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## What is a Christian Teacher to Do with Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading?

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### Abstract

In this theoretical analysis, the authors explore the question, *What is a Christian teacher educator to do with Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading?* They begin by outlining the primary components of Rosenblatt's transactional theory, focusing on reading as a transaction and the efferent and aesthetic stances. Next, they discuss who they are as teacher educators and former students, how their faith backgrounds intersect with Rosenblatt's work, and the approach they took to address areas of tension that they and other Christian educators have experienced with Rosenblatt's theory. Finally, they conclude by discussing implications of Rosenblatt's work for reading scripture, identifying both the strengths and limitations of her theory, along with strategies for inviting students to discuss this issue at faith-based institutions.

### Introduction

In November of 2004 at age 100, just months before she died, Louise Rosenblatt spoke to a standing room only group of English teachers at a conference in Indianapolis, Indiana. Kent Williamson, then executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English, explained that, at age 100, Rosenblatt had acquired "rock star status. Why? Because her ideas and beliefs were just as fresh, as liberating and as relevant to the challenges that teachers face today as they had been so many years ago" (Holley, 2005, B06). As early as the 1930s, Rosenblatt (1938/1995) argued that meaning resided not in a text itself but in the transaction between the reader and the text. Although initially ignored, Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading took root with the advent of reader-response theory in the 1960s and became a staple for literacy researchers, literacy methods courses, and classrooms teachers, transforming both our understanding of how reading works and how best

to discuss literary texts within the classroom.

In his forward to her fifth edition of *Literature as Exploration*, originally published in 1938, Boothe described Rosenblatt's late blooming, but ever expanding, influence:

I doubt that any other literary critic of this century has enjoyed and suffered as sharp a contrast of powerful influence and absurd neglect as Louise Rosenblatt.... She has probably influenced more teachers in the ways of dealing with literature than any other critic. But the world of literary criticism and theory has only recently begun to acknowledge the relevance of her arguments.... (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. vii)

Clearly, Rosenblatt has had a powerful and lasting impact on both literacy scholars and classroom teachers. But what is a Christian teacher educator to do with Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading? If meaning does not reside within a text, what are the implications for those who have a high view of sacred texts? Does meaning not reside within the Bible? Only a couple of scholars, Pennington (2005) and Pike (2003), have explored Rosenblatt's theory within the context of scripture, identifying both the important contributions and areas of tension her theory provides for Christian faith. Although Pennington (2005) and Pike (2003) have provided initial groundwork for applying Rosenblatt's transactional theory to scripture, we have few examples of how Christian teacher educators have attempted to reconcile her theory with their view of sacred texts or how they help their students navigate this issue.

In this theoretical analysis, our purpose is to explore these very concerns. We begin by outlining the primary components of Rosenblatt's transactional

theory of reading, focusing on reading as a transaction and the efferent and aesthetic stances. Next, we discuss who we are as teacher educators and former students, how our faith backgrounds intersect with Rosenblatt's work, and the approach we took to address areas of tension that we and other Christian educators have experienced with Rosenblatt's theory. Finally, we conclude by discussing implications of Rosenblatt's work for reading scripture, identifying both the strengths and limitations of her theory, along with strategies for inviting students to discuss this issue at faith-based institutions.

### **Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading**

Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading consists of two primary contributions. First, the notion of the literary transaction provides a foundation for conceptualizing the reading experience. Second, the efferent and aesthetic response continuum helps us understand the role of a reader's "stance" in what he or she understands from a transaction with a text. An understanding of these two elements proves central to understanding Rosenblatt's approach to literary interpretation.

### **Reading as a Transaction**

As an English professor in the 1930s, Rosenblatt initially drew heavily on New Criticism which largely ignored the role of the reader, placing meaning solely in the text (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995). Her job, as she explained it, was to lecture to her students about the correct meaning of the literary works they read. The students' job was to respect her literary expertise and learn the correct interpretation she provided. Fortunately for her and her students, Rosenblatt grew frustrated with this approach. She recognized that her students cared little for what she thought about the readings and were disengaged. One day she came to class with a new approach that would radically transform English classes for years to come. She asked her students what they thought about the texts they had read. Rosenblatt quickly discovered such an approach reinvigorated her students' interests in the material. Moreover, the variety of interpretations brought to class provided new insights and understandings for her and the students.

In 1938, Rosenblatt (1938/1995) published her landmark book, *Literature as Exploration*, in which

she first described her transactional theory of reading. Rosenblatt argued that rather than residing solely in the text or solely in the mind of the reader, meaning is generated in the transaction between the reader and the text, what she referred to as the "poem" (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, p. 12). She used the word transaction to illustrate the give and take relationship that exists between the reader and the text. According to Rosenblatt (1938/1995), making meaning from any text occurs in a "constructive, selective process over time in a particular context...in a to-and-fro spiral" as the text and the reader influence the interpretation of the truths contained therein (p. 26). Containing echoes that suggest something like a hermeneutic spiral, Rosenblatt's meaning making process is unique to each person because no two people—not even the same person at two different times—will have the same experience with a text. This active, "two-way process" occurs as the reader and the text meet amidst the particular set of circumstances under which the reading takes place (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 72). Rosenblatt (1938/1995) explained:

Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation. The "meaning" does not reside ready-made "in" the text or "in" the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between the reader and text. (p. 7)

Unlike the approach of the New Critics, for Rosenblatt meaning did not reside within the text, pure, undefiled, and waiting to be discovered by the savvy reader. The text contained words and ideas, but the meaning resulted only when brought into contact with the reader, his or her own understandings, life experiences, beliefs, predispositions, habits, and customs that influenced the meaning that resulted as the reader transacted with the text.

Rosenblatt (1938/1995) acknowledged the text represents, at least initially, the intended meanings of the author. However, as readers reread texts

throughout the course of their lives, they bring different experiences to these texts and in turn create new meanings they have not previously experienced. Thus, the meaning of a text cannot be limited to the original intended meaning of the author, nor can it be left to an expert in the field. Yes, Rosenblatt (1978/1994) acknowledged the expertise scholars bring to a text, but she did not believe they held an ultimate monopoly on interpretation; they too could learn from others. For Rosenblatt, rather than being a written text, a literary work of art (or poem as she called it) is the moment in time in which a reader transacts with a given text, and thus, with each reading and rereading, the literary work of art is created anew.

### **Reader Stance: Efferent or Aesthetic?**

Another principle central to understanding Rosenblatt's ideas about interpretation is the concept of "reader stance" (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995 p. 10). This concept essentially suggests that the stance—or purpose—a reader adopts as he or she approaches a text influences the focus of his or her interpretive experience. In fact, Rosenblatt suggested that the reader's stance is the most important choice readers make going into a text. Readers may approach a text with a variety of purposes, visualized along a continuum where different ends of the continuum represent difference stances.

At one end exists the efferent stance or purpose. From the Latin word meaning "to carry away," an efferent reading primarily consists of reading done for the purpose of understanding information or taking ideas from the reading experience (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 11). Rosenblatt (2005) argued that during an efferent reading experience, the reader "pays more attention to the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the logical, and the quantitative aspects of meaning" (p. 12). Efferent reading usually focuses on reading done to discover facts, to comprehend concepts, or to search out information. The meanings derived from this approach to reading often reflect the ideas of the larger community and shared or public meanings.

At the other end of the continuum is the aesthetic response to literature. From the Greek term meaning "to sense" or "to perceive," aesthetic responses include feelings, perceptions, and senses that result

from the reading experience (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 73). Rosenblatt (2005) explained, "The aesthetic reader pays attention to—savors—the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth and scenes as they unfold" (p. 11). This approach or stance towards the reading experience focuses primarily on the emotions or thoughts the transaction stirs within the reader. These nuanced meanings are often specific to the individual and his or her own experiences.

Rosenblatt (2005) further distinguished between these two approaches to texts when she explained the following:

No two readings, even by the same person, are identical. Still, someone else can read a text efferently and paraphrase it for us in such a way as to satisfy our efferent purpose. But no one else can read aesthetically—that is, experience the evocation of—a literary work of art for us. (p. 14)

In other words, reading for an efferent purpose often involves identifying facts, ideas, or concepts recognized as shared or held in common. In contrast, aesthetic readings are grounded in our individual experience with a text and are shaped by our unique beliefs, understandings, and preoccupations.

Although these two different approaches exist, readers do not just have an aesthetic or an efferent experience with a text; rather, their experiences typically reside somewhere along a continuum. The reader may be reading with a specific efferent purpose, but transact from a more aesthetic stance with a particular line from the text. Similarly, readers may read with multiple purposes or read different parts of the text in different ways at different times. Rosenblatt was also quick to point out that readers do not need to first have an efferent experience with a text in order to make meaning from an aesthetic reading. Although a particular stance may prove dominant in a given text, neither stance is dependent on the other.

### **Finding Common Ground**

In a chapter called “What the Student Brings to Literature,” Rosenblatt (1938/1995) explains that readers bring “a mass of absorbing and conflicting influences” to the reading experience that influence and shape the meaning found therein, that color their perspectives, and that guide their interpretations (p. 79). For this reason, addressing some of the primary influences that shape and shade our readings of Rosenblatt and the process by which we applied her theory to the reading of scripture proves essential to understanding our work.

### **Who We Are and How We Came to Admire Rosenblatt’s Work**

Understanding the potential areas of conflict between Rosenblatt’s theory and Christian faith, particularly in regards to where meaning occurs, we formed a discussion group consisting of Huddleston, Coombs, Sehres, and Miller to explore the implications of Rosenblatt’s theory for Christian teacher educators. Huddleston is an assistant professor of Teacher Education at Abilene Christian University. He teaches undergraduate literacy assessment and instruction courses and graduate research courses. Coombs is an assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University, where she teaches courses in the English education program. Sehres and Miller served as research assistants with Huddleston and took both undergraduate and master’s levels courses with him. We believed that Sehres and Miller would contribute diversity to the conversation by adding student perspectives. Sehres is now teaching fourth grade English language arts and reading in Lubbock, Texas, and Miller is teaching head start preschool in Abilene, TX.

All four of us have come to have a great respect for Rosenblatt’s contributions and believe that her work has greatly impacted our understanding of the reading process as well as how we teach reading in our classrooms. In addition to our admiration for Rosenblatt, we greatly value the various faith traditions we represent. We each identify ourselves as Christians. Huddleston attends a Church of Christ congregation, Coombs a Latter-day Saint congregation, Sehres a Methodist congregation, and Miller a Baptist congregation. While we recognize that our faith traditions have important differences (some that might even make Rosenblatt smile), we all share a high view of scripture, believing that all

scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16).

We each came to admire Rosenblatt through a variety of paths. Huddleston began reading her work while working on his master’s and actually met her at the National Reading Conference in 2002. After hearing one of her “rock star” presentations, he ended up in line with her while checking out of the conference hotel. Having difficulty getting her old airport baggage tag off of her suitcase, she asked Huddleston for help. He removed it, and rather than thanking him, she grabbed the name tag he was wearing, saw he was from Texas, looked him in the eye and said, “Fight it! Fight it!” Having attended her presentation, he knew she was referring to high-stakes reading tests. She had argued in her presentation that just as there is not one valid interpretation of a text, there should neither be just one interpretation of how a student is performing in reading.

Coombs first began reading Rosenblatt deeply while working on her doctorate at the University of Georgia, where she read about these theories as she studied sociocultural approaches to literacy and learning. These theories later became essential components to her dissertation research and the research she continues to pursue. Sehres and Miller learned about Rosenblatt in their undergraduate literacy classes and then read her work extensively for this project. Sehres later drew on Rosenblatt for the theoretical framework in an action research project in her master’s program.

### **The Approach We Took**

We began with an in-depth reading of Rosenblatt’s major works (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, 1938/1995, 2005) as well as theological readings discussing biblical interpretation (e.g., Powell, 2007; Richards & O’Brien, 2012; Wright, 2013), related work in the social sciences (e.g., Juzwik, 2014; Smith, 2012), the arts (e.g., Fish, 1976), and education (e.g., Pennington, 2005; Pike, 2003). Our discussion group met periodically over the course of several months. Each member of the research team kept a journal to record his or her thinking regarding the assigned readings and to inform our discussion at our meetings.

As our understanding of Rosenblatt’s theory developed, we applied her theoretical concepts of

the reader, the text, the poem, and the literary transaction to the process of interpreting scripture and implications for Christian teacher educators. We now share the findings of our discussions, focusing both on areas of tension that we and others have identified along with how we sought to address them.

### **Addressing Areas of Tension**

There are a number of potential areas of struggle for Christian teacher educators when applying Rosenblatt's theory to sacred texts. Evaluating Rosenblatt's work through a Reformed Biblical framework, Pennington (2005) highlighted a couple of areas of concern. First, Pennington (2005) took issue with the secular perspective through which Rosenblatt writes, and second, she expressed concern over Rosenblatt's rejection of modernist epistemology.

In addition to both of these concerns cited by Pennington (2005), we have struggled with the notion that meaning does not reside within the text. Each of us grew up in religious traditions that strongly emphasized that scripture is the Word of God and that God's truth is found within the text. Thus, to think about the meaning of scripture being co-constructed through a transaction with the text rather than simply residing within the text awaiting our discovery has to some degree kept us awake at night. Finally, we have struggled with the concept of multiple interpretations of a text. If as Rosenblatt argued there is no single correct interpretation of a text, does that mean all interpretations are equal? Below we address each of these concerns and how we have come to think about them in relation to our religious faith.

### **Learning from Secular Scholars**

As mentioned above, Pennington (2005) expressed concern for Rosenblatt's secular perspective in her writing. For example, she noted that Rosenblatt did not "situate the reader in the context of a reality spoken into being by the word of a loving God," and that she left "no room for Biblical covenantal relationships or the fulfillment of the new covenant in Jesus Christ" (p. 6). Furthermore, Pennington (2005) argued that Rosenblatt portrayed language as "derived from impersonal evolutionary processes" and opposed "a biblical view of language as a complex and mysterious gift endowed by a divine

Creator" (p. 6).

It is true as it was with many secular scholars trained in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kearney, 2006), that Rosenblatt rarely discussed issues of faith or religion in her writing. Although she was the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants (Pennington, 2005), we can only speculate about any personal religious convictions she might have had. Rosenblatt had strong beliefs regarding democracy, human cooperation, and the betterment and empowerment of citizens within society, yet we are left to wonder where or how these values originated with her.

That being said, through our readings and discussions, we have come to realize that we have learned a great deal over the years from various secular academics, and Rosenblatt is a classic example. We find her transactional theory of reading to be convincing, and although she does not adopt a Christian viewpoint in her writing or envision language as a gift from God, we believe her theory has taught us a great deal about how reading works with both secular and sacred texts. Although, as we will describe below, we believe Rosenblatt's theory is lacking in regards to the reading of scripture, there is much it still offers, and her secular approach does not negate these contributions.

Moreover, the hermeneutic concept of a "fusion of horizons," provides a way for thinking about how diverse perspectives inform our understandings. Although two people may not necessarily agree, transactions between them may result in a "fusion of horizons" where each party develops understandings that allow them to see the perspective of the other (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 270). As Freeman (2007) explained, "the fusion of horizons is not about people working through their differences and coming to an agreement; it is about people participating in an event of understanding in which both are transformed" (p. 942). Great power exists as we learn from perspectives we consider different, foreign, or unusual to our own because they provide opportunities to consider difference, as well as to see our own customs, habits, and beliefs through a unique lens.

### **Christian Faith and Modern Epistemology**

Another concern expressed by Pennington (2005) was that Rosenblatt rejected “modernist epistemology that claims certainty, objectivity, and universal absolutes” (p. 6). Instead, Pennington (2005) noted that Rosenblatt advocated that “truth is a process, and defined as what a particular discourse community deems useful to promote democracy” (p. 6). Although Rosenblatt’s dismissal of modernist epistemology may cause concern for Christians who have been raised in traditions that value truth and absolutes, like ours, a number of Christian scholars, some even evangelical, have argued that Christians should move beyond modernist epistemology. The Bible itself does not endorse any specific epistemological stance, but Smith (2012) noted that evangelical Christians have bought into epistemological foundationalism by arguing that the “right foundation for indubitable knowledge is the text of the Bible” (p. 151). He concluded that evangelical biblicism is “driven not by gospel concerns and scriptural self-attestation but by modern preoccupations with the certainty of knowledge, which was intellectually doomed from the start to fail” (Smith, 2012, p. 151).

Similarly, Middleton and Walsh (1995) argued that the modernist obsession with objective truth, certainty, and brute access to truth awaiting our discovery has “legitimately been deconstructed by postmodern thought” (p. 168). They even critiqued critical realism (often seen as an epistemological middle ground) as carrying too many “overtones of a realism that has proven to be bankrupt” (p. 168). Instead, they advocated for “epistemological stewardship” (p. 168) that is “profoundly suspicious of all totalizing epistemological claims precisely because it recognizes the situated particularity of all finite knowing and the universal brokenness of all human subjects” (p. 170).

Moreover, moving beyond modernism has helped a number of Christians who have been seduced into seeing science as the only way of knowing, to believe in faith once again. The realization that science is but one lens (albeit, often a very helpful and convincing lens) for understanding the world has opened doors for knowing and believing (Middleton & Walsh, 1995). Middleton and Walsh (1995) concluded that modernity is a “story that

many still (insistently) tell, but fewer are able to believe” (p. 20).

### **Meaning Outside of the Text**

Although as Christians we consider scripture to be the Word of God, and in our everyday language treat it as though it speaks for itself, our ongoing readings and conversations concerning Rosenblatt have helped us realize that scripture only speaks when people read it. As Rosenblatt (1978/1994) said, a text is simply “paper and ink on a page until a reader evokes from it a literary work of art” (p. ix). Some might argue, however, that since scripture is sacred it functions differently from secular texts, and our job as Christians should be to passively listen to what it has to say.

Although we acknowledge that reading scripture does differ from reading secular texts (see our discussion below regarding the Spirit), we ultimately believe that the notion of scripture speaking for itself is untenable. Clines (1997), for example, told the story of biblical scholar Edward Greenstein who desperately tried to convince his theology students that the Bible does not simply speak for itself. Upon entering class one day he laid his Bible on a desk at the front of the class and said, “Today, we are simply going to listen to the text. Today we shall hear what it has to say” (Clines, 1997, p.15). After several minutes of silence the class grew restless and clearly understood his point: “texts themselves cannot speak and have nothing to say; without readers, the Bible text, like all texts, is mute” (Clines, 1997, p. 16).

Words are symbols for ideas, concepts and things that can only be understood as we make sense of them. Thus making meaning, even the meaning making of sacred words—requires interpretation on some level. The word “hermeneutics” means “to interpret”, and scholars and religious leaders adhere to a myriad of types of Biblical hermeneutics—textual, philological, literary, traditional, form, redactional, historical, and “history of religions” criticism. Scholars explore literal, moral, allegorical and anagogical interpretations, as well as parallelism and other patterns within the Bible (Hermeneutics, n.d.). These different perspectives or lenses provide theoretical frameworks that offer additional insight into scripture and the possibilities contained among multiple meanings. Biblical

scholars from various religious traditions apply these lenses and approaches to readings of the Bible in order to better understand the message contained therein or to trouble traditional interpretations of ideas considered long understood.

As we considered Rosenblatt's notion of meaning in the transaction and not in the text itself, Coombs shared with us how her church teaches both the role of the individual and the Spirit in interpreting scripture. Although her faith tradition teaches that scripture truly is the Word of God, it also places heavy responsibility on individual members to involve themselves in a transaction not just with scripture, but also the Spirit as they seek to understand the multiple meanings of scriptures. Oaks (1995) explained this concept this way:

The idea that scripture reading can lead to inspiration and revelation opens the door to the truth that a scripture is not limited to what it meant when it was written but may also include what that scripture means to a reader today. Even more, scripture reading may also lead to current revelation on whatever else the Lord wishes to communicate to the reader at that time. We do not overstate the point when we say that the scriptures . . . assist each of us to receive personal revelation. . . Because we believe that scripture reading can help us receive revelation, we are encouraged to read the scriptures again and again. By this means, we obtain access to what our Heavenly Father would have us know and do in our personal lives today. (p. 9)

In other words, the Spirit opens us up to personal revelation so that the act of reading leads us to understanding—we both learn the content, and the act of reading puts us in a frame of mind to receive the message God wants us to hear.

Although not all of our faith traditions are as explicit as Coombs's when it comes to personal revelation, our own experiences with scripture and those of others in our congregations, are similar. Only on rare occasions do we approach scripture with the sole interest of trying to understand what it meant to its original audience, although at times that has great value. Instead, we often come to scripture

engulfed in the trials and tribulations of our daily lives, believing that in addition to answering questions of the past, scripture has something to contribute to our current situation, answers to contemporary issues that we face, and guidance for our daily walk. And, through reading it we believe that we are not reading alone but that God through the power of the Holy Spirit is transacting with us.

### **Are All Interpretations Equal?**

If a literary work of art, "the poem," as Rosenblatt (1978/1994, p. 12) called it, is in fact a moment in time in which the reader's presuppositions play a major contribution in the construction of meaning, one might expect that Rosenblatt would endorse highly subjectivist interpretations of text. This ultimately, has been one of the largest areas of tension we have experienced. If meaning does not reside within a text, does this mean that all interpretations are equally valid? Can we legitimately make the Bible say anything we want it to?

Although Rosenblatt (1938/1995) acknowledged that she shared certain "relativist assumptions" with postmodern critics, the postmoderns have often "derived from them extreme conclusions" quite different from hers (p. xix). In fact, Rosenblatt (1938/1995) strongly warned against the dangers of extreme subjectivism:

Reluctance to impose a dogmatic philosophy may lead to an equally dangerous attitude of noncommittal relativism that refuses to admit any standards and tends to produce a paralysis of judgment on the part of the student. Such pseudoliberalism can lead to the feeling that there is nothing to believe, that there are no values to be sought in this confused world. (p. 124)

For Rosenblatt (1978/1994), the reality of multiple interpretations of a text never meant that all interpretations are equally convincing. But how does one justify an interpretation? How can there be common standards for validity when we each bring to the text our unique expectations? For Rosenblatt, the key to questions regarding validity consisted of both the text and the community of readers. Rather than being a construction solely within one's individual mind, interpretations are constructed in



the transaction between the reader and the text.

The text plays a key role in setting parameters for interpretation. As such, Rosenblatt's criteria for validity revolve around the text itself. Rosenblatt (2005) identified three criteria for determining validity of interpretation:

- (1) That the context and purpose of the reading event, or the total transaction be considered
- (2) That the interpretation not be contradicted by, or not fail to cover, the full text, the signs on the page
- (3) That the interpretation not project meanings which cannot be related to signs on the page (p. 24)

Beyond these three criteria that focus on the parameters of the text, Rosenblatt argued that communities of readers can agree on additional criteria for evaluating the quality of interpretations.

Rosenblatt drew on Dewey's (1938) concept of "warranted assertibility" (p. 9, 345) to strengthen her claims concerning the validity of interpretation. Addressing epistemological questions in the sciences, Dewey accepted nonfoundationalist premises that rejected absolutes as being the end goal of science and instead argued for warranted assertibility as the final product of investigations. Having agreed on specific criteria for what counts as evidence, scientists produce a warranted assertion that serves as the best answer science can provide for the time being. Although strongly evidence-based, these answers are tentative in that they may change if new evidence is brought to light. Although specifically addressing the natural sciences, Dewey acknowledged that the concept of warranted assertibility could be applied to other human concerns. Rosenblatt (2005) then applied warranted assertibility to the interpretation of texts, arguing that the meaning assigned to the text must be based on textual evidence.

### **Implications for Christian Teacher Educators**

Having identified some of the potential tensions of applying Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading to scripture and how we have attempted to reconcile them, we now highlight implications of

her work for Christian teacher educators. We believe that Rosenblatt's theory not only helps explain how the reading of scripture occurs, but it also provides useful strategies for interpreting scripture within our faith communities. We focus on the implications of her work in relation to transacting with scripture through the Spirit, reading scripture both efferently and aesthetically, and using the text and interpretive communities to provide both interpretive diversity and interpretive parameters. Finally, we conclude by offering strategies for initiating conversations with students about this issue.

### **Reading with the Spirit**

Perhaps somewhat ironically, applying Rosenblatt's theory to the reading of scripture has raised our awareness of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation, something that Rosenblatt's theory fails to account for. As mentioned above, writing from a secular perspective, her transactional theory accounts for the author, the reader, and the text, but from a Christian perspective, we believe the Holy Spirit participates in the transaction as well.

The central role of the Spirit in Christian understanding of the Bible cannot be ignored and has a long history in the Christian faith. Since the reformation, religious leaders have emphasized the role of the spirit in individual interpretation. Luther once wrote,

[N]o man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it. (as cited in Rupp, Watson, Erasmus & Luther, 1969, p. 112)

Spiritual truths are not discovered through mankind's interpretation, but through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14; John 16:13). Pike (2003) also highlighted the frequent references in scripture to the role of the Spirit in interpretation. He explained, "No one can interpret Scripture in a fully biblical way without God's special help to understand and interpret what was originally inspired by the Holy Spirit. Spiritual truth is spiritually discerned" (Pike, 2003, p. 59).

### **Reading the Bible Efferently and Aesthetically**

Rosenblatt's concept of efferent and aesthetic reading takes on additional importance for the Christian reader. How many of us have read the stories of the New Testament in order to learn more about the life of Jesus Christ? In reading with this efferent purpose, we learn about his ministry, his interactions with people of a variety of backgrounds, and the doctrines he taught. However, as we have revisited these stories again and again, how many of us have had additional meaning revealed to us as the Spirit has touched our hearts, prompting us to consider what the application of His teachings might mean for our relationships with a specific individual? Does this qualify as a unique kind of aesthetic experience with the scriptures?

When Rosenblatt (2005) explained the importance of providing opportunities for aesthetic experiences with texts, she explained, "It is more important that we reinforce that child's discovery that texts can make possible such intense personal experience" as opposed to delineating plot (p. 79). Perhaps these personal experiences with texts result as we seek for opportunities to feel the Spirit and open ourselves to the messages communicated by the Spirit.

### **Textual and Community Limits**

While we acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in individual revelation, Rosenblatt (2005) reminds us that interpretations do have limits. The text of scripture itself serves as an anchor for keeping our interpretations in check. The extent to which the context of scripture is considered, the extent to which an interpretation can be supported by the text or excluded by the text all provide parameters for determining the validity of interpretations.

Additionally, Rosenblatt recognized the role communities play in defining interpretive boundaries. Rarely is the interpretation of scripture solely an individual activity. More often, we interpret scripture as a community of believers (Pike, 2003). Rosenblatt (1938/1995) explained that each individual brings "the moral and religious code and social philosophy assimilated primarily from his family and community background" to the literary transaction (p. 89). For example, a Catholic student might react differently to a reading of a text, specifically the Bible, than a Baptist student based on the interpretations of the same verse of scripture

within their own faith communities. Similarly, Petric (2012) also argued that the constraints of the traditions, faith communities and belief systems of Christians significantly influence the interpretations they derive. "The community influences the way in which a reader approaches a text, the expectations and even the conclusions drawn from the text—in other words, the entire pursuit for meaning" (Petric, 2012, p. 65). Traditions and beliefs of our respective religious communities value certain perspectives and interpretations and provide parameters for what counts as acceptable interpretations.

For Rosenblatt (1938/1995) though, the role of the interpretive community was not solely to establish parameters for interpretations. Rather, the community was a place to share diverse interpretations as well; Rosenblatt (1938/1995) argued that it is the capacity to see and interpret texts differently that ultimately provides the mechanism for progress. Interpretive outliers are important and must be considered within the community of readers in order to preserve the capacity to grow. The community of readers and the diverse interpretations they produce provide the means by which individual readers can reevaluate their own interpretations and grow from the perspectives of other readers whose interpretations differ from their own. Multiple interpretations of a text (even scripture) are not necessarily a bad thing. Disagreements are not always the result of our fallen nature as human beings. As humans, we have a wonderful capacity to both see things differently and to build consensus with each other. The ability to see things differently (disagree) is one of the greatest strengths humans have for ultimately making progress.

### **Inviting Students into the Conversation**

Both Huddleston and Coombs introduce students to Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading in their undergraduate literacy courses. It is interesting how quickly and naturally the class discussions turn to the interpretation of scripture once students grasp the concept of reading as a transaction with the text. Most of the students readily connect with Rosenblatt's theory and easily apply it to the myriad of scriptural interpretations among believers before we even raise the question. Nonetheless, on

occasion tempers will rise as students arrive at different conclusions concerning this topic, or the discussion will stall without the depth of thought and critical exploration we hope for. Knowing that Rosenblatt is a common reference in literacy teacher education courses, we offer the following suggestions for engaging students in thoughtful conversations regarding the implications of Rosenblatt's theory for interpreting scripture. These strategies have proven useful in our classrooms for deepening students' thinking in ways that both preserve our faith heritages while welcoming new insights.

**Extend their thinking with follow up questions.**

Although our students easily connect Rosenblatt's theory to the diverse interpretations of scripture they have experienced, at times the discussion remains at the surface level only. We have found that a few pointed questions regarding the role of the Holy Spirit and the church community in interpretation can deepen their discussions and challenge them to more fully wrestle with any tensions that arise. Some questions we have asked include the following: What role do you believe the Holy Spirit plays in helping Christians interpret scripture? If scripture is the Word of God, does that mean that meaning must reside in the text alone? How many of you have read scripture multiple times and came away with new insights than you had before? How have you seen your church build consensus regarding a passage of scripture that many of the members disagreed about?

**Welcome diverse interpretations.**

Perhaps nothing better exemplifies the spirit of Rosenblatt's work better than having an appreciation for diverse interpretations. Multiple interpretations are inevitable, but as teachers, creating a safe and welcoming environment for disagreement in the classrooms provides space for students to honestly explore their thinking. As we previously mentioned, Rosenblatt did not view different interpretations negatively but rather as a means for gaining new insights.

**Emphasize the tentative nature of our conclusions.**

Rosenblatt's work emphasizes the tentative nature of the conclusions we draw. Although we and our students may feel confident in our beliefs regarding

how Rosenblatt's work might be applied to the interpretation of scripture, Rosenblatt reminds us to remain humble in our assertions, recognizing that as we continue to grow and learn our understandings may change.

Inviting diverse interpretations, questioning their interpretations, and remaining open to dialogue about their conclusions, allows students to wrestle with the scriptures and with Rosenblatt's theories. Rather than inviting doubt, acknowledging the complexities that sometimes result from these types of discussions can help students work through ambiguities or uncertainties they encounter in their own study of the scriptures. In addition, these approaches invite them into an unending dialogue with the text that can continue throughout a lifetime.

Both Sehres and Miller were introduced to Rosenblatt's work initially as undergraduates in Huddleston's classes and then more fully through this project. Although they both describe the experience as transformational, it was not always easy. Here they explain what that experience was like for them, both challenges they faced and new insights they gleaned from the process. Wanting to capture their own words in their voices, we share their responses in first person.

(Sehres) Upon my first introduction to Rosenblatt's work and theory, the implications for my practice as an educator were clear. However, the implications for my spiritual life as a Christian were not. The initial application of Rosenblatt's theory to the Bible and how we interact with that text was challenging. I found myself wrestling with the idea that the Bible itself does not hold all of the meaning, but rather that meaning is created when the text and the reader come together. However, through discussion and study of both Rosenblatt and relevant scholars, it eventually became clear. I found that the idea of transacting with the Bible in new ways each time we read it fits clearly with my beliefs. Many Christians speak of gaining new knowledge each time they reread a scripture, which truly aligns with Rosenblatt's transactional theory. Every time we interact with a text, we bring our own unique perspectives, situations, and prior understandings. The text is ever changing because its readers are. The Bible is, in fact, a living

breathing thing because we make it so.

(Miller) Rosenblatt instantly made sense to me. She describes what I see happening all the time: different people reading the same text and coming away with different things. That could have been a bit nerve wracking for my faith because I firmly believe that the Bible is God breathed, but instead it lent answers to questions I had already been asking. I grew up in the Church of Christ, but more recently I have attended a slightly more charismatic church; while both highly regard the Bible, I have seen different interpretations of some texts. Within those churches, there are even more individual interpretations. I have always wondered why these people who believe in the same God and scripture could have such varying beliefs. Rosenblatt tells us, it is the human element. We bring our own experiences, attitudes, prejudices, and purposes to reading; all these things change the interpretation. Unlike with regular books though, with the Bible, we can ask the Holy Spirit to show us truth as we read, and he delivers. That does not mean though we will always come to the same conclusions; we have to learn to listen to the Spirit and put aside our previous thoughts and attitudes on the subject in order to hear and accept truth that may be sometimes difficult.

### God's Literary Work of Art

Each of us agrees that the hours of reading, discussion, and reflection we have done regarding Rosenblatt's work and the interpretation of scripture has given us many new insights into our faith, scripture, and interpretation. We identified various areas of tension that might arise between Rosenblatt's theory and scripture and have addressed those areas of tension in ways consistent with our religious convictions. We also were able to flesh out specific implications of Rosenblatt's theory for our work as teacher educators such as reading with the spirit, reading the Bible efferently and aesthetically, and drawing on textual and community limits when interpreting scripture.

We conclude now by sharing one specific insight that especially stood out to us, an image that none of us had previously considered from a Christian perspective, and one we likely would not have considered without Rosenblatt's concepts. As mentioned previously, for Rosenblatt (1978/1994),

the literary work of art was never the text itself. Rather, the literary work of art was the many transactions between readers and the text. Applied to the reading of scripture this notion of the literary work of art produces a unique and striking image that helped us see the relationship between God, scripture, and us in a new way. God's literary work of art is not scripture itself but is instead His people transacting with scripture. We are God's literary work of art when God through scripture is working in us.

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