of a dead man Are modified in the guts of the living.

"The words of a dead man/ Are modified in the guts of the living." Auden perhaps can startle us into realization of the reader's active role in literary communication. The words of a poet remain merely black marks on the page until they are brought to life anew by his readers in the context of their own worlds. "He became his admirers."

Much discussion of literature seems to imply that communication is a one-way process. The author, we say, communicates to the reader. The reader is thought of as approaching the text like a blank photographic film awaiting exposure. Actually, the reader and the text are more analogous to a pianist and a musical score. But the instrument that the reader plays upon is—himself. His keyboard is the range of his own past experiences with life and literature, his own
present concerns, anxieties, and aspirations. Under the stimulus and guidance of the text, the reader seeks to strike the appropriate keys, to bring the relevant responses into consciousness. Out of the particular sensations, images, feelings, and ideas which have become linked for him with the verbal symbols, he creates a new organization. This is for him the poem or play or story. Only through a recasting of his own experiences can he share the writer’s mood, his vision of man or society or nature.

Moreover, literature provides a special form of communication. Perhaps “communion” would be a better word to apply to imaginative literature. For in reading a poem or novel, we are preoccupied with the experience we are living through in the actual reading. We are alert to the very sound and rhythm of the words conjured up in our inner ear. We are intimately involved in what we are recreating under the guidance of the text. Othello is for each of us what we see in imagination as we read, what we think and feel during our actual imaginative participation in the personalities, the situations, the sequence of events, the lyric moments, called up in us by Shakespeare’s words. We live through the suspense, the foreboding, the ultimate resolution. The structure of the work for us is the structure of our experience while under its spell. Aristotle, after all, recognized this inwardness of literary experience when he made the nature of the spectator’s response a test of tragedy; it is the reader who feels the pity and terror that are the marks of tragedy. No one else can read—i.e., experience—a literary work of art for us. That is why, also, we find that the Antony and Cleopatra read at fifteen is not the same work we evoke at thirty.

Recognizing Factors in Literary Experience

Hence, the quality of our literary experience depends not only on the text, on what the author offers, but also on the relevance of past experiences and present interests that the reader brings to it. We all know that there will be no active evocation of the literary work, no such experience lived-through, if the text offers little or no linkage with the past experiences and present interests, anxieties, and hopes of the reader. The work will not, we say, “come alive” for that reader, but, of course, we should phrase this actively, and say that he is not ready to bring it to life.

This fact of the need for “readiness” is now usually recognized at the beginning of the child’s career as a reader. The child is first helped to link experiences to verbal symbols. Thus he becomes able through words to structure past experience and to emerge into new understandings. Without sufficient relevant experience, he can evoke nothing from the page. At best, he may be able to make the appropriate sounds and parrot the words, but there will not be organization of meaning. To phrase this simply as a matter of “vocabulary” is to miss the point. Probably Ernest Hemingway’s vocabulary in “The Killers” and other of his stories is quite within the range of some fourth-graders. They would understand the individual words, yet be unable to organize them into a meaningful story. They would
not bring to the text the experience that would enable them to recreate the story in all its complexity. This, of course, is another way of saying that we must postpone asking them to read this story until they develop sufficient awareness and maturity to interpret all that is implied or suggested by the text.

What, then, are some implications for curriculum of this briefly-sketched view of how literature communicates? The primary inference, of course, is that curriculum planning must take into account two elements: on the one hand, the great wealth of literature of which we are guardians, and, on the other hand, what the student-reader at any point brings to this cooperative enterprise of literary communication. We need to remember that always we seek to help particular students, at particular times and places, with their special past experiences and present concerns, to participate in literary works. Literature equals book plus reader. The danger is that we may neglect either one or the other factor in this equation.

Avoiding Overemphasis on the Work

We may fall into the error of concentrating mainly on books: As specialists, we naturally feel our responsibility toward transmitting the rich heritage of English and American literature, and we are increasingly being called upon to broaden our purview to include the whole range of world literature. Today, with all that threatens our system of values from within and without, literature can perform a crucial function. Surely, we are justified in reviewing our literature curricula, to make certain that they include works embodying the esthetic, social, and moral sensitivities that constitute our living humane tradition. Yet we must guard against preoccupation simply with designating those works that we consider important from an historical, social, or esthetic point of view. We cannot afford merely to assume that the reader’s contribution will be taken care of, or to imply that simple exposure to a sequence of works is sufficient.

Of course—whatever the practice may be in particular schools—there are very few today who would urge a return to, let us say, a set list of books which every high school student should read, or which even every college-bound student should read. The Advanced Placement program has demonstrated that the colleges certainly do not seek such uniformity. Nevertheless, a tendency to speak mainly of books alone emerges in current discussions of the literature curriculum. For example, the current—very laudable—concern with raising standards is often phrased simply in terms of names of authors or kinds of books, such as classics or certain genres, that should be included in the literature program, with perhaps only vague remarks about levels of comprehension taking the place of a real facing of the other factor in the literary equation.

At a conference of college and high school teachers of English, for example, I heard a college instructor complain that he could not count on his freshman students’ being able to recognize various allusions to mythology or the Bible, nor could he count on knowledge of any particular literary masterpieces. He seemed to believe that high school teachers were
wilfully thrusting inferior books upon their pupils in place of the great masterpieces. I fear that he was not alone in looking upon the high school years simply as preparation for real literary experience in college. Surely, entering college freshmen should have had experience with mythology, the Bible, and Shakespeare. But when the pupil does read such works in high school, it should not be simply in order to be able later to recognize allusions or make comparisons, nor should it be for the purpose of later simplifying the college instructor's task. If the high school student reads the Odyssey or the Book of Job or Romeo and Juliet, it should be primarily because at this point in his life this particular work offers a significant and enjoyable experience for him, an experience that involves him personally and that he can assimilate into his ongoing intellectual and emotional development. Potential present meaningfulness should be the first criterion of selection. Without this, we have said, there will be no real literary experience. And that, of course, brings both the student and the book into the center of focus in curriculum planning.

Fortunately, a major advance in American education and in the teaching of English during the past twenty years has been the increasing provision for individual differences and for the interests and needs of the individual student. It is also more and more generally recognized that the immediate, deeply personal concerns, anxieties, and aspirations of the young reader—especially the adolescent—remain the major path for him into literature. It would indeed be unfortunate if those who are seeking to raise our cultural standards should defeat their own ends by encouraging a disregard for this still by no means universally-understood insight. Yet the implication often seems to be that concern with the personal or social approach to literature, or concern with the interests and needs of student readers has caused, and necessarily leads to, neglect of the classics or literature of high quality. Nothing is more contrary to the nature of literature itself than the notion of such an inherent contradiction.

To improve, not simply the quality of books studied, but rather the quality of literary experiences undergone: this should be the emphasis when we speak of raising standards. To lead the student to have literary experiences of higher and higher quality requires constant concern for what at any point he brings to his reading, what by background, temperament, and training he is ready to participate in. Literary sensitivity and literary maturity cannot be divorced from the individual's rhythm of growth and breadth of experience. Sometimes a lively and discriminating response, let us say, to Enid Bagnold's National Velvet may be a sounder rung in the ladder of literary maturation than a pale, confused perusal of, say, A Tale of Two Cities or Pride and Prejudice. Hence the need for a curriculum based on the idea of individual development rather than on a standard sequence of books.

A developmental curriculum would make personal involvement and immediacy of interest the basis for growth—growth in the capacities required for participation in good and great literature. Let us not, therefore, reject the plans for the study of literature that take into account the con-
cerns and interests of youth, and that allow for individual differences in maturity, breadth of experience, and temperament. Our aim, after all, is to help students develop a lifetime habit of turning to good literature. Books are losing out at present in the competition for the American’s attention; evidently even college graduates read very little. To blame this on failure to expose pupils to specific books, or types of books, is to oversimplify. A more realistic explanation, surely, is that the student in school and college has not been led again and again to literature as relevant to his ongoing life, offering him, here and now, aesthetic pleasure in the actual reading and help in organizing his sense of himself and his world. Once such a feeling for literature is established, we need not fear neglect of the masterpieces of the past or present.

Avoiding Overemphasis on the Personal Factor

But we have said that neither of the elements in our two-pronged equation should be overemphasized. If to be concerned mainly with books does not insure a sound curriculum, so also are there dangers in too narrow a concern with the personal factor. One danger is that we shall be satisfied with lively response for its own sake. This reflects a very limited view of literature as communication. Tolstoy, it will be recalled, fell into such a fallacy in “What Is Art?” Insistence on the capacity to arouse emotion as the test of art can lead to the notion that that work is greatest which produces a response in the greatest number of readers. Tolstoy’s attempt to define the kind of emotions he valued led only to didacticism. Emphasis on the intensity of response may come ultimately to justify “box office” and best-seller standards, or propagandist demands of a totalitarian state dictating the reactions to be elicited from readers. At fault, of course, is the conception of literary communication as a one-way process, with the passive reader being stimulated to respond emotionally, rather than to engage in an intellectually and emotionally active process, first, of literary recreation and, second, of critical reflection on that experience.

Concern for the personal factor may sometimes also lead to overconcentration on works dealing with the immediate world of the student, on the assumption that these are automatically closer to their interests. This, again, reflects too limited an understanding of the kinds of personal linkage possible between the reader and the literary work. If we think, not simply of the externals of setting and situations, but rather of the underlying emotional and social preoccupations of young people, we shall be able to find personally relevant experiences awaiting them throughout the whole range of literature. Too early or too remotely academic study of Shakespeare in the schools, for instance, has alienated many from his works. The solution sometimes will be to substitute modern plays about contemporary life. But often the solution will lie in looking at the works of Shakespeare from the point of view of the youthful reader. For example, the adolescent’s sense of himself launched in a grim world of his elders’ making may be the door through which he can find his way into Romeo and Juliet. Let the scholar not shudder at the
thought that interest in "family relations" may serve as the bridge from the student's world into that starlit tragedy. The young reader, when personally involved, will be impelled to leap the hurdles of time and language and form, and will become caught up in an active recreation of the work itself. Wisdom may lie, too, in being content with what the student makes of a great classic, if he lives through it in his own terms without distortion, even if these do not include all the subtleties apparent to our more mature eyes. This will be sounder training than the glib echoings of sophisticated critical dicta that too often take the place of the young reader's organization of his own response.

Fortunately, to seek literary works that will first of all personally involve the student does not inevitably lead to emotionalism for its own sake. Irresponsible, irrelevant, impressionistic free associations, discussion of topics tangential to the text, simply are evidence of inadequate communication, an imperfect sharing with the writer. The text remains the writer's controlling contribution, the test of the relevance and adequacy of the reader's response. Here, surely, the teacher enters actively. He knows that a lively personal reaction is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of full literary communication. Once the live circuit has been set up between the book and the student, he can be helped to bring forth a more complete, a more balanced, a more discriminating experience from it. Indeed, it is precisely the linkages with the student's own intimate preoccupations that provide the challenge to cope with constantly more complex and more difficult works.

Helping Students Reflect on Literature

Recalling that the literary work is something lived-through by the reader, we can recognize that "teaching the literary work"—teaching a novel or teaching Romeo and Juliet—means helping the student primarily to reflect on what he has made of the text. He needs to become aware of the points at which his own concerns have led to excessively emotional or biased reactions, or his lack of experience and knowledge have prevented adequate participation in the work. He needs to scrutinize his response to the various aspects of the work, in order to achieve a more unified patterning of it. He needs to inquire whether the literary experience has brought about a reshaping of what he brought to it. He needs to sense the difference between the shoddy and the genuine. He needs to fit the work into the context of his past encounters with literature and with life. The teacher's task is to help him better to carry out such responsibilities of the reader in the process of literary communication.

Given this view of literary communication, we can avoid the danger of putting one or another peripheral concern in place of the refinement of the student's power to enter into and to interpret literary experiences. We have already mentioned the danger of making literature simply an excuse for discussion of, say, teen-age problems. There is an equal danger, of course, of making the literary work merely the starting point for absorption in literary history, intellectual or social history, or the author's biography. Another such flight from the lit-
erary-work-as-experienced can be the study of technique and critical terminology as somehow an end in itself, leaving the amateur critic still incapable of handling his own emotional responses to the text.

Surely, we should be wary of any literature curriculum for the schools designed mainly to illustrate literary history, to demonstrate literary categories, or to inculcate critical terminology. The matter of readiness cannot be merely taken for granted or left to improvisation and compromise. Literary history, the history of ideas, biography, technical analysis, are all, of course, valid and essential subjects for study, when they provide a context for literature and illuminate the literary work—the literary experience—itsel. When, for example, students came into a classroom recently exclaiming that they had felt Jane Eyre's troubles so much more intimately than David Copperfield's, the teacher made this the starting point for discussion of differences in style and method. Without such response, lecturing the students on narrative techniques or the use of imagery would simply build up a view of literature as something to be analyzed for academic purposes. Personal involvement, again, provides the impetus for meaningful study of technique, for acquiring a critical vocabulary, or for placing the work in its historical context.

Defining the Value of Literature

In the current upheaval in education, we shall undoubtedly be called upon often to defend the value of literature in the school and college curriculum. (Recently, I was told that the preoccupation with science is leading even writers of elementary reading texts to increase the amount of "scientific" material, and to reduce the amount of space given to narrative!) It is indeed important not only that we base our English curriculum on sound theoretical grounds, but also that any plans for the literature program be phrased to give evidence of due care for all of the factors.

We are justified in arguing the importance of literature, because of both what it communicates and how it communicates. As our little equation indicated, we can point both to the culture-bearing riches of books and to the reader's achievement of intellectual and imaginative powers through his active role in the literary process. Our age requires people capable of cooperating in the common tasks of a complex society and at the same time capable of living a truly free creative inner life as individuals. Literature—the good and great literature of the past and present—is at once an intensely social and an intensely personal kind of experience. Using the socially-produced system of symbols which is language, using "the words of the tribe," the poet, the novelist, the dramatist give utterance to their most personal and yet most broadly human visions of nature, man, and society. The reader, recreating these works, living through them intensely and personally, is freed to discover his own capacities for feeling, his own sense of the world, and his relation to it. Thus through literature, the business of self-discovery and self-organization can go hand-in-hand with imaginative participation in the cumulative experience, the keenest sensitivities, the highest aspirations of

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few cases, it is also the record of the trials and successes as man found some answers, which worked for him and which may work for other men. Language is not only the means by which man lives, it is also a record of patterns by which living may be meaningful. Poor is the student whose school only teaches him HOW he may meet the problems before him; potentially rich is the boy or girl whose school has made it unnecessary for him to relive all of human existence by teaching him some of the answers to the problems which he will meet.

Essential in Beat philosophy is a doubt about the reality of these answers—because they are old they are obsolete. Such a belief is the most severe condemnation of the elders of the present day; too frequently the realities of living have been taught as flatulent platitudes. When the doubt of the Beat Generation is honest, it is far more real than the placid acceptance of cultural patterns typical of many Americans. In an age of power, when the fact that man can blow New York City off the face of the map in half a second means to the Beat Generation that there is no assurance of tomorrow, there are answers in literature, and teachers are obligated to teach them.

What should be the teacher's attitude toward Beat writing? Teachers cannot expect their students to think of them as intellectually living if they refuse to consider ideas as reality and condemn them along with their creators, who have not been understood. Neither can teachers hope to comprehend or influence the minds of their charges if they refuse to use the language by which those minds think and communicate. If teachers believe and understand the truths star-studding their discipline, they can negate the nihilism of Beatism in a real and positive way.

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**Literature: The Reader's Role** — (Continued from page 310)

our culture. We can indeed claim an important place for literature in the curriculum; such imaginative liberation, such nourishing of a personal life is needed throughout the whole span of the student's growth. In these troubled days, we can echo Auden's words of 1939:

> Follow, poet, follow right  
> To the bottom of the night,  
> With your unconstraining voice  
> Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

*From "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" by W. H. Auden. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.*
## SUMMARY OF REPLIES TO QUESTIONNAIRE


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<tr>
<th>Do You Agree That—</th>
<th>English Journal (69)</th>
<th>Other* Secondary (68)</th>
<th>Total Secondary (137)</th>
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<td>2. Not all pupils, at any grade level, can be expected to achieve the same degree of mastery of English fundamentals.</td>
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<td>3. Life presents many situations in which only those who can meet specific requirements of skill and knowledge demanded by the situation, should be expected to assume responsibility for meeting that situation.</td>
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<td>4. Children at a very early age should be introduced, through appropriate learning experiences, to the concept stated above (No. 3).</td>
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<td>6. Concern with the meeting of specific standards should increase gradually from kindergarten to college.</td>
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<td>7. Complete disregard of the need to meet objective standards is a serious weakness in any school program.</td>
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<td>10. Colleges should assume full responsibility for selecting students to be admitted to their courses.</td>
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* Cedar Falls, Iowa (22), Baltimore (9), Louisville (37).

Number answering Yes to all Ten questions—22
Number answering Yes to all but No. 10—14
Number answering Yes to all but 8, 9, 10—6