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Literature as a Tool for Personal Development

What do Swedish Secondary School Pupils Learn from Reading Literature in English?

August 2006
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Introduction

Literature studies have a long tradition in Swedish education. Literature is used both in compulsory school and upper secondary school and it is mainly Swedish literature or translations into Swedish that are used. However, by the time Swedish pupils reach upper secondary school they have been studying English for about eight years and many of them are capable of reading novels in English as well. A common situation today is that literature is used to a certain extent in English classes, but not among all students and not by all teachers. One of the reasons for this is that authentic¹ literature is often considered too difficult, so many teachers choose to work very little with stories and novels, or they choose simplified works with an easier language. That way all the students can profit from reading the texts irrespectively of their language level. Even though language may provide some difficulty, it might seem a bit awkward not to take the opportunity to study literature in English as well since school today, more than ever before, is concerned with the pupils' personal development, intellectually as well as emotionally and morally. The national curriculum laid down by the National Agency for Education states that: "Education shall support the development of pupils into responsible persons who actively participate in and contribute to vocational and civic life" (Lpf 94, 5). It does not say what specific subjects, or teachers, that should be concerned with this matter, which could be read as it is everyone's responsibility, including the language teachers'. To use literature is, after all, a widely accepted way of studying questions about life.

A current discussion among teachers and scholars is whether one should read authentic literary works in school or if it is more suitable to read simplified texts. When studying a foreign language one often finds extracts from different literary works in the textbook and the extracts are used to study literature. The question that can be asked is: What advantages might

¹ In his book *Läsa på främmande språk [Reading in a Foreign Language]*, Bo Lundahl defines authentic literature as texts that have kept their original form and that have been written for the purpose of enjoyment by native speakers, and not for language study (59).

there be using authentic texts, instead of adjusted texts or extracts, concerning vocabulary, grammar, idiomatic expressions and variations in the language due to age, gender or geography? There is an ongoing discussion whether there is any use in reading literary works in a foreign-language class at upper secondary school or if a textbook will have the same effect on what the students learn. Another current question today when we move towards a more multicultural society is if literature can help to provide tools for a better understanding and respect for differences among our adolescents? Opinions differ whether the extra struggle it takes to read authentic material in a second language is worthwhile. Some say *it is* because literature has so much to give; others say that the pupils have to work so hard only with understanding the words in the different works that time is just wasted.

The aim of this essay is to investigate these questions from the perspective of teaching a foreign language, in this case English, in the Swedish upper secondary school. The essay will argue that it is well worthwhile to read authentic literature written in English. Not only does one become a better reader and develop one's English, one also grows as a person by reading well-written literature. It will be argued that authentic literature provides a vivid context in which questions on cultural differences can be studied. It will also be argued that the personal effort a reader puts into reading a novel will automatically help him or her mature and develop his or her way of thinking when it comes to, for example, moral issues and questions about identity. This idea will be supported mainly by the theories of Bo Lundahl and Louise Rosenblatt who, from their different perspectives, have dealt with the question of what effect a literary text has on its reader. To start with, the essay will deal with the argument that is most commonly put forward for reading authentic literature, that is the question of language training. Secondly, there is the question of cultural understanding. In our multicultural society and the unfortunate increasing racism we see today, the need to understand, and respect, other cultures and different values is greater than ever. The importance of these issues is underlined by the national curriculum which states that education should "foster in the individual a sense

of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility” (Lpf, 2). Lois T. Stover discusses the connection between what adolescents read and how they act, and argues that students often are interested in reading about foreign cultures and, for example, that interest could be used to discuss and to counteract racism (108). In other words, the natural curiosity that a reader shows towards what is new and exciting in different cultures in a novel could be used as a bridge when working with tolerance towards others in areas that struggle with racial antagonism. Further, the essay will treat the moral and ethical dilemmas that a reader would have to face while reading certain texts. Louise Rosenblatt, who has written several books in this area, claims that “[i]t is practically impossible to treat any novel or drama, or any literary work of art, in a vital manner without confronting some problem of ethics” (16). There are those who move even further in their theories on what literature can achieve. When discussing the possibilities of what is called bibliotherapy², Hugh Grago draws parallels between the effect of psychotherapy and what bibliotherapy might do for someone in distress (163-171). These theories will prove to be supportive of the argument of this essay since they maintain that literature has a positive effect on its readers. Finally, possible problems that might occur, such as difficulties in understanding a text language-wise or the unfamiliarity to read books on the whole will be discussed, together with some suitable preparations needed in class if Swedish secondary school pupils and literature in English are to be a successful combination. Again, the work of Bo Lundahl will be drawn upon together with Ronald Carter’s *Teaching Literature* and Aidan Chambers’ *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children*.

Different novels will be used to illustrate the arguments of the essay. Examples from Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and J.D Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) will show in what way the language of an authentic novel can differ from that of a simplified text. Further, extracts from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Silko’s *Ceremony*

² The practical process starts with a ‘patient’ who is recommended a story, by a skilled librarian or a reading therapist, which in some ways bears on the patient’s problem. If it is successful, the patient realizes that the story has something to say to him/her and will hopefully either ask for another story or start to talk about the first one with the therapist. This way the patient and therapist may find potential solutions to the problem.

(1968), and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) will show how a sequence from a novel can help students discuss moral matters and alienation. Together with the arguments from the scholars mentioned above, these examples will be supportive of the thesis of this essay and show what additional knowledge the pupils could acquire by using authentic literature in class.

Language Learning and Literature

The aim of foreign language study at upper secondary school is communication and much effort is put into learning words. To be able to read a text in a foreign language the pupil needs to understand the words but, on the other hand, reading is the best way to improve one's vocabulary. Here literature provides great possibilities. By reading well-written literature the pupil will be exposed to a rich vocabulary at the same time as he or she develops his or her reading skills. As a result the pupil will be able to read more and more complex literature. In this context the difference between an authentic text and simplified version will be high-lightened.

A Swedish scholar, who is particularly interested in why one should read authentic literature as a language pupil is Bo Lundahl. One of his arguments is that since authentic literature tends to be more interesting, the pupil is more likely to learn the language easier. The will to understand the plot and the amount of language the pupil is exposed to will help the learning of a foreign language. It is only by *reading* that one can become a better reader. Moreover, research that has been done in California and Canada by, among others, Stanovich and West (1989), shows according to Lundahl a connection between how much a pupil read and how well he succeeds in other subjects. A high reading ability and a rich vocabulary are said to help develop the general cognitive ability (Lundahl 20, my translation³). However, a common argument against reading authentic literature in school is that it is too difficult.

³ All references and direct quotes from Lundahl's *Läsa på främmande språk* will hereafter be translated by myself

Those who are against using authentic literature say that there are so many words that the pupils cannot understand that the text becomes incomprehensible. The argument goes that so much time is spent looking up words or guessing from the context that most of the reading experience is lost. Not everyone agrees with this claim, however. Naturally, pupils in a group are at different language levels but authentic literature is not necessarily difficult literature. By staying with an interesting text, the pupil will not only be exposed to a rich vocabulary and have the chance to learn new words, he will also meet a natural variation of the language that does not exist in the graded readers. Every-day expressions as well as teenage language and slang, which are natural forms of the English language, occur frequently in authentic literature but rarely in textbooks. Lundahl states his point of view as follows: “[w]e have to know words to be able to read well. But it is a mutual relationship. Along with a growing vocabulary the possibility to read and understand texts increases at the same time as the reading itself increases the vocabulary” (86).

Today, however, simplified versions of authentic texts are often used in school. There are two types of graded readers: either written to be used in language training from the start, or rewritten versions of classic works. Lundahl says that he can understand to a certain extent why easy-readers are widely used. They are cheap and easily accessible, and their degree of difficulty is clearly marked (59). In *Läsa på främmande språk* we find examples of what is done in the rewritten versions: the metaphors are removed, as well as many descriptions; every-day expressions and local words are replaced by neutral forms; and difficult words are replaced by easier ones (60). The effect this has on the original novels is of course first and foremost that they become flat and boring, and one major argument for reading novels at all is that they are interesting to their readers. How a text can change is clearly shown by Lundahl when he compares the opening from the original version of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to an adjusted version. The original reads:

YOU don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly – Tom's Aunt Polly, she is – and Mary, and the Widow Douglas, is all told about in that book – which is mostly a true book; with some stretchers, as I said before. (74)

The simplified version, however, shortens the opening to only three lines:

You don't know about me, unless you've read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer". But that doesn't matter.

That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth (mainly). (75)

The difference between the two versions is obvious; everything that makes this text special is removed from the easier version. It is no longer the unique voice of Huck Finn that we hear. It is now three lines of information, and there is no trace of the effort the author has put into making his work and the character alive. The reader will not acquire any feeling for the Southern dialect or language rhythm either. As an adventurous story, the adjusted version becomes remarkably flat. Lundahl supports this idea when he puts forth the fact that adjusted books are written to help their readers learn a new language: "*What* the book is about comes inexorably in second hand. Texts written for English-speaking children have inversely been made from the need to express thoughts, experiences, opinions and emotions" (61). Or, as Aidan Chambers puts it: "it ought to be fun to read as well as challenging, subversive, refreshing [and] comforting" (16).

In addition to the regional variations of the language we also have the age related differences. A work that contains a lot of youth language and every-day expressions is J.D Salinger's novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, originally written for an adult audience but has been read, and still is being read, by many adolescents. The novel is a good example of a work that

would lose its very special style if it was simplified. In the following example the protagonist Holden has just been notified that he is not welcome back to his boarding school after the Christmas holidays since he has failed all his subjects except English. He is very skilled in English and his teachers think that he would not have any problems in passing the other subjects as well if he only bothered to try. In this passage Holden quarrels with a friend over an essay that he has written for him:

All of a sudden, he said, 'For Chrissake, Holden. This is about a goddam *baseball* glove.'

'So what?' I said. Cold as hell.

'Wuddaya mean *so what*? I told ya it had to be about goddam *room* or a house or something.'

'You said it had to be descriptive. What the hell's the difference if it's about a baseball glove?'

'God damn it.' He was sore as hell. He was really furious. 'You always do everything backasswards.' He looked at me. 'No wonder you're flunking the hell out of here,' he said. 'You don't do *one damn thing* the way you're supposed to. I mean it. Not one damn thing.' (36)

Even if there is a lot of dialogue in a graded reader, this type of language is not found. This is a typical passage that could appeal to a young reader and make him interested in finding out more about the protagonist and what is going to happen to him. Briefly put, the authenticity makes it more interesting.

Dialects and local variations are, as we could see in the example from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, more or less left out from the simplified novels. In a textbook there is often a chapter on, for example, the West Indies that contains certain local expressions or words, but if compared to reading a whole novel that takes place in that culture and that has been written by a native author, a chapter in a textbook does not give much of a reading experience. A novel that does give a very special reading experience is Jamaica Kincaid's *The*

Autobiography of My Mother, a novel about the life of Xuela who spends her whole life wondering about her mother who died while giving birth to Xuela. As a reader one gets into the very special way of life people live on small islands and especially the women's situation. The author uses a very rhythmic language in the novel which sometimes is almost like poetry. Both the reading experience and the experience from the culture will be very rich when you get into that language rhythm, which is typical for the West Indies. This rhythmic description of a woman contains, for example, the typical repetitions:

She had been beautiful when she was young, the way all people are, so beautiful when they are young, but on her face then was the person she had really become: defeated. Defeat is not beautiful; it is not ugly, but it is not beautiful. I was young then; I was young, I did not know. When I looked at her and felt sympathy, I also felt revulsion. I thought, This must never happen to me, and I meant that I would not allow the passage of time or the full weight of desire to make a pawn of me. I was young, so young, and felt my convictions powerfully; I felt strong and I felt I would always be so, I felt new and I felt I would always be so, too. (65)

The words are not difficult so a passage like this one is easily understood. What it does is that it gives the reader a picture and a feeling of the woman described, as well as the narrator and even the culture in a unique way, none of which would come out from a textbook.

In this context Stephen D. Krashen's theories⁴ are worth mentioning. According to his input hypothesis we can either learn a language by acquisition, which is the natural way, the way children learn to speak their mother tongue, or we can do it by learning, which is a conscious process in which we study rules and structures. The use of authentic texts is supported by Krashen's theory. With an input at the right level, an interesting content, and a

⁴ Most of his theory is presented in his book *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Oxford: Pergamon Press. 1981

motivated pupil we come close to “the natural approach” that Krashen aims for. His critics say that this is a very inefficient way of learning, and according to Lundahl, one that criticises Krashen is a scholar named Widdowson who wants a better mixture of content and form than what Krashen recommends (69). Lundahl agrees with Widdowson at the same time as he claims that what is best learnt are the things we learn with interest (86). Whether or not one agrees completely with the theories of Krashen, the fact remains that he has had a great influence on the theories of language learning. When practicing communication the natural way, we should, according to Krashen, speak about things that interest us, and what could then be better than to discuss a novel that we have enjoyed.

Thus, if we use novels and books to improve our pupils’ vocabulary it is necessary to use captivating texts that can catch the reader’s attention, then reading becomes a natural way of enriching the vocabulary. Not only will our pupils meet new words but a variation of words, such as dialects from the southern part of United States as well as English spoken in other countries or regions. In addition to regional variations the authentic texts will contain youth language and every-day expressions which result in authentic literature giving a much more complex picture of the English language than a textbook could ever do.

Alienation and Cultural Understanding

Literature has unique possibilities to help us see who we are and also help us understand others. In literature one can both meet and identify with a number of characters whom you normally would not meet. This is developing for one’s character and it is an opportunity we should not miss in school. One should keep in mind that learning about oneself and others is a life-long process, and school has a responsibility to show pupils what an infinite source literature can be. At the age when they are in secondary school, youths often have many questions about identity, how they should behave, and why others behave as they do. In

today's global society cultural understanding and tolerance are qualities that our pupils could make good use of, and this is also something that they could develop from reading literature.

In the context of democracy Louise Rosenblatt has done much research on the importance of literature as she claims it to be an infinite source that should be more used. According to Rosenblatt, the most important goal for all studies and teaching is democracy and democratic values, and she believes that literature can be of great help to a teacher when teaching these values to pupils. In her work she deals with English teachers in America who teach pupils in their first language. But here we will see that her arguments are applicable on English studies in Sweden as well, that is, in a foreign language. She states that not to use literature in the classroom would be a waste of means since “[t]he capacity to sympathize or to identify with the experiences of others is a most precious human attribute” (37). As an example, Rosenblatt talks about a group of students at New England Women's College that were questioned about why they read literature:

The students valued the literature as a means of enlarging their knowledge of the world, because through literature they acquire not so much additional *information* as additional *experience*. New understanding is conveyed to them dynamically and personally. Literature provides a *living through* not simply *knowledge about*. (38)

This is a view that she shares with Bo Lundahl, who also talks about bringing the real world into the classroom by reading authentic literature (Lundahl 62). By following the advice of these scholars, we could give our pupils a deeper insight and a close experience of other cultures, as opposed to the information they would get through a textbook.

Even though we live in a multicultural society today the distrust between groups of different origin is a problem in many places just as well as increasing racism. This tendency must be counteracted at every level. The way literature can move people between various

places, together with the possibility to encounter different cultures through literature by foreign authors, is something that must be used. Lois T. Stover states that:

[s]tudents are often intrigued by the thought of living elsewhere and are interested in other countries, even when they may not be curious about the lives of their peers [...] who come from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. [Young adult] novels [by foreign authors] provide insight for readers about the commonalities of the adolescent experience and about how the cultural milieu in which a person acts affects their decisions .(108)

The natural curiosity that Stover talks about could be of help when using literature as a base for discussions. To read about, and to identify with, someone from a place far away could be safer to many youths than to identify with, or show interest in, a schoolmate that comes from the wrong side of town. Here literature can be used as an opening, a way to see a connection or to draw parallels to a closer situation. Pupils can find a way into discussing uncomfortable matters that they normally would avoid talking about. Stover gives us an example where students from rural Maryland read novels from the Soviet Union and explored topics like racism, and prejudice, which could be done safely because of the cultural distance between themselves and the characters. Afterwards, they could more easily move into discussions about concerns closer to themselves (110).

When reading a novel like Silko's *Ceremony* both the problem with alienation and the need for cultural understanding can be discussed. The protagonist of the novel, Tayo, is a half-breed, and he has problems feeling at home both in the reservation and in the white society. He takes a chance to become accepted in the American society during World War II when he joins the army, and as an Indian has new experiences in the white man's uniform. When thinking back he realizes that:

[w]hite women never looked at me until I put on that uniform, and then by God I was a U.S Marine and they came crowding around. [...] I never saw so many bars and juke

boxes- all the people coming from everywhere, dancing and laughing. They never asked me if I was Indian; sold me as much beer as I could drink. (41)

Unfortunately the time in the army does not help Tayo and he ends up feeling even worse after the war, both from his experiences on the battlefield and the knowledge of what society thinks about the Native Americans. This story deals with Tayo's quest to find himself, and throughout the novel the reader can follow the protagonist's struggle at the same time as the reader learns a lot about the American Indian culture. There are great variations in how different cultures conceive the world, and by reading and discussing *Ceremony* pupils' notion of how different cultures affect the way people think can be developed. At one time Tayo wonders about Christianity:

But the fifth world had become entangled with European names: the names of the rivers, the hills, the names of the animals and plants- all of creation suddenly had two names: an Indian name and a white name. Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus would save only the individual soul; Jesus was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family. (68)

Religion and culture are often closely connected and differences between religions involve differences between cultures. In the case of *Ceremony*, a study of the influence one's culture has on one's identity can be done, and parallels can be drawn to the various religions that exist among the pupils in class or at school. A passage like the one above can be used in order to try and understand what underlying causes there could be behind someone's actions.

There are, however, some criteria that have to be fulfilled if the novel is to affect the reader. Lundahl talks about a cultural bridge and if we "recognize the cultural milieu in which a story takes place, it becomes easier to read and to understand the text" (Lundahl 24). He further

claims that “[i]t is not until the world of the pupil meets the world of the text that the content feels important” (41). Rosenblatt puts forward the same thought when stating that “[i]f each author were completely different from every other human being and if each reader were unique in all respects, there could, of course, be no communication [...]. We can communicate because of a common core of experience, even though there may be infinite personal variations” (28). These thoughts from Lundahl and Rosenblatt are interesting and seem logical, but one should not be too afraid to use books that seem to be distant from the pupil’s experience. A novel is as full of nuances as the human being, and there may well be a possible connection between a novel and a reader that does not show until the reader has started reflecting on the book. Of course connections are easier found if a teacher knows his or her pupils, as these scholars emphasize, as well as something about the literature. But there could still be many perfect matches that are impossible to foresee.

Thus, through literature the ability to identify with, and respect others, can be developed. One condition, however, is the understanding of one’s own identity. When initiating a discussion with pupils where identity is the theme the teacher needs a starting point for the discussion. A good base for talking about identity is a novel or a text that deals with the problems of knowing oneself. Alienation is a major theme in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden tells us the story about “this madman stuff that happened to [him] around last Christmas” (1). He has obvious troubles in finding out who he is and what he wants. The reasons for him feeling lost are several: one is the death of his younger brother Allie when Holden was thirteen. This death has come to symbolize a border between childhood and puberty, and “[o]n Allie’s side of the border it is still childhood, a time when self and world seem, at least in memory, to exist in enchanted unity”(Rowe 80). Another matter that makes him an outsider is the feeling that he cannot conform to “the corrosive materialism of modern American life” (78). That is, he is something of an idealist that cannot accept when people do things out of, what he thinks, the wrong reasons. He tells us about two nuns that he has met and how he

admires them for their work and he compares them to a friend's mother who only "could go around with a basket collecting dough [...] if everybody kissed her ass for her when they made a contribution" (Salinger 103). Overall Holden is quick, and sometimes very sharp, in his comments about his friends and people in general. On one occasion he calls up an old friend to have a drink, and when the friend is leaving he says to himself that "[h]e was strictly a pain in the ass, but he certainly had a good vocabulary" (134). Because Holden keeps telling us his thoughts and how he has acted in different situations throughout the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* provides a good base for discussing young people's behaviour and thoughts, and for comparing this to how society regards them. Young people's problems are often complicated by the fact that the adult world around them does not understand their way of thinking, and therefore it could be meaningful to meet over a novel like *The Catcher in the Rye*. Though the novel was first published in 1951, it is still being read by many young people today. One reason for its popularity could be that Holden is a character with whom one can easily identify. His manners, his diverse problems and his charming character are parts of what makes him appealing to young readers. To use Rowe's words: Both [Holden's] overt aggression and his more subtle hostility toward others are regularly redeemed by the vitality of his compassion, intelligence, and wit" (82). The implied reader of the novel is like a friend of Holden's and that also makes the story accessible to young people, and the reader is also addressed as a naratee directly by Holden as a first-person narrator.

The capability to identify with a person who is, at first glance, very unlike one self is an important quality in our modern society. We hear about increasing racism even though we, through modern communication, live closer to each other today than ever before. This section has pointed out a few ways in which literature can be of help when trying to understand and tolerate others. It is fairly easy to identify with someone when reading a book since you come very close to the characters, and in literature we find all sorts of people with all sorts of qualities. Holden and Tayo who serve as examples here are two young men, very different

from each other, but at the same time with many similar characteristics. In their company pupils can compare and discuss personalities and the fact that it is common, and normal, to sometimes feel lost.

Moral and Ethical Development

As stated earlier, one of the main tasks of the Swedish school system, according to the national curriculum, is to prepare the student for life as an adult. Already at compulsory school children are trained to take responsibility for their studies and their actions. The Swedish school has changed over the years from being an institution where one first and foremost study different subjects into being a place where one is supposed to gain knowledge as well as mature as a person. On the first page in the national curriculum it says that “individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall represent and impart” (Lpf 94, 3). Teachers are more concerned with the moral development of their pupils today than earlier, and when pupils arrive at secondary school there could be no reason to expect this work to be done only in specific classes, when all teachers most likely could contribute to the pupils’ personal growth in their specific subjects. The development from a child into an emotionally and morally mature person will not occur without effort. Rosenblatt points out that in today’s society, with very rapid social and economic changes, it is even more difficult for our teenagers to find out what ideas and ways of life that are eligible (84). “The adolescent’s own assumption of adult roles cannot [...] be as automatic as in the case of the youth in a more stable society ”(86). Therefore, in a society like ours, school must help the individual to “build for himself a mental and emotional base from which to meet the fluctuating currents about him” (162).

A commonly used, and very popular idea of our time is the concept of *the life-long learning*, and here again literature has unique possibilities since “literature enables the youth to live through– and to reflect on– much that in abstract terms would be meaningless to him”

(173). We must, however, be aware that literature, as well as life, is full of stereotypes and dogmatic statements. A well-known and common example is the way Huckleberry Finn talks about, and sometimes acts toward, the runaway slave Jim. It is most natural for Huck to say, for example, that Jim “was right; he was most always right; he had an uncommon head, for a nigger” (Twain 81), or “I never see such a nigger” (83). Using Stover’s words: “many contemporary figures in well-written young adult novels do interact with others based on their prejudices” (Stover 107). Stover further claims that youths need to be exposed to these characters to be able to examine why these stereotypes exist, and to confront their own behaviours (108). Rosenblatt also has her theories on this area and says that “[t]he literature classroom can stimulate the students themselves to develop a thoughtful approach to human behaviour” (17), and the result will be that “[o]ne might condemn the act and yet wish to understand what produced it” (222), which could be argued to be a more mature way of looking at matters than just to dismiss them as being wrong.

A novel that could be very useful, and interesting to young readers, when discussing ethical and moral dilemmas is *Frankenstein* (1818). It is fascinating that a nearly 200-year old book, written by a young girl contains a theme that is still an issue today. When Mary Shelley at the age of seventeen wrote *Frankenstein* she could not possibly have had any idea that the question of what is human or not would be such a burning question at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Where is it morally right to draw the line between nature and science? Do we consider the young and fairly innocent Frankenstein as a great scientist or as a crazy lunatic that could not separate right from wrong? To study a classic work like *Frankenstein* has many advantages. First, it is well known. Many pupils are likely to know the story, through the film or just because the concept of the monster has become something of a legend over the years. Secondly, the story of the young natural philosophy student provides many possibilities to discuss moral matters. If we get the chance, can we take on the role of mother nature and to what extent are we responsible for our actions? Are we allowed to do a mistake

and then be excused on the grounds that it was a mistake? Young Frankenstein is driven by passion when he realises that “[w]hat had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world was now within [his] grasp” (50). Then when things start to go wrong he is much less determined in his actions. As a reader you are faced with the question whether he should have acted differently. He is clearly tormented and aware of his own pain. One example is when the young servant girl, Justine, is innocently accused with the murder of his brother: “The tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained with innocence, but the fangs of remorse tore my bosom and would not forgo their hold” (81). The agony of the young scientist resembles very much the agony of the monster:

Accused creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even *you* turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image, but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance . Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred.

(126)

The resemblance or difference in their agony provides a natural base for a discussion on what is right and what is wrong. One can continue by drawing parallels to people at our own time; that from the beginning are innocent babies but through deceit and lack of encouragement turn into cold and callous criminals.

There are many teachers who use authentic material in their work, even literature that deals with difficult matters. One example that shows how pupils can mature morally through schoolwork is a project that was done in a fifth-grade class at McKinley Elementary School in Santa Barbara, California. The teachers Irene Pattenaude and Louise B. Jennings did a four-month “tolerance focused study” that was organized around literature of the Holocaust. The project resulted in an article in which we are able to follow the moral aspect of Matthew’s development, who is one of the pupils involved. The authors write in the article that their “definition of tolerance goes beyond passive acceptance of difference to a provocative stance

of responsible action for contributing to justice and equity” (325). To achieve this the pupils are informed about the history of the Holocaust through, for example, picture books, poems, letters and extracts from novels. Matthew’s initial response after reading a picture book is that “people should kill the nazis” (330). However, after continuing this study for some time he shows remarkable change in his responses. His teacher says that after a while “Matthew was grappling with the moral dilemma of protecting oneself versus taking action on the behalf of others” (335). Then finally the class examine how they can promote tolerance and responsibility in their own community and Matthew writes in a composition that:

I learned to respect religious and non-religious people more. I know what they went through. I learned to control my temper more and to be nice to people when they are acting mean or if someone is cussing at you, don’t cuss back. I learned not to be a bully and not to push people around. (338)

At the end of this study the pupils, not only Matthew, showed more sympathy and responsibility towards others. They were interested in what makes people different and why some do bad things towards others; they did not just judge them as being bad. Further they used their new interest and knowledge to take action for a better and less violent community of their own.

Just as a distant issue can help pupils come closer to difficult matters in their surroundings and open up a possibility to discuss those matters; I would argue that reading literature in English would help Swedish pupils in a similar way. The fact that one reads in a different language from one’s own could enhance the ability to identify with different characters since the reader is already a little outside his usual self. When it comes to making a stand or taking a moral decision the reader is not so trapped by the way he usually reacts. Young people today do, however, meet the English language in a number of situations besides reading but literature is again unique, this time because it forces the reader to stop to think and reflect.

When playing a computer game we never have to take a stand, we are immediately told when the “right” thing has been done. It is almost the same when watching television, it is very easy to switch the channel if the program gets boring or uncomfortable. With reading a book it is almost the opposite, it is easier to keep on reading than to change books, even if it makes us uneasy; to start on a new book requires more effort. However, Widdowson is quoted in *Läsa på främmande språk* when he claims that we have a different understanding of a novel when read in a foreign language and we are not likely to “experience different nuances, associations and semantic shifts” (63) and therefore it is an illusion that a text is authentic when it comes to learning a language. It could be true that we miss many nuances but, on the other hand, if one reads a novel out of interest in the characters and the culture it could become really awkward if you read a translation. When reading, for example, a Swedish translation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* we will not experience all the different southern dialects that are so much a part of that particular text. The difference between Huck and Jim is underlined by the way they speak and the reader understands for one that Jim is black; it does not have to be spelled out in the text:

‘It’s good daylight. Le’s get breakfast. Make up your camp-fire good.’

‘What’s de use er makin’ up de camp-fire to cook strawbries en sich truck? But you got a gun, hain’t you? Den we kin git sumfn’ better den strawbries.’

‘Strawberries and such truck,’ I says. ‘Is that what you live on?’

‘I couldn’t git nuffn’ else,’ he says. (49)

In the passage above there is no trouble in knowing who is who, and it is impossible to transfer this difference into a translation. As a consequence the moral aspect of how a white and a black person is described in the novel becomes much more obvious than if we read a translation.

The question about what is morally right and what is morally wrong is not easy to answer, not for our pupils, nor for many adults, and as we have seen, literature can be of help in this matter. We could follow the development of Matthew and how literature helped him to mature in his way of thinking, and together with Matthew we are all taught that we should take responsibility for our own actions. But as we see in *Frankenstein*, this could be easier said than done. *Frankenstein* also serves as a good example since it was written such a long time ago, and obviously moral matters were as difficult then as they are now.

Personal Development and Self-Awareness

When reading one becomes involved in the way people react to different experiences; they may react almost the same way, or completely different, than you would have done yourself in a similar situation. We can recognize ourselves or someone that we know, and through the novel we may get a greater understanding of our own selves or of others. A reader who lives in a split family may struggle with feelings similar to Xuela's when she is not sure of her father's love and she has to live with a stepmother that does not want her:

And so I had come to know well the world in which I was living. I knew how to interpret the long silences my father's wife had constructed between us. Sometimes in these silences there was nothing at all; sometimes they were filled with pure evil; sometimes she meant to see me dead, sometimes my being alive was of no interest to her. (Kincaid 55)

This situation is probably known to many youths today when divorced families are very common. It could certainly be a theme in a simplified version as well, but then there would be much less nuances than in an authentic novel and less chance that the reader could identify with Xuela, or someone else in her family. All types of identification, done partly or completely, lead to a personal development and an awareness of one's identity. Or, to use

Chambers' words: "I hold that in literature we find the best expression of the human imagination, and the most useful means by which we come to grips with our ideas about ourselves and what we are" (16). This quality of literature could be especially helpful to someone in distress. A reader that does not feel psychologically well could find comfort in sharing Tayo's feelings and realize that one could feel really bad without an evident reason:

For a long time he had been white smoke. He did not realize that until he left the hospital, because white smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls; it was sucked away by the words of the doctors who tried to talk to the invisible scattered smoke. [...] They saw his outline but they did not realize it was hollow inside. [...] The new doctor asked him if he had ever been visible, and Tayo spoke to him softly and said that he was sorry but nobody was allowed to speak to an invisible one. (Silko 14-15)

The type of feeling described above is an example of a feeling many might have but which could be difficult to describe, to actually pinpoint what is wrong. By reading about Tayo and the way he deals with his problems a reader could receive the language he or she needs to be able to express what is bothering them.

There are those who move even further in their theories about what literature can achieve. Hugh Crago has written an article about the possibilities of bibliotherapy. The article entitled "Can Stories Heal?" draws parallels between the effect of psychotherapy and what bibliotherapy might do for someone in distress. He says that bibliotherapy may not yet have reached the status it deserves and a contributing reason for this is that "[f]ew advocates of bibliotherapy have had much knowledge of reader-response theory [and] [e]ven fewer have had much personal acquaintance with the wider fields of psychology and psychotherapy" (163). It is in the meeting between the text and the reader that he sees the most obvious parallel to psychotherapy. The relationship between a client and a therapist is in many ways comparable to the encounter between a reader and a text. He argues that the commonly

assumed confidence a client needs to have for a therapist “before he or she is likely to accept challenge to existing habits of thought and feeling” (166), is very similar to the “exquisite degree of ‘matching’”(166) that is needed between a reader and a text if any self-insight on the reader’s behalf is to take place. “The whole notion of bibliotherapy rests on the possibility of such matching” (166) according to Crago. He admits, however, that the type of healing that bibliotherapy, in its existing form, offers, is “more likely to occur through the reader’s own unconscious selection of texts that will ‘speak’ to her or him than through planned recommendations of a professional mediator” (170). He claims further that the weakness of bibliotherapy is due to deficiency in the bibliotherapy on how narratives actually interact with human lives. This is also the argument of this essay; if school provides the possibilities for the pupils to read texts, they will find the texts that have something to say to them. The challenge for the teacher is to find a number of well-written texts and to present them to the pupils so they have something to choose from. Crago explains this human addiction to stories and texts as being “an aspect of our symbol-making nature” (169), we do have a language that is very metaphorical and in our dreams we find a language of symbols and analogy.

Also Rosenblatt follows this line of thought when she talks about how literature, even if it seems on the outside to have little to do with the pupil’s life, “may provide vicarious experience and occasion discussion that will lead to increased self-understanding for the student” (196). She does, however, warn the teacher not to use the therapeutic ability of literature literally, but to be aware that this is the type of effect that literature might have on her pupils (197). Crago also discusses examples where a text or a story has been rejected by the reader because the protagonist was too similar to himself and he also points out that a person “with more deeply-rooted dysfunction will prove far beyond even a well trained teacher or librarian’s ability to help”(171). This is, however, a problem a teacher always faces, not only in the context of literature. A teacher always risks having pupils that need professional help of a kind that a teacher cannot provide. Therefore there is no need to be

afraid of what kind of reaction a book may conjure up. Even if the reactions might be strong, they will have a positive effect on the reader as all identification leads to personal awareness. Since literature could be comforting for someone in distress, and according to bibliotherapy works as therapy, many pupils could find support in reading.

Eventual Difficulties and Conceivable Preparations

Since there is a debate whether one should use authentic literature or not, there must be negative sides or problems connected with using authentic foreign literature in class. One difficulty could be the language barrier. If a pupil does not have the vocabulary enough to understand a text then it is difficult to motivate reading it. That the language is too difficult has been mentioned above since it is a common argument against reading authentic literature. This is of course something that has to be considered when choosing a text for the pupils or having them choose one for themselves. One of the purposes of working with literature is the meeting between the text and reader, and what might come out of such a meeting. And if a meeting is to take place the reader needs to understand the text. To read in a different language than our mother tongue most likely involves meeting some words that we do not fully understand even when our knowledge of the language is good. There are, however, a few things one can do to help a reader that is struggling with a foreign language.

First of all it is important to know why we read a text. The reasons can vary all from trying to find certain information, practicing a foreign language or pure pleasure. The techniques differ depending on what purpose the reading has. Many pupils are not aware of this, they tend to read everything in school the same way. They are reading to learn and details are often important. I would argue that pupils need to be able to find the message in a text without understanding all the details. A useful exercise is to pick out what is important in a text without retelling everything one has read. This may sound easy but my experience tells me that many pupils find it difficult. When the vocabulary is difficult one needs to use one's

previous knowledge to understand a text, together with pictures and the context. This is a question of training. It is also a matter of training to be able to continue reading even though there are single words that one does not understand. If discussing and informing the pupils of these matters they can be helped in their reading process.

In *Läsa på främmande språk* Lundahl presents a model for different reading skills in a foreign language (17). Today the model is widely used and it distinguishes between, what is called, *bottom up* reading and *top down* reading. When reading from the bottom and up one notices details and the particularities in a text; whereas in a top down reading one tries to see the whole text and a wider message. As said above many pupils are more familiar with the bottom up model. In school they often read texts to find certain information or the right answer. When reading literature they need to be comfortable with the top down model so that they can get a wider picture of a text.

Another possible difficulty that might occur is that of a complicated plot. Even if the language in a text is at a suitable level, the understanding of a text could still be difficult if the plot is very complicated. A very popular genre today is fantasy. In a fantasy novel there is often a very complicated plot with many different characters. The story can take place at different levels both in time and place, and together with a foreign language this could be very confusing. The reading and the understanding of a text is depending on the reader's earlier knowledge and experience, or as Lundahl puts it "[t]he amount of preparations needed is decided by the teachers notion of the distance between the reader and the text. The more unfamiliar they are to the content, structure and language of the text the more carefully one needs to prepare the reading" (139). In this context one could easily assume a long distance between a reader and a fantasy novel, but interest on the reader's behalf can shorten that distance considerably. When it comes to complicated plots in general the pupil must be aware of differences with possible structures and why an author chooses to use one structure or the

other. Short textual examples can be used for comparison and as a starting point for a discussion.

Lack of reading experience may be another obstacle. There are pupils in upper secondary school that have never read a book in their mother tongue. Of course there is no point in just giving an inexperienced reader a book to read and report. Those that are not used to reading could benefit from reading different texts together with other pupils or together with the teacher. Another possibility is to work with shorter texts that the pupil can survey so that the length of the story is not discouraging in itself. To read the first chapters in a novel together with others could also help an inexperienced reader to get into a novel and to help awake an interest in the text. However, most important is to provide possibilities for the pupil to discuss what he or she has read. To save time most reading is done at home. It is a good investment though to have time in the classroom for discussions since there are always questions on a text, things that the reader has not understood or something that is just bothering him. These thoughts are supported by Aidan Chambers and his concept of “booktalks”. He claims that if the reader becomes used to discussing what he or she has read their way of thinking about literature will change. As an effect the reading will sooner or later take on new dimensions. He states that “[t]alking about literature [...] and talking about what we thought and felt while reading a book lie at the heart of all teaching of literature” (118). In *Teaching Literature*, Carter makes a similar claim when he says that it is necessary to make the “links between 'what the text is about' and 'what this literary item means to me'” (46). He further suggests that inexperienced readers should jointly read shorter stories and that their reading should be supported by questions on the text (98). Questions can be helpful in making the connection between the reader and the text that makes the text more comprehensible.

Lack of motivation is maybe the most difficult obstacle to overcome. Many pupils do not want to read, even when the language is no problem. As a teacher maybe one has to accept that, there is no way to force someone to read, even less to like it. If one decides to try anyway

it is important to find texts with subjects that concern the pupils. A common study of a subject that is present in a few texts later presented to the pupils might help to awake an interest.

Crime, for example, could be such a subject. If motivation is low it is also important that the reader has enough background knowledge to quickly get into a text. Another thing that can improve motivation is a variation in the reporting of what has been read. To always have to leave a written report may not always stimulate the interest in literature. An awareness of his or her own reading ability as well as his or her attitude towards reading and what causes it could be fruitful. Since reading literary texts is a goal in the English B course in Swedish upper secondary school this type of awareness could motivate a pupil to set up his or her own goals and a plan on how to reach them.

Most important of all is for the teacher to find interesting texts to offer the pupils. A novel needs to have a natural drive in itself. If an experienced reader finds a novel slow and long-winded than it is probably not a good choice for a pupil. It is easier to inspire someone to read a novel if one likes the novel oneself.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that it is well worthwhile to use literature written in English in Swedish secondary school. The advantages of using authentic literature to improve vocabulary, as a starting point for discussions and as a means to personal development have been made clear through this essay and illustrated by the textual examples from the novels used. As for the language in literature an example from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been studied to show that the differences between an authentic text and an adjusted text can be so extensive that the originality of the text disappears. The variation that is a natural part of language is present however in authentic literature. In *The Catcher in the Rye* we find examples of typical youth language while in *The Autobiography of My Mother* we find a language typical for the West Indies. These variations would not be as evident in a translation as they are in the

original text. That cultural differences could be better understood and accepted through a text by a foreign author has been pointed out using the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Leslie Marmon Silko and Mark Twain. Authors writing in their mother tongue about their own culture give the reader a detailed and vivid picture of people and places which our pupils would not otherwise have. These novels have also proved to be useful in the context of moral issues and questions about identity together with the works of Shelley and Salinger. For example, in *Frankenstein* we meet the moral dilemma of taking responsibility of one's own actions as well as the question what man can do and what should be left to nature. As a reader one has to decide on what one thinks is right and what is not. In addition it has been shown that an old work like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* contains the question about stereotypes and racism which are as current today as when the novel was written. It is also accessible to young people since many have already heard about the story or seen it on film. All these novels feature young characters with whom a reader in an upper secondary class could identify, and as stated above, all types of identification lead to some sort of personal development. The protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden, has proved to be a character that is appealing to young readers as well as Tayo in *Ceremony*. They are both feeling lost in different ways and constitute possibilities for identification. Pupils get the chance to learn that irrespectively of where or when we live, questions about identity are the same. All novels used have also shown a great variety concerning vocabulary, style and language. The variation available in literature is one of its most unique qualities. Thus, these novels are excellent ways of bringing the real world into the classroom. Through reading and talking about literature we can help the pupils move closer to the intentions in the national curriculum where education should "foster in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility" (Lpf, 2).

It has further been shown how eventual difficulties that come together with reading authentic literature can be handled. Reading has to be practised like all other skills. For a

teacher it is necessary to teach the pupils different reading techniques and give them opportunities to practise reading. This is necessary when reading literature in your mother tongue as well but even more so when using authentic literature in a foreign language. Finally it has been argued that stimulating an interest in reading and working with motivation may be the most important part when using literature in class. To sum up, I would say that school has an important task in providing possibilities for the students to discover literature. School has a responsibility not only to teach the pupils how to read literature but to offer literature in which they can find the joy in reading.

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