

making meaning with texts

louise rosenblatt



selected essays

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Chapter Five

The Acid Test for Literature Teaching

This is a critical hour for the teaching of literature in the schools of America. Many of our high school and college graduates, it is being demonstrated, have not developed the habit of reading literary works. This, quite rightly, raises questions concerning the efficacy of what in the past has been happening in English classrooms. Meanwhile the pressure of increasing numbers in the schools creates a trend toward larger classes and therefore toward the kind of teaching that can be done for large groups sitting in rows, passively receiving information. In this shifting situation, a mass production approach to education, converging with a revived academicism, may lead to the abandonment of the very elements of literature teaching that are essential.

Of course, many factors other than teaching methods are involved in the present crisis in culture. Often the teachers of English are closer to the young people of America, and closer to the essence of literature, than the scholarly gentlemen who view with alarm and yearn for the genteelly literate élite of the past. Yet the danger does exist that the whole cause of literature training as a part of general culture may suffer defeat. If there has been only limited success in the past, a reason has been the confusion about the essential nature of the subject-matter of literature teaching. Unless this confusion ceases, English teachers will not know what to defend and what to sacrifice under pressure of increasing numbers and academic attacks. My aim in the following discussion is to present what seems to me to be at the very heart of any literature teaching.

Transactions Between Readers and Books

Our business seems usually to be considered the bringing of books to people. But books do not simply happen to people. People also happen to books. A story or poem or play is merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. When these symbols lead us to live

through some moment of feeling, to enter into some human personality, or to participate imaginatively in some situation or event, we have evoked a work of literary art. Literature provides a *living through*, not simply knowledge *about*: not information that lovers have died young and fair, but a living-through of *Romeo and Juliet*; not just facts about Rome, but a living-through of the tensions of *Julius Caesar* or the paradoxes of *Caesar and Cleopatra*.

For the reader, the literary work is a particular and personal event: the electric current of his mind and personality lighting up the pattern of symbols on the printed page. Or perhaps we should say that the symbols take meaning from the intellectual and emotional context the reader provides. The current of his thoughts and feelings has for the time of his reading been channeled by the printed symbols. The result has been a more or less organized imaginative experience, and the word, “story,” or the word, “poem,” points towards this segment of the reader’s experience.

When we teach literature, we are therefore concerned with the particular and personal way in which students learn to infuse meaning into the pattern of the printed symbols. We are not dealing with books as separate and fixed and neatly outlined and summed-up entities. We are dealing with each student’s awareness, no matter how dim or confused, of a certain part of the ongoing sequence of his life, as he seeks to marshal his resources and organize them under the stimulus of the printed page.

Our subject-matter as teachers of literature, then, is the transactions between readers and books. If we are to “teach literature,” certain kinds of experiences known as literary must first be brought about—that is our primary responsibility. This means helping specific students to have such experiences.

Once an organic relationship has been set up between young readers and books, many kinds of growth are possible, and the teacher can proceed to fulfill his function. Above all, students need to be helped to have personally satisfying and personally meaningful transactions with literature. Then they will develop the habit of turning to literature for the pleasures and insights it offers. Moreover, the sense of the intimate meaningfulness of literature is basic to wholesome growth in the kinds of abilities traditionally thought of as literary and critical.

This view is becoming more widely accepted today, and few teachers of English would deny that the individual’s ability to read and enjoy literature is the primary aim of literary study. In practice, however, this concern tends to be overshadowed by the emphasis on whatever can be easily systematized and measured. Or the English program becomes whatever can be more easily justified to colleagues and administrators, whose own past English training has often produced only skepticism about our whole literary activity. Various attitudes and practices within our own professional training also tend to obstruct, and some of these will be pointed out later in this discussion.

To place any particular problem in teaching in proper focus, we must keep in mind that our concern is with developing lifelong personal relationships

between books and people.¹ Thus we may develop criteria for judging the short-term motivations we provide our students, the works we ask them to read, and the teaching methods we employ.

Before we can logically consider such matters as the selection of works to be read, or the value of different approaches to literature, an underlying requirement must be faced. The atmosphere in the classroom, the relationship between teacher and pupil, and among the pupils, must *permit* a personal response to what is read. The variety and unpredictability of life need not be alien to the classroom. Teachers and pupils need to be relaxed enough to face what indeed happened as they interpreted the printed page. Frank expression of boredom, or even vigorous rejection, are more valid starting points for learning than are docile attempts to feel “what the teacher wants.” The young reader, in learning to inquire about why he has responded inadequately to a given work, is learning both to seek the personally meaningful and to read more adequately.

Often, the teacher is eager to create such an atmosphere of untrammelled, frank responsiveness to books but is unsuccessful. This seems frequently to be the result of a failure to see how certain conventional notions about literature, certain approaches and emphases, can come between the student and the book. The following discussion will seek to point out some of these.

Creating a Live Circuit

Perhaps all of us, at no matter what school or college level we teach, should have the opportunity to observe that second miracle of language (the first, of course, being acquisition of the spoken word), the child’s entrance into the world of the printed page. What a delicate process it is, and with what pitfalls it is beset! We know the importance of “readiness”: physical and neurological readiness to perform the highly complex operation which is the act of reading; emotional readiness to meet the challenge. Also essential is a sufficiently rich experience to make the words into meaningful signs, pointing to things and ideas. The queer black shapes must not only come to have sounds attached to them; these sounds must also be related to the appropriate object or idea. A set of black shapes on a page—*CAT*—becomes linked to a certain crisp sound in the ear. This becomes a word *read* only when that sound is linked to a certain class of furry, four-footed creatures. The beginning reader, then, should bring to the printed symbols a certain fund of experience with life and language. And the reading materials offered to the youngster should bring him verbal symbols that can be linked with that experience.

With the beginning reader, we can easily follow the process as he draws on past experience to achieve meaning from printed symbols. We can see, too, how

1. A conference devoted to surveying some of the general implications of this emphasis is reported in Grambs, Jean D., *The Development of Lifetime Reading Habits* (New York, published for the National Book Committee by R. R. Bowker Co., 1954).

he uses the printed words to organize and interpret that past experience. Moreover, we can glimpse the moment when, through words, he reorganizes past knowings and attains new insights. There is a continual shuttling back and forth between words and past experience and newly crystallized understanding.

But how easily this web of relationships can be broken, and the habit of mere verbalization fasten itself on the child! How easily he can come to feel that reading is simply associating the right noises with print, and have little or no comprehension of what it symbolizes.

In working with older pupils, whether in elementary or high school, or even college, we do not always recognize that we are faced with a problem parallel to that of the beginning reader. The six-year-old is perhaps readier to admit, and indeed to sense, the break between symbol and referent. The older child has too often already acquired the habit of being satisfied with only a general notion of the meaning of a passage. Fortunately, few become as extremely indifferent to words as the college sophomore who wrote, "the lemon meringue pie, its chocolate filling dotted with mounds of cocoanut." He defended this by saying that as he did not know just what a meringue pie was, any collection of good flavors would do! Many read story or poem or play with a similar willingness to let the printed symbols evoke only a pallid, generalized notion about the work, rather than as full a living-into it as possible.

The beginner, sounding out correctly the words found on the printed page without comprehension of their meaning, has failed to link words to experience. Parallel to this is the high school student who reads a story or poem or play as an academically and socially required exercise in words. It is something to verbalize about, to summarize, to analyze, but not something to be related to the ongoing stream of his own life.

Surely, like the beginner, the adolescent reader needs to encounter literature for which he possesses emotional and experiential "readiness." He, too, must possess the raw materials out of which to evoke in a meaningful way the world symbolized on the printed page. To avoid the mere translation from one set of words to another, that world must be fitted into the context of his own understanding and interests. If the language, the setting, the theme, the central situation, all are too alien, even a "great work" will fail. All doors to it are shut. The printed words will at best conjure up only a ghost of a literary experience. The literary work must hold out some link with the young reader's own past and present preoccupations, emotions, anxieties, ambitions.

Hence a standard literary diet, prescribed for all in standard sequence, negates the reality of our school situation. In our heterogeneous society, variations from group to group, and within groups from individual to individual, make it necessary for us to plan our reading program in terms of the specific group and the individual differences within it. We need to be guided by an understanding of such matters as the pupils' general background, level of maturity, major interests, social difficulties and aspirations.

Sometimes, if the group is sufficiently homogeneous, they will be able to share much of their reading. With other groups, differences may require that there be a greatly diversified pattern of individual reading. Indeed, for any young reader both kinds of opportunity are needed—the chance to share and compare literary reactions and the chance to follow his own personal bent.

Some educators fear that this emphasis will degenerate into limiting young people to books dealing directly with their immediate environment and present problems. This would indeed be a frustration of the power of literature to carry us into new and broader realms. A steady diet of books about the students' own age group, their own minority or majority group, their own social or psychological problems, would probably result in the reading of the works simply as sociological or psychological documents. But even more misguided are those who, out of a fear of such misinterpretation, seek to use only an abstract ideal of literary culture as their guide of what should be presented to the student. A false dilemma has been set up, for it is not necessary to choose between these two extreme alternatives. To some students today, *Jane Eyre* can be more personally and immediately compelling than, for instance, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, not simply, however, because *Jane Eyre* is a better book and a classic, but because the personality and situation of its heroine offer so many linkages with the emotional preoccupations of these contemporary adolescents.

There are some young readers of literature who will kindle at once to a magical phrase, who will respond to the subtle chemistry by which word acts upon word, image upon image, to create a unique effect. For most, however, the path leads from personal preoccupations to literary awakening. Sometimes the linkage between reader and book may be rather accidental. The attempted assassination of the President in 1950 shocked a young man into a sense of the immediacy of *Julius Caesar*. The play gave him, he realized, much understanding even of the present that could not be derived from the current newspaper. But contemporary relevance is not summed up in the morning paper, and the immediacy of the literary work can derive from much more fundamental sources. For example, the adolescent's need to see physical or social handicaps overcome has for many surmounted the remoteness of style or time or place or age level in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Of Human Bondage*, or *The Old Man and the Sea*. Youth seeks to understand itself and its world, to feel from within what it means to be different kinds of personalities, to discover the possibilities in human relationships, to develop a usable image of adult aims and roles. Such are the deep-seated interests that can be brought into play to nourish a vital interest in literature.

Especially in the high school years, we should help young people to discover the power of literature to enable us to experiment imaginatively with life, to get the feel and emotional cost of different adult roles, to organize and reflect on a confused and unruly reality, and to give us pleasure through the very language that accomplishes these things. Both our classroom atmosphere and the selection of reading materials should therefore be guided by the primary concern for creating a live circuit between readers and books.

Initiating a Process of Growth

Yet how often is actual practice still guided by vestiges of the scholarly patterns of a quarter-century ago. How often is it a matter of exposing the youngsters to the traditional materials and of being resigned when the exposure does not “take”? Of course, our young people should be acquainted with American writers of the past, but will “Snow-Bound” be equally vital to all eighth graders? For a certain group, *Macbeth* may best serve the aim of developing a lasting interest in good reading, but for some pupils this play might better give way for a while to such works as *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Some recent first novel in which the author broods over his own adolescence may be more powerful than *David Copperfield*. Again, *David Copperfield* may offer more points of contact with a contemporary reader than *Silas Marner*, *Vanity Fair*, or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

From the world of teen-age stories, of *Seventeenth Summer*, the path can lead to *Romeo and Juliet*. From Zane Grey to Guthrie to Rölvaag to Cather has been another progression. Stories about parent-child relations, and minority group characters, and historical figures, and farmers, and scientists—whatever may strike the spark of personal relevance can create the conditions for leading the young reader into ever richer and more challenging literary experiences.

A process of growth is involved. To *initiate* that process, each young reader needs works that his own past experiences and present preoccupations enable him to evoke with personal meaningfulness. Without this, literature remains something inert, to be studied in school and henceforth avoided. But when books arouse an intimate personal response, the developmental process can be fostered. No particular type of reading is being urged here as the panacea. There is no formula: not contemporary literature as against literature of the past, nor minor as against major works, nor even syntactically simpler as against more demanding works. Rather, we need to be flexible, we need to understand where our pupils are in relation to books, and we need a sufficient command of books to see their potentialities in this developmental process. Our main responsibility is to help the student to find the right book for growth.²

Avoiding Substitutes for Literature

Having created the situation for a live response to books, we must scrutinize carefully the way in which teaching methods and approaches will either foster or hinder a lasting sense of personal meaningfulness. In high school, just as with the beginning reader, teaching techniques can be successful in the short run and set up bad habits for the long run. The adolescent can be easily led into

2. Some of the bibliographical aids available for the teacher are: the reviews of new books in this journal; the book lists of the National Council of Teachers of English; Lenrow, Elbert, *Reader's Guide to Prose Fiction* (New York, Appleton-Century Co., 1940); *Reading Ladders for Human Relations* (Washington, D.C., American Council on Education, 1955).

an artificial relationship with literature. Year after year, as freshmen come into college, one finds that even the most verbally proficient of them, often those most intensely drawn to literature, have already acquired a hard veneer, a pseudo-professional approach. They are anxious to have the correct labels—the right period, the biographical background, the correct evaluation. They read literary histories and biographies, critical essays, introductions to editions, and then, if they have time, they read the works. The quest is for the sophisticated interpretation and the accepted judgment. At worst, their interest in the author's life seems to be on a par with the Hollywood gossip column. At best, it tends to make the literary work a document in the author's biography.

Shock and confusion often result when they are asked about the impact of the work on themselves as unique personalities. They tend not to linger on that, or even to pay much attention to it. They have learned hastily to substitute someone else's experience with the work. Already they seem shut off from the full personal nourishment that literature can give.

It is much easier in the classroom to deal with ideas and information *about* literature than it is with literature itself, as it resides in the myriad transactions between individuals and books. To help a young reader to reflect critically on his own response is indeed challenging to him and to the teacher. Naturally, the tendency is to concentrate on the easily checked "facts" of the story or play, or to present information about literary history, or to discuss the often entertaining items about the life of the author. Hence it is that in many classrooms pupils learn to ignore or even distrust their own responses to literature. They may therefore reject literature altogether as irrelevant to themselves. Or they may divert their original interest in literature to studies around and about literature. The student comes to substitute these for the kind of reflection on his response that would enable him to approach the next work in a sounder way.

Knowledge of literary history, information about the lives of authors—surely, we wish our high school graduates to possess as much of these as possible. There is, of course, no inherent contradiction between such concerns and the development of a living sense of literature. The contradiction often results, however. Knowledge about literature becomes an end in itself, and the literary work becomes largely an object to be described, manipulated, catalogued, categorized.

Sometimes, however, the young reader's attempt to understand his response to the work raises pressing questions about the difference between his own times and the context in which the work was written. Then the knowledge about the intellectual and social setting of the work helps the reader directly to assimilate the work and to understand both himself and his own age better. When the high school girl feels only pity for Katherina at a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*, we are inevitably involved in the problem of why that response is out of key with the total work, and that in turn involves us in historical matters—literary and social.

We shall solve our dilemma by placing such concerns in perspective and by staunchly refusing to sacrifice the more important for the less important. We shall resist the temptation to treat the literary work primarily as a document in the author's biography, or as a document explaining the age when it was written, or as a document illustrating shifts in literary technique. These are indeed temptations, it must be admitted, because such knowledge is more conventionally a sign of literary "culture," and is more easily taught and tested, particularly with large classes.

The criterion for high school teaching should remain: relevance to the nourishment of a personal sense of literature as a mode of experience. If that job is considered central, we can move happily on to historical and social approaches in their properly secondary place. For they will no longer lead away from the work of art, but feed back into the reader's heightened awareness of how it fits into the context he himself provides.

Analysis of the Literary "Transaction"

Another danger to the development of a relationship of personal integrity with literature stems insidiously from the apparent concern with the literary work itself. An extreme illustration of this was the exclamation of a core curriculum teacher, "We would like to include novels in our assignments. Why can't you English teachers give us a simple method for analyzing a novel? Something that pupils could be quickly taught to apply to any novel." Unfortunately, "a method" for analyzing a novel is not useful in the way that "a method" for division of fractions is—something to be applied routinely. This routine approach, of course, is the danger: a systematic dissection of plot, setting, characters, theme, style, or, if the emphasis is more sociological, the routine items may be author's life and times, setting of the novel, main problem, and so on. Similarly, when the influence of the "New Criticism" has permeated secondary teaching, the potentially valuable emphasis on "close reading" often has been nullified also by the creation of routine formulae for analysis. Literary works then seem to exist only to illustrate the use of symbolism or the method of irony.

All such approaches may seem to be forcing the pupil to focus on "the novel itself." But the existence of such a pattern that the pupil knows he must follow tends to stultify his experience of the work. He is reading in order to say something about these items. His attention is turned away from where the novel fits into his experience of life and literature, and any item—plot or theme or style—is as remote from himself as any other item.

Sensitivity to the different aspects of the literary work is highly desirable, of course, but when the eye of the reader is focused on the work as personally perceived, he will not march impartially through a set of items or apply again and again a single type of analysis. He will be aglow with a particular response. He will need first to register this response, to get the particular quality of it.

And he will need to reflect on it. For it will be the result of the way the work fits into his own past experience of books and life.

This approach to reading is a safeguard against still another danger—sentimentalizing about the characters in a literary work and opinionated discussion of topics tangentially suggested by it. Because we are concerned with the total development of our students, we value the power of literature to enhance their understanding of themselves and of human problems. When the focus of our teaching is the transaction between reader and book, such concerns do not lead away from the work into sheer emotionality and theorizing. The student scrutinizes the two-way circuit set up between himself and the literary work. He tests whether his particular personal response is justified, whether it has incorporated as adequately as possible what the printed page offers. He is often helped in this self-criticism by comparison of his interpretation with that of others.

Should not this process of reflection deal with such questions as: What happened, not simply in the story, but rather within me as I read the story? What things struck me forcibly? What were the “clues” in the story that “added up” to a meaning for me? What puzzled me? What meanings did others see in it—my classmates, my teacher, perhaps critics in published comments? Do they defend their interpretations by pointing to things in the story that I overlooked? Does this help me to see my blind spots? Or did they overlook some things that make my interpretation at least equally possible? How can I make this reflection the means of arriving at a more complete response to this and other works?

Raising such questions will inevitably lead to analysis of the work, but the basic question will be: What in this book, *and in me*, caused this response? Such a query will not produce the flabby clichés—the “Keats-has-a-fine-command-of-words” sort of thing—nor will there be a facile listing of recurrent images or a glib repetition of standard comments. The primary concern, after all, should not be the counting of different kinds of images in Keats’ poem, but the savoring of a particular way of thinking and feeling evoked by it. From that might follow, for example, a clumsy but purposeful probing into the specific themes, phrases, images, patterns, that lead to “a mixed-up feeling of sadness and happiness.” Instead of, “The plot holds your interest,” the question may arise, “Why did I care so much about what happened to a feeble, ignorant old man?” Or it may be “Why did I jump to such wrong conclusions, and ignore so many clues, about the character of the husband in that story?” Such concerns will help the young reader to discover, let us say, the way the author has enlisted his sympathy and built up the tension of the story. But they will also at the same time help the young reader to handle the ideas and assumptions, the sensitivities and blind spots, that he brings to his reading.

The student can thus learn to avoid projecting his own attitudes on the work. He can discover that a strong emotional response to a book does not necessarily prove its literary merit. He can learn not to accept shoddy writing

and stereotyped characters simply because he agrees with the moral or political theme. He may become able to admire the masterly technique of an author yet question his view of man and the world. To reflect on what one thought and felt while reading, in order to sort out the ideas and emotions relevant to the work, and in order to relate them to other experiences in life and literature: this is an essential part of growth in ability to read.

The various frameworks for analysis of the literary work should perhaps most often be something for the teacher to keep in mind in guiding the young reader. Whatever the specific framework may be, one requirement seems fundamental: the problems should be phrased in terms of the transaction between the reader and the book. The analysis of the "how" of the book will be a logical outcome of the "what," the actual quality of the experience with it. Such understanding of technique and background will not become an end in itself, but will serve to illuminate or organize the pupil's sense of the work as a total experience.

Some years ago, a latter-day Monsieur Jourdain applied to me for a private course in literature. As he talked, it dawned on me that he wanted me to teach him who Goethe was, when Shakespeare lived, whether *Hamlet* was a comedy or tragedy, but that he had no intention of reading any of the literary works! It would be comparatively easy to drill the vast numbers coming into our high schools in that kind of get-rich-quick knowledge about literature and to leave them impervious to literature as a personal mode of experience, as an art.

We need to resist the pressures from without and from within ourselves that lead to such empty results. As we review our current high school programs in literature, we need to hold on to the essentials, or take the opportunity as readjustments come about, to create the practices that will meet the acid test: Does this practice or approach hinder or foster a sense that literature exists as a form of personally meaningful experience? Is the pupil's interaction with the literary work itself the center from which all else radiates? Is the student being helped to grow into a relationship of integrity to language and literature? Is he building a lifetime habit of significant reading?