

WHY STUDY LITERATURE?

BY DOUGLAS JONES

I couldn't believe it. Marilyn Lane* was reading aloud the part of the young Greek noblewoman Antigone with a confidence I'd never seen in her before. For three years, she'd sat in my English classes, a girl who seemingly couldn't write, wouldn't listen, and rarely tried to cooperate in class. But now she was reading Sophocles' centuries-old words with a surprising intensity:

Say that I'm mad, and madly let me risk
The worst that I can suffer and the best:
A death which martyrdom can render blest.

Marilyn was a pretty girl who could be likable—when she felt like it. She typically surrounded herself with loud, smart-mouthed friends whose attitudes about school grated on an English teacher's sensibilities.

Marilyn masked her scholastic inferiority with sneers and sarcastic put-downs; but she stood apart from her crowd in a lonely sort of way. I'd pretty much given up on hoping she'd ever understand anything we did in class. I'd come to expect her brash, inarticulate apathy about school, English class, and everything worthwhile in life.

But now she was actually concentrating on Greek drama. And reading it well. Why I'd assigned the part of Antigone to Marilyn I couldn't explain, but in doing so, I'd stumbled onto a discovery about her. Marilyn had caught a glimpse of

*Not her real name

herself—a young, headstrong woman at odds with the world. And now I had that glimpse of her, too, as she read on with authority:

No one at my side
No one to regret,
Uncelebrated love
Is all I have for my last walk . . .
No tears will mourn me dead. No friend
to cry.

The class listened. Antigone was Marilyn's role.

* * * *

I suppose all English teachers have stories like Marilyn's that illustrate the power of literature in the lives of students. Each of us has experienced that power ourselves, but we too often find ourselves up against the chalkboard defending our exploration of literature to students who are not convinced that the subject has any value at all. ("Why do I have to read poetry? I'm going to be a doctor, and this stuff won't do me a bit of good then!")

Too often we English teachers meet the antagonizing students' challenges with a stammering, "Well, in a few years you'll probably be able to see this in a different perspective." Then we finish the class period with a stock lecture on the backgrounds of the English Romantic Movement attended by (at best) lukewarm student interest.

Helping Students Understand

We English teachers know that literature is valuable to modern young people, regardless of their plans for future

What are the pedagogical implications of a reader-response approach to teaching literature?

employment. Indeed, we know that education itself is far more than a preparation for a well-paying job. But somehow we need to share with our students the ways literature helps us to gain insight into the human condition, into morality and values. We need to be able to answer the question, *Why should students who want to be computer programmers, ministers, or graphic designers study literature?*

Each of us must draft our own answers to this question, not relying on one source or point of view; but perhaps this article can stir up some responses to the question, *Why study literature?*

The Function of Literature

First, we need to review some of our theories about the teaching of literature. The General Conference Department of Education pamphlet, "Guide to the Teaching of Literature in Seventh-day Adventist

Schools," offers the following as a function of literature:

The study of literature confronts the student with reality, explores significant questions, and introduces ideas in their historical context. It provides a basis for developing discriminatory powers.¹

From an academic point of view, arguing for the study of literature is easy. Thoughtful people representing a wide range of scholarly and professional pursuits know that literature offers insight into human nature, that it offers spiritual and secular images and symbols worthy of serious reflection.

We need to provide our students with many opportunities to read and respond in both speech and writing to a variety of literary texts. Alex T. Gruenberg says that "what literature can do is present options, explore possibilities, and widen experience."² However, he cautions that literature should not be seen as "a set of answers, but a process of seeking answers."³ In studying and responding to literature, our students can experiment vicariously with answers to troubling situations; they can begin to develop their own set of criteria for handling the demands of life.

Helping Students Develop Judgment

In a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article, "Why Study History?" Paul Gagnon argues that *judgment* is a primary benefit to be gained from classes in history.⁴ Likewise, the study of literature offers our students opportunities for developing judgment. This should certainly be a selling point to



students skeptical about studying literature, regardless of their career plans.

As students read Dickens' *Great Expectations* and cringe over Pip's shoddy treatment of his old friend Joe, they are making evaluative judgments about how to treat others. As they experience Jerry's "outsider" status in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, students are forced to consider the effects of peer pressure and make judgments accordingly.

In discussing what teachers do and expect in a literature class, we must first analyze our own perceptions of literature. *How* we present literature to our classes is fundamental to our students' question, *Why do we have to study literature?* The theories of reader-response criticism can make literature more meaningful for students.

Reader-response Theory

Reader-response theory, a workable alternative to the new critical approaches (or pseudo-new critical approaches) common in American secondary schools, generally is traced back to the publication of Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* in 1938. Rosenblatt explains that literature exists as performance.⁵ It is not the ink marks on the page, but the interaction (or transaction) between the reader and the ink marks (the text).⁶

Rosenblatt, in her later study *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, maintains that a literary work—a *poem* she calls it—is

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not an entity by itself. Rosenblatt says that the *poem* is the convergence of the *text* and the *reader*. The mingling of the reader and the text *results* in the poem.⁶ The end product is composed by the author's creativity and intention, colored by the personality, intentions, and experiences of the reader. Rosenblatt describes the poem as an event or a transaction.⁷

Using a reader-response approach, Robert E. Probst says that when we study *Paradise Lost*, for example,

we are inevitably studying ourselves. The study of a poem is the study of me—or you—doing something; it is the study of an act, a process, a behavior, a happening.⁸

Teaching Implications

What are the pedagogical implications of a reader-response approach to teaching literature? How does this orientation help us answer our students' questions about

studying literature? Reader-response studies accommodate student-centered, experiential education. A shift from emphasizing the "meaning" of the poem, or the author's meaning in the poem, to what the poem means to the student can produce a classroom environment of student exchange and self-realization. No longer under the threat of "right and wrong" answers about a literary work, students are freed to explore the questions, answers, and feelings evoked by their reading.

Rosenblatt maintains that the freedom of a response-centered curriculum fosters deeper student understanding and appreciation of literature: "Sound literary insight and esthetic judgment will never be taught by imposing from above notions of what works should ideally mean."⁹ This approach to studying literature allows our questioning students to validate their reactions to a poem, a story, or a play.

Facilitating Student Discovery

With a reader-response approach, the teacher no longer functions as the all-knowing dispenser of answers, the last word. Reader response-based literature study requires a different expertise of the English teacher:

The teacher of literature...seeks to help specific human beings discover the satisfactions of literature. Teaching becomes a matter of improving the individual's capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to

reflect self-critically on this process . . . The teacher's task is to foster fruitful interactions—or, more precisely, transactions—between individual readers and individual literary works.¹⁰

Consequently, the high-school English teacher no longer needs to feel compelled to provide lectures on specific authors and literary periods, because the literary study centers on the students' response. Bombarding the students with background information about "The Open Boat" and naturalism in American literature is distracting and, in fact, irrelevant to the students' involvement with the literature. In a response-centered English classroom, evaluation and literary criticism will grow naturally from the students' responses.

Too often English teachers confuse literary *study* with literature. Alan Purves tells us that literary scholarship "is not the same things as the works it deals with, just as science is not nature and history is not human events."¹¹ The literature teacher should help teenagers to bring their experiences to the text and then participate in the *poem*.

Rosenblatt comments on the young adult in literature class: "Like the beginning reader, the adolescent needs to encounter literature for which he possesses the intellectual, emotional, and experiential equipment."¹² And Purves points out that "the particular response we make depends on who is responding."¹³

Letting Students Choose

A reader-response curriculum in literature class probably works best if students are allowed to choose their own reading. This challenges the English teacher's role as guardian and facilitator of our literary heritage because students rarely *want* to read the classics or are not emotionally or sociologically prepared to do so.

Rosenblatt advises teachers to match literature with age and interest levels of students—and then let the young people select their own reading and explore their own responses:

Those who try to crowd into the school years everything that "ought to be read" evidently assume that the youth will never read again after the school years are over. People who read for themselves will come to the classics at the point when particular works will have particular significance for them. To force such works upon the young prematurely defeats the long-term goal of educating people to a personal love of literature sufficiently deep to cause them to seek it out for themselves at the appropriate time.¹⁴

Balancing the Literary Diet

English teachers do have a responsibility to provide a variety of literature for their students to read. I think we need to

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balance the literary diet in our classrooms between a variety of self-selected works and occasional classics. For example, my student Marilyn Lane's involvement with *Antigone* would probably not have occurred had I not assigned the class to

orally read the play. From varied reading experiences our students will discover that reading literature is a significant and enjoyable pursuit.

Undoubtedly, the reader-response approach to teaching literature in the secondary school will run into opposition. In an era of back-to-basics, literature teachers are often chided for spending too much time on "the frivolous" when they should be drilling students on grammar or composition. A reader-response approach to literature will, no doubt, threaten the preoccupation with imparting technical skills—encoding/decoding—which supposedly enhance career preparation. But English teachers need to keep in mind that the primary matters of importance in their classrooms should be what Benjamin DeMott calls

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can be either a career or an avocation. Invite professional musicians to discuss their work on career days or during music class.

10. If you are musically illiterate, do not pretend to know more than you do. Ask someone in the community to outline a plan for you to follow in teaching music or invite a retiree or professional musician to teach several units or even the entire music curriculum.

11. Above all, make music class fun. If students do not enjoy listening and participating, it will be meaningless or may even generate negative attitudes.

Everyone needs a creative outlet for his or her emotions. Listening to or performing music offers just such an opportunity. If people do not have a positive, constructive outlet for their emotions, their only choice is negative and destructive. Personal music-making can soothe and subdue the spirit and promote peace of mind. In an alienated, high-pressure society, music offers solace as well as time for personal enjoyment that can be shared with someone else.

Our imagination and subconscious mind give meaning to and are nurtured by music. Within that realm of existence God communicates with us. Through our creative efforts we can also communicate with Him.

In the ancient tabernacle services, God took advantage of all human senses in trying to reach His people. The ringing bells, the smell of ascending incense, the bleating of sheep, the lights of the candlesticks, and even the blood on the altar spoke a message from God. The sounding of the rams' horn trumpets and the singing of the people combined in response to the voice of God. The Bible gives us unmistakable directives to use music in the worship of God and to associate musical sounds with spiritual perspective.

Today, our schools largely have the responsibility of providing the link between music and praise. In shaping the school curriculum we need to reassess our priorities and teach those subjects that are most important. If we are really serious about this, we will reaffirm that we want our students to learn first about God, and then to master as many other worthwhile subjects as can possibly be crowded into their schedule.

Music belongs to the first category—learning about God. Today, as in the schools of the prophets, we can teach our students about God through music. "Sanctified intellect brought forth from the treasurehouse of God things new and old, and the Spirit of God was manifested in prophecy and sacred song."² This quote, in the book *Education*, gives us an astounding concept to ponder. What is God trying to say to us? Why does the

noise of the world's music drown out the voice of the Spirit in sacred song?

King David caught the vision of God's Spirit as manifested through music. He placed musicians in the temple and gave them the job description of "praising the beauty of Holiness."

Currently in our church we have few ministers of music. Only in our schools are a few musicians employed for teaching purposes. Many young people feel called into musical service for God each year, but most of them eventually choose other careers because they know they will probably never be able to get a job within the church.

It is time that we stopped viewing our Christian musicians as entertainers who are so eager for self-gratification that they will perform anywhere free and at any personal sacrifice. If we get our priorities straight, we will recognize the value of these professional musicians in our schools and churches, and we will pay them what their service is worth.

Imagine the positive results of our recognizing the value of music in our lives and institutions. Let us resolve to teach our students about music as it was taught in the Bible, challenging them to look for and listen to the good and uplifting. This will hasten the day when in all our schools and churches we will hear God's people praising Him with singing and instruments of praise. □

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- ¹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 167.
² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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the "particulars of humanness"¹⁵—fostering understanding and compassion, developing judgment, exploring attitudes and ethics.

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A Validation of Experience

As we look back at the original question that prompted this discussion—*Why teach literature?*—it is easy to see that when teachers focus on their students' responses to their reading rather than on "correct" interpretations, when they allow their students the *authority* to speak about their own responses, students will find a validation of their experience. When literature teachers take a reader-response approach to teaching, instead of, "Why do we have to read this?" they will hear "Why can't we read more?" □

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² Alex T. Gruenberg, "Report From the Institute: Notes on the Teaching of Literature," *English Journal*, 75 (October 1986), p. 32.
³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
⁴ Paul Gagnon, "Why Study History?" *The Atlantic Monthly*, 262 (November 1988), p. 43.
⁵ Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, rev. ed. (New York: Noble and Noble, Publishers, 1968), p. 280.
⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-53.
⁷ ———, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), pp. 6-21.
⁸ Robert E. Probst, "Mom, Wolfgang, and Me: Adolescent Literature, Critical Theory, and the English Classroom," *English Journal*, 75 (October 1986), p. 34.
⁹ Rosenblatt, pp. 33, 34.
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 27.
¹¹ Alan Purves, *How Porcupines Make Love: Notes on a Response-centered Curriculum* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1973), p. 22.
¹² Rosenblatt, p. 26.
¹³ Purves, p. 35.
¹⁴ Rosenblatt, p. 218.
¹⁵ Benjamin DeMott, "Reading, Writing, Reality, Unreality..." In *Response to Literature*, James R. Squire, ed. (Champaign, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968), p. 36.

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simply not grasp the author's complete meaning.

Literary Devices Are Used Throughout the Bible

"Literature exploits, for example, such