

# From “What Facts Does This Poem Teach You?”

[EDITORS' NOTE: In this article, Rosenblatt answers specific questions: Just how do I foster an aesthetic stance? What types of activities encourage an efferent stance? She carefully explains her position—that the aesthetic stance in reading is missing in schools—and outlines what we must do to balance efferent reading with aesthetic. First appearing in *Language Arts* (1980, 57, 386–394), this essay discusses the literary experiences of children across ages—from the young child acquiring language to the college student.]

## Implications for Teaching

Doing justice to the aesthetic mode of language behavior does not require discovery of a new array of teaching techniques. Rather, our transactional theory provides the criteria for evaluating our present practices, for reinforcing some strategies and eliminating or redirecting others. . . .

. . . We all have observed . . . children's delight in the rhythms, the intonations, the blending or clash of vowel and consonant—often even before the “meaning” of the words is caught. The child's response to nursery rhymes is surely largely in terms of awareness of sound, rhythm, images; the young listener often “gets” the tone or mood or emotional impact even when there are many referential blanks. I remind you of these familiar observations because these potentialities of language seem to be less and less honored the further the child is led into language activities, and especially into reading.

That the young reader needs to be helped to become aware of the two different stances was brought home to me years ago. In a reading workbook for the third grade, a page with broad margins and uneven lines of print made me think, “At

last this class will read a poem!” But when I looked more closely, I found these words preceding the text: “What facts does this poem teach you?” The children were being alerted to adopt an efferent stance, to read with their attention focused on the facts to be reported later! This instance has come to symbolize for me the ways in which in our educational process the aesthetic stance is, often unwittingly, nullified or subverted. Many teachers, especially in the earlier years, avoid this pitfall and preserve the children's spontaneous sensibilities; but the pressures of the basal reader, the reading tests, the calls for “basics,” more often, it seems to me, have led to an increasing neglect.

Although in recent years there has been an increased emphasis on children's literature in the early and middle years, we cannot be certain that the ability to read aesthetically actually is being developed. This is true also in the secondary school years, when the teaching of reading is replaced ostensibly by the teaching of “literature.” Unfortunately, until about 1970, the critical theories dominating the college and university teaching of literature—which set the models for the high schools—simply intensified the tendency to hurry the student away from any personal aesthetic experience, in order to satisfy the efferent purposes of categorizing the genre, paraphrasing the “objective” meaning or analyzing the techniques represented by the text. When the reaction came, there developed in some quarters an equally unfortunate pendulum-swing to an excessively subjective approach which neglected the responsibility toward the text—hence the still more recent pendulum-swing back to an even more excessive demand for “basic” efferent reading. The solution, as I see it, requires a fuller understanding of the

reading process in both kinds of transactions with texts.

Certain negatives become clear:

1. Do not generate an efferent stance when presenting texts as poems or stories or plays.
2. Do not use the texts being read aesthetically for the explicit teaching of reading skills.
3. Do not preface aesthetic reading with requests for information or analysis that require predominantly efferent reading.
4. Do not hurry the young reader away from the lived-through aesthetic experience by too quickly demanding summaries, paraphrases, character analyses, explanations of broad themes.
5. Do not hurry the young reader into substituting literary terminology or definitions for the lived-through work. (Not so long ago, we were reading articles about "literary criticism" of that sort in the second and third grades! Fortunately, I don't think the notion "took" in those grades.)

What, then, are the positive implications?

The underlying philosophy honors the development of the social and aesthetic sensibilities of children as of equal importance with their logical or cognitive development. These facets of the personality should be seen as mutually supportive. The school and classroom environment should provide for activities and pursuits that foster the acquisition of language by enabling the child to bring meaning to the printed page. One element in that program should be systematic provision for the growth of habits of aesthetic listening and aesthetic reading.

Ideally, the classroom should include pleasant and inviting place for aesthetic reading. Of

course, at the very least, there should be available a wide variety of texts. There is no dearth of materials to enable each child to find texts appropriate to his or her interests and abilities. Readers of this journal are well aware of the proliferation of excellent "children's literature"—picture books, poetry, stories, novels, biographies, historical and science fiction and nonfiction. Such categories do not always reveal which texts are actually mainly informative, hence to be read efferently, and which offer the potentialities for aesthetic reading—a problem not so much for the child as for the teacher who enters into the picture and who will influence the child's reading stances.

As for "reading level": since aesthetic reading should be carried on for its own sake, for its immediate rewards, common sense suggests that the texts should engage as much as possible the child's already-acquired "skills." However, we know what happens when children's interest is intense: texts seemingly beyond their "level" may become accessible. Moreover, although the explicit teaching of skills destroys the aesthetic stance, aesthetic reading may yield much incidental learning or reinforcement of skills. As for literary "conventions," such as the cues for poetry cited by Graves, or the sense of narrative "structure," or figurative language, these will be absorbed in the actual reading if the young reader's attention is on what is being evoked from the text. Repeated experiences should precede the theoretical analysis of such conventions. Similarly, we should keep in mind for literary terminology—e.g., *satire*, *sonnet*—as for any other, learning names before we experience their referents is futile (Rosenblatt 1968).

If the negative warning is against inculcating an efferent stance when it is appropriate, the positive corollary is that the atmosphere and circumstances of aesthetic reading should make the young reader feel free to pay attention to what is being lived through under guidance of the text. There should also be the opportunity, if desired, to talk freely about the experience with peers and with the teacher. Some teachers have made the literary experience the center not only of discussions, but also of other activities, utilizing music, paintings,

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creative dramatics, and writing. The current interest in developing children's ability to compose their own poems and stories offers an important means of strengthening the child's sense of the aesthetic potentialities of language. (This question of the relation between writing and reading deserves fuller treatment than space permits. As indicated at the opening of our discussion, speaking and listening, writing and reading are intertwined.)

There is a danger that literary texts may be used mainly as a medium for generating other activities. Hence the need to make sure that follow-up activities are such as to maintain connection with the lived-through evocation which is the poem or story. Children's spontaneous comments should be welcomed, encouraged, and, as often as possible, made the starting-point for further discussion. If the teacher finds it necessary to spark discussion, opening questions or comments should be especially monitored for their possible effect.



Louise visits with Sheridan Blau at the the 2004 Annual Convention in Indianapolis.

It is evidently very easy to impart the notion that there is a "right" answer, or that the main purpose of the reading has been to acquire information. Instead, questions or comments should lead the reader back, to savor what was seen, heard, felt, thought, during the calling-forth of the poem or story from the text. What caught the interest most? What pleased, frightened, surprised? What troubled? What seemed wrong? What things in the child's own life paralleled those in the poem or story? As differing responses are heard, there can be a continuing return to the text, to see what in the text led to those varied interpretations or judgments.

I recalled a teacher of the second grade who had fulfilled many of the conditions indicated above, and whose class, in the course of lively discussion about one passage in a story, had actually started to grasp something of how language works metaphorically. But perhaps the memory of a college course in criticism aroused the feeling that she had not "done justice" to the story, for she called the class together again to admonish them that they should always "look for the main idea." A vivid recall of some one part or aspect of a reading experience, and its assimilation, may be more productive than a dutiful rehashing of the whole poem or story. The aim, let us recall, is to develop the habit of aesthetic evocation from a text. If the young readers are allowed in the early years to retain and deepen that ability, we can cheerfully leave for later years the more formal methods of literary analysis and criticism. For, after all, the experienced work is what should be being analyzed or criti-

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cized. The great problem, as I see it, in many school and college literature classrooms today is that the picture—the aesthetic experience, the work—is missing, yet students are being called upon to build an analytic or critical frame for it. No wonder they so often fall back on published “study aids,” which give them all the (efferent) answers required.

Some (and not only those Gradgrinds who consider literature a dispensable “frill”) fear that primary focus on aesthetic experience means a wallowing in feelings alone. Literature, we can reply, deals with all that is basic in human life, from the most humble to the most ideal. Elsewhere I

have developed at length the thesis that, once there has indeed been a lived-through evocation from the text, students can be led toward increasingly self-critical and sound interpretations, and enhanced capacity to relate the experience to literary, historical, or social contexts (Rosenblatt, 1976). Nurturing both efferent and aesthetic linguistic abilities, from the beginning and throughout the entire curriculum, will ensure success in the teaching of both kinds of reading.

### Reference

Graves, R. (1977). Poem: A reminder. In *New Collected Poems*. New York: Doubleday.