How to use Literature as a Mirror:

Anne Michael's 'Letters from Martha' from a reader-response perspective

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Abstract

This essay examined the connection between human experience and the interpretation of literature. The aims were to find out how expectations, experiences and knowledge colour our interpretations, and to get an understanding of how the meaning of literature is created and mirrored by the reader. Previous studies have been made on reader-response theory, but studies that focus on teacher-student relationship and their cooperation when studying literature have not been found. This essay attempts to introduce how teachers can relate to students' responses and interact reader-response theory in their teaching, opening up for using personal viewpoints. This would create a greater understanding and empathy among students, and hopefully make reading a more stimulating and joyful experience. Seminars were conducted with students from upper secondary schools in southern Sweden, where students got to read the poem 'Letters from Martha' by Anne Michaels. Reader-response theory was used to explore the students' interpretations of the poem. Additionally, students were encouraged to personalize their reading and made aware about the endless possibilities of interpreting a text, where no interpretation is more correct than the other, from a reader-response point of view.

The study showed that when the students were motivated to submit their personal interpretations, they felt that reading poetry in school was an enjoyable and fulfilling activity.

Keywords: Reader-response theory, mirror, literature, intersubjectivity, text world theory, critical reading

Table of contents

1. Introduction

In the syllabus for English (Skolverket, 2011) it is stated that "In teaching students should meet written and spoken English of different kinds, and relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge." (p.1)

In literary studies, reader-response criticism is a favourite among many students, since it is their understanding that the reader can never be wrong (Tyson, 2015, p.161). It is the reader's interpretation that is the response to the text, and the analysis of that response is what teachers use for assessment. In the 1930's, the reading process started to get more attention, battling against the perception that the role of the readers, when creating meaning of a text, did not exist (Tyson, 2015, p.162). In recent years, researchers have raised interest for and focus on the role of the reader, and today we know that that role is crucial for our understanding of literature. Reader-response theorists believe that the meaning of the literary text is not passively consumed by the reader, but that the reader is the one actively making the meaning of a literary text (Tyson, 2015, p.162). This essay explores the significance of this belief and the practical implication of the teacher-student interaction when analysing poetry/texts, in upper secondary schools in southern Sweden in 2018.

There are many factors that influence the way we interpret a text: literature we have encountered prior to this particular reading, feelings, mood, associations, memories, psychical condition, and all of our accumulated knowledge (Tyson, 2015, p.165). These factors suggests what will be discussed and analysed further in this essay, namely that if the reader is the one making meaning of a text, the same text can have different meanings to different people and in different occasions (Tyson, 2015, p.162). Our knowledge and personal experience colour the way we interpret a text.

Literature, and especially poetry, are these days more and more sophisticated. This augmented sophistication results in that the language use, and particularly metaphors, get more and more consequences of reference (Rexroth, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to see if people mirror themselves in literature, and in that case, *how* their life experiences affect their interpretations of the text. Moreover, the aim is to find out if reader-response techniques are helpful for students when studying literature. By investigating my aims, and the research questions stated below, I hope to be able to shed a light on the importance of making literature and poetry reading a personal, yet democratic, activity in school.

1.1. Research Questions

- Are the interpretations that students come up with when reading a text connected to their mood or life experiences? If so, how?

- What are students' attitudes towards being able to create meaning of a text?

- Do students become more motivated to read when they are able to discuss the text and its meaning, together?

2. Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, the theoretical frameworks used in this paper will be presented, as well as some background to why these were chosen for this purpose. The theoretical frameworks that have been used are reader-response theory and gap-filling, the mirror, intersubjectivity, 'otherness' and 'self', text world theory and critical reading. All these are connected in the sense that they analyse the role of the reader. These theoretical frameworks will give ground for the analysis of this essay, and be connected to the results of the seminars.

2.1. Background

"*The subject matter of literature is as wide as human experience itself*" (Rexroth, 2018, Themes and their sources section, para. 1)

Literature is a human expression that intends to arouse emotions. It is an attempt to say something, to generate meaning. "The content of literature is as limitless as the desire of human beings to communicate with one another" (Rexroth, 2018, Content of literature, The word as symbol section, para. 1). Words can be both primitive and sophisticated, and be used to formulate either experiences of an objective reality, or a more abstract one. If we use the word *blond* for example, it can be used either as a primitive word, expressing the objective reality that someone has blond hair, or it can be used as a more sophisticated word, in this case a metaphor, for someone being stupid. The metaphor and more explicitly the mirror as a metaphor will be examined further in 2.3.

The main theory used for this essay is reader-response theory, mostly from the point of view of its theorists Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt. Alejandra Giangiulio Lobo writes about Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory in her article and makes an attempt to answer Charles E. Bressler's question of what happens during a reading process. She states as follows: "…the reader has to be seen not only as the person reading, but also his or her world

knowledge, background, viewpoint, reason for reading, and knowledge of words and literature must be taken into account" (Giangiulio Lobo, 2015, p.3).

2.2. Reader-Response Theory

In Tyson (2015) it is stated that:

> Reader-response theorists share two beliefs: (1) That the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature. (p.162)

According to Wolfgang Iser there are two poles involved in the reader's experience of interpreting a text: the artistic pole and the aesthetic pole (Iser, 2010, as remarked in Khrais, 2017). The artistic pole is when the text is created by the author, but when reading a text, the reader responds aesthetically to what is not explicitly formulated, and uses his or her own imagination and experience to fill in the gaps. Here is where the communication between the text and the reader begins (Iser, 2010, as commented in Khrais, 2017). Gap-filling will be further explored in 2.2.1.

Just as Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt also speaks about aesthetic reading, and she is often associated with transactional reader-response theory. It analyses the transaction between the text and the reader (Tyson, 2015, p.165). Rosenblatt claims that both the text and the reader work together to produce meaning of the text itself. She separates the terms *text, reader and poem*. The *text* is just printed words on a page, while the *poem* is the literary work that is produced by the text and the reader together (Tyson, 2015, p.165). As Rosenblatt quoted in *Literature as Exploration* (1995); "a novel or a poem or a play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (p.24).

The overall goal in all teaching and education is, for Rosenblatt, that there are democratic values in our society (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.6). With this goal in mind, reading literature is not itself the objective, but being able to use democracy when reading and discussing the text. This goal can also be connected to the syllabus where it is stated that students should be given the opportunity to express themselves (in English), adapt and use different language strategies, and develop "the ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used" (Skolverket, 2011, p.2).

A study was done in Indonesia by Iskhak (2016) on pre-service teachers in the field of English literature. Their confidence and experience in speaking and writing in English was insufficient, and reader-response pedagogy was used as a project to see if it would benefit them in their future career. Rosenblatt's reader-response theory was used and empowered student's voices, aesthetic experience and motivation in reading activities (Iskhak, 2016). This empowerment of the pre-service teachers is important since students will probably not take interest in something that they feel that their teacher does not like or feels insecure about.

Not only can students interpret a text in different ways but also when interpreting, recognize themselves in what is written. Bommarco's (2006) study shows that students identify themselves in what they are reading, hence getting a feeling of not being alone (p.151).

Harfitt & Chu (2011) showed with their research about using reader-response activities in the classroom, that it has been revealed that such activities decrease the anxiety students feel about the linguistic content of poems. Some students will still want to know and look for the poems "true" meaning, but generally students get to take a more authoritative role in the classroom, where their interpretation of the text is not listed as either right or wrong. Furthermore, the anxiety they might feel is reduced by discussing with peers before

discussing with the teacher or in whole class. When it is time for a whole class discussion, the teacher does not point out any particular student, but opens up for anybody who wishes to share their interpretation, also making the classroom a comfortable and secure place for all of the students. Using reader-response activities in class also reduces the difficulties that many students encounter when reading poetry. The students/pre-service teachers from Hong Kong that took part in Harfitt & Chu's (2011) research said that poetry is often hard to grasp because it is too abstract, and that many poems do not have one true meaning or answer, even though some students are looking for just that.

2.2.1. Gap-filling.

Wolfgang Iser theorised that the meaning of text is not solely created by the author, but that the reader actually has an active part in creating the meaning of a text (St Clair, 2007). Furthermore, the text itself also creates the reader, "who is implicit in its rhetorical structures" (St Clair, 2007, para. 10). Since reading is a dynamic activity rather than a passive one, the reader needs to keep revising and reviewing the text "whilst being simultaneously influenced by past and present revelations" (Khrais, 2017, p.1) to fill in the gaps. In addition, the reader's response to the gaps is, in fact, the perception that he or she has of the text (Khrais, 2017). Reader-response theorists believe that not only do different readers have different interpretations of the text, but that the same reader can, on different occasions, produce different meaning because of the many variables that contribute to our experience of the text (Tyson, 2015, p.162). The perception that the reader has of a text might, most likely, change. The experiences in life, conversations with peers and listening to other interpretations, or even just rereading the text and think from another perspective, might change the interpretation completely. Such variables are what Iser's idea of wandering viewpoint is based on. When we discover a gap in the text, we fill it in with our interpretation, hence, covering it. When we

later revisit the text, we are likely to discover new gaps, thus shedding light on a new perspective and interpretation (Khrais, 2017, p.1). Again - reading is a dynamic activity.

Literary theory offers a way of understanding and legitimating the existence of different interpretations (St Clair, 2007), and the gap in the text is a gap in communication (between the text and the reader, and the reader and other readers) which allows different views and interpretations (Khrais, 2017).

2.3. The Mirror, Intersubjectivity and 'Otherness' and 'Self'

When readers respond aesthetically to a text and try to create meaning of it, they often recognize themselves in the text, as Bommarco (2006) explained. In other words, they mirror themselves in the text. Manfred Faßler stated that in everyday speech, as well as in the language of science and philosophy, the mirror serves as "the medium of knowledge, truth, confession, self-observation, and understanding" (2000, p.9, as cited in Breyer, 2018, p.2).

The mirror as a physical object reflects the image of what is set before it, without adding or subtracting anything. It shows us how others see us (Breyer, 2018, p.4). The mirror as a metaphor however, reflects the image seen by the 'other'. That image is the perception of the 'other', which is inflected with the knowledge and experiences owned by him or her (Breyer, 2018, p.3).

The 'other' is the metaphorical mirror, that sees a virtual imagine, whilst the real image is the 'self', and in front of the mirror. This might indicate that there is no absolute truth, and that everything depends on the perspective of the observer (the eye of the beholder). Mirrors and other persons are appreciated for how they objectively and (hopefully) honestly reflect back an image of the one set before them, since it stimulates self-reflection, which can lead to new evaluations of one's own person (Breyer, 2018). The

difference between the mirror as a physical object and the 'other', is that the mirror is simply a tool for self-monitoring that is used on command, while the 'other' may spontaneously interject observations, making us self-aware and opening up for new perspectives for critical self-reflection.

The relation between people, intersubjectivity, is seen in the exchange of perspectives in the mirror, mentioned above (Breyer, 2018, p.4). Furthermore, we as selves are continuously re-constructed in intersubjective communications (Mead, 1967, as described in von Wright, 2014). If a situation in a classroom is common and shared, all students and the teacher are participating in this type of communication, and individuality and each participants sense of self manifests itself. This means that there is no evaluation from the teacher, nor sense of authority or demanding compliance (von Wright, 2014). Each individual in the intersubjective communication is a recipient of something new: a new perspective, a new thought, a new knowledge.

The difference between the mirror and intersubjectivity is that "the mirror suggests a model of adequation between world and mind" (Breyer, 2018, p.16), that is, between the 'other' and the 'self'. Intersubjectivity on the other hand, concerns the bidirectional views shared between two embodied persons, or as Breyer herself stated "the encounter" of them (p.16)

2.4. Text World Theory

The basic principle of text world theory is "that human beings process and understand all discourse by constructing mental representations of it in their minds" (Text World Theory, n.d, Abstract section, para. 2). In other words, we as readers create a text world, a mental picture, as we read and process a text (Werth, 1999, p.27). For us to create a mental construction and make sense of a text, it needs to have enough information. However, our

personal viewpoint, cultural assumptions, et cetera, colour the way we interpret words and sentences, even if the narrative is very straightforward and uses commonly used words. (Werth, 1999, p.27).

Text world theory uses stylistic aspects as "a method of linking linguistic form, via reader inference, to interpretation in a detailed way and thereby providing as much evidence as possible for and against particular interpretations of texts" (Short, 1996, p.27, as cited in Mohammadzadeh, 2017, p.2). Thus, stylistics and cognitive stylistics provide students with tools for interpreting literary text in various ways and generate different meanings, by making connections between the texts and the readers. Since this approach is student-centred, teachers in literature classes should force students to engage in activities to negotiate meaning, which will help them develop their language and literary awareness (Mohammadzadeh, 2017).

2.5. Critical Reading

"Many people suggest that never accept things as they're portrayed" (Yu 2015, p.1). There is a great difference in the interpretation of a text if it is read by a critical or non-critical reader. For non-critical readers, the text offers the truth. They understand the text as consistent of primitive words that have no ulterior meaning (Rexroth, 2018). For critical readers however, a text alone provides us with only one portrayal of it, and it is the reader that gives their individual point of view of it and generates meaning as they read. As John Steinbeck put it: "a story has as many versions as it has readers" (as cited in Yu, 2015, p.1). Since we can never fully understand the intentions of the writer when reading a text, readers who think critically get a deeper interpretation of the text (Yu, 2015) and thus a more enjoyable experience. Students need tools to understand the author's intention with the characters in the text, as well as tools for critically relate those intentions to other viewpoints about human nature and behaviour (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.269).

3. Method

This chapter includes which schools and students chose to participate, as well as how the seminars were conducted. Rather than using a particular method, this paper is based on a research context, classroom observation, which will also be mentioned in this chapter.

Since there were not many contestants, but a great variety of them, a qualitative, inductive approach was used. The collection of data, that is the seminars, preceded the hypothesis.

3.1. Classroom Observation

This study was made as a classroom observation, in seminar form. It was a classroom made for teaching, also called a genuine classroom by Nunan (2013, pp.91-92), where I was a visitor using a one-hour lesson for the seminar. The goal was to see how student's interpret a poem, and for them to connect their interpretation to their own experiences in life. However, while watching their interpretation take form when talking to peers, another interesting feature in this study was revealed: how the students behaved and cooperated (or not) in order to get to their interpretation. The students from the two separate schools who chose to participate differed in their way of approaching their interpretation. In other words, observing the students' process and how they socialized in the language classroom (Nunan, 2013, p.93) was an interesting aspect to this study.

3.2. The Schools and Participants

Two upper secondary schools in Southern Sweden chose to participate in this study. One of the schools is a public upper secondary school, while the other is a private, so called elite upper secondary school. Both classes were in the science programme. In the first seminar, at the public school, 25 students attended. In the second seminar that took place in the private school, there were 13 students. In both seminars the teacher of the class was present. All

students volunteered to participate, and were 17 or 18 years old. Additionally, there was an even mix of gender and ethnicities.

3.3. The Seminars/Data Collection

Firstly, I introduced myself and told them what I have done before studying to become a teacher. The reason was three-folded. I wanted to take the edge off me being a stranger, since that can inhibit the students' confidence and enthusiasm about opening up about their life experiences. I also wanted to give an example about how my life experiences colour the way I interpreted the text (without giving away how I actually interpreted it). Harfitt & Chu (2011) explained that teachers also carry an interpretation of a poem, and if teachers feel that they need to know the meaning of the text before teaching it to the class, the teacher is simply transferring their own interpretation to the students. By letting the students interpret the poem on their own, without any prior analysis or examples from me, I let the students be part of the classroom scenario in a completely different way. They got to master their own class and I took a more passive role, as an observer or guide for the students, rather than a lecturer.

Furthermore, it worked as an ice-breaker, for students to feel more relaxed, interested and willing to participate efficiently in the study.

Secondly, I introduced the task. I explained that I am doing a small research project on reader-response theory, to study if and how students connect their personal interpretations when reading texts, in this case poetry. I asked the students to write their personal interpretation, and connect it to their experiences in life. I wanted them to write down the first thought that came to their mind when reading the poem, and it could be either a big event in their life that came up, or a small one. I explained that it could even be something that they had seen or heard of, not necessarily something that they had accomplished themselves. I

described the reason as wanting to see if it is possible to use more reader-response in the classroom as a variety to teaching literature.

Thirdly, I distributed the poem and let the students read it at least once in silence. Since the study is about how they comprehend the content of the poem, we needed to sort out any words that they did not know before going on with the content. Once they understood all the words, I let them discuss the poem in pairs or with peers sitting nearby them. After a while I asked them to write down their personal interpretation of the poem, and why they believed they interpreted it in the way that they did. When about 20 minutes had passed, I opened up for whole-class discussion.

The whole-class discussion was for students to be able to react on each other's responses. The reason for this was that after they had all written down their personal interpretations there were still some students that could not figure out *why* they interpreted the poem in the way that they did. Since students were allowed to react on each other's responses, some of the remaining students actually came to turns with why they interpreted the text in their way, after hearing a few interpretations by their peers. Hearing peers' understandings, shed new light to their own thinking.

After the seminars had taken place, I read all the 38 responses. Then I divided them up into themes. All the interpretations that agreed on the poem being about romantic love created one theme, all of them that thought the poem was about friendship created another theme, et cetera. Furthermore, the themes where divided into schools. Later, I found out that the division into schools did not really influence the result, so I decided to mix the schools up in the analysis.

<div align="center">**4. Analysis**</div>

This section shows students' responses and how they changed for some, after having reread or discussed the poem with peers. More explicitly, this section includes the findings of the seminars as well as a discussion. Based on the results, suggestions for educators are presented.

4.1. Findings and Discussion

When analysing the collected data, I divided the student answers into separate schools and themes: love, friends or family, friendship, both friends and family, mother-daughter relationship, and travelling and other.

The differences in the type of schools turned out to have significance not in the results, but in the process of getting to the results. Both classes were in the science programme, but I found that the students from the elite school were much more calculating when trying to figure out the poem and its meaning. Examples will follow in the summary in 4.2. In the themes below, the answers from the two schools are mixed together, since there was no reason for diving them up.

4.1.1. Romantic love.

Out of the 38 students in total, 15 students believed the poem to be about love. More specifically, romantic love. Either a woman and man in love and/or married, or a lesbian couple being in love and/or married. Out of these 15 students, seven did not mention the two lovers or the married couple as a man and a woman, but two people, men *or* women, or even explicitly Martha and Anne (the author).

Three out of the 15 students interpreted the poem as a love story because they recognize the theme from a book or a movie they have seen. One of the students wrote the following:

Martha is writing letters to a person, perhaps a lover, who I think is in love with her. I however feel that this person is living their life through Martha's letters. Martha is also probably slowly falling in love with the receiver, as she writes "wait for me" in the last letter we have knowledge of.

The student continued:

…I find it to be a rather sad life that the receiver lives, constantly living and experiencing through someone else. I also feel like the person has been in love with Martha for quite some time, and has never really gotten over her. It also seems like she's married, which really makes it selfish of her to keep writing to the receiver, trying to keep them both (husband and receiver) in her life (…) As a person, I tend to be rather harsh and want to see the issues so that they can be solved, which may be why I see it in this way since I feel bad for the receiver.

Another student recognized the theme from similar stories, and believed the poem to be about an arranged marriage:

Indian guy opening letters from a European girl that he wants to be with (…) the letters give him flashbacks to when he met her and could be with her (…) I know that it's common in that your family, and not you, choose who you will marry.

There was another student who believed it to be about arranged marriages as well:

Two people in love, sending letters to each other. One is from India and the other one is from the Western Europe, due to this they are not allowed to marry by their parents (…) I think the reason I interpret it in this way is because I want it to be like that.

A different student wrote "Someone is married but there is another one whom he or she rather wants. But they are far apart. Either in distance or in class (society)". One student believed it to be about love because of the resemblance to the student's own experience: "I can relate to this because my father used to travel a lot when I was younger but instead of letters he used to give us a call and tell us about different countries". Another interpretation from a student's experience (or rather the student's parents) was: "I believe this because I have travelled abroad a lot and my parents are from different countries. So I can relate to hate leaving your native country as my mom did for her love" (translated by me).

Five students simply did not know why they interpreted the poem as being about love: "I try not to interpret things I don't know" one of them wrote. Two of them changed their mind after rereading the poem and/or listening and talking to peers about it (Tyson, 2015). As Iser claims, amongst with what Tyson (2015) writes about reader-response theorists, new light is shed when we reread a text (p.162). Not only does our own knowledge and associations affect how we interpret a text, but also the viewpoint of others and their understanding of it.

This is interesting from a teacher's perspective. Taking text world theory into account, teachers should encourage students to engage in activities to negotiate meaning of texts, which will help the students improve their language and develop literary awareness (Mohammadzadeh, 2017). This will in turn make connections between the text and the reader, which also was the case for these students.

One student thought the poem was about two friends at first, but later changed opinion when reading "marriage" and "wait for me", while another did the opposite and thought the poem was about love at first, only to change opinion to believe it being about a mother and a daughter writing letters to each other.

Just as Iser in Khrais (2017) and Tyson (2015) have stated that new revelations and viewpoints occur when revising a text, these students also changed their interpretation of the poem after speaking or listening to each other, or even just by rereading the poem. Other students continued to write on their interpretations after the discussion had taken place, which also was a sign of them getting new ideas of how to see and interpret the poem.

Surprisingly only one student related the interpretation to his/her own love life experience, saying that he/she had a break from the ex and the relationship ended quickly after that, stating that a break might be healthy for both.

4.1.2. Friendship.

Three of the students believed the poem to be about friendship. One student described its interpretation in the following way: "the poem seems like it's about some type of love between Martha and someone else. I say some type of love because it can't be the usual love relationship between two people but rather love between two friends."

It is interesting to see this statement, since the student seem to be certain about the poem not being about a romantic relationship between two people. The student did not state where the idea came from, so all that can be done in this case is to try to detect the possibilities of what lies behind the statement. Tyson (2015) speaks about the unconscious, and how that can have a great impact on us (pp.13-14). In this particular case, the student provided us with an interpretation with great certainty, but not a reason for it. This could mean that the student has experienced a specific way of how two lovers communicate, and does not believe that 'Letters from Martha' reflects that.

Another student wrote that the poem reminded the student of its best friend, who lives abroad, and therefore enjoyed the poem:

Sometimes it's very hard to keep up with each other's lives and you feel quite

lost (…) The poem feels very personal, I recognize both the excitement from

writing to a close friend about travels and such but also the feeling of being

"left out" that you're missing out on someone's life (…).

This was the student's personal experience being felt in that moment, after having read

the poem. However, this experience and these feelings are usually volatile, and will

change and adapt in time (von Wright, 2014, p.5).

4.1.3. Friends or family.

Eleven students in total believed that the poem is about a relationship between friends or

family. Three of these believed the poem to be about family. They noticed "torn between

distance and desire" in the poem and wrote for example "I read this text as Martha travelling

the world and she is admiring it as well as loving her family. And so she is in a hard place

where she can't decide what to choose". Another student describes the situation as the main

character in the poem always travelling and moving places, while her beloved one being at

home, not wanting to come along. The student describes it as the person having a fear to

overcome or in general just cannot decide what action to take, mainly because of the person's

relationship with the place she is living in.

None of these three students know why they interpreted the poem in the way that they

did. Again, connecting to the unconscious, these students might have similar fears or are

indecisive about something in their life (Tyson, 2015), for example what to do when they

graduate. These are not facts, but mere possibilities of the reason behind them not knowing

where their interpretation came from.

4.1.4. Friends and family.

Two students believe that the poem is about both family and friends, making them equal. "Martha is writing home from her travels. She loves to travel but misses her family and friends back home". Another student has lived abroad and used to receive letters and messages from people (family members and friends) which the student felt far away from mentally and physically. "I don't want to say if Martha is my lover/sibling/friend because friends and siblings can be really close, like lovers. And females can have a female lover".

This comment has an interesting aspect connecting to gay, queer or lesbian criticism (Tyson 2015, p.324). Tyson states that heterosexual criticism versus a gay criticism depends on the critics own sexual orientation, mirroring themselves in the text before them. This does not necessarily mean that the student's interpretation mean that they are gay, but that it could be a possible conclusion of their interpretation. No matter the students' personal sexual orientation, the importance of being able to express themselves democratically and without being oppressed, remains high (Rosenblatt, 1995).

4.1.5. Mother-daughter relationship.

Three students explicitly believed the poem to be about a mother-daughter relationship. One student expresses a desire to travel and move abroad, but know that the student will miss its mother tremendously then:

> It's about family. Martha is writing to her mother. She has a problem. She is
> torn between desire and distance. Distance from her family. Her mother is
> keeping up with everything in Martha's life by reading the letters, and she is
> waiting for her daughter to come home.

A different student writes as following:

She lives by herself. The reason is (because of love and betrayal from family) because she wanted to get away from everything and her past life. She is sad but has found peace within herself but misses her family (mother and sister).

The student continues: "Sometimes I just want to get away and be by myself. I have a strong, sensitive bond with my mother and sister. I would be very sad if they betrayed me." The third student believes the poem is about a mother and daughter writing letters to each other. The reason is because the student lives apart from his/her mother.

In these interpretations we see that students not only understand what is written in different ways, but also that they identify themselves and their immediate surroundings in what they are reading (Bommarco, 2006). Another example of that is when a student explained that she understood the poem as being about the distance between the student and mother, since they recently had an argument, which affected the student's mood.

4.1.6. Travelling and other.

Ten students believed that the poem is about something else, and several of those interpretations are about the love for travelling. The poem is about being in different places and postcards being sent, so in some way it touches on the subject of travelling. However, the students connected the poem to themselves and their wishes and dreams in life. Four of the students had an idea of why they interpreted the poem in the way they did. The reasons are for example:

I've always wanted to do a lot of things in the future. I've imagined how my life would be when I got total control of what to do with my life, and therefore waiting for my future life whilst feeling a bit stuck in the life that I have now, where I have lived in the same city my whole life with a desire to "break free".

19

Another student relates the poem to being torn between distance and desire as follows: "Martha is travelling the world (…) she is married (…) but she is writing as if she is in love with India (…) she's torn between her marriage and the desire to experience and travel the world". The student interpret the poem in this way because of the student's desire to travel, but is strongly influenced and worried by the potential longing of the beloved ones in Sweden.

The feelings that students in their last year of upper secondary school might feel, like the feelings stated above about wanting to travel, "break free" and "get away", are (usually) volatile (Tyson, 2015, p.162). Their interpretation of the poem is connected to their present emotions and desires. If they would reread the poem 10 years from now, they might interpret it in a completely other way. As Mead (1967) stated, we are all continuously re-constructed in intersubjective (shared) communication (as commented in von Wright, 2014, p.5).

A couple of more students express their love for travelling and relates all the romantic features in the poem to that. Five other students also believe that the poem is about travelling, but did not write any reason behind their interpretation. Another student writes multiple interpretations where an example is about two friends writing to each other, where the person is in deep love with her lifestyle (of travelling). The student however does not find a suitable or reasonable fit to any of the interpretations, and leaves out a personal reason for the interpretations given.

The two remaining students did not give any interpretation of the poem, or reason for it.

4.2. Summary

As mentioned in 4.1, both classes were in the science programme. The students in the private school however, were far more calculating when trying to understand the poem. In the presentation of my project I told both classes that there are no wrong answers, and that their

interpretation was theirs only, connecting to their personal experiences, knowledge or beliefs. Nevertheless, several of the students in the private school looked up the distance between the cities in the poem, to see how long it would take (more or less) for the letters to arrive to the recipient. I was also asked about the population of Nagaur, and I listened to students discuss if one interpretation would be more logical than the other, trying to get an understanding of the "real" meaning of the poem. In other words, they used elements from the text as evidence to support their interpretation. This is an interesting observation, since generally we want students to analyse texts based on evidence, but that was not the case in this particular task. The task was to read and interpret the poem from their personal and individual point of view, and without anything being assessed. The reason for this was, again, to use reader-response theory and let students personalize their poetry reading as an experiment to be more creative and have an alternative approach when working with it. The students were informed about the anonymity and that there were no right or wrong answers. As von Wright discusses, in intersubjectivity there is no evaluation from the teacher, nor sense of authority or demanding compliance (2014). This could mean that the pattern of evaluating students' performances in upper secondary school is so well established that students still behave as if they were assessed by an authority, even in a type of seminar like the ones I conducted. Another observation was that when students tried to find out the "true" meaning of the poem, they actually read in a non-critical way, believing that the words did not have an ulterior meaning (Rexroth, 2018). The critical readers however tried to find their own truth in the poem, using their own imagination or experiences in life when interpreting the text.

In reader-response theory, and explicitly in these seminars, the students are the 'other', who reflect their interpretations and view of the text onto the writer (even though she might not be aware of it). If those interpretations or views would be known to the writer, it might be both fulfilling and stimulating. However, the students also perform as the 'other' to each

other. An example is when some students had difficulty to locate what kind of experiences in life had coloured their personal interpretation. When peers shared their interpretation, or when they discussed the poem in pairs, an exchange of perspectives happened (Breyer, 2018, p.4) and new light was shed and they mirrored themselves and each other, without being aware of it. Some students also came up with more than one interpretation, and one stated three possible meanings of the poem.

Furthermore, students' unawareness of why they interpreted the poem in the way they did, can be based on their defences, such as for example selective memory, denial or avoidance (Tyson, 2015, p.15). These defences helps us to keep unpleasant memories away, by for instance repressing them or avoiding them (Tyson, 2015, p.15). This can mean that with psychological help, students might understand themselves and thus, their interpretation better. In this seminar however, we just scraped the surface and did not go into the details of unconsciousness.

4.3. Validity and Reliability

This study showed that there are differences amongst students and their personal interpretations and reason behind it, but not in between schools. Something that limits the validity of this study is that even though all the participating students were of the same age and live in southern Sweden, they might have very different backgrounds and upbringing, both ethnically and socially. The student answers were objectively observed. However, in some cases interpretations were made about the students' understanding of the poem. This could affect the reliability of the study, because a different researcher could have a different background and viewpoint on school and students of that age.

4.4. Suggestions for Educators

It is important to not only have the knowledge about how students interpret a text or why they do it, but also to incorporate that knowledge into the syllabus and the genuine classroom, to keep improving teaching techniques and, thus, learning.

Rosenblatt (1995) stated:

> In this revolving time schools and universities need to meet a new type of issues that are impossible to predict. Students need to understand themselves; they need to develop harmonious relationships with other people. They need to find a philosophy and an inner self where they can get a perspective on the changeable society that they are in; they will for better or worse have an impact on its future. All knowledge about people and society that the school can give them, need to be incorporated in their lives. (p.19)

As Iskhak's (2016) study shows us, teachers need to be comfortable and confident enough in their literary skills to be able to teach and implement reader-response theory and critical reading in their classrooms. Harfitt & Chu (2011) agrees with Iskhak, and their study showed that reader-response activities in class are fruitful for many reasons.

In the syllabus for English (Skolverket, 2011) it is stated that "In teaching students should meet written and spoken English of different kinds, and relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge."(p.1).

This study shows us that students, even though them being of the same age, with similar living conditions (live in southern Sweden) et cetera, have a great variety of perception when they read a text. That indicates the importance of teachers being aware and observant with all of their students, as much as it is possible, and let them read and analyse texts as a dynamic activity, using language as a dynamic process rather than as a static

product (Khaghaninejad, 2015). As Harfitt & Chu (2011) mention in their research article, students make personal and social connections when interpreting a text. It is important to understand that teachers can make references out of students' responses to understand them, the society that they move in, and how it affects them.

In today's classrooms, poetry is often about the mechanics, like metrical feet, rhyme, et cetera. While adding the part of personal interpretation and mirroring, there is a big chance that students will find poetry study more interesting and fulfilling, which turned out to be confirmed during the work on this paper. The seminars were well received by students and they enjoyed the assignment very much.

To achieve the best results, it is appropriate to use a scaffolding technique. If the task used in the seminar is the first lesson, students need to be further challenged in the second lesson, to develop their literary skills and use their personal interpretation in different reader-response activities. To build on the initial lesson(s) it could be an idea to let students engage in participatory writing (*meddiktning* in Swedish) (Bommarco, 2006, pp.152-153). Students will then transform their impressions, interpretations and associations to an alternative ending to the poem or text that they have read. Another idea for the second or third class is to let them read another poem, which is also open for interpretation. This time the teacher can leave out the ending of the poem, and let students write their own ending, without having been influenced by the poems real ending. This type of activity will give them a chance of taking the role of the author, and share their personal belief and interpretation of the text. In this way the students can also practice literary skills, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics used for writing poetry. Teachers ought to present the goals and purpose with each task and what it leads up to, connecting it to the syllabus. By doing this, the students and teacher work together to achieve the end result.

Mohammadzadeh (2017) argues that text-world theory is student-centred and that teachers in literature classes should therefore force students to engage in activities to negotiate meaning. The reason for this is that it would help them develop not only their language in general, but also their literary awareness (Mohammadzadeh, 2017). Furthermore, the study of Harfitt & Chu (2011) showed that the activities where students get to interpret and find their personal understanding of, in this case, a poem, also worked with for example advertisements, stories, pictures or paintings, and not only poems (p.9).

5. Conclusion

As we have seen with this study, what John Steinbeck said about a story having as many versions as it has readers (as stated in Yu, 2015, p.1) is really true. Even though several students agreed on the poem being about romantic love, friendship, or something else, none of their personal interpretations were exactly the same as anybody else's. Students' current and earlier experiences in life, as well as mood, dreams and hope for the future, et cetera, coloured the way they interpreted the text. That is, their interpretations did not depend on their gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity or which school they attended. It was their most personal experiences as individuals. For some students, interpretations were built on life experiences, and for some, they recognized the themes in the poem from other stories they had read or seen in a movie, and connected those experiences to this particular poem. In summary, this essay shows that students do, to some extent, mirror themselves in literature.

Students' attitudes towards being able to create meaning of the text was in general positive. Several of the students approached me after the seminar and expressed that they had enjoyed the activity. This study also showed that students do get more motivated and aware of the text they are reading, when given opportunity to mirror themselves and each other in the

poem. This activity gave them a chance to be creative in creating meaning, and using themselves as starting point. As we have seen, the reason *why* the students interpreted the text as they did was not possible for all to figure out, but it was an appreciated feature in the task for most of them, since they got to do a task focused on themselves. The fact of not being assessed was a contributing factor to their enjoyment of the activity. Furthermore, the feedback given by the students testifies for a desire of more activities like this in school, especially when teaching poetry.

5.1. Further Research

The collected data only scraped the surface, and did not show if students learned anything during the seminar, or if they would have, if more tasks like these were to be done. To get deeper into the benefits (or disadvantages) of using reader-response theory in the classroom, it would be interesting to do further research on how we as teachers can implement reader-response theory in the classroom, and especially how students' learning is affected by those activities. Specific learning tools and activities for class would also be fruitful to test in genuine classroom environments.

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7. Appendix

Envelope = kuvert

Allahabad Agra Delhi = tre städer i (brittiska) Indien

Reeks = ryker

Sari'd throngs = Indisk klädesplagg som kvinnor har (typ klänning), throngs betyder trångt/trängsel, alltså en trång gång på en marknad, full med dessa klädesplagg.

Rickshaws = Cykeltaxi/vagn. Som en tuktuk men utan motor

Wild boars = vildsvin

Skinny tea wallahs = försäljare av skinny tea

Clay cups = lerkoppar. Te-koppar i lera

Cud = idissla (tugga, svälja, få upp igen, upprepa. Kor och andra hovdjur gör detta)

Cardboard box = kartong/låda

Terrain = terräng

Exodus = utvandring

Cattle fair = boskapsmässa

Decaying = förfalla

Twilight = skymning

Jangle = gnissla

Gaudy = grann, prålig, färgglad

Flashy = prålig

Envoy = sändebud