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# Aesthetic Experiences in the School Curriculum: Assessing the Value of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

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JEANNE M. CONNELL

Louise Rosenblatt's seminal work, *Literature as Exploration* is a classic educational text written during the progressive education era and is still in print today, currently in its fifth edition.<sup>1</sup> Despite being written six decades ago, this text continues to be read by many students and teachers in the field of reading and English education. The timelessness of this work resides with its relevance to an ongoing debate in literary theory and English education on how best to restore the aesthetic value of literature and to make literature more central to achieving broad humanistic goals that are part of the general aims of the school curriculum.

In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt presents a novel challenge to the much revered tradition that dominated literary theory throughout most of the twentieth century, that of privileging text over reader. According to Rosenblatt, the relationship between the text and the reader is fundamental to having aesthetic experiences, and thus the "reader counts for at least as much as the book or poem itself" (p. v). In a more reader response approach, what is now called a *transactional theory of reading*, Rosenblatt contends that the "self" of the reader and the text are more flexible, taking on their character during the process of reading.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the reader plays an active role in the process of constructing meaning from a text. Most important, the reader undergoes a lived-through experience with the text that serves as the basis for a personal response that is essential to the formation of aesthetic experiences. When teachers apply Rosenblatt's transactional reader response theory to the study of literature, literature becomes a mode of personal life experience that involves a potentially powerful combination of intellect and emotions not available in other areas of study. The unique potential of the arts provides students with lived-through experiences that not only point to the importance of the study of the arts in school curriculum, but also indicate a need

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to integrate in some fashion Rosenblatt's notion of aesthetic experiences with other disciplines of study.

*Literature as Exploration* outlines Rosenblatt's new literary theory based on reader response and addresses the broad implications for changes in both teaching and the design of the school curriculum. This shift to an organic, experientially based theory of reading suggests significant changes in the goals and methods of literature classes. While its primary goal is to improve the teaching of reading and language arts in schools, *Literature as Exploration* contains important messages for teachers in aesthetic education, as well as for those educators concerned with broader curricular and pedagogical reform. It presents a persuasive argument for the distinctive and valuable contributions of aesthetic experiences to the broader educational goals of a democratic society.<sup>3</sup>

The milestone of the sixtieth anniversary of the original publication of *Literature as Exploration* serves as part of the impetus for a detailed reexamination of this work.<sup>4</sup> The current essay argues that much of Rosenblatt's philosophy of literature (what she later termed a transactional theory of reading),<sup>5</sup> first articulated in *Literature as Exploration*, remains relevant for contemporary educators. With this text, Louise Rosenblatt began a long and distinguished career in English education and literary theory. While throughout her career Rosenblatt succeeded in becoming an influential voice in changing both reading theory and the way literature is taught in schools, her broader message of why aesthetic experiences are a crucial part of the general school curriculum has been largely overlooked. Even though Rosenblatt published numerous scholarly articles during the past three decades, her text remains one of her most definitive statements on why aesthetic experiences need to be restored in the study of literature and also need to be viewed as a critical component of the general school curriculum. This paper provides a brief overview of the central themes contained in *Literature as Exploration* and then explores the distinguishing features of Rosenblatt's concept of aesthetic experience and its broader educational implications.

### **Background for the Writing of *Literature as Exploration***

The inspiration for *Literature as Exploration* grew out of a combination of Rosenblatt's own interdisciplinary studies of literature, anthropology, and social science in both her undergraduate and graduate studies. Her experiences as a college-level English teacher, beginning in 1929 at Barnard College, and her work as an advisor for a Progressive Education Association study in 1935 further informed her original perspectives. After teaching at Barnard College for six years, Rosenblatt received a one-year appointment to the Commission on Human Relations to give advice on a project to create

a set of textbooks on human relations for adolescents that incorporated the latest advances in social science. The project was funded by the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation and was administered through the Progressive Education Association.

In her role as an advisor on the Commission, Rosenblatt met with many progressive educators, read widely in the fields of education and the social sciences, and visited numerous experimental classrooms in schools and colleges. These experimental classrooms made a lasting impression on her thinking about the nature and processes of literary experiences. Rosenblatt was especially captivated by the "lively expression of opinion, and the excitement of freedom from conventional methods" that characterized the students' responses to learning.<sup>6</sup> It was these observations that reinforced her own disillusionment with the way literature was taught and also pointed to a need for a theoretical discussion especially aimed at teachers of literature, in order to promote the kind of teaching that was occurring in these experimental classes. After completing her appointment with the Commission, Rosenblatt concluded that discussions of human relations that took place in literature classes could also perform a distinctive and vital function in the education of citizens in a democracy. These observations about the potential of literature to contribute to the broader aims of education led her to produce an additional work of her own. *Literature as Exploration* was published under the auspices of the Progressive Education Association in 1938.

In this book, Rosenblatt challenges the dominance of New Criticism in literary theory and details the distinguishing features of aesthetic experiences. Her main goal is to provide "a theoretical foundation for revising the teaching of literature, a foundation for setting up a process that would make personal response the basis for growth toward more and more balanced, self-critical, knowledgeable interpretation."<sup>7</sup> To a great extent, Rosenblatt and her followers achieved this goal. In the past two decades, literary theory has undergone dramatic changes due in large part to the emergence of reader response theory inspired by Rosenblatt's work.

John Willinsky argues that Rosenblatt is one of four key theorists influencing how literature is taught in secondary schools today, and James Squire places Rosenblatt's transactional perspective among the ten great ideas in the teaching of literature.<sup>8</sup> However, despite the attention now accorded reader response theory among literary theorists, serious debate continues regarding the appropriate use in schools of text-oriented and reader-oriented approaches to the teaching of reading and the study of literature. As Robert Probst notes: "*Literature as Exploration* suggests also that we have yet to conceive of adequate curricula. We still depend upon the features of texts, rather than upon the features of transactions with texts, to organize our literature programs."<sup>9</sup>

**Rosenblatt's Challenge to New Criticism**

One of the primary aims of *Literature as Exploration* is to rescue aesthetic experiences from the dominating influences in early twentieth-century literary theory that deny the reader any kind of active role in the process of making meaning by drawing attention to the transactional nature of the reading process. Rosenblatt's emphasis on a reader's response to literature developed in the 1930s in opposition to both nineteenth-century literary theory and to the rising dominance of a text-based literary theory known as New Criticism. Nineteenth-century literary theory emphasized literary and social history, the author's biography, and the normative messages of the text. New Criticism emphasized an objective analysis of the text, privileging meaning from the text over involvement by the reader.<sup>10</sup> For Rosenblatt, both traditions undermine the opportunity for literary aesthetic experiences. In contrast to New Criticism's focus on the text, she emphasizes an active, creative role for the reader in relation to the text. One of the major contributions of her transactional-based reader response theory is its focus on bringing the notion of the reader's experience with the text to the foreground. Rosenblatt reminds teachers that experience rather than the transmission of knowledge is one of the more critical purposes of literature classes. Through literature, readers "acquire not so much additional information as additional *experience*" (p. 38). It is this experiential aspect that Rosenblatt contends differentiates the literary work of art from other forms of verbal communication (p. 278). She stresses the importance of this epistemological shift in literary study: "To reject the routine treatment of literature as a body of knowledge and to conceive it rather as a series of possible experiences only clears the ground. Once the unobstructed impact between reader and text has been made possible, extraordinary opportunities for a real educational process are open to the teacher" (p. 74). It is crucial that during the reader's initial engagement with the text, the reader be allowed to undergo the experience on a personal level without interference from traditional concerns of the text-oriented classroom, such as identification of text structure or class assignments. For Rosenblatt, the initial reading of the text should focus to the fullest extent possible on the reader's personal experience with the text. When attention is given to the aesthetic transaction, reading becomes more than an abstract mental occurrence, it becomes a mode of personal experience.

Rosenblatt's challenge to text-based theory is clear as she brings the reader back into the reading process and redefines literary experience by emphasizing the individuality of each reader and the inevitable uniqueness of each reading event.

There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or poem or play

remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text; the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings (p. 25).

The emphasis is on the organic relationship between reader and text, or what Rosenblatt calls the aesthetic transaction.<sup>11</sup> She then goes on to provide a detailed analysis of how to distinguish features of aesthetic experiences.

### **Distinguishing Features of Aesthetic Experiences**

One of the primary aims of *Literature as Exploration* is to provide teachers with an understanding of the distinguishing features of aesthetic experiences so that aesthetic experiences can be nurtured in the school curriculum. Much of this book supplies practitioners with practical suggestions that aid them in modifying their approaches to the teaching of reading and the study of literature. Aesthetic experiences, according to Rosenblatt, produce a double value. They can yield the kind of fulfillment that "can be enjoyed in itself--and at the same time have a social origin and social effect" (p. 24).

Aesthetic experiences reside in the synthesis of what a reader already knows, feels, and desires with what the literary text offers (p. 272). Rosenblatt indicates that little attention has been given to the synthesizing process, which may be one reason for the dearth of aesthetic experiences in the classroom. She describes this synthesizing process as follows:

Under the guidance of the text, out of his own thoughts and feelings and sensibilities, the reader makes a new ordering, the formed substance which is for him the literary work of art. The teacher of literature, especially needs to keep alive this view of the literary work as personal evocation, the product of creative activity carried on by the reader under the guidance of the text (p. 280).

The synthesizing process of aesthetic experiences is distinctive from non-aesthetic experiences because it involves (1) an organic immersion in the reader's prior beliefs and experiences; (2) a connection to emotional drives; and (3) a stimulation of imagination. In her discussion of an organic immersion in the reader's prior beliefs and experiences, Rosenblatt draws attention to how a reader's prior belief system is constituted by, and constitutes, reading. Rosenblatt states:

Through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader's consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, [and] scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work

personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text (pp. 33-31).

This connection with each reader's past helps explain the original nature of each reading event. With each encounter with the text, the reader approaches the text anew. As the reader undergoes a lived-through experience with the text, past beliefs and experiences play a significant role in the synthesizing process.

The idea of immersion in the reader's prior beliefs and experiences suggests that teachers should choose texts that link to students' needs and interests. Rosenblatt cautions teachers to avoid focusing exclusively on students' current interests. She states: "Sometimes, the notion of 'interest' is oversimplified or superficial, as when works dealing with teen-age problems are offered to adolescents, or when youngsters are allowed to go on indefinitely following one type of reading—science fiction say" (p. 283). Rosenblatt goes on to warn against concentrating too narrowly on the external life of the reader in such a way that fails to lead young readers to experiences beyond their immediate surroundings. Some materials will serve as a bridge, utilizing previous experiences that lead to new ones. The goal of literary study is to broaden students' comprehension of the world through their experiences with humanly significant works. The goal of literature classes is to lead the "young reader to learn how to enter through the printed page into the whole culture" (p. 284).

Another distinguishing feature of aesthetic experiences is a connection to the reader's emotional drives. The emotional tensions that arise during aesthetic experiences stimulate conflicting impulses out of which thinking usually emerges in real life. Rosenblatt draws on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, who defines rationality as the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires. Rosenblatt believes that reason should arise in a matrix of feeling, and these conditions occur during aesthetic experiences (p. 227).<sup>12</sup>

Thus, difficult human problems cannot be effectively considered when impersonal academic treatments convert them into abstract subjects of thought that are dissociated from the human contexts in which they occur. Rosenblatt concludes that:

Literature . . . may provide the emotional tension and conflicting attitudes out of which spring the kind of thinking that can later be assimilated into actual behavior. The emotional character of the student's response to literature offers an opportunity to develop the ability to *think rationally within an emotionally colored context*. Furthermore, the teaching situation in which a group of students and a teacher exchange views and stimulate one another toward clearer understanding can contribute greatly to the growth of such habits of reflection (p. 228).

Rosenblatt stresses further that the educational potentialities of literature rest on providing opportunities for the "student to react to a work on a variety of interrelated emotional and intellectual planes" (p. 240). Connection to personal needs and preoccupations makes aesthetic experiences in a literature class a potentially powerful educational force and provides a vital link to the learning process (p. 182). Without the combined linkages with a reader's past experiences, present interests, and emotions the work will not come alive as an aesthetic experience (p. 81).

Finally, aesthetic experiences are distinguished from nonaesthetic ones by the degree to which they stimulate imagination. Literary works, carefully chosen to represent a wide range of cultural patterns and human relations, stimulate a reader's imagination in a number of ways. Readers participate in the experiences of others, develop a sense of the complex fabric of our society, extend beyond the provincialism of time and space, and create an awareness of possible alternatives that can serve as a liberating force in their thinking (pp. 192-93).

Imagination that connects readers emotionally and intellectually with the lives of others serves an important function in a democratic society. Rosenblatt believes that humanly significant literary works foster "the kind of imagination needed in a democracy—the ability to participate in the needs and aspirations of other personalities and to envision the effect of our actions on their lives" (p. 222). Imagination, when directed toward positive feelings of humanity and sensitivity toward others, should serve to promote better social relations that are especially important in a democratic community. Imagination also serves to help readers translate ideas into human terms and to project the consequences of converting ideas into actions (p. 185). Benefits to the students accrue from using imagination almost as a trial-and-error method by anticipating the consequences of alternative actions.

Educators must try to select texts that foster feelings of humanity and greater sensitivity toward others. The essence of a carefully chosen program in literature, according to Rosenblatt, is a "rejection of stereotyping, superficial and unshaded reactions to the mere outlines of situations or to the appeal of vague and generalized concepts" (p. 104). This kind of complexity and diversity of life can be reflected only by presenting students with a wide range of literary works. To achieve this goal of diversity, Rosenblatt supports expanding the traditional reading lists of literature classes to include underrepresented groups, particularly minority and women writers. Rosenblatt believes that the more varied the literary fare provided to students, the greater its potential as an educationally liberating force, even if students read about social and moral codes very different from the ones that a particular school is committed to perpetuate (pp. 214-15). Diversity is arguably one of the most valuable strengths of the United States, and diversity in humanly significant literary works benefits students.

By encountering a literary heritage that reflects varied and contrasting forms of human life and personality, students come to know the complex and dynamic nature of society.

*Literature as Exploration* focuses on the difference between aesthetic experiences and nonaesthetic experiences by emphasizing an organic immersion in the reader's prior beliefs and experiences, a connection to emotional drives, and a stimulation of imagination. By detailing the complex elements of the synthesizing process of aesthetic experiences, Rosenblatt hopes to persuade teachers in reading, language arts, and English to embrace a transactional theory of reading and to seek ways to provide more aesthetic experiences in the classroom.

### Conclusions

*Literature as Exploration* highlights the distinctive contributions that aesthetic experiences make to the learning processes of students. Rather than regarding literary study as an examination of the canon or a structural analysis of texts, Rosenblatt points to the power of aesthetic experiences to transform the learning process. Aesthetic experiences connect students with the emotions, needs, problems, and aspirations of themselves and other human beings (p. 274). Aesthetic experiences can yield personal fulfillment, but they also have a social origin and social effect. For Rosenblatt, one of the primary aims of literary study should be to promote the development of a democratic society, a society that requires a citizenry capable of sound social and ethical judgments.

Rosenblatt explores how literary study can develop such sound judgments. The distinctive potential of the arts to provide students with lived-through experiences highlights the importance of the study of the arts in the school curriculum. She contends that literary study provides students with meaningful experiences that contribute to flexibility of mind, fresh insights, freedom from rigid emotional habits, and patterns of inquiry conducive to social understanding (p. 104).

Rosenblatt's commitment to educational reform, however, is much broader than simply improving the state of teaching reading and literature. Aesthetic experiences should be introduced to reinvigorate many different phases of the curriculum (p. 235). It is not surprising then that Rosenblatt urges greater use of interdisciplinary study in schools. Since the province of literature is all that "man has thought, felt, and created" (p. 268), there exists great potential for developing interdisciplinary study that taps into the power of aesthetic experiences. Such integration of the school curriculum could occur only if educators do justice to the distinctive potentialities inherent in aesthetic experiences. *Literature as Exploration* is one of Rosenblatt's most definitive statements on why students' aesthetic experiences need to

be nurtured both through the study of literature and through the general school curriculum. Indeed, Rosenblatt suggests that "literary experiences might be made the very core of the kind of educational process needed in a democracy" (p. 274). By addressing how the study of literature contributes to our democratic goals, Rosenblatt foregrounds a fundamental educational concern of how schools contribute to the development of a capable, democratically minded citizenry. She challenges educators to keep these broad goals of education in mind when designing the school curriculum. Ultimately, Rosenblatt contends, the success of any educational process must be judged by its effect on the actual life of the student (p. 182). For Rosenblatt, life means a more democratically inspired existence that schools help to construct. This progressive challenge is indeed a valuable one for contemporary educators working to redesign the school curriculum to meet the changing needs of the next century.

## NOTES

1. Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (1938; reprint, New York: Modern Language Association, 1983). All subsequent references to this book will be indicated parenthetically in the text.
2. Louise Rosenblatt, "Literary Theory," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, ed. James Flood, Julie M. Jensen, Diane Lapp, and James Squire (New York: Macmillan, 1991), p. 59.
3. *Literature as Exploration* presents an optimistic view regarding the potential for social reform because of the rapid advances in the natural and social sciences. For a critical analysis of Rosenblatt's progressive-era optimism, see John Willinsky, *The Triumph of Literature/The Fate of Literacy: English in the Secondary School Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), chap. 5.
4. An excellent volume celebrating a fifty-year perspective on Rosenblatt's work is Edmund Farrell and James Squire, eds., *Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990).
5. Louise Rosenblatt, "The Aesthetic Transaction," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 122-28.
6. Farrell and Squire, *Transactions with Literature*, p. 100.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Willinsky, *The Triumph of Literature*, passim, chaps. 1 and 5, and James Squire, "The Ten Great Ideas in the Teaching of English in the Past Half Century," in *Teacher as Learner*, ed. Merron Chorny (Calgary, Alberta: Language in the Classroom Project, 1985), pp. 9-18.
9. Farrell and Squire, *Transactions with Literature*, p. 36.
10. Cleaneth Brooks and Penn Warren, eds., *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938); Rene Welleck and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949); and E. D. Hirsch, *The Validity of Interpretation* (New London: Yale University Press, 1973).
11. Rosenblatt, "The Aesthetic Transaction," pp. 122-28.
12. For a more detailed analysis of the connection between Dewey's theory of transaction and Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, see Jeanne Connell, "Assessing the Influence of Dewey's Epistemology on Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 395-413.