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"Living Through" the Looking Glass

Rebecca E. Pennington
Covenant College

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"Living Through" the Looking Glass

Abstract

In Lewis Carroll's (1871, 1992) well-known poem from *Through the Looking Glass*, "Jabberwocky", nonsense words combine with known English words to create a whimsical effect appealing to readers of all ages. The words seem to gambol and dance in the ear as one imagines the valiant son with the bloody "vorpal sword" in one hand and the head of the monstrous Jabberwock in the other as he goes "galumphing" back to his father (Carroll, 1871, 1992). Alice senses there is meaning in the poem but confesses that she cannot quite understand it. She exclaims, "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas –only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate—" (p. 182). Figuring out what words "mean", or the interpretation of text, is a complex and contested undertaking. Like Alice, readers often sense that they grasp the meaning but certainty eludes them. Determining the meaning of a text or "comprehension" is a crucial issue for teachers at all levels. Although reading theorists fundamentally disagree on how reading should be taught, comprehension lies at the heart of reading instruction, regardless of which approach to reading one favors.

Born just after 1900, Louise M. Rosenblatt, literary critic and English educator, has powerfully influenced reading instruction for six decades. The purpose of this paper is to summarize Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response, to evaluate her work from a biblically informed frame of reference and to suggest practical implications for Christian teachers.

“Living Through” the Looking Glass

Rebecca E. Pennington

Jabberwocky

*“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”*

*He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought-
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.
And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burred as it came!*

*One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.*

*“And has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjuous day! Callooh! Callay!”
He chortled in his joy.*

*‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

(Carroll, 1871, 1992, p.180-182)

Introduction

In Lewis Carroll’s (1871, 1992) well-known poem from *Through the Looking Glass*, “Jabberwocky”, nonsense

words combine with known English words to create a whimsical effect appealing to readers of all ages. The words seem to gambol and dance in the ear as one imagines the valiant son with the bloody “vorpal sword” in one hand and the head of the monstrous Jabberwock in the other as he goes “galumphing” back to his father (Carroll, 1871, 1992). Alice senses there is meaning in the poem but confesses that she cannot quite understand it. She exclaims, “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas –only I don’t exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that’s clear, at any rate–” (p. 182). Figuring out what words “mean”, or the interpretation of text, is a complex and contested undertaking. Like Alice, readers often sense that they grasp the meaning but certainty eludes them. Determining the meaning of a text or “comprehension” is a crucial issue for teachers at all levels. Although reading theorists fundamentally disagree on how reading should be taught, comprehension lies at the heart of reading instruction, regardless of which approach to reading one favors.

Born just after 1900, Louise M. Rosenblatt, literary critic and English educator, has powerfully influenced reading instruction for six decades. The purpose of this paper is to summarize Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reader response, to evaluate her work from a biblically informed frame of reference and to suggest practical implications for Christian teachers.

Context

Comprehension, widely acknowledged as the pinnacle of reading achievement, is the last of five major areas for study identified by the National Reading Panel in its 2002 report: 1) phonemic awareness; 2) phonics; 3) fluency; 4) vocabulary; and 5) reading comprehension (NICHD, 2000). “Comprehension” is loosely described in educational literature as a process where “meaning is constructed from print” (Tovani, 2000, p.17) and books written for teachers detailing how and when to

teach comprehension strategies abound (Cole, 2003; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Miller, 2002; Tovani, 2000).

While a wealth of resources promotes comprehension strategies, few define comprehension in detail or address the question of meaning. The term “comprehension” assumes an agreed-upon meaning gathered from a specified text that is acceptable to the educational community (Rosenblatt, 1994). Reading comprehension tests require specific “correct” answers implying the following conclusions: 1) the author of the text in the tested passages has some intended meaning, 2) the reader must somehow understand it and 3) some conceptions of meaning are acceptable while others are not. Defining comprehension remains an illusive endeavor. What does “construction of meaning from text” entail? What is happening inside the mind of the reader as she attempts to make sense of print?

Influence

Louise M. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reader response, first articulated in *Literature as Exploration* (1938; 1968) and later in *The Reader, The Text, the Poem* (1978), shone the spotlight on the role of the reader in creating meaning. Rejecting the text as the sole source of determinate meaning, Rosenblatt locates the construction of meaning in the “transaction” between the reader and the text (Connell, 1996; Karolides, 1999). Considered both a pioneer and a contemporary in the reading world (Herber, 1994), her work spans nearly three-quarters of a century. In addition to her seminal works cited above, Rosenblatt has published numerous articles, including “The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing” in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (Ruddell, Ruddell, & Singer, ed., 1994). Citations from her publications abound in literacy education texts and periodicals. She has received numerous awards in the fields of English, literacy, and philosophy. In 1999, she received the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Award for Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts. Professor Nicholas Karolides (University of Wisconsin-River Falls) introduces his interview with her on the occasion of this award, “As a writer and speaker, as a creative thinker, Rosenblatt’s energetic and dedicated espousal of a theoretical doctrine and its application in our classrooms has indeed been massively influential since *Literature as Exploration* first burst upon

the language arts scene in 1938 (Karolides, 1999, p. 158). In 2000, *Literature as Exploration* (1995) was included in University of South Carolina Museum of Education’s publication, *Books of the Century* (Kridel, 2000). Rosenblatt’s still-active voice calls educators to promote literacy as a means to achieving a democratic society.

Transactional Theory

Steeped in the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, three central concepts form the foundation for Rosenblatt’s transactional theory. First, Rosenblatt’s definition of a literary work as a “lived through experience” promotes the active role of the reader in the reading process. Second, her description of the reader’s stance toward a text as residing on a continuum from “efferent” to “aesthetic” highlights the importance of the reader’s background knowledge and purposes for reading in the creation of meaning. Third, Rosenblatt offers criteria for valid interpretation of text that balances authorial intent, text, and reader response. In addition to these three pillars of transactional theory, Rosenblatt’s vision of a democratic society legitimizes literacy instruction and drives explication of her theory. (Karolides, 1999; Rosenblatt, 1978; Taylor, 2004). Finally, implications for practice that flow from Rosenblatt’s theory merit consideration.

Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reader response owes the term “transaction” to pragmatist philosophers John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley. Dewey and Bentley eschewed the term “interaction” as too dualistic and embraced the term “transaction” because the former implied a behaviorist stimulus-response epistemological understanding. In a 1999 interview Rosenblatt states, “This approach has been an important part of my thinking, so that I welcomed the term transaction, to emphasize that the meaning is being built up through the back-and-forth relationship between reader and text during a reading event” (Karolides, 1999, p. 171).

Drawing on concepts from multiple disciplines of philosophy, ecology, psychology, sociolinguistics, and anthropology, transactional theory embraces a reciprocal and interdependent model of the reading process (Connell, 1996; Karolides, 1999). The reader, author, and text exist in dynamic relationship, rather than the text being understood as the object and the reader as

the subject. Charles Peirce's work in semiotics, particularly his triadic formulation that includes three players, "sign-object-interpretant", profoundly influenced transactional theory. Rosenblatt writes, "Peirce's triadic model firmly grounds language in the transactions of individual human beings within their world" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1059).

Concepts from other language theorists support her work as well. For example, Rosenblatt employs Bates' (1979) metaphor of a semantic iceberg to represent word meaning. The tip of the iceberg reveals public meanings while the base embodies hidden, personal meanings. Rosenblatt culls from sociolinguist Lev Vygotsky the recognition that although language is socially constructed, the individual retains a crucial role in meaning making. Williams James's notion of "selective attention" scaffolds Louise's conception of transaction. From the milieu of consciousness, humans engage in a "choosing activity" by selecting stimuli to which they attend. Selective attention during reading, guided by the reader's existing schema, shapes the sense of words and ideas that emerge as the reader makes sense of the text (Rosenblatt, 1994).

A central feature of Rosenblatt's theory is her definition of the literary work. A "poem", the term Rosenblatt applies to any literary work of art, must be understood as an event in time. Rosenblatt distinguishes the "text" — a set of interpretable linguistic symbols—from the "poem" — a literary work of art created by the reader during a lived-through experience (Rosenblatt, 1978). Experiences and present personality converge with the reader's current situation to construct the work, a process she names "evocation". She states, "Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he [the reader] marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem" (1978, p. 12). Writing to teachers in *Literature as Exploration* (1968), Rosenblatt describes the reading process thus,

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).

For Rosenblatt, meaning comes into being in the transaction and does not simply reside "in" the text or "in" the reader (Mills & Stephens, 2004). Prior experiences with text, the natural world, and the social context converge to create a "linguistic-experiential reservoir" from which readers draw to make sense of verbal symbols (Rosenblatt, 1994).

A second tenet of Rosenblatt's theory, frequently cited in texts on children's literature (Hancock, 2000; Norton, 2003), is her description of the inner attitude or purpose with which the reader approaches the text and the reading task. Rosenblatt calls this the reader's "stance" and describes it as a continuum moving between two poles. On one end of the spectrum is the "efferent stance" (from the Latin for "carry away"), which focuses on what information the reader takes away from the reading experience. On the other end is the "aesthetic stance", which involves the emotions, feelings, and response that the text evokes in the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1991). Any text may be read efferently or aesthetically, although Rosenblatt admits that certain text structures are more likely to cue the reader to adopt an efferent stance and other texts to adopt an aesthetic stance. Efferent reading attends to public, shared meanings of words (verbal symbols) while aesthetic reading attends to private, personal response. Any evocation of a literary work is a mix of public and private meanings and each individual's reading event resides somewhere on the continuum.

Although Rosenblatt's spotlight on the reader might cause one to associate her with the extreme relativist position of deconstructionist literary criticism, she clearly distinguishes herself from relativism in her discussion of valid text interpretation. She acknowledges that in resolving the interpretation issue one must answer the question of whether the reader's interpretation corroborates with the author's probable meaning. Rosenblatt does not desire to negate the author's intentions; rather, she denies that they constitute the sole meaning of the text. Rejecting the extremes of Mill's expressive theory that privileged the reader and New Criticism's impersonal formalism that privileged the text, transactional theory validates the importance of author, text, and reader. She states,

The 'close reading' of the New Critics centered on the

text. The transactional view also assumes close attention to words of the text. But it assumes an equal closeness of attention to what that particular juxtaposition of words stirs up within each reader (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 137).

Chapter 5 of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978) is devoted to an analysis of textual “openness and constraint”. After describing the flexibility of individual words in language, Rosenblatt goes on to discuss the larger context created by the text as a whole. The text is open in the sense that “multiple and equally valid possibilities” (1978, p. 75) for interpretation exist and constrained in the sense that the “particular pattern of linguistic symbols which constitutes the text” guides the reader’s evocation (p. 75).

Rosenblatt does not claim that any interpretation of a text is acceptable. She postulates several criteria for valid interpretation. First, that “the reader’s interpretation not be contradicted by any element of the text” and second, that “nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis” (1978, p. 115). To these two criteria she later adds a third: that the context and purpose of the reading event, or the total transaction, be considered” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p.1079). Throughout the body of her writings, Rosenblatt insists that while no single determinate meaning can be found for a text, infinite possibilities for interpretation do not exist. Succinctly summarizing her theory she states, “The transactional view, while insisting on the importance of the reader’s contribution, does not discount the text and accepts concern for validity of interpretation” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 151). She continually appeals to readers’ growing self-critical analysis and response on the efferent-aesthetic continuum to hold them accountable for responsible interpretation.

The longevity and proliferation of Louis Rosenblatt’s influence on reading education might prompt one to wonder what motivates her. Democratic vision and political consciousness emerge throughout the body of her writing. The daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, Rosenblatt’s background engendered concern for socioeconomic and political affairs early in her life. In the mid-1930s she authored a series of books as part of her work for the Progressive Education Association’s Commission on Human Relations. Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid conception of evolution, with its emphasis on cooperation further spurred her to promote de-

mocracy as a way of life (Karolides, 1999; Kridel, 2000; Taylor, 2004).

In Rosenblatt’s view, literature enables readers as citizens to develop the imagination necessary to envision consequences of human laws and actions, and teachers foster literary imagination as they teach literature. Rosenblatt summarizes her own motivation in terms of democracy, “At the risk of sounding pompous, I have said that my efforts to expound my theory have been fueled by the belief that it serves the purpose of education for democracy” (Karolides, 1999, p. 171). Later, speaking at the International Scholars’ Forums in Literacy Studies, Rosenblatt reiterates her inspiration as “the humanitarian love of democracy” (Taylor, 2004, p.). Like Dewey, Rosenblatt envisions democracy as a way of life, not simply a set of ideas (Davidson, 2001).

Implications for Teaching

Transactional theory has woven its way into the practices of literacy educators, implicitly, if not always explicitly. Rosenblatt identifies several implications of transactional theory for teaching. First, the reading and writing process parallel each other in their transactional character, although they are not mirror images. Teachers can reasonably connect the two in teaching. Reading enriches the writer’s sense of the possibilities of language, and writing “deepens the reader’s understanding of the importance of syntactic positions, emphasis, imagery, and conventions of genre” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1081).

A second instructional implication challenges teachers to create a literate classroom environment where reading and writing processes are understood as transactional and encompass individual, institutional, social, and cultural contexts. For example, socioeconomic and ethnic factors can shape behaviors and even children’s concepts of story (Rosenblatt, 1994). Rich dialogue and collaborative interchange about text interpretations promote active reader response to a variety of texts. Process and product concerns intertwine as teachers facilitate learning in a constructive classroom.

Third, Rosenblatt advocates that children learn to select an appropriate stance early in their reading career thus developing the ability to read both efferently and aesthetically. Rosenblatt is particularly troubled by

educational practice that encourages students to adopt the efferent stance with most texts, rewarding them with success if they can “recall the color of the horse” or other such details (1991, p.447). Teachers should clearly understand theoretical differences between stances and build into daily practice activities that build a sense of the aesthetic and well as the efferent.

Careful analysis of the vast array of teacher resources on reading comprehension reveal how deeply rooted Louise Rosenblatt’s work has become in literacy practice. Suggestions for building print-rich literate environments, admonitions to connect reading and writing, and multitudinous activities encouraging reader response to text abound in books, journal, and teacher websites. A considerable body of research derived from her model has developed in the decades since her first publications and will undoubtedly continue in future years. Two specific techniques, Transactional Strategies Instruction (Pressley, et al., 1992) and Reciprocal Teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1985) exemplify the ongoing impact of transactional theory.

Biblical assumptions

Critical analysis is rooted in foundational beliefs about language formed within the context of a biblical frame of reference. God created all that exists from nothing by the power of His word and sovereignly rules His creation (Psalm 24). He has revealed Himself to humankind in three ways that involve language– the “word”: created reality (general revelation), Scripture the written word (special revelation), and Jesus the living word (the Incarnation). Language is part of the “noetic equipment” with which humans make sense of the world they experience. Language does not create reality, God created language as one aspect of reality (Bruinsma, 2003).

As divine “image bearers” (Genesis 1:28-30), humans are uniquely capable of communicating through language. Adam and Eve talked to God and each other, reflecting the communicative character of the trinity. Written language (writing/reading) emerged as humans obeyed God’s command to fill the earth and care for it. God the Holy Spirit used written human language to reveal Himself in Scripture and tell the story of God’s plan for His kingdom. Speaking across time and space, the very words of God embody His truth and character in words obligating humans to covenant

faithfulness.

Before the fall, humans communicated directly with God. Sin marred human capacity to love God and others. God’s wrath toward idolatrous humans by confusing their languages at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) narrates humankind’s imperfect, fallen communicative capacity. Even without the fall, however, language communicated incompletely. Later at Pentecost, believers of diverse language were once again united through Christ’s redemption, creating a newly unified community, the church (Acts 4).

The purpose of language is to enable humans to love God and to love our neighbor. This purpose is fulfilled in part as language functions personally and communally. Language is integral to an individual’s sense of self even though that “self” develops within a social context. Loving one’s neighbor “linguistically” (Bruinsma, 2003) means consciously using language to meet needs of others and seeking to understand their perspective. Language constitutes one way of knowing God, others, and our world in order to activate our wills and actions on their behalf.

Reading and writing are complex processes involving all of our faculties and our community. While much can be garnered through observation and experience and Scripture informs our understanding, language is complex and linguistic processes remain somewhat of a mystery. God wrote His Word, but did not include in it an explicit description of the process. Pursuit of “meaning” is fraught with difficulty, beginning with precise definition of the word itself. Humility reminds us that God is the ultimate interpreter and source of true meaning.

Evaluation

Transactional theory offers both insights and cautions to Christian language arts teachers. Earlier I traced Rosenblatt’s philosophical base, described four essential aspects of her transactional theory, highlighted her purposes for literacy education and outlined implications for teaching she has suggested. I will employ the same organizational structure to analyze her work and to consider application of her theory to classroom practice.

The pragmatist philosophy deeply embedded in trans-

actional theory poses the primary challenge for a Christian considering Rosenblatt's work. Like Dewey, she rejects modernist epistemology that claims certainty, objectivity, and universal absolutes (Connell, 1996). Her emphasis on the interconnectedness of the reader and the text refuses to endorse the reader as a mere impersonal spectator and affirms the relationship that exists between the knower and the known. While a Reformed epistemology rejects the modernist notions of autonomous human reason, it embraces the concept of relationship. Middleton and Walsh describe the covenantal relationship between God and His creation eloquently when they state, "The Scriptures name the world in which we live-indeed, name the very being of all reality-'creation'. And a good name for the relationship between the Creator and creation is 'covenant'" (Middleton & Walsh, 1995, p. 148). Language is part of God's gracious gift of life to his "covenant partners" (1995, p. 149).

Neither Rosenblatt nor the pragmatist philosophers who influenced her situate the reader in the context of a reality spoken into being by the word of a loving God. She leaves no room for Biblical covenantal relationships or the fulfillment of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Both pragmatist philosophy and, by implication, Rosenblatt's theory embrace individual and social construction of truth. The Bible cannot be a self-authenticating standard for knowledge to which Christians submit. Truth is process, and defined as what a particular discourse community deems useful to promote democracy.

Rosenblatt employs strong language toward those who would impose dogmatic philosophy upon the young. Pursuit of unchanging values renders insecure youth "ready prey to those enemies of democracy who hold out the delusive bait of ready-made solutions to all problems" (1968, p.129). She cautions further, "Those who find the task of working out their own philosophy too difficult, or are not sufficiently mature to assume the responsibility for their own choice of goals and moral code, turn to authority-to some institution such as a church or to an individual such as a dictator" (p.164).

Teachers may not responsibly rely on literature to lead to transcendent truth either. She writes, "Our literary heritage itself, with its reflections of the varied and contrasting forms of human life and personality,

with its expression of so many different life goals and values, is eloquent rebuttal of any absolutistic approach to life." (p. 129). For Rosenblatt, a legitimate goal of education is to pursue a "constantly closer approximation of truth" but human reason, not divine revelation, provides the source. It is left to "the individual to work out his own principles and his own hierarchy of values" (p. 131). Mature individuals, having clarified their own understanding, can then contribute to societal stability. Humans create morality through changing social patterns of interaction with each other and the natural world. Rosenblatt lives in a closed universe, one in which a transcendent, triune, personal loving God does not reveal truth.

Rosenblatt's definition of the reading process falls more in line with a Reformed Biblical framework than her philosophical base, although concerns arise. Her strong focus on the "lived through experience" or the transaction through which the reader creates the literary work honors the active, purposeful nature of humans as God's image bearers (Graham, 2003). Unique personal traits, beliefs, and prior experience with language undeniably affect the reader's sense of meaning when reading. The Bible depicts humans living as whole persons, activating a range of cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual capabilities.

Transactional theory recognizes the fluid nature of language and its limitations regarding communication. Humility requires Reformed educators to admit that while we revere Scripture as God's inerrant word, human words bear the stamp of brokenness and rebellion inherent in sinful human hearts. Rosenblatt does not attribute this to human sinfulness, however. Her presupposition that language is derived from impersonal evolutionary processes diametrically opposes a biblical view of language as a complex and mysterious gift endowed by a divine Creator.

Transactional theory's chief appeal for me resides in Rosenblatt's core concept of the efferent-aesthetic continuum as central to the reading process. While difficult to critique in specifically Biblical terms, time spent reading with children lends support to the wisdom of this notion. Too often, children approach the text to "find the answers" instead of first responding to the playful rhythms, rich descriptions, and deep emotion expressed. If meaningful communication, care for God's world, and increased love for God and neighbors

are proper goals of reading “comprehension”, then increased attention to purpose seems in order. Teachers who overemphasize the efferent stance limit students’ interpretive possibilities and reduce the reading process to a cognitive exercise.

Any analysis of a literary theory inevitably requires one to consider the question of valid interpretation. Are all possible meanings a reader might construct acceptable?

Rosenblatt offers interpretive criteria (discussed earlier in this paper) and I find it difficult to argue with her on this point. Her dislocation of meaning from the text alone belies an apparently relativist position which disturbs Christians committed to truth rooted in the text of Scripture (Bruinsma, 2003; Thogmartin, 1994). Yet Rosenblatt’s hermeneutic clearly rejects as irresponsible any interpretation not anchored in the text. With respect to authorial intent she writes,

“Those who seek a unitary criterion of interpretation fear that the alternative is complete subjectivism, the reader ‘alone’ This is a false dilemma: we do not need to accept as the sole criterion either the banishment of the author or the absolutism of the author’s intention” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 113).

Jesus shows concern for the role reader beliefs play in constructing meaning when he tells the parable of the sower (Mark 4:13). While the type of seed (text) remained constant, the growth response differed greatly. Twenty-two years of teaching children and young adults yields numerous examples of readers personally engaging text in diverse, yet responsible ways.

An important note here concerns Biblical hermeneutics. The Bible as text holds a unique hermeneutical position and this discussion is not intended to encompass interpretation of Scripture. While Scripture claims for itself divine authorship and we can trust the Holy Spirit to illuminate our hearts with understanding, the same cannot necessarily be said for humanly authored texts. This begs the question, ‘Does a verbal plenary Biblical hermeneutic dictate a particular approach to reading instruction?’ (Adams, 1997). For a provocative application of Rosenblatt’s reader response theory to Biblical interpretation, see Mark A. Pike’s article, “The Bible and Reader Response” (Pike, 2003). Much more could be said about both Biblical hermeneutics

and literary criticism but neither my expertise nor the scope of this paper allow for more in-depth discussion. Further practical implications for Christian educators will follow.

Although not explicitly part of transactional theory, Rosenblatt’s messianic vision for a democratic society motivated her work and shaped her teaching. Implicit in her earlier works (1938; 1968), later articles and interviews reveal heightened resolve to continue this quest. One recent article expressed concern for the damaging impact of current educational reform efforts (Taylor, 2004). Schools such as the Center for Inquiry in Columbia, South Carolina incarnate her vision (Mills & Stephens, 2004).

The passion pulsing through Rosenblatt’s many writings is difficult to escape. Christian teachers, however, are to be energized by passion for Christ’s kingdom, not simply a democratic ideal. Citizenship in a heavenly kingdom necessarily involves responsible citizenship in the state, but ultimate loyalty is to King Jesus.

One aspect of the democratic classroom that fits with a Biblical framework is a strong emphasis on community building. Practices such as cooperative learning, community circle, collaborative rule making, shared tasks, and reading/writing workshop value the voices of all class members. In Christ’s body, the church, members use their gifts to love and serve others (Ephesians 5, I Corinthians 12).

In democratic classrooms, the teacher acts as a guide or facilitator rather than an authoritarian ruler. Christian teachers recognize that although students and teachers are equally fallen, teachers retain the authority of servant-leaders in the classroom. Jesus, the master teacher, modeled both authority and humility with his disciples. Donovan Graham’s (2003) discussion pertaining to the aims of education and the role of the teacher in his book, *Teaching Redemptively*, offers fruitful insights to Christian teachers considering these issues.

Implications for Christian Teachers

Mark Thogmartin (1994) concluded that Christian schools predominantly employ narrowly conceived reading methodology centered on phonics. In stark contrast, books written by those implementing Rosen-

blatt's vision often paint a vivid and appealing picture of reading and writing in a vibrantly alive classroom where children are avid readers and prolific writers. Can this be real? Do these classrooms exist? It is difficult to deny the stories told in many of these works. In spite of the philosophical concerns addressed above, Rosenblatt offers insights that can equip teachers to teach effectively.

Rosenblatt's recognition of the crucial role of the reader's personal experience and background knowledge in reading comprehension resonates with teachers who see this phenomenon played out daily as they interact with real children in real classrooms. Children without rich literacy experiences at home struggle to comprehend complex stories and analyze expository text. They surprise their teachers as they share creative yet divergent interpretations of text. Voluminous resources exist to assist teachers as they create language-rich classroom environments. Space prevents detailed discussion of theory into practice that could pertain here. The following brief suggestions, growing from Rosenblatt's transactional theory may challenge Christian teachers seeking to love God and neighbor linguistically.

1. Invite children to experience literary works aesthetically before engaging in critical analysis.
2. Design instruction around a variety of literary genres that offer opportunities for both efferent and aesthetic response.
3. Model a wide range of effective reading strategies including comprehension strategies and cross-curricular literacy projects.
4. Assess language arts achievement through authentic measures (retelling, journals, portfolios) as well as standardized measures.
5. Explicitly teach the Bible as God's very words and celebrate its beauty as a model of literature.
6. Actively explore ways to use literature as a means to love those of other cultures.

Conclusion

Language is God's beautiful and loving gift to humans. We use it daily yet its complexity and mystery elude comprehension. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response invites Christian educators to experience literature as a "lived through" event. Pedagogy informed by the "common grace insights"

evident in her work enable us to see through others' eyes, hear their voices of pain and pleasure, and love both God and neighbor more fully. True meaning, still veiled to humans in the "now" of this earth, will be revealed in the "not yet" of the coming kingdom. Paul reminds us, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (I Corinthians 13: 12, NIV). Like Alice in the world beyond the looking glass, we struggle to make sense of words and our world. We look forward to the future when all language will echo the clear meaning of God's words and Jesus the incarnate Word will reign forever.

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Rebecca E. Pennington is an Assistant Professor of Education at Covenant College.