Three Relationships in the Teaching of Literature

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Our conception of literature—what it is and what it does—will determine how we set about teaching it. If it is the cultural heritage, to be preserved and transmitted, then we may teach the literary work as a valued artifact, demanding that students show it respect and acknowledge its place in the literary canon. We may lean toward an historical approach in which we study the work's origin, the cultural context in which it was created, the influences upon its author, and the influences it exerts upon those who follow.

If literature is instead the domain in which we develop basic skills, then we may teach it simply as practice material, the exercises in which we teach skills of decoding, using context clues, identifying techniques of characterization, and so on. We are likely to be concerned about measuring progress and about reading levels, and we may plan our teaching around specific skills, probably phrased as behavioral objectives, rather than around intellectual content or some other organizing principle.

If literature is a collection of moral lessons, then we use it to indoctrinate students in good and upright thinking. We would judge the literary work in terms of the righteousness of its message, and we would wish to restrict students' reading to works that will catechise them properly. We would expect students to submit to the guidance offered by the words and by our presentation of them.

If literature is the culture's reservoir of visions, of conceptions of reality, then we do something else. Presumably, we give the students some autonomy, respecting their independence and uniqueness, their experience—however limited—and the conceptions that they have acquired or formed out of that experience. We offer them literature with an invitation to forge out of it their own visions. We may worry less about transmitting (the heritage), measuring (the skills), and judging (the morality), and more about cultivating students' growth and development, their gradual creating of their own conceptual world.

Applebee says that we have never adequately defined what literature is and therefore how we ought to teach it. Rather, we have accepted a convenient formulation, manageable and respectable, but possibly deficient. He remarks that teachers of literature have never successfully resisted the pressure to formulate their subject as a body of knowledge to be imparted.

In this conception literature is the information we have about literary works and writers. There is, of course, a great deal of information about literature and it is tempting to conceive of the discipline as that body of knowledge. Many textbooks succumb to that temptation. They are organized to present the knowledge we have accumulated. Usually that means an organization based on genres or chronology, since much of our information about literature comes from studies of literary types and of literary history. Implicit in Applebee's criticism, however, is the notion that other formulations are possible, and perhaps desirable. Recently, critical theory has begun to suggest some of those other possible formulations of our discipline.

Critical theorists have turned their attention directly to matters that teachers will find significant. We find much on the relationship between reader and text, for instance, in the work of the subjective, transactive, and transactional critics—
Bleich, Holland, and Rosenblatt. They are interested in how readers make sense of a literary work, how students' biases and predispositions shape the act of reading, and what reading may do to shape students' perceptions of reality. In their work, we find a reformulation of literary studies with interesting implications for teaching.

Other critics—those working in reception aesthetics, for instance, seem to be interested in how literature reveals, or creates, what Jauss has called a "horizon of expectations" for a culture, and their reflections on literature's "socially formative function" raise questions about the cultural context for reading, and thus about relationships among readers—a matter of great interest to teachers. Bleich examines the interaction among readers more directly, and on the smaller scale of the classroom, because he is interested not only in criticism but also in teaching.

The structuralists and semioticians—Culler and Scholes, for instance—by their focus on the conventions and structures that govern both writer and reader raise questions about the relationships among texts. The structuralists assert that everything must be understood as part of a system, and the system of literature is a vast evolving set of codes, symbols, and conventions to which writer and reader must submit. Semioticians emphasize codes—the patterns of understanding, perhaps the schema, by which we interpret events. Scholes says that the schools must teach students these code systems:

Instruction in reading must both socialize and desocialize. That is, students need to acquire the interpretive codes of their culture, but they need to see them as codes, so that they can appreciate those texts that reshape accepted ideas and at the same time defend themselves against the manipulative exploitation of received opinion.

Modern critical theory—some of it, at least—has turned its attention to the relationships with which a teacher needs to be concerned: that between the reader and the text; that between the reader and other readers; and that between the text and other texts. The different schools of thought offer different perceptions of the relationships, of course—there is no unanimity. But it may be useful, nonetheless, to consider the teaching of literature in terms of these three relationships as they have been shaped by the schools and as they are conceived by current theory.

What relationship between reader and text have we expected, or cultivated, in many classrooms?

Students are expected to submit to the authority of the text. Meaning resides there, on the page, to be found, dug out, learned, and tested.

They are asked to accept the judgments of texts rendered by history and the profession. Their quality and significance are predetermined, and not to be judged by students. Shakespeare is great; Guest is not. Milton is great; McKuen is not.

Students are warned that texts control us. We censor books because students will be contaminated, damaged, misled by bad books. Thus we tell students that their role as readers is passive, receptive—they will be shaped by the text.

They are told, by almost all their writing assignments in the literature class, that the appropriate thing to do with a text is to write a proposition about it and prove it—the argumentative or expository essay is often the model for both our writing about literature and our discussions in the classroom.

In a literature classroom operating on assumptions like those above, the individual reader is largely irrelevant. Meaning resides in the text, it is best interpreted by the more experienced critic, represented in the classroom by the teacher, and a student's task is to accept the meaning given, learn the information, and absorb the judgments of the critical establishment. Such a classroom is
fundamentally authoritarian, no matter how sociable and friendly the atmosphere, how relaxed and informal the teacher. It assumes that meaning exists independent of readers—that it is external to students’ minds—and that readers somehow have to swallow it.

Readers are expected to suppress their individuality and uniqueness, so that individuality and uniqueness do not contaminate the reading. Learning, given these assumptions, is a matter of absorbing a meaning that remains constant regardless of who does the learning, so individuality is simply an obstacle to be overcome. If allowed to rear its head, it interferes with the tidy transmission of information. Readers’ subjectivities, their unique backgrounds, the idiosyncracies of their thoughts and attitudes—all are inconveniences.

Within the past decade or two, theorists have begun to recognize that the role of readers is more complex. Readers are not simply receptacles for the author’s ideas and the critic’s judgments. Rather, readers do something with the text, make something of it, create something in the process of reading, and what they create depends not only on the text itself but also on who readers are and what they bring with them to the reading. Critics have conceived of this transaction in various ways. Holland, at one extreme, argues that our reading is tightly circumscribed by our personality—we find the meaning that our psyches needs to find, regardless of the text.  

Structuralists like Culler, near the opposite extreme, seem to be suggesting that the meaning resides largely in the linguistic and semantic systems and that our reading as a consequence is essentially the predetermined working out of the limited possibilities of the system.  

Rosenblatt’s conception of the transaction, however, is especially provocative and useful because it respects both text and reader.

Her conception of the relationship between reader and text allows readers to be interested in themselves and their own conceptions, grants them autonomy, but does not deny the authority of reason or the significance of the text. She sees readers as performers or creators, people who assimilate—make the work their own, digest it, work with it, create with it.

The implications of Rosenblatt’s vision lie in four principles:

Students must be free to deal with their own reactions.

There must be an opportunity for “an initial crystallization of a personal sense of the work.”

Teachers should attempt to find the points of contact among the opinions of students.

Teachers’ influences should be “an elaboration of the vital influence inherent in literature itself.”

Readers encounter the text, and in the encounter make meaning. To the act of reading readers bring conceptions, feelings, and attitudes, hold them up against the work, and confirm, modify, or refute them in the process. Readers reshape their visions of the world—perhaps slightly, or perhaps dramatically—by assimilating the other visions the work offers readers.

It is a vision of the relationship between reader and text that allows teachers to teach—it is not permissive or lax. But it is a vision of literature and its teaching that students might be expected to accept willingly, because it implies an interest in them, respects them, invites them to be themselves, to express themselves, to create themselves, rather than simply submit to the authority of the discipline and the teacher.

What sort of teaching does such a conception imply? Teachers who accept the vision of literature that Rosenblatt offers might try several strategies. They will, in any case, keep in mind that what the literary work means can only be determined by the student—teacher, critics, and other students can help, but they cannot make the meaning for the reader. They will invite students to confront the text as openly and directly as possible, so that they might be more likely to find their own, unique, responses to it.

Teachers might, for instance, invite an immediate, unconsidered response to the work. Even such general remarks as “I like it” can start the talk. Acknowledging that the student is allowed to like or dislike the work, that such expressions are legitimate, invites further comment and thus investigation of both the “I” that feels as it does and of the text. The teacher’s request for elaboration is not a challenge or a threat, but an invitation to search, in text and self, for the sources of meaning, for the patterns of thought and the strategies of coping that constitute the uniqueness of the reader.

Or, we might ask for a brief written response before allowing any talk. Five minutes to write a response to a poem commits students, momentarily at least, to an idea, a feeling, a perception. The isolation of writing denies the student the lazy
recourse of accepting whatever someone else presents—"I think what he said." The discussion that follows should be fed by the diversity of reactions that emerges in the brief writings.

It's important, in asking for these responses, to free students as much as possible, but some transition may be necessary. Students are accustomed to questions that guide them, that tell them what and how to answer—they need gradually to depend on their own resources, their instincts and feelings. At first it may be helpful to suggest strategies by which they may begin to identify their own responses. They may be asked any number of questions: What are your reactions to the poem? How does the work make you feel? What does it call to mind, make you think? Who, what, or when do you recall when you hear the work? What, in the work, intrigues you?

Such questions are a compromise—the ideal question may be a shrug of the shoulders—"Well, what do you have to say?" That offers the least control and direction, but it also offers the least help, and students need help at first. They will probably have to unlearn some strategies they have for dealing with literature, strategies that very likely include waiting for the questions that previously have always come from the teacher or the text. Now, students are being asked to sense their own questions, to stay alert so that they may find their own ways into the text. It's a new and difficult obligation.

Consider the problems of entry to this poem, for example, by Mark Doren:

"The Child at Winter Sunset"*

The child at winter sunset,
Holding her breath in adoration of the peacock's tail
That spread its red—ah, higher and higher—
Wept suddenly. "It's going!"
The great fan folded;
Shortened; and at last no longer fought the cold, the dark.
And she on the lawn, comfortless by her father,
Shivered, shivered. "It's gone!"
"Yes, this time. But wait,
Darling. There will be other nights—some of them
even better."
"Oh, no. It died." He laughed. But she did not.
It was her first glory.


Laid away now in its terrible
Lead coffin, it was the first brightness she had ever
Mourned. "Oh, no. It's dead." And he her father
Mourned too, for more to come.

We might ask students for their initial responses. If they need assistance, we might ask them simply to tell us what they see in the poem or to paraphrase it. That might not seem a request for unique response, but the diversity in the perceptions of the retelling will often suggest the differences in the response. We might find that students tell us a great many different stories. One may say that it is about the silliness of children, crying about such insignificant matters as the sun going down. Another may say that it is about the inevitability of death. Others that it is about the fading of beauty; the repeated losses one suffers throughout life; the cold indifference of adults; the inability of adults to protect children from sorrow; the inability of adults to understand the pain children feel over little things.

Clearly, there are triggers in the poem for all of these responses—all are plausible. What, then, does the poem mean? The reader's perspective may well determine what it means. The reader may be young, naive, content—one whose worst fear is the up-coming test on relative clauses and whose most painful loss was the baseball bat he broke two years ago. Or the reader may be a young mother who has had to help her child cope with the death of someone in the family. The difference in maturity and experience of the readers will lead inevitably to a difference in readings. But that the readings are different does not imply that one is right and the other wrong, or that one is necessarily better than the other. The connections readers make with the text are the ones their experience enables them to make. The literature class should not attempt to homogenize the readings, insisting on one purified interpretation, cleansed of all personal elements.

Another way of eliciting responses is to ask students to identify the most significant word in the poem, as Bleich recommends.7 If one says "adoration" and another says "mourned," then we've found a difference that may be interesting to explore. Discussion of such differences should reveal something about the poem, and about the readers. The literature class should try to make students aware of the possibilities in the poem, and it may do so by showing them the various readings produced by classmates, the teacher, and

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even the critics. Discussion is, of course, the crucial technique, and so we must consider the relationship between one reader and another.

**Reader and Reader**

What relationship among readers have we assumed in many English classrooms?

The only readers who count are the teacher and the critics and literary scholars. Their opinions are to be deferred to; their techniques are to be imitated; their answers are to be returned on the tests.

Other students are to be ignored if they have a history of being “wrong,” followed if they have a history of being “right,” scorned if you yourself are the one who is most often “right.” Other readers are most easily divided into those two camps—the ones who are correct and the ones who are incorrect.

Since much classroom exchange is modeled on the debate, other readers are to be argued with and beaten, if possible. We listen to them to find out what is wrong with their ideas. We do not change our minds, because to do so is to admit that we made a mistake.

Implicit in these assumptions is the notion that there is a correct reading and that the teacher’s task is to help the student see it. The relationship that obtains between readers, then, is hierarchical. At the top is the most firmly entrenched critic, the expert; second-in-command is the professor who hands down the pronouncements from graduate seminars to the teacher; and the teacher then transmits the information to the student, humble and expectant at the bottom, like the foot-soldier, shivering in the trench, waiting for orders.

What gives the critic authority, presumably, is careful, objective study. Here is a scholar who has acquired vast knowledge, has risen above the confines of mere subjectivity, and has achieved a perspective that enables him or her to speak about the meaning of texts. Other readers—students especially—are expected to defer to, and perhaps aspire to, that position.

A necessary assumption for this hierarchical relationship among readers is one discussed earlier—that meaning resides on the page, in the text. But if, as Rosenblatt and others have argued, the meaning is in the reader rather than on the page, made in the complex act of reading—reflecting—talking—writing, a fusion of self and text, then the authority of critics is undermined. They cannot be authorities on my meaning, or yours, because they don’t know us. They may know the text but not my making of meaning out of the text. They may remain authorities on the information—they may know about the writer, the text, the history, the influences, the genre—and they may serve as models of careful, thoughtful reading. They may be better able to make logical and persuasive inferential statements about the work or the writer. But they cannot possibly be authorities on my meaning, or yours. Or your student’s.

That isn’t a serious demotion. It simply recognizes that the reading of literature is not fundamentally a cold, detached, objective process. Literary works are not written to be put on scales and weighed or put in beakers and decomposed into their component parts. They are written to be read, to be interacted with by unique, diverse, idiosyncratic human minds. And so all readers—when we are talking about the meaning and significance of a literary work—are equal. The critic and the teacher become, then, not authorities on meaning, explicators of texts, sources of answers but simply other readers with whom to talk.

Not even the writers themselves may dictate to us what we shall make of the work. In a recent work on assessment, Rowntree cites a conversation
between Nevill Coghill and T. S. Eliot about a recent production of one of Eliot's plays. Coghill writes:

Myself: I had no idea the play meant what [the producer] made of it . . . that everyone is a Crippen. I was astonished.

Mr. Eliot: So was I.

Myself: Then you had meant something very different when you wrote it?

Mr. Eliot: Very different indeed.

Myself: Yet you accept Mr. Doone's production.

Mr. Eliot: Certainly.

Myself: But . . . but . . . can the play mean something you didn't intend it to mean, you didn't know it meant?

Mr. Eliot: Obviously it does.

Myself: But can it then also mean what you did intend?

Mr. Eliot: I hope so . . . yes, I think so.

Myself: But if the two meanings are contradictory, is not one right and the other wrong? Must not the author be right?

Mr. Eliot: Not necessarily, do you think? Why is either wrong?*

if meaning is made, rather than simply found, it is made in a social context. As language is both idiosyncratic and social—our understanding of a word is uniquely shaped by our experience but it shares some common ground with the understandings held by other speakers of the language—so, too, is the act of reading literature. Inevitably, we identify our concepts by noting how they compare with those of others or with a generalized notion of how the society in which we live views matters. As Bleich says,

Like the infantile processes of language acquisition, subsequent contexts of knowledge formation are always communal, even if a particular individual forms knowledge in opposition to his community.9

And so the relationship among readers should be collegial. They should be partners in the enterprise of meaning-making, assisting one another to comprehend the text, oneself, and the others in the group. Responsibility for the reading must lie with the individual, but the group, the other readers, may assist.

What does this understanding of the relationship among readers mean for the classroom? First, it demands that we break the habit of thinking of statements about literary works as right or wrong. True, we can make statements about literature that are demonstrably correct or incorrect. The significant statements, however—those about meaning—will very likely be beyond our ability to identify as right or wrong. If a character in a novel strikes students in a certain way—students like him, or hate him, or distrust him, or whatever—then we may ask for reasons, look for specifics, but we exceed our authority if we tell readers that they are not entitled to their feelings and perceptions. Rather, we need to find ways to help readers explore those feelings and perceptions, to think reasonably about them.

So we might call for the original responses, perhaps those jotted down in five minutes of silence after the reading of a poem, and begin to discuss them by raising the same questions we employed earlier to encourage reaction to the text. If it seems desirable, we might instead collect the brief jottings, glance through them, and establish an agenda for the discussion by identifying the issues that seem to arise most often. We would hope that the act of writing would have given students some commitment to their responses—if not confidence in them, at least some interest in considering them. Asserting that we are not looking for errors but for possibilities, we might ask students to elaborate upon and compare their reactions. “Why do you suppose,” we might ask, “that you feel as you do or think what you think?” “How does your perception differ from your classmate’s?” “What accounts for the difference—have you seen something different in the text, do you interpret some line or word differently, or has the text called to mind some association or memory that shapes your reaction?” We would ask students to think now, not only about themselves and the text but also about readers who surround them.

Such talk need not be permissive and undisciplined, although it is obviously susceptible to meandering digressions through memories and associations tenuously connected with the reading. Its objective is to understand a complex happening—the individual response to the poem—and it must thus explore some difficult ground. It is not so simple as looking at the connections between one line and another, the similarities between one symbol and another, the causal relations between one event and another—instead, it demands that we look at all of those matters and, at the same time, at ourselves and those with whom we are working. Intellectually, it is much more complex, rigorous, and demanding than any reading limited to the analysis of text alone.

Tone in the classroom for such talk must be cooperative—debate is an inappropriate model.
The discussions must build, rather than destroy. All involved should be willing to change their minds, to realize when appropriate that they have missed something in the text, or that they have misinterpreted a feeling of their own as the author’s assertion. To encourage this sharing, it is occasionally suitable for teachers not to read works in advance, so that they may think with the group, demonstrating the process of reading. If they go through the act of making meaning with students, students may see that the process is tentative and probing, that it begins in unarticulated response and is gradually shaped into coherent statements about self and text.

Students need to know that they are the final authority on what the text means, but they need also to be aware of the obligation that accompanies that authority. If they assume that holding that authority allows them to assert, without thinking, anything that occurs to them, then they condemn themselves to immobility, they trap themselves in whatever perceptions they hold at the moment, denying themselves the opportunity to change or grow. That they can do so is obvious; that they might want to do so is evidence of the adversary relationship that exists between some students and teachers. If students see the literature classroom as a place where values and attitudes and interpretations are imposed upon them, then they naturally resist. But if instead it is a place in which they can safely test their ideas, reshape their visions of the world, then they may be more willing to explore and think.

Text and Text

Relationships between texts are not very important—work in the English classroom focuses on the single text.

The relationships among texts are established by anthologies and course descriptions and are usually either historical (one text either follows or precedes another), generic (texts are related by type—poem, play, so on), or authorial (all written by the same person), though they may occasionally be thematic, in which case, the teacher or the textbook will tell students what theme they develop.

The literature classroom seldom pays close attention to the relationship between texts. As George Henry complained many years ago, we teach the isolated text reasonably well, but we do little to help students build their ideas by examining the differing perceptions of issues offered by different texts. We may talk about the theme of “power” in Macbeth, but we seldom encourage students to examine the ideas that emerge from reading that work against the notion of “power” that they develop in reading another work, perhaps All the King’s Men.

If, however, students are to be charged with the responsibility of making meaning, that responsibility is not circumscribed by the boundaries of the single text. The important concepts—love, justice, virtue, evil, responsibility—should, presumably, be continually reshaped as individuals acquire more and more experience. Each new text is part of the experience. As other readers may show other possibilities within one text, so other texts may further broaden an individual’s scope.

Applebee has argued that there is a need to reconceptualize the “literary heritage” and its implications for patterns of teaching. Typically, the curriculum has viewed the literary heritage as only a body of works, an accumulation, a piling up of books, and we need to see it instead as a continuing dialogue about issues significant in the culture. LaConte suggests that

Our accumulated literature is a body of continuing artistic commentary on the human condition, commentary containing deeply imbedded values and powerful recurrent themes, commentary that not only records the history of human thought, but also shapes it. It is this view of our literary heritage that can serve as the basis for a curriculum model for our time.

He recommends a curriculum that is essentially thematic and considers the themes of literature of the past to be connected to the literature of the present. Such a curriculum might be organized around what he calls polarities, good/evil, loyalty/treachery; heroism/cowardice. Within the polarity, he suggests, we should devise questions that “should not suggest precise, certain answers, but should instead represent the kind of doubt that has prompted the writing and reading of literature throughout history.”

The literary selections within each cluster should reflect historically different responses to the questions, organized perhaps in three groups—past, present, and future. Such an arrangement might tempt teachers into an historical approach, but that isn’t the intent. Rather, it is to ensure that the literature represents diverse opinions about the issues, to stimulate and provoke
through contrast. LaConte would invite students to add selections to the lists, further broadening the range of material.

Implicit in such a plan is the notion that no one text is the final voice on an issue, and that reading is not a matter of submitting to the text. Rather, students are expected to make the text submit to them. It is to contribute to their growth, to feed them with ideas and perceptions that they will not absorb unthinkingly but will assimilate, test, and make their own.

Such a plan seems a workable compromise with response-based teaching. It offers direction and organization, yet it does not neglect student response or imply that students are passive recipients of information. Rather it provides a framework in which students may work to create their own visions of reality. It places students' responses in an historical and cultural context and thus prevents them from growing provincial from too much concern with their own souls.

Conclusion

At the basis of the conceptions emerging today of literature and its teaching is the assumption that knowledge is made and that it must be remade by each of us. It is an epistemology that ties together language, literature, and composition. The making of meaning is a linguistic process, the formulating and testing of propositions and assertions; literature is the reservoir of meanings made, the visions others have had; composing, both oral and written, is the act of forging our own visions. An English classroom that accepts this epistemology and strives to cultivate the relationships among readers and texts that it implies is likely to produce enthusiastic readers who will continue to learn from their reading.

Footnotes

13. Ibid., p. 132.

Selected Bibliography of Books on Literary Theory and Related Topics:


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