

1987

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Recommended Citation

Small, Robert (1987) "Reading and Writing Literature as a Way of Knowing," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1726>

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The following article is based on Mr. Small's keynote address at the Fall Conference of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.

READING AND WRITING LITERATURE AS A WAY OF KNOWING

By Robert Small

Most of us who became English teachers, certainly at the middle and high school levels, did so because we liked to read literature. We went off to college; and, when we had to decide on a major, literature courses appealed to us. We liked to read anyway; and an English major, we thought, would allow us to do what we liked to do and get a degree for doing it. Few of us declared a major because we liked to study composition; and fewer still because we enjoyed the study of linguistics. No, it is clear that we English majors majored in English because we wanted to study literature, or, at least, because we wanted to read it.

Once we became English majors, we had to decide what to do with our degrees. Now various claims have been made for our majors as excellent preparation for a career as a journalist or as preparation for medical school. But teach it to others is what we chose to do with our major.

Literature and the Other Art Forms

English departments are the largest in most middle and high schools. Every student takes English every year. Typically, every student buys, rents, or is given a textbook for every subject; but, in English class? Two books: grammar/composition and, yes, literature. Only literature, of all the artistic creations of our kind is required of every student. How many courses in music are required of students in

your middle and high schools? Unless those schools are very, very unusual, the answer will be, "none." Painting and sculpture are in the same sorry state as music; very few students actually study them in most schools.

But we've managed to make the study of literature an important part of the curriculum--at least in the amount of school time devoted to it. English teachers are supposed to be naive, but our success in getting our favorite thing to be required of everyone makes me doubt our other-worldliness. We've kept ourselves in business and gotten paid for doing what we like to do: read and talk to others about what we've read.

Public Attitudes Toward English

While we see our job as teaching literature to students, it is pretty clear that parents, taxpayers, school board members, and politicians, when they think about English, more and more think about matters like composition and reading comprehension. They don't mention literature when they get excited about what schools are and are not doing well. (Indeed, even we fall back to those matters when we ask for smaller classes: have you ever heard a case made for small English classes on the basis of a need for small groups to discuss literature?) But, as I said, it's the teaching of literature that we really want to do; and we do a lot of it. Most studies of what goes on in English classes have shown that literature takes the majority of time.

For some time, though, we've been in danger. Despite recent reports from places like the Carnegie Foundation that support the need for humanistic studies in schools, our place in the school curriculum as literature teachers is not always secure. Our own success in making literature central in the curriculum has made us vulnerable because we take up so many resources. More than one English teacher has had the experience of telling parents at a back-to-school night what he or she was doing with their children in English class and having the parents object in one way or another to "all that literature." We've heard them ask for more grammar and spelling. That request tells us that parents

value English class because it supposedly equips them with basic reading and writing skills that they believe are necessary for successful careers, high positions, lots of money, and entrance to country clubs. For a time, English teachers were in serious danger of becoming an endangered species. We were about to have our favorite subject--literature--declared a "frill" and made an elective for the guidance department to fiddle with.

A Student Teaching Story

Despite the fact that many students today indicate that literature is their least disliked subject in school, there is a general feeling among taxpayers that the study of literature is trivial and a waste of time and money. I think I know why that is; and, to explain, let me tell you a story.

I remember vividly my own student teaching. I had just finished a Master's degree in English with a concentration on the English novel and a thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a comic novel--excellent preparation for student teaching as I'm sure you will agree. When I arrived at the high school where I was assigned, I learned that I would be teaching two classes of junior English, one superior class, and one average class. For once, the labels were correct. The story I want to tell you has to do with the superior class. These kids were by far the smartest group of students I have ever faced. They went on to get law degrees from Harvard and PhD's in mathematics from Princeton. The teacher with whom I was to work told me that I would be starting off with *The Scarlet Letter*. She suggested that I sit in the back of the room and observe for a couple of days and then take over. Since I was scared to death, that suggestion was fine with me.

She told me that she would introduce the novel and then I could pick it up. When the students arrived, therefore, I was cowering in the back row. After a few words about the life of Hawthorne, she had them turn to the first chapter. Now, I'm sure you remember that first chapter--it's usually referred to as "The Custom House Chapter." I

decided at once that I was glad that she was teaching that part. (Frankly, I've never been clear as to why Hawthorne wrote it or why it is always placed at the start of the novel. It never has seemed to me to be a particularly interesting way to begin the book, certainly not when there is that excellent real first chapter where the crowd gathers and Hester holding Pearl steps out from the prison with the rose beside the door. Still, I was straight from a Master's program in English. Consequently, a scholarly approach to literature was something that seemed natural to me.) I must admit, however, that I was surprised when the teacher began the study of "The Custom House Chapter" by having the first student in the first row read the first paragraph aloud and then moved on to the next student and so forth down one aisle and up the next.

Now remember, this was a very, very bright group of students. I remind you of that, not because the round-robin approach would be good for slower students, but to explain why they were able to cope with this dreariness so well. Sitting in the back of the room, I was in a good position to see what was really going on. I'm sure you can guess what they did. They counted ahead, reviewed the paragraphs that they were going to have to read aloud to check for unusual words, and then went back to their geometry homework.

And so it went until the reading had gone about halfway around the room. At that point the teacher stopped the reading to ask a question of the student who had just finished. What she asked was the meaning of a metaphor in his passage. Because he hadn't been paying attention to what he was reading or what had come before his paragraph and because his mind was on geometry, his answer was halting and confused. Quickly, she asked other students about metaphors in their paragraphs; and, since no one had been paying attention, their answers also came slowly.

I've never been sure why she did that. Perhaps she suspected that all was not well. Perhaps, since I was sitting in the back of the room, she felt she needed to "do some teaching." At any rate, dissatisfied with their answers, she made an assignment for that night: Find all of

the metaphors in the chapter, write them down, and explain what they mean. Later, I learned how they coped with that challenge. You can probably guess their strategy: they divided the chapter up and shared the results by phone that night. They had no problem managing her unfortunate assignment. Even I, still possessing the numerous odd ideas about literature, students, and teaching that my English major had given me, knew that that was not the way to teach a novel.

Now I give you this example not because that teacher was a very bad teacher as English teachers go, for she wasn't. Rather, I believe it illustrates why so many parents and taxpayers feel that the study of literature in schools is at best a frill and most likely trivial. In that one hour, that teacher had combined a bad introduction to the work, for what she had the students do had nothing to do with what is profound and thought-provoking about *The Scarlet Letter*; a bad first contact with the novel, for dreary reading aloud was surely no way to engender excitement and curiosity; and a bad assignment, for, though Hawthorne does use a highly colored style in this novel, metaphor detection and paraphrases trivializes both the style and the content of the novel. Too often we, like that teacher, have acted as if there is nothing to literature but a trivial bag of tricks. We have treated the very authors whom we revere as if they were the Wizard of Oz--phonies standing behind a screen turning cranks. Obviously, no one would read *The Scarlet Letter* just because Hawthorne used a lot of metaphors and symbols.

So Why Teach Literature?

As I became a teacher on my own, I looked for reasons why anyone should study or teach literature other than as a voluntary diversion. There seemed to be clear reasons for studying science (it presents reality, doesn't it?) or even history (we're condemned to repeat it if we don't know it, right?). But stories and poems and plays, many written by foolish and even unpleasant people who lived a long time ago? What, other than entertainment for those who wanted it in that form, could such stuff give most people? What possible justification could

there be for taking valuable class time requiring people to read such things? I knew there had to be an answer, and now I think I've found at least part of the answer with the help of three people.

Making Meaning

The first of these very helpful people is Elliot Eisner. In his work dealing with art education and curriculum development, he has explored the artistic creations of humankind as what he calls "aesthetic modes of knowing" (see especially, Elliot Eisner, "Aesthetic Modes of Knowing" in Elliot Eisner, ed. *Learning and Teaching in the Ways of Knowing*, NSSE, 1985, pp. 23-36). In our age when the so-called "hard sciences" carry so much prestige, there is a tendency in many quarters to treat artistic creations as merely entertaining, as decorative but of no real lasting value. Eisner argues that, in fact, the act of artistic creation is similar if not identical to the scientific act and that both are ways of knowing. Both the scientist and the artist make meaning out of chaos. Though most non-scientists (and unfortunately, some scientists, who should know better) think that the knowledge that comes from science is found, not made, quite the opposite is true. Scientific "truth" has changed again and again throughout human history. The truth of Galileo was changed by the truth of Newton, which was, in turn, changed by the truth of Einstein.

No, it is clear that scientists do what novelists and playwrights do. Consider the biologists. They look through microscopes, record what they see, analyze the results, interpret their analyses so as to give them meaning as far as they can, and then present to the world those results and the meaning they have given to them. Astronomers do the same with stars. Sometimes both biologists and astronomers don't understand what they have found and present the results as mysteries. Authors and painters and musicians work on exactly the same task in exactly the same way. Novelists look at the world, record what they see, analyze and interpret, and present the results to the world. Like those of biologists and astronomers, their interpretations may or may not make sense to a reader. And, as is true in biology and astronomy,

the insights into the world presented by a novel may seem true to one generation and false to another.

The making of meaning is what all of them--scientists and artists, physicists and poets--are doing: not finding meaning but making it. And they all use metaphors often to express that meaning. What, after all, is the term "black hole" but a vivid metaphor for a puzzling phenomenon? Niles Bohr tells how he was stumped by the bits of information that he had discovered about the atom until the image of the solar system came to him in a reverie. That metaphor--an atom is like a solar system--allowed him to move on to understand the physics of the atom, though, like many metaphors, once it had served its purpose, it proved not to be fully satisfactory. Watson and the spiral of the chromosomes and Poincare and the insights that came to him while stepping onto a bus and while watching the waves beat against a shore are other examples of the power of the metaphor to make meaning from the chaos of the physical world. Even the story of Newton and the apple, though perhaps not historically accurate, is a metaphor itself of the power of the metaphor.

It is important to point out that the old, tired distinction between form and content that English teachers have worried to death makes no sense from this perspective. The purpose of both science and art is to make meaning of the chaos of reality. Therefore, the form that each gives in and to that meaning--the laws of physics and the controlled rime and metre of the Shakespearean sonnet--is the meaning that has been made, as much as is the sense of the words or the mathematics of the formulae.

So Eisner has helped me to see that literature--indeed, all art--is a making of meaning from chaos and a sharing of the meaning made. From ancient times until our own, young and old people have used stories to explain the natural world and the world of human experience. Myth and joke and anecdote--stories make meaning.

The Responses of Readers

The second person is Louise Rosenblatt. Almost fifty years ago, she published *Literature as Exploration* (Third Edition, Noble and Noble, 1976), in which she presented to teachers of literature a concept that is still unknown to too many of us. Essentially, she said something like the following. Far too many teachers of literature--and, therefore, readers of literature--believe that reading is a passive act. In that view, a reader opens a book as one might open a package, reaches down into it, and pulls out what the author put there. Some readers who are careful and perceptive get most or all of what is there. Less attentive and less able readers get less and get it less accurately. But all are mining for the gold that the author has deposited.

Rosenblatt urged us not to think of the reading of literature in that way. Rather, she said, when a piece of literature is successful for a reader, that success comes from the fact that the reader brings to the selection all that he or she is and has experienced. A merger, a mingling of reader and work occurs. From that amalgam comes a new creation that never has been and never will be duplicated because it contains the unique quality of the single reader. When I read *Pride and Prejudice* (as I try to do every year or two to keep in touch with the best there is), my response is uniquely mine. That individuality is the real glory of literature and probably the reason why so many people like to talk about what they read.

Now, I can imagine you saying to yourself, "Oh, sure, Rosenblatt's one of those 'anything goes' people." But she is not. Rosenblatt is careful to tell us that there are responses that are true to the work of literature and responses that are just plain wrong. The merger of reader and work must be true to the work, just as it must be true to the reader.

Let me represent that idea graphically, using an idea suggested by a friend who teaches philosophy. Suppose I put a set of dots on a blackboard using a ruler to make them, placing one every inch or two

apart. Then I ask you to draw a line connecting them. What do you think would be your first inclination? Well, most people would draw a straight line through them. Consider, however, the fact that a curving line sweeping up through one and then down through the next and so forth also connects them, as does a jagged line going sharply up, then sharply down. How many possible lines connect those dots? An infinite number. But consider also a line that connects the first two and then wanders off down the board not meeting several, then darts back to touch the last dot. Does that line connect all the dots? No. Truth to the literary work, like truth to the dots, is essential to response; but, after one's own discovery, the excitement of literature comes from the very diversity of valid responses. Although there may be a mild satisfaction in finding that a friend who has read a novel that you just finished agrees in every way with what you say about that novel, such a discussion is ultimately dull. Much more interesting is a discussion with someone who has seen the book differently, drawn different conclusions, found different insights.

Rosenblatt tells us that the teaching of literature should not be the giving to students of the one true interpretation. Such singularity doesn't really exist, though literature teachers have often acted as if it does. Rather, the teacher of literature should make possible a sharing of personal responses, valid, semi-valid, and erroneous. In that sharing, the readers can learn from each other; reconsider what they found in the book; keep, modify, or reject parts of their own responses; and go away to re-think their reactions. Although we teachers often act as if there is only one correct response to a work of literature, from our own experience we should know that Rosenblatt is surely correct. As I said, I read *Pride and Prejudice* every year or two. As I grow older and change as a person, my response to that novel changes. Because I am not the same person I was two years ago, I am not the same reader. My reading is not necessarily better or wiser than it was when I was fifteen--it is merely different.

The glory of teaching literature the way Rosenblatt suggests is that, as teachers, we are not locked into a boring and repetitious

telling of the one right way, an interpretation that we have told year after year to disinterested students. Rather, each reading of the work is a new discovery, because we have changed and, more important, because the students who read the work with us are different people--different from the students in last year's class and different from each other.

I remember watching a student teacher try to teach short stories to a group of students who would be called "low achievers" and "disadvantaged" in our current jargon. Intelligent and upper-class in her own background, she failed again and again. We struggled together without success to overcome her handicap. Then, one day, she assigned a story about a boy and his parole officer. The next day she said, "So, what do you think?" and the students started. Those kids had had parole officers or their parents had or their boy friends had. They brought lots to the story that we, never having had parole officers, could not. Their responses were alive and real. That student teacher and I took far more away from that class than we brought to it.

Elliot Eisner has helped me to understand why literature is important: it is a way of knowing, a making of new meanings out of the chaos of reality. Louise Rosenblatt has helped me to understand why the teaching of literature is important. Only in English classes do most students have a chance to share with others their responses to the meaning writers have created.

Students as Readers

As teachers, then, we have the responsibility to select literature for our students to read, and to create a receptive, inquiring environment for sharing responses and understanding works. But, doing that is a terribly difficult task. It is much more difficult, in fact, than giving students the truth about a few great classics we learned in our college English classes. The third person I want to introduce you to has helped me to understand how I can carry out that responsibility by helping me to see what part literature plays in the lives of students.

In *Books and the Teenage Reader* (Revised Edition, Bantam, 1971, pp. 28-30), G. Robert Carlsen was one of the first educators to consider the fact that literature plays a different role in the lives of people at different ages. After a thorough study of the responses to reading of children, teenagers, and adults, Carlsen identified four cumulative stages of reading works of literature. He defined those four stages as (1) escape, (2) personal philosophy, (3) general philosophy, and (4) aesthetic appreciation.

In the first stage, "escape," which begins in early childhood, people become lost in the world of the books that they read. They live the events. It is as if they have been transported into the book. On the other hand, they rarely consider the meaning of what is happening. They will retell the story of the book, but they infrequently question why characters acted as they did. In other words, they do not ask philosophical questions. The second stage, "personal philosophy," begins in the upper elementary grades and in middle school: children continue to read for escape; but they also begin to ask questions about themselves in relation to the characters and events in the stories they read. They wonder whether or not they would have acted as those characters acted. More important, perhaps, they wonder whether or not they would have wanted to act in those ways. They test themselves in relation to the books they read. Could I have acted so bravely? Would I have acted so honestly? Would I want to lead a life like that of the main character?

In the third stage, "general philosophy," readers continue to escape into books; and, as they read, they continue to ask themselves questions about their own lives. But additionally, they ask more general questions about truth, the meaning of life, right and wrong. In this reading stage, which seems to begin in the upper middle school grades and in senior high school, readers use literature as a way of considering general questions about larger issues in life. The question is no longer, Should I live that kind of life? but rather, Should humans do so? And why? And finally, some readers arrive at a stage where the form of a work--that is, the aesthetic qualities--is as pleasurable and

important as what it says about life. These readers can appreciate the ways a work of literature makes meaning. It is Carlsen's view that such appreciation rarely comes to a reader before the upper senior high school grades, and that many readers never come to such an appreciation.

These stages apply to my reading. I have gone through them just as Carlsen describes them. I still read for escape--I enjoy nothing as much as a good mystery novel in the hour or so before I go to bed. And I frequently ask questions about myself as I read novels and poems. Since I haven't made up my mind about all that is true and good, sometimes I also consider general questions about life and the world. And, of course, I stop to value the artistic mastery of a Jane Austen or a Sue Ellen Bridgers. I also find the stages that Carlsen describes to apply to my students. I remember those seventh graders who always wanted to talk about themselves after reading a story, when I wanted to talk about plot structure. I remember those eleventh graders who wanted to turn every study of poetics into a debate about what was true and right. I remember those college graduate students who seemed only to be concerned with the question, "Is it a **great** poem?"

What Carlsen tells me is that literature serves many functions for all of us. More important, as we mature, literature can take on special roles in our lives. The students who want to use literature for self-understanding are not being perverse when they refuse to consider the beauty of the author's language. They value and appreciate it. If we as teachers cannot accept the different uses of literature that our different students make, then we are the problem, not the students. Our failure to recognize and capitalize on these different uses of literature often results in our interfering in a successful interaction between reader and work of literature. We can reduce what seemed to be a profound, interesting, and meaningful story--or a story that was just plain fun--to a mere bag of literary tricks. In this way we can cause students to turn away in disappointment from all literature.

And So At Last

I am still teaching literature now, twenty plus years after my experience as a student teacher. But I teach it very differently. I have changed for a lot of reasons--Elliot Eisner, Louise Rosenblatt, and Robert Carlsen are three. Now I see literature, new and old, not as a set of dead monuments to be admired and learned, but as human efforts to make meaning of reality, efforts that can help me make my own meanings. I see teaching literature as a way of helping others (and myself) find meaning by sharing their responses to the works that they have read. I see that people at different stages in their lives respond to literature in different ways. I understand that a teacher should help students share their honest responses and not try to force them into responses that they aren't yet ready for. Most of all, I see reading a work of literature as a creative act, not merely a passive act of figuring out what the work was meant to say. You'd think that I'd have known that all along, wouldn't you?

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NASA administrator's response to a question concerning improvement in the performance of the space shuttle program after the Challenger accident:

I think our performance in terms of the liftoff performance and in terms of the orbital performance, we knew more about the envelope we were operating under, and we have been pretty accurately staying in that. And so I would say the performance has not by design drastically improved. I think we have been able to characterize the performance more as a function of our launch experience as opposed to it improving as a function of time.