Literature, a Gateway to New Worlds
Encouraging Aesthetic Reading through Transactional, Reader Response, and Envisionment Theories and Methods
Abstract

The purpose of this essay has been to demonstrate that increased use of aesthetic reading in the Swedish Upper Secondary EFL classroom would lead to several benefits to the students. To do this I have given examples of three didactical theories and methods that could be used in combination for this purpose. Each theory, and the methods that can be linked to said theory, has been analysed on how it could be used in the classroom and what benefits it could lead to. Subsequently, a combination of these theories and methods has been created and applied to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in order to exemplify how it could be applied to the teaching of literature in the EFL classroom. The benefits from this type of reading include among others an enhanced ability for critical thinking, a greater ability to work with and understand literature, and a greater understanding for other cultures.
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Introduction

There are limitless ways to use literature in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at upper secondary level, but how many of them are indeed implemented in the classroom? This essay will argue that students would benefit a great deal from the use of aesthetic reading when dealing with literature in the EFL classroom.

In her influential systematization of the various didactic methods dealing with reading in Literature as Exploration, Louise M. Rosenblatt states that the two main approaches to reading are the efferent stance and the aesthetic stance (Exploration 292-93). The first one focuses more on gathering information by reading while, as Bo Lundahl points out in Engelsk Språkidaktik, the latter centers on what happens to the reader during the actual reading (240).

According to my limited experience as a reader and as a teacher trainee, when it comes to reading novels, the efferent stance is generally the one that is used in schools. Furthermore, all students in a class are expected to read the same novel at the same time. The product created from this type of reading is usually some sort of essay where the students put the information that they have gathered to good use. For example, after reading a text students could be asked questions that focus on the authors purpose, and would have to provide an evidence-based answer for said question. In “Efferent vs. Aesthetic Reading”, Vicky Giourouakis states that these sort of questions have “contributed to the idea that there is a correct interpretation to every text and that meaning is to be discovered, not constructed” (1). She also claims that readers who read aesthetically instead of efferently retain information in a better way (1-2).

In the EFL classroom, literature is used as repository of vocabulary and grammar examples, and in addition literary texts are used instrumentally in order for students to learn facts about other cultures. There is nothing wrong with using literature in this manner; in fact it is most likely very beneficial to the students in terms of language learning and intercultural
competence, and in the Syllabus for English in Swedish upper secondary school it is clearly stated that “students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 1). One of the overall goals in the EFL classroom is to learn English, and to work with text written in English is obviously helpful. Furthermore, the students are meant to gain knowledge about other cultures and study different ways of looking at text. This leads to the conclusion that there are already good ways of working with literature in Swedish upper secondary EFL teaching. However, this paper argues that there are other benefits to be gained from reading literature that should have a more prominent role in the classroom than they usually have. According to Rosenblatt, readers who use the aesthetic stance “acquire not so much additional information as additional experience” (Exploration 38). The aesthetic stance to reading might therefore for example work well with one of the requirements of the syllabus:

Students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used.

(Skolverket 1)

There are a great number of aspects on EFL teaching and learning in the syllabus, but the encouragement of students’ curiosity is a key aspect if the other goals are to be achieved. Students are taking part in several diverse social worlds, both in and outside of school. Some of the worlds are lived by the students themselves, while some of them are lived by characters the students meet in different texts. Comparing and combining these worlds is an important part of the identity formation of young people (Lundahl 243). I would argue that letting
students use the aesthetic stance when they read may encourage their knowledge about language and culture. This aesthetic reading can also help students explore the worlds that they are living in as well as the ones they meet in text. For example, if a student reads about a moral dilemma in a fictional text and by reflecting on it figures out his own opinion on the matter, his self-knowledge would increase. In addition to this, his language development would benefit from reading and working with the text in terms of analysing, re-reading and discussing it with his classmates.

As mentioned above, Rosenblatt has done a large number of studies in this field, and one of the subjects that she has investigated is what a human being brings to the equation when immersing him- or herself into a literary text. According to her, the human element cannot ever be excluded from the reading process and a person is always trying to “reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible” when reading (Exploration 6-7). In her transactional theory Rosenblatt theorized what happens during aesthetic reading and why it should be taught to students, and even though many years have gone by since she first started, her ideas are still standing firm in the field of literary didactics.

According to Judith Langer, reading is “an act of envisionment building”, and how a reader gathers knowledge throughout the reading process is something she discusses in Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literary Instruction (3-4). In addition to this she has conducted a significant amount of research regarding the relationship between a reader and a text.

In The Pleasures of Children’s Literature, Perry Nodelman discusses whether there is something to gain from reading a text without the purpose of searching for information or using it to learn grammar. According to his findings the most important element of reading is pleasure. And while the aesthetic stance is not primarily focused on the pleasures of literature
it does indeed focus on what it is making the reader think or do, which is exactly what Nodelman means that pleasure is for. He writes that when a person enjoys a novel it is because of what the novel makes that person think (23).

This essay will use three didactical theories and some methods that can be linked to them in order to give examples of how it may be possible to use aesthetic reading in the classroom. These theories and methods are all more or less related, but they are different enough for them to be separated. The three theories all have to do with the relationship between a reader and a text in some way, and can all be connected to aesthetic reading. The reader response theory is built around the idea that the meaning of a text often is created by the reader himself, and had a great influence on Rosenblatt when she created the transactional theory. The transactional theory also focuses on the reader, but deals with the reading itself in a different way, and it is in the transactional theory we find the term aesthetic reading. Envisionment theory on the other hand, investigates what a reader might gain from the reading itself.

My working hypothesis is that aesthetic reading is greatly underused in the Swedish Upper Secondary EFL classroom and I would argue that the use of literary didactical theories and methods that support an increase in aesthetic reading would lead to great benefits for the students. In this essay I will investigate the transactional theory, reader response theory, and the envisionment theory and some methods that can be linked to them. These theories and methods will be analysed in terms of how they can affect students’ attitudes towards aesthetic reading. Subsequently these theories and methods will be employed in a reading of some sections of Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray. I will attempt to demonstrate how these theories and methods can be used in ways that may encourage students to develop a positive attitude towards aesthetic reading.
The reasons for the usage of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for the purpose of this demonstration are simple. First and foremost the language and content of this novel is appropriate for the level of English that has been chosen for this project, which is English 7. English 7 is the third course available to students in upper secondary school. In the Core content of English 7 it is mentioned that the teaching should cover “strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning” (Skolverket 11). The content is especially well suited for the purpose of this essay since the novel deals with several changes of perspectives in terms of character opinions, views of life and so on. Furthermore, it is also stated in the syllabus for English in the Swedish upper secondary school that knowledge of English “can also provide new perspectives on the surrounding world, enhanced opportunities to create contacts, and a greater understanding of different ways of living” (Skolverket 1).

This aim of the syllabus ties in well with what Lundahl discusses about possible benefits with aesthetic reading, such as widening ones understanding of the world (242). The novel is also appropriate for reading with both the efferent and aesthetic stance, which means that if a teacher would like to use the combined method given in this essay but make some changes, it would still work.

On a final note I would like to clarify that even though this essay will focus on three didactical theories and some methods that follow from them, there are a great number of other theories and methods that may prove just as useful when attempting to encourage aesthetic reading in the EFL classroom. The combination I propose is just one example of many possible combinations and this one does not exclude the others.
The Basics of the Reader Response Theories and Methods

Throughout the years there has been a wide assumption that the meaning of a text lies only in the text or, possibly in the author’s intention. However, reader response theorists claim that the meaning of a text is created in the encounter between a reader and a text.

As previously mentioned, and as Richard Beach and James Marshall state in Teaching Literature in Secondary School, the focus of teachers often lies “exclusively on what the text says and on what the text means without acknowledging or addressing the reader’s role in the construction of those meanings” (70). In this context is should be pointed out that in order to understand the reader response theories and methods, the first thing one must understand is that reader response theory is just not one single concept. It is a name for a collection of theories that when put to use generate a variety of methods that are different from one another. This section will focus on discussing and explaining the components of this collection of theories and methods that are relevant to the aim of this essay.

In Literature as Exploration Rosenblatt writes:

There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers and the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or a poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. (24)

This quote pinpoints the one thing that all reader response models have in common; the meaning from reading a text is created in the encounter between the text and the reader’s individual experiences. This means that a text can have an infinite number of meanings (Lundahl 240). The two stances that were mentioned in the introduction, the aesthetic and the
efferent stance, are well known to reader response theorists, and describe different ways to read or create meaning when reading a text. Some reader response theorists claim that this meaning is created when a text and a reader are merged (Lundahl 239).

In *The Act of Reading* Wolfgang Iser discusses the reading process from the reader response perspective. The relationship between a reader and a text is described by Iser as a combination of two poles, the artistic and the aesthetic, and “the artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader“ (21). He argues that even though the transfer between a text and a reader is initiated by a text, the success of this transfer “depends on the extent to which this text can activate the individual reader’s faculties of perceiving and processing (*The Act* 107). In other words, the readers give the text meaning.

In *A Teacher’s Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*, Richard Beach states that there are five different perspectives on reader response theories. The first one he mentions is the Textual perspective, which focuses on how a reader draws knowledge from a text and then uses it when reading a similar text. This means that if a person is reading a love story, he will use his knowledge gained from previous love stories, identify similar factors and predict how the story might evolve. When the focus instead lies on the different ways a reader experiences a text, one is dealing with the Experiential Perspective. The theorists that use this point of view investigate if and how personal ideas, experiences and so on affect the way a text is perceived. The Social Perspective investigates what influence society has on a reader’s comprehension of a text. Those who use the Cultural Perspective study whether factors such as religion and moral values have an impact on the reader/text transaction, and finally the Psychological Perspective focuses on the subconscious of the human being. Beach argues that even though these theoretical angles only deal with one part of the reader/text transaction at a time, all of them focus on “how readers create meaning” (7-8).
In “Reader response theory in the high school English classroom”, Karen Shelton states that most proponents of the use of different reader response methods agree that if students were allowed to use their own experiences to a higher degree when interpreting and reacting to different texts, they would not only develop higher levels of thinking in terms of literature, but also gain a broader understanding of themselves. On top of this it is likely that students would get the opportunity to feel excited “at the thought of fulfilling a reading assignment”, since the lack of excitement in the classroom, according to Shelton, is a result of reading used simply as “a passive act of collating facts and ideas without any purpose” (6). Furthermore, Shelton argues that one of the key factors to a successful use of reader response in the classroom is how the teachers deal with the questions regarding the text that the students read. In order to succeed with reader response in the classroom and to help the students use aesthetic reading the perception that there is a correct answer to a text must disappear (6). According to Shelton, students are convinced that there are only a few interpretations of a text that the teacher wants to hear, or the students will fail (10-11). This originates from the assumption that the meaning lies in the text, and not as reader response theorists claim, in the encounter between text and reader.

**Transactional Theory and Different Types of Reading**

While a large number of people have contributed to the transactional theory throughout the years, Rosenblatt is the one who is generally considered to be its creator and so it is only natural that several of the facts brought up in this section will be based on her ideas. I would also like to clarify that the transactional theory was somewhat based on the reader response theory. Therefore some of the aspects discussed in this section may seem similar to aspects discussed in the reader response section. It is however important to separate them, since the
main concern of reader response theorists is the reader, while the focus of the Transactional Theory has to do with the relationship between a reader and a text.

In *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* Rosenblatt describes how throughout the centuries, the text and the author have alternated and sometimes coincided with each other in terms of what has been considered the most important factor when discussing the meaning of a text. These two have been in a constant battle for the spotlight almost always leaving out the third party, the reader. Rejecting this point of view, Rosenblatt argues that we should have a greater concern for the overlooked reader (*Reader Text Poem* 4-5).

With the reader in mind when discussing the reading process Rosenblatt states that there is no linear relation between a text and a reader. The reading process is instead a “situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other” (*Reader Text Poem* 16). This claim draws from her research conducted over the course of 25 years, where the findings display that readers, when reading, are paying attention to a multitude of images, feelings and other stimuli, and that all of these altered their perception of the text they read (*Reader Text Poem* 10). These findings also led her to the conclusion that readers contribute to the meaning of a text and she gives a rather simple example to explain it: A musical score is created by a composer, who has written it down in order to guide others who wish to play it. However, the written page is only an “indication of how close the composer was able to come in transcribing his exact thoughts on paper” which means that the interpreter is on his own in the end (*Reader Text Poem* 14). Without actually hearing the music, it would be almost impossible for him to reproduce the musical piece exactly as the composer had it in mind when he wrote it (*Reader Text Poem* 13-14).

Regardless of the type of text a reader comes across he must actively draw from his experience in order to evoke its meaning, but there exists more than one way to do this. As mentioned above, Rosenblatt characterize the two main ways as aesthetic and efferent reading
During a nonaesthetic reading, or efferent reading, the attention of the reader lies almost exclusively on the remains of the reading. The word efferent was chosen by Rosenblatt as a derivation of the word *efferre*, which means “to carry away” and the information gathered that remains after the text is finished or the solution to a problem is the objective with such reading. Aesthetic reading, in contrast, the attentions of the reader “is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” *(Reader Text Poem 2).*

In *Literature as Exploration* Rosenblatt investigates the benefits of aesthetic reading. According to her, the aesthetic experience “can be enjoyed in itself - and at the same time have social origin and social effects” *(Exploration 23).* When asking college students what the main reason was for their voluntary reading, the findings supported her claim that “literature may offer us an emotional outlet” *(Exploration 36).* This outlet may permit us to “exercise our senses more intensely and more fully than we otherwise have time or opportunity for” *(Exploration 36).* Rosenblatt further claims that literature is a source of knowledge about society and people *(Exploration 36-37).* Apparently, the students in her study felt that literature helped them gain experience, which they could not have gained anywhere else. Other benefits that the students mentioned included a means to escape the world, the possibility to learn how to sympathize with and understand others, and learning how to deal with a situation that they might come across later in life *(Exploration 39-40).* Building on *Literature as Exploration*, Jeanne M. Connell writes in “Aesthetic Experiences in the School Curriculum” that “Rosenblatt reminds teachers that experience rather than the transmission of knowledge is one of the more critical purposes of literature classes” *(4).*

In order to facilitate for teachers to incorporate this way of reading in their classes Rosenblatt provides examples of different features of aesthetic experiences. The key to teaching aesthetic reading seems to lie in what the teacher should not do. According to
Rosenblatt, it is important for the teacher to be brave enough to step outside the usual framework of the literature lessons and not only use the classic texts without thinking about their purpose. It is also a “necessity not to impose a set of preconceived notions about the proper way to react to any work”, but letting the student confront and deal with his own reaction (*Exploration* 61-63). For instance, teachers should provide students with texts that in some way connect with the students’ interests and needs. This is according to Connell based on the idea of “immersion in the reader’s prior beliefs and experiences” (7). This connection to the students’ interests does not have to be very precise, but nevertheless there has to be a connection in order for the students to be able to use an aesthetic stance. To exemplify this, Rosenblatt mentions a class in India who were made to read Restoration comedies. Since they had no previous experience or knowledge of the subject and they had only experienced the living condition of their village, it was impossible for them to comprehend the text at all. To them, the text was merely a collection of words that they read to “satisfy a teacher’s demand” (*Exploration* 55).

**Envisionment Building**

In *Envisioning Literature*, Judith A. Langer discusses how literature can have a very positive impact on a student’s life. She claims that literature has a critical part in our lives, and that it gives us the opportunity to “define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be” (5). Langer also claims that literature can and should be used in order for students, and everyone else, to gain social, personal and intellectual benefits (6-7).

When Langer discusses reading, she uses the word *envisionment* to describe the reader’s response to a text. This description has much in common with how both the transactional and reader response theories view reading. The envisionment is an individual matter, and depends on the earlier experiences, opinions and thoughts that the reader
possesses. These envisionments also change during the course of reading (9). The building of an envisionment is something that happens almost automatically, and Langer’s theory is based on both entering and stepping out from this envisionment. Langer exemplifies this by describing how a student meets someone for the first time. Without having any knowledge about this person the student starts to build an envisionment, an assumption of what kind of person this is, and the same thing happens with a text (9).

According to Langer there are a four stances that “are crucial to the act of envisionment building” (15). The reason for this is that they all provide a different perspective to gain ideas from. The first one of these stances is “Being Out and Stepping into an Envisionment”. This basically means that from the beginning when we start to read, we are outside the text and know almost nothing about it, and so we try to step into the envisionment by gathering our ideas and experiences in order to understand what the text will be about. One of the characteristics of this stance is that we automatically try to use any clues that may be available to start developing envisionments (16). The second stance is “Being In and Moving Through an Envisionment”. The key to this stance is immersion. We start to immerse ourselves in a text and begin to ask questions about the different conditions in it. Langer describes this stance as “the time when meaning begets meaning” (17). When a reader reaches this stance he usually speculates about what different things might mean, changes his envisionment when new ideas arise and uses his previous knowledge in order to further build his envisionment (17).

In both of the two first stances the reader uses his experiences and knowledge in order to make sense of the text. In the third stance however, the order in which we are doing this is reversed. When “Stepping Out and Rethinking What One Knows” the reader uses what he has learned from the text and applies it to the real world instead of the other way around. Langer gives the example of when a person reads Toni Morrison’s Beloved and starts to reflect about
his own feelings about slavery, power and subjugation (17-18). This stance is according to Langer the greatest reason why we study literature at all. It is the most powerful stance, and even though it does not occur as often as the other stances it has a potential impact that outweighs the other stances. Langer also states that “the lessons of literature can be a valued aspect of experience. They provide us with a set of mirrors in which to view our possible as well as our present selves” (17-18). The last stance Langer calls “Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience”. This is when the reader steps back from the envisionment he has created in order to “reflect back on it” (18). According to Langer, the focus of this stance is “on the author’s craft, on the text’s structure and on literary elements and allusions” (18).
Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

In this section I will give examples of how to use a combination of transactional theory, reader response theory and envisionment theory in the classroom, to make students use aesthetic reading and show how this could give the effect of increasing the students’ love of reading. In order to explain I will use sections of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde when giving examples.

When choosing a novel in order to achieve the ambition of making the students use aesthetic reading it is, as Rosenblatt discussed, important to select a novel that has some sort of connection to the students’ current interests (*Exploration* 55). It is the teacher’s task to find a way to “develop these understandings in the context of [the students’] own emotions and their own curiosity about life and literature” (*Exploration* 63). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains several subjects that are important to young adults according to Philip Hwang and Björn Nilsson. In their work on developmental psychology, *Utvecklingspsykologi*, they claim that how to handle sexuality, experimenting and taking risks are important issues that will accompany young adults throughout their entire lives (318-323). These subjects are all dealt with in *Dorian Gray*. Other subjects covered are the superficial society, the consequences of influence and so on. Similarly, Iser claims that a reader must feel involvement in order to gain experience, which is one of the aims when reading aesthetically. According to him, it is the involvement in a text that “makes the text into a presence for us” (*The Act* 131). Iser explain the benefits of this presence by writing:

> The more present a text is to us, the more our habitual selves - at least for the duration of the reading - recede into the past. The literary text relegates our own prevailing views into the past by itself becoming a present experience, for what is now happening
or may happen was not possible so long as our characteristic views formed our present. (The Act 131)

With this in mind, one of the first things a teacher does when preparing a reading assignment, selecting the text, is one of the most important ones when the aim is to ensure aesthetic reading. Since the involvement in a text is essential for a reader to gain experience, and gaining experience is one of the main aims of aesthetic reading, choosing a text in order for the students to become involved is naturally an important task for the teacher.

After choosing the right text for the students to read it is, as Rosenblatt emphasizes, necessary for the teacher not to introduce a “set of preconceived notions” about how the text should be read, but to let the student confront and deal with his own reaction (Exploration 61-63). In addition to this, the teacher must also convey the idea that it is the student’s reaction to the text that is important, and that it does not matter if the student’s reaction does not coincide with the teacher’s or the typical literary critic’s response. However, when reading a text from a different period of time it is still important to involve background material in terms of history and biography in order for the students to be able to have some understandings to draw from. In Literature as Exploration Rosenblatt brings up a good example of how background information might have an impact on the student’s notion of a text. A group of students were asked to read a text in which a woman was very non-independent. Several of the students thought that the text was unrealistic, since no woman would become so dependant on her husband these days (115). The students were then told that the text was written during the nineteenth century, and asked to reflect about how independent a woman was able to be during that time. Suddenly, the students did not think the text to be as unrealistic anymore. In other words, when given the appropriate amount of background information the student will apprehend and adjust to the scale of the writer of each text that he
reads, and he will form his own opinions about these matters. The students may also “work out the positions that they have taken” and they may “discover that they are making assertions based on fundamentally contradictory concepts” (Exploration 114). This will help the students create a consistent structure of values, help them gain a “more reasoned foundation” for judgements that they make, and attitudes and thoughts that they have (Exploration 114). In other words, they will improve their ability to think critically and learn to question their previous generalizations.

It is important to remember that background material will only have value when the students have the need for it, as in the example above about the dependant woman. When reading Dorian Gray one of the most important matters for the students to have some knowledge about is the reactions that the novel caused among the public when it was published in 1890. Critics called it both immoral and scandalous and without this information it is possible that the students might not understand one of the most important messages of the text, which according to my interpretation is the power of influence, but it could depend on the reader. However, it might be a mistake to give the students more information than this, since too much information can influence the students’ responses to the text.

When deciding how to use a specific text, and implementing reader response theories and methods, it is a good starting point to review how the text would look if viewed through Beach’s five perspectives. Since all of the five perspectives in some way deal with how a reader creates meaning, the choice of perspective depends on what the teacher hopes to achieve with it. However, it is also possible to use all of the perspectives at once, or only a few of them. I will give examples of how some of these perspectives, together with other elements from the transactional, reader response and envisionment theories and methods might be implemented in the teaching of literature in order to encourage students’ aesthetic reading.
Dorian Gray has often been described as a gothic and philosophical novel, and this relates to the textual perspective. For example, it is not unusual for a character in a gothic novel to change his or her personality for the worse during the course of the story and this is one of the elements that a reader who looks at Dorian Gray with textual knowledge of gothic literature might recognize from earlier experiences. In addition to this, there is also a chilling atmosphere that becomes more evident for each chapter. One example of this is when Dorian decides to show Basil how the painting has changed: “They walked softly, as men do instinctively at night. The lamp cast fantastic shadows on the wall and staircase. A rising wind made some of the windows rattle” (201). Other gothic elements include the supernatural, in terms of the changing painting, and Dorian’s oblivious or perhaps unintentional bargain with the devil in order for him to stay young.

According to Beach, if the students were to practise their textual knowledge by attempting to predict how the story would end for Dorian, by recognizing his descent into darkness, and reflecting on their own ideas and opinions about his life, the students would learn how to “perceive consistent patterns in a text and to interpret the meaning of these patterns” (156). This is in essence the same as Langer’s “Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience” stance, since the students reflects on what they have read in order to gain new knowledge that they can use in the future and it ties in well with the results concerning the students in Rosenblatt’s study, mentioned in the section about transactional theory, where it was found that the students gained experiences they would have been unable to gain elsewhere. It is important to be aware of the fact that not all students are able to practise their textual knowledge in this way, or even stepping into an envisionment at all. According to Langer, it is possible to encourage and help students who are experiencing difficulty with. One example of how to do this is to let the students who are unable to entering the envisionment discuss the text they are dealing with together with students who are used to
both stepping into, moving through and stepping out of the envisionment (23-26). Another possibility is to encourage the envisionments not only when dealing with literature, but in all types of social activities (26).

In terms of philosophy *Dorian Gray* could in some ways serve as a warning against the consequences of aestheticism, or perhaps the aesthetic lifestyle. After meeting Lord Henry, Dorian embarks on a purely aesthetic journey where morality is of little or no concern at all. This is a good starting point when the goal of reading is purely to let the students gain experience they might have some use for in their future lives. Reading about a character who ignores risks, cares little for other people and in the end dies unhappy and unfulfilled could be a great way for the students to reflect on where their opinions stand on such matters. During this reflection, the students would use both Langer’s “Stepping Out and Rethinking What One Knows” stance, and the “Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience” stance while attempting to form their own opinions.

As mentioned earlier, the experiential perspective deals with how readers can perceive a text differently depending on their previous experiences, thoughts and so on. Since readers can respond to a text differently, it is a good idea as a teacher to give the students a number of choices on how to present their responses (Beach 156-157). When working with a text in order to encourage aesthetic reading, it is not always necessary to have the students read it in its entirety. Depending on the task at hand, it may be more beneficial for the students to only give them a section of a text. To use only a part of a text is according to Lundahl one of the foundations to aesthetic reading encouragement, and when applying the didactic tool, created from the experiential point of view, to *Dorian Gray*, I would suggest to let the students start their reading by chapter three (241). In this chapter, Dorian has just met Sybil Vane, an actress whom he describes as “the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life” (*Dorian Gray* 59). The students would stop their reading at the point where Lord Henry tells Dorian that
Sibyl has died. Since the students only have read this part and nothing else, they will have no knowledge of the fact that Sybil killed herself. Nor will they have any idea how Dorian has been described in the previous chapters.

As previously discussed, immersion plays an important part in aesthetic reading and to achieve this my suggestion is to draw from what the students learn from Langer’s second stance, “Being In and Moving Through an Envisionment”. The students would be asked to try to view Sybil’s death from Dorian’s perspective and then account for their responses in text, re-enactments, group discussions or in any other way they feel is the most suitable for their type of response. According to Beach, studies show that students who have worked with literature in similar “response-centered groups” not only perform equally as well in literature studies as other students, but also seem to develop “a more positive attitude toward writing” (157).

Another example of how to implement the section with Dorian and Sybil in the classroom from an aesthetic point of view is based on Lundahl’s discussion about aesthetic reading in Engelsk Språkdidaktik. According to Lundahl, it is a good idea to first let the students read a text, and then give them an assignment and let them read it, or just a part of it, again (412-414). I would therefore have the students read the novel, and then read only the chapters where Dorian and Sybil are in a relationship, and have them discuss the following: Firstly, how do they think Dorian should have acted when Sybil no longer was able to act? Secondly, if Dorian had chosen not to end his relationship with Sybil, would his life have ended differently? According to Beach, the students will have different answers depending on their “social roles”, and when adopting the social perspective it is important for the teacher to be able to anticipate these different roles in order to keep the discussion balanced (158). For example, a student who does not find love to be of any significant importance to the outcome of life might feel that Dorian’s life would have been the same no matter what he did, while a
different student might think that Dorian would have spent the rest of his days being happy should he have decided to stay with Sybil.

By the encouragement of aesthetic reading it is my hope that the students will learn how to implement Langer’s third stance in the future, “Stepping Out and Rethinking What One Knows”, in order to gain a greater understanding of themselves and literature. There is one subject in particular in Dorian Gray that ties in very well with this. The power of influence is touched upon in more than one way throughout Dorian’s journey and it is a subject that is very relevant for all students to gain knowledge about. Nowadays students are bombarded with influences in terms of text, films and people that they stumble upon both in the real world and on the Internet. It is therefore very valuable to them to gain insight into how influence might not always lead to positive consequences for people who are exposed to it.

One of the most prominent influences Dorian is exposed to is the one of Lord Henry, and it ultimately leads to Dorian’s downfall. In the beginning of the novel Dorian is like a blank page, innocent and simple, and the negative influence of Lord Henry starts to affect him almost as soon as they meet. Lord Henry is quite knowledgeable in the art of influence, and is well aware of the power it holds, and he decides to exercise this power on Dorian:

There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one’s soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one’s own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth … there was a real joy in that. (Wilde 39)
The yellow book, given to Dorian by Lord Henry, is another powerful influence in the novel. Ultimately it represents the same ideas as the one Lord Henry imposes on Dorian, but in a different form. The book comes to serve as a sort of guide on how to live life for Dorian, and it is a great way for the students to gain some knowledge about the dangers of only adopting one single source of directions in life.

In addition to this textual influence, the painting Basil made of Dorian is the foundation to the entire story and is another influence for Dorian. Without the painting, Dorian would not have found himself unable to age, and it is possible that his fear of losing his beauty and youth might not have overwhelmed him as it did: “I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose?” (Wilde 43). Besides the influences mentioned above, there are countless others in the novel just waiting for the students to be found, such as Dorian’s influence on Basil that in the end causes Basil’s death.

In order for the students to work with this subject, one suggestion is to let the students finish the text, and then sit down in groups to discuss. During the reading, the students will have worked out the general ideas about good and evil in the text, “a scale of values that the writer applies to personalities and relations among people” (Exploration 112). The students will apprehend and adjust to the scale of the writer of each text that they reads, and they will form their own opinions about these matters. These matters are what the students may discuss together.

Discussions such as these are an excellent opportunity to implement Beach’s cultural perspective in the teaching. According to Beach, there are almost always students with different cultural backgrounds in a class, and it is likely that their ideas or values in some ways will differ, and it is also likely that they may experience “difficulty empathizing with cultural perspectives different from their own” (159). In order to change this, I would let the
students tell each other how they have perceived the influences of the different characters, texts and so on in the novel. After doing so, I would have them reflect about how their different cultural backgrounds might have had an impact on their opinions, and why they might disagree on some matters. By doing so, in time, the students will hopefully learn how to “reflect on the limitations of their own and others’ cultural perspectives” (161).
Conclusion

The overall purpose of this essay was to point out that aesthetic reading is greatly underused in the Swedish Upper Secondary EFL classroom, and that the use of didactical theories such as the transactional, reader response and envisionment theories and methods in the classroom in order to encourage aesthetic reading would lead to great benefits for the students.

To let students work with literature in a way that encourages aesthetic reading can lead to great benefits for the students. In the discussion above I have given examples of a number of these possible benefits. It is however important to note that it is unlikely that all students would benefit equally from this type of reading, and that there might be other benefits or even disadvantages that I have not foreseen.

According to Rosenblatt, aesthetic reading gives the students a chance to “work out the positions that they have taken” and “discover that they are making assertions based on fundamentally contradictory concepts”, if they are not presented with all the background information to a text right away (Exploration 114). And by discussing how they perceive certain events or scenes differently, they could gain a “more reasoned foundation” for judgements that they make, and attitudes and thoughts that they have”, meaning that they could develop their critical thinking and being to question generalizations they previously might have had (Exploration 114).

According to Giourouakis, students who learn how to read aesthetically are able to retain information better than other readers (1-2). One explanation for this could be that when a reader reads aesthetically he can step into one of Langer’s stances, “Being In an Moving Through an Envisionment” and this could help the reader to start asking questions and reflecting about what he is reading (6-7).

According to Beach, one possible benefit is that the students could gain a greater self-knowledge and a greater ability to understand and work with literature. By reading about
different dilemmas, students are given the opportunity to work out their own positions and opinions about matters that they might not yet have come across. They also get a chance to reflect on how they would act in certain situations that characters come across in texts, and could learn to respect that other people might act differently from them when discussing it with their classmates. Beach also claims that students who experience “difficulty empathizing with cultural perspectives different from their own” could develop a greater understanding about other cultural values when discussing matters such as the power of influence, by discovering that their fellow classmates might not share their opinions on the subject (159).

For future research I would suggest more studies to be carried out on how the transactional, reader response and envisionment theories and methods work in the EFL classroom. Similar studies on how other didactical theories and methods could prove useful in combination in order to use aesthetic reading is also encouraged. In addition to this, it would also be interesting to investigate if different types of literature yield different benefits, and if all students benefit from aesthetic reading in similar ways.
Works cited


