LITERARY MEANING THROUGH *ENVISIONMENT BUILDING*

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Abstract

Starting from the premise that reading is a social act rather than an individual act, the article pursuits some reader-response theories that provide a foundation for a literature-based instruction. J.Langer's term of *envisionment* –text worlds in mind- also informed my approach to literature. The article is a plea to the importance of engaging students actively with the literary text and their entering the text-worlds by responding individually and then sharing them in a collaborative social work that will result in developing their critical skills and further on in developing qualitatively different options.

We build environments all the time when we make sense of ourselves, of others, and of the world. *Envisionment building*, in which one constructs and negotiates meanings through conversations with others and 'meaning-making', are desired instructional goals and we want to make these things happen in our academic classrooms. Understanding helps us grow personally, socially and intellectually. *How* we read is more important than *what* we read. By teaching students how to read gives them the power to think creatively as well as critically.

Keywords: literary meaning, envisionment building, text-worlds, reader-response, understanding.

Motto: "Literature sets the scene for us to explore both ourselves and others – to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be … In its best sense, literature is both intellectually provocative and humanizing, allowing us to use various points of view to examine thoughts, beliefs, and actions."
(Langer *Envisioning Literature* 5)

Introduction

Literary understanding, i.e. what happens when we make sense of literature in the development of mind, is more important than its content and cultural knowledge. Understanding helps us grow personally, socially and intellectually. *How* we read is more important than *what* we read. By teaching students how to read gives them the power to think creatively as well as critically. It builds in them literary as well as life skills: they learn that everyone's opinion counts; they learn how important it is to listen more to one another; they learn that agreement is not required and how important it is to back up your idea when disagreeing.

In 1995 Judith A. Langer introduces the term *envisionment* in her work *Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction*. Langer's definition of *envisionment* is similar to that of the idea of *enchantment*. Langer defines *envisionment* as "the world of understanding a person has at any point in time" (9). Langer then expands her definition to declare *envisionments* as "dynamic sets of related ideas, images, questions, disagreements, anticipation, arguments and hunches that fill the mind during every reading, writing, speaking and other experience when one gains, expresses, and shares thoughts and understandings" (9). However, Langer does not limit her definition of *envisionment* to the

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literary world of children's literature as she states, "Envisionment building is not just a literary activity; we **build envisionments** all the time when we **make sense of ourselves**, **of others**, and **of the world**" (9, emphasis mine). Similar to the *enchantment*, *envisionment* is what captivates the reader and may even promote a change in the reader's emotional state. (Rule 46)

Envisionments, Langer declares, "are text-worlds in the mind" and our goal is to help students "step into", "move through", and revise their *envisionments* as they interact with the text. *Envisionment-building*, moreover, is a social process in which one constructs and negotiates meanings through conversations with others.

As teachers, "envisionment-building" and "meaning-making" processes are desired as **instructional goals** and we want to make these things happen in our classrooms. But how can we make the reader create imaginary stories about the world in his mind, how can we make him imagine to learn?

Engaging Students with Text

The following will give some action techniques as to how a literature teacher can make her students read in a powerful way and which expands and transforms her understanding. (Cf. Wilhelm 6)

Langer's strategies including "being out and moving through an envisionment", "being in and moving through an envisionment", "stepping back and rethinking what one knows", and "stepping out and objectifying the experience" all draw upon the reader's knowledge of the text and of the world. (qtd. in Applebee 112)

Judith Langer gives four different types of such interpretive *envisionments* (qtd. in Beach 187):

1) "being out and stepping into an envisionment", in which readers "make initial contacts with the gene, content, structure, and language of the text" (7);
2) "being in and moving through an envisionment", in which readers are "immersed in their understandings, using their previously constructed envisionment, prior knowledge and the text itself to further their creation of meaning" (7);
3) "stepping back and rethinking what one knows", in which readers "used their envisionments to reflect on their previous knowledge or understanding" (7);
4) "stepping out and objectifying the experience", in which readers "distanced themselves from their envisionments, reflecting on and reacting to the content, to the text, or to the reading experience itself" (7).

Starting from poorer readers who might spend more time in the first stance of "being out and stepping into an envisionment", students can climb up the scale from an abstract level to a more 'interpretive' level, by learning "to develop a store of qualitatively different options to use in particular circumstances for particular purposes" (Beach 20).

By going through the four types or levels of response, students "gain connectedness and seek vision. Through literature students learn to explore possibilities and consider options for themselves and humankind. They come to find themselves,

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imagine others, value difference and search for justice. They become the literate thinkers we need to shape the decisions of tomorrow." (Langer qtd. in Steiner 127)

The literature courses are mediums where students can enter an alternative, imagined world. I use the term 'envisionment' in Langer's definition to refer to the understanding the student reader has about the literary text studied.

Obviously, the cultural and social contexts the students are coming from are very important in the active or passive participation of students in the literary understanding of the text.

Although Romanian educational environments host 99% white ethnic groups, their response to American literary texts, for instance, is not universally alike. While some have more cultural experience with Afro-Americans, either from trips abroad or from international scholarships, others are not at all familiar with real-life content but, paradoxically, in some cases have better responses to the texts, based on their previous knowledge from books, television, internet, etc.

There is also a third group, totally passive, of students who have not travelled abroad and have not read almost anything about this ethnic group (beliefs, customs, etc.).

The teacher's **instructional response** as both a reader and an interpreter of literature but also as a builder of envisionment, is extremely important and influential in order to convince the student reader of the importance to engage actively with the literary text and enter the text-world. The teacher's role is enhanced due to the manner in which she builds up confidence in students while they read literature and then expand upon or change those understandings through discussions.

Whether the text is being read, written, discussed or tested, the *envisionment* is simply the understanding the student reader has of the text at that moment. Alternate responses to the same text can appear thus in the case of different students *at that moment* or in the case of same students *at different moments*, literature being an ongoing process of re-envisioning cultural mythology.

Louise Rosenblatt in 1978 also tackled the subject of students' experiences while they are reading. She also spoke about the meaning as a "two-way process that resides in the transaction that occurs between the reader and the text where the reader constructs a personal envisionment guided by the text. The reader uses prior experiences to select images and feelings that will enable him or her to shape the text at the same time that the text shapes the reader." (349)

Rosenblatt identified two stances readers might take while reading a text, depending on their aesthetic **reader-responses theories** that provide a foundation for literature-based instruction or efferent purpose of reading. When the purpose is aesthetic, the reader centers on what is being created during the actual reading: personal feelings, ideas and attitudes. When the text is informational, such as a textbook, the reader's attention narrows in order to build up the meanings and ideas to be retained. According to Rosenblatt, the text can be read both ways, depending on the reader's decision. (qtd. in Neuman 349)

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In other words, Rosenblatt insisted "on the centrality of the personal responses of individual readers to text. In doing so, she offered students less authoritarian literary lessons that allowed readers to find their own way into texts." (Cherland 261). In this free engagement with the text, Rosenblatt's approach connected individual text responses to a larger social world through sharing and discussing these literary responses. According to Cherland, they develop thus a more critical attitude toward accepted opinions and become participants in the improvement of democratic life.

This democratic approach to teaching American literature has been encouraged by other theorists as well. Students' responses to literary texts differ, and those differences should be valued. Among these, I can mention Gordon M. Pradl who sees reading as a social act rather than as an individual act. He encourages democratic conversations in the classroom that imply finding ways (through mediation, negotiation, and the celebration of difference) to maintain a relationship with those who are different from us or with whom we disagree. The struggle is always to keep a conversation going without resorting to authority, dogma, or the exclusion of the 'other'. The goal is to have confidence in your own perspective, yet never losing sight of the perspective of the other person. His democratic classroom views the study of literature as a classroom democratic encounter, a social act rather than an individual act, in which students share and test responses and interpretations; through social collaboration, they build up their own reading of texts as they work.

Drawing on my experience as a university teacher, this democratic approach to a literary text raises a lot of questions regarding how to plan the lesson. My students, although they come from similar white raced families, they belong to different ethnic groups (Romanians, Hungarians, Jewish, Germans, Gypsies). Provoking them to respond individually to an American literary text and then to work in social teamwork, sharing and arguing for or against others' opinions, is quite a difficult task for me as a teacher. Romanian students are used to a traditional way of learning and hence are used to teacher-centered classes in which the teacher gives her own opinions and interpretations of a text and the students memorize them mechanically with least mental or active contribution.

Although twenty-two years have passed since we started building up a democratic society, both teachers and students find it hard to redefine the educational process and understand the principles and values of a democratic society and education. As teachers we must treat all students equally while recognizing diversity (economic, social, cultural and intellectual). Most students hate reading. "Why do we need it? I don't have time to read" are frequent attitudes. My role is to connect them to literature by showing how reading can make them escape from themselves, from their own problems, make them better, more alike and more tolerant to one another.

I start my courses on American literature with Tocqueville's famous statement that "all men are created equal". While they are explicitly told that the US is a democratic country in which every voice counts, I urge them to contribute to the building up of such

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a democratic society in Romania as well. We start looking at literary stereotypes and famous myths (e.g. the myth of the noble savage, the myth of individual opportunity, the myth of togetherness, of reinvention, of tolerance, of educational sin, of democracy, etc.). By entering this imaginary world of literature, they can compare, feel assimilated or rejected, assume recipes of success or failure, respond based on prior cultural or reading experience and then respond alternatively due to a larger cultural and reading experience as an outcome of social collaborative work. While in the beginning they are very shy, even reluctant to speak, certain that their responses to a text are irrelevant and mistaken, gradually, due to other, more cooperative and active students, the less interested start getting into the text. I provoke them to discussions related to their own experience which, although might apparently deviate them from the academic content, in fact deepen them into the understanding of the text. If they touch books on a personal level, they can eventually understand the role of literature and of *envisionment building* process. They will be able to understand that our experiences are limited and literary texts teach about us and about other people. Reading allows you to be in a place away from yourself. If we lose stories we lose our culture and other cultures as well. Stories are more powerful than reality.

Literature enriches our lives with images and meanings. It is a quest for personal reflections; through the literary text, students take ownership for their own growing interpretations and there are many ways to gain deeper understandings through them. Literature sets the scene for us to explore who we are, who we and the world might become. Each story recreates us differently.

Conclusion

We have seen that Langer's *envisionment-building* approach considers text interpretations as constant and ongoing processes, always collectively created and in transformation. The literature classroom is therefore an opportunity to share and rebuild our interpretative procedures, to review and recreate our sense-making processes.

Literature is seen as a way to produce meanings that are present in everyday processes of understanding, and not only when in contact with literary texts. Langer's suggestions of classroom strategies and the examples from her own teaching experience can be implemented with good results in the Romanian education to attract students to reading and to make them involve in the unfolding of its hidden meanings and its multiple-layered interpretations. Her suggestions are even better when we think of the traditional educational system still practiced on a large scale in Romania, in which teachers dictate text interpretations and students are supposed to memorize them for exams.

The teaching technique prepares students for 21st life. After all, literary understanding is life understanding. It is a strategy to develop *ways of thinking* that we learn in many contexts of our lives rather than *types of texts*. Texts should empower students to reflect on and potentially reshape themselves and their world.

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If I succeed to make them *envision* as Professor Langer says, i.e. make them picture mentally, especially some future events, as an aftermath of reading a literary work, it means I grabbed their hearts and will not let them go. I can show them further on how reading can save lives, can push political movements, how literature permeates our lives and brings meaning to our world. It gets us in touch to where we are and what we can do to *envisionate* literature, knowledge and democratic society as well. Their insights have led me to view questions in a different way, directing me to new interpretations. In a nutshell, envisioning literature empowers both the teacher and the students through techniques like mutual listening and collaborative ways to make sense of the literary text and, implicitly, of the world we live in.

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