

The Rise of the Reader

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I. The problem of meaning

Abstract

This article outlines the relationships between the reader and the text, the reader and other readers and the importance of the reader and its constantly changing role in the past decades. Therefore, our students are not considered passive receptors for the author’s ideas or the teacher’s judgments, but they have the power to explore and to create their own meaning according to their unique personalities and their private experiences.

Keywords: text, meaning, reader, literature, teacher,

Many critics are interested in how readers make sense of a literary work, how pupils’ biases and predispositions shape the act of reading, and what reading may do to shape pupil’s perception of reality. Critics such as Bleich, Holland or Rosenblatt reformulated literary studies with interesting implications for teaching. Other critics, those in the field of aesthetics, for instance, appear to be interested in how literature reveals or creates what Jauss has called a “horizon of expectation” (Jauss, 1982:12) for a culture, and their reflections on literature’s “socially formative function” (ibid.) raise questions about the cultural context for reading, and about the relationship among readers.

The structuralists and semioticians ask questions about the relationship among texts. The structuralists state that everything should be comprehended 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. Modern critical theory has turned its attention to the relationships with which a teacher needs to relate to:

- a) the relationship between the reader and the text; (Probst,1986:61)
- b) the relationship between the reader and other readers; (ibd:62-63)
- c) the relationship between the text and other texts. The teaching of literature should take into account the three relationships mentioned above, as they have been shaped by the schools are developed by current theory. (ibd:65)

a) Reader and the text

Many times students are expected to yield to the authority of the text and to find the meaning which resides in the text and then learn it. They are asked to accept the judgements of the texts offered by literary history, and their quality and significance are predetermined, not judged by the students. Many times students are informed that text controls them, thus teachers implement the idea that their role as readers is passive and that the meaning is best interpreted in the classroom by the teacher. Thus the student's task is to accept the meaning given, memorize the information and absorb the judgements of the critical establishment. In his article "The Three Relationships in the Teaching of Literature" (1986) Robert E. Probst asserts that such a classroom is considered authoritarian. Readers are supposed to repress their personality or individuality and uniqueness, so "individuality and uniqueness do not contaminate the reading" (Probst, 1986:62). Given these assumptions, learning becomes "a matter of absorbing a meaning that remains constant regardless of who does the learning, so individuality is simple an obstacle to be overcome" (ibd.) the student has been given to understand that there are proper ways to react, that there are certain things to look for, that he must be ready to discuss and the characters, to analyze plot and subplot to or to talk about the author's choice of words. To some extend there is a reflection on our educational system, its emphasis on the attainment of good marks, rather than on the value of the work.

Robert Probst asserts that reader's subjectivities and their distinctive backgrounds, the "idiosyncrasies" of their thoughts " (ibd.) and attitudes were considered inconvenient. However, within the past decade or two, theorists have begun to acknowledge that the role of readers is more complex. Readers are not considered simply receptors for the author's ideas and the critic's judgements, but they have the power to "do something of it, to create something in the process of reading" (Rosenblatt,1995:3). Moreover, what they create it is not only determined by the text

itself, but also by who the readers are, and what they bring with them to the reading (ibid.). Critics claim that our reading is tightly “circumscribed by our personality and that we tend to find the meaning that our psyches needs to find regardless of the text” (Probst,1986:4). Others seem to be suggesting that the meaning resides mainly in the linguistic and semantic systems and that our reading as a consequence is basically the predetermined working out of the limited possibilities of the system (ibid:5).

Rosenblatt’s conception of the relationship between reader and text enables readers to be interested in themselves and their own conceptions, allows them autonomy, but does not contests “the authority of the reason or the significance of the text ” (Rosenblatt,1995:3). She views readers as performers “people who assimilate-make the work their own, digest it, work with it, create with it” (ibd.) So, her main focus is on the meeting of the student and text, on the transaction between the reader and the text. She argues that literature only lives in the mind of the reader during and after the act of reading.

Rosenblatt suggests that what literary work means can only be determined by the student. Teachers, critics and other students can help, but they cannot make the meaning for the reader. Moreover, students are invited 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. The literary experience, then, is not dictated by the text, but is evoked by it.

It is essential , 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 and they need gradually to depend on their own resources , feelings etc. “At first it may be helpful to suggest strategies by which they may begin to identify their own responses What are your reactions to the poem? What does it call to mind, make you think?” (ibid.15)

The difference in maturity and experience (the reader might be young, naive or mature) of the readers will lead inevitably to a difference in meaning, and the links readers make with a text are the ones their experience enables them to make.

The literature class should not venture to homogenize the readings, demanding on one purified interpretation, voided of all personal elements. The discussion of differences in opinions should reveal something about the text and about the readers. The literature class

should try to make students aware of the possibilities in the text and it may do so by showing them the various readings elaborated by classmates, the teacher and even the critics. Therefore, discussion becomes a crucial technique. The purpose of discussion is to enable students to reflect upon their own literary experience that might trigger some valuable ideas: “They might find secrets that are not there, that might open a small window into our own consciousness” (ibid). Readers must not be confined to extracting from texts: rather, they must be invited to create the texts, to bring them to bear upon their history and forge something new from the encounter. Furthermore, debates or free exploration of response may yield a sharpened understanding of oneself, of the text, and of the others with whom it is discussed. Literature is open, inviting us in to perform and to search rather than providing us with dogma. It offers us more questions than answers, prodding us to form tentative answers of our own, and to hold them tentatively, ready to rethink and revise when appropriate. The exploration of response does not disable student readers, encouraging them to intellectual laziness and emotional self-indulgence. Rather, it demands that they take into account the complex interactions of the words on the page, the history they carry with them, and the responses of other readers. The meaning they make through such explorations of texts and readings is potentially greater significance to them. Meaning must be forged by the individual out of an individual encounter with the text and other readers. (ibid.)

b) The reader and other readers

The assumptions that the only readers that should be taken into consideration are the teacher, the critics and the literary scholars and that their techniques are to be imitated and their answers to be returned on the tests, implies that there is only one correct reading, and that the teacher’s task is to help the students see it.

In the view of Robert Probst, sometimes the classroom is divided into two groups: the ones who are correct and the ones who are incorrect. The relationship obtained between readers, then, is hierarchical. At the top, there is the established critic, the expert: second in command is the professor who hands down the assertion from the graduate seminars to the teacher, and the teacher then conveys the information to the student. A necessary assumption for this hierarchical relationship among readers refers to the fact that meaning resides in the text (Probst, 1986:63-66).

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 the text. She notes that the reading of literature is not essentially a detached objective process and that the main role of the literary works is not to be weighted, and be decomposed into their component parts, but to be read and interacted with by unique, distinctive human minds. Therefore, all readers are equal when speaking about meaning and significance. The critic and the teacher should not be considered authorities on meaning, explicators of texts or sources of answer, but simply other readers to whom to talk.

If meaning is made rather than simply found, it should be created in a social context. As language is considered both unique and social, our understanding of a word is remarkably shaped by our experience, but it “shares some common ground with the understandings held by other speakers of the language” (Rosenblatt,1995:17) so, too, is the act of reading literature. Automatically, we identify our concepts by noting how they compare with those of others or with a generalized notion of how society in which we live in views matters. The significant statements, those about literary meaning will very likely be beyond our capacity to establish as right or wrong. Additionally, all involved should be open to change their minds, to realize that sometimes they missed something in the text or they have misinterpreted a feeling of their own as the author’s ideas. If students perceive the literature classroom as a place where values and attitudes are imposed upon them, they will not be willing to participate. But instead if they perceive the classroom where their feelings are nurtured and understood, they feel safe to test and express their ideas, reshape their perspectives of the world, then they may be more eager to explore.

In conclusion, the relationship among readers should be friendly and collegial. A partnership should be created among the same members of the group when searching for meaning and they should assist one another to understand the text.

c) Text and other texts

Literature does not pay too much attention to the relationships between texts, because in the classroom we deal with a single text. According to Robert Probst, we teach an isolated text, reasonably well, but we do little to encourage students to support developing their ideas by exploring the diverse perceptions of issues presented by texts. When making meaning students should not feel constraint by one single text, but they should correlate different texts, as other texts

may broaden the individual's scope. And this will contribute to their growth. Notions such as – love, justice, death should be frequently reshape as students gain more experience. “ The literature selected by the teacher should reflect historically distinctive responses. That is to ensure that literature represents diverse opinions about the issues, to stimulate and provoke through contrast” (Probst,1986:64).

If we accept the idea that the literature experience lies in the mind of the reader, in the transaction between the reader and the text, then teachers must adjust their instructional goals and teaching practices. The curriculum must also be reconceived to deal with this approach to literature, particularly in the selection of texts.

Therefore, if meaning is not contained within the ink and paper but is shaped through the complex act of reading, then we have to acknowledge that meaning is variable , that one text will yield different meanings for different readers. As more teachers and researchers have looked closely at readers reading, that variability has become both transparently obvious” (ibd). One may know what the text means for himself/herself but you can only guess what it will mean to each of the readers, who are about to confront it for the first time, in an environment drastically different from ours, carrying psychic burden hidden from ours, disturbed or calmed by events of which you may not be aware. The teacher must find ways of encouraging students “to make their own meaning, to assimilate the literary text into the ongoing stream of their intellectual and emotional lives” (ibd: 3).

Conclusions

If in the past meaning was simply found than made, now we have to accept the idea that literature experience lies in the mind of the reader and in the transaction between the reader and the text. Moreover, in order to reach the aesthetic beauty of a work of art and to develop critical thinking students need to be encouraged to think for themselves especially in a literature -based classroom where meanings in the text can be ambiguous . Since there is more than one way to read a text, students may relate to it differently. According to Probst the students who “parrot the thinking of their teachers or critical judgements of scholars, or memorize peripheral information about the author’s lives and historical period, have not started to digest literature yet” (Probst,1986:38). There is obviously more to literature, than simply learning factual knowledge about the author, time frame etc. Within the past decades or two, theorists have begun to acknowledge that the role of the readers is more complex and that they are not considered simple receptors for the author’s ideas and the critics’ judgement, but they have the power “ to do something with it, to create something in the process of reading” (Rosenblatt,1986:4). Additionally, what they create, it is not only determined by the text itself, but also by “who the readers are and what they bring with them to the reading” (ibid.10). According to Rosenblatt, students can make meaning for themselves, and are considered thinking beings, who have opinions, therefore our duty as teachers is to show them to use their ideas and feelings to full capacity. Through guided questions, debates, dialogues and discussions and other student centred techniques, students are able to react to a text in a personal way and grow and develop as individuals.

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