



**Reading Literature Supports Cognitive and
Emotional Development.
A Practical Realization on the basis of Zora
Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching
God***

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Introduction

My student teaching experience was very beneficial for me, as it gave me valuable experiences about the field of education. Interacting with the students proved to be the most rewarding aspect of teaching for me, and even though I held the title as teacher, I learned a significant amount from these students. One of the important lessons that I have learned from my students is how beneficial teaching literature is. Literature offers many linguistic benefits, but it can also educate the “whole” student. For example, literature can help to stimulate the imagination of the student, develop their critical abilities, increase their emotional awareness, and develop a deeper understanding of who they and others are. In my class, we used literature to enlighten important topics such as bullying, relationships, love, and identity. Through literature, my class formed a closer bond as a group, and I believe that the students developed their cognitive, emotional, social and cultural skills.

I will use my experiences as a student teacher as a basis for my thesis. I claim that literature can provide new understandings in regards to how we conceive ourselves and the world. I believe that teachers should be more aware of the wider educational function of literature, and I will attempt to enlighten this in my thesis by applying Åsmund Hennig’s ideas and perspectives on how to teach literature as an aesthetic and personal experience. I will direct attention to the need to strengthen students’ response to the cognitive, emotional aspects of the literary text. To display the possibilities a reader-oriented approach can represent, I will use the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston as suggested literature in class. I will reveal how I believe this novel can educate the students to get a deeper understanding of who they are and how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can form students into more independent thinkers, better citizens and human beings (Hennig 46).

This thesis will focus on three main issues. Chapter one is dedicated to exploring the different approaches to teaching literature. This chapter is supported by theory from Anne-Kari Skarðhamar and her presentation of four approaches to teaching literature. I will further examine the cognitive and emotional aspects of reading, and I will reflect on reading as an aesthetic experience.

Chapter 2 reflects on the different aspects which need to be taken into account when selecting literature. I will also explore why I choose to apply *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a point of departure for reflecting on how this literature can be employed to develop students' aesthetic, cognitive and emotional skills. It also sets out to introduce the author of the novel, Zora Neale Hurston, and place her in a historical context. Likewise, I will present the novel and its place in the Harlem Renaissance. I will briefly comment on the relevance of learning biographical and historical information to further understanding of the text.

Chapter 3 will first examine the students which I worked with during my practical teacher training. I will briefly map their abilities and social challenges and use this information to exemplify how literature can address issues in the classroom. I have approached the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by exploring three significant themes in the novel: identity, gender roles and race issues. I assess these subjects as valuable for students' personal growth and understanding of life. I will reflect on how to establish a connection between the text and the student but also how this interaction can stimulate to personal growth and literary competence.

Lastly, I will dedicate this chapter to suggesting different approaches to teaching, with a purpose to educate the "whole" person. I emphasize that these are general formulas or suggestions for what to teach in a specific classroom rather than specific methods for teaching. I

will not provide a teaching scheme because the teacher needs to assess the specific needs of her or his classroom. My intention is to provide a way of thinking about some important and recurring issues that most teachers will need to address. I will examine broad teaching approaches as writing, discussions and visualizing responses and then I will explain how these are connected to the National Curriculum.

1. Methods and Theories

1.1. What does the National Curriculum say about cognitive development?

The National Curriculum tells schools and teachers the knowledge, skills and understanding that is required in each subject. The competence aims in English in LK06 is divided into three main subject areas: language learning, communication and culture, society and literature. The authors of the curriculum are concerned with the individual growth and perception of the world and it is seen in the objectives of the study: “In addition to learning the English language, this subject will also contribute insight into the way we live and how others live, and their views on life, values and cultures. Learning about the English-speaking world will provide a good basis for understanding the world around us and how English developed into a world language” (Utdanningsdirektoratet). Further, in the competence aims after VG1-programmes for general studies it is stated that students should be able to “express him/herself in writing and orally in a varied, differentiated a precise manner, with good progression and coherence” (Utdanningsdirektoratet). When students write texts they practice how to develop and structure their ideas. In order to become skilled writers, they need to read a lot of texts. This means that reading, and the ability to express what one has read, are all part of students’ cognitive development.

1.2. The importance of reading - cognitive and emotional aspects of reading literature

Ion Drew and Bjørn Sørheim list various reasons why students should read, such as: it gives pleasure, it provides language input, it is a source of ideas and information and it acts as a foundation for writing and speaking (58). Further, reading is a matter of having experiences- seeing the world from different perspectives, and therefore, reading literature is valuable because it can teach the reader to understand themselves better and the world around them.

The knowledge students gain by reading literature of different fields and about different topics greatly contributes to the development of their own personalities, that is to say literature can enrich their attitudes and ideas concerning certain issues, their understanding of society and culture, but also their awareness of being an individual in a community of many different people (Diedrich 4). Teaching literature by means of carefully chosen texts and motivating methods may produce real pleasure in the student's minds, even if the text they read is written in a foreign language. If the teacher successfully puts his objectives into action, the students might even carry their enjoyment for literature with them beyond school and find pleasure in reading other English literary works on their own.

Åsmund claims that we can distinguish between four different perspectives on how literature appeals to the reader: aesthetic, cognitive and emotional, social and cultural, and finally instrumental perspectives (34-46). I will mainly present the cognitive and emotional aspect, as I believe it is relevant to my thesis.

Reading narratives impact students' cognitive development and critical thinking, both of which are critical for academic success. Stories help us to develop our memory, to analyze the text, ourselves and the world around us. Students who spend more time reading narratives tend to achieve better results in school (Whalen 2). Further, literature requires a different mode of thinking from what is typically thought of as formal reasoning. Stories help develop cognition and critical thinking because the learners employ sequence, cause-effect relationships, reflection, and connections among related ideas.

To understand one's place in the world has never been easy, but according to Åsmund Hennig literature can contribute to forming identity and comprehending diversity (39). He claims that one of the many challenges of today's students is the constant pressure of finding your

identity. In fact, Hennig claims that many students experience anxiety and self-doubt in regards to finding and understanding themselves (39). In the past, one's identity was in some ways given, in as you were what your parents were. Today things are different in which the present generation of youth can to a larger extent develop their own identity. Unfortunately, many youths find themselves struggling, feeling insecure and lost in this process. It is important to remember that it is easier to be "given" an identity than to find and assert your own. To escape those feelings of insecurity, we seek to create our own identity. Hennig compares it to literature, in the way that people use stories and the structure of literature to create a meaningful self.

Another aspect is the cognitive development of language. According to Hennig we use language when we think, and the development of language is important to foster more advanced thoughts (40). A way to immerse oneself in language is through reading, and literature is maybe the greatest source to fruitful language. Students can express and develop their skills further through writing. It is evident that students' ability to use advanced language is related to their literary reading.

Student's cognitive development is connected to their emotional development (Hennig 40). Literature will trigger emotions; in fact the experience of the text is based on the emotional responses to the literature. This allows students to experience feelings which they normally would not access on a daily basis, and provide them an opportunity to develop and mature their emotional skills. The emotional aspect of reading explains why literature might have a therapeutic effect on people. Literature which enlightens topics that concerns us can help us view our problems from a multiple perspectives and create meaning and clarity. The emotional connection we establish with literature can also comfort us and give us a feeling of not being alone.

1.3. Literary Competence

Hennig defines competence as the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitude, interest and values the holder has for reading and understanding literature (82). Overall, it says something about what we know and can, or what we are trying to achieve. In this respect, literary competence is the skills and knowledge we hold in regards to literature. In short, literary competence includes knowledge about the text, context, and reading, and the skillset to read literary texts. By reading, experiencing and reflecting on literature, students expand their competence.

There is a clear variation in students' literary competence. Teachers need to map their level in order to adjust the teaching approaches accordingly. The challenge is to gain this information. In accordance with the ideas of the reader oriented theory, Hetmar suggests to access students skills through different activities or performances (qtd. in Hennig 88-91). Hetmar points out that by arranging different tasks one can display the competence the students obtain. One may for example engage them in a literary dialogue where they are challenged to express their response to the text. The teacher may assess how the learners are able to voice their thoughts, and how they handle the information of the other participants (qtd. in Hennig 88-91). The instructor can use this information to meet students' needs, and this is in accordance with the National Curriculum which stresses the importance of adjusting the teaching to the student's specific needs (Utdanningsdirektoratet).

1.4. Reading as an aesthetic experience

Reading is an aesthetic experience. It is a meeting between the text and the reader, where the reader creates a unique understanding of the text, and creates a new world that has never existed before. This world is created on the basis of what the text tells us and what the reader

brings to the understanding of the text (Hennig 11). The images and understanding that is created, provides the foundation for the teaching.

The process of the reading is just as important as finding the motivation to read it. This aesthetic event which occurs through the reading takes place in between the learner's conscience and subconscious response to the text. The challenge in today's classrooms is that teachers do not always provide enough room for the individual responses to the text. A suggested interpretation to the text is often forced upon the reader. As Åsmund Hennig states, it is a big difference between being told what a text is about and discovering it yourself (12). A challenge for the teacher is to be able to help the students to find a connection between the text and themselves in terms of emotions and experiences. If the text is not relevant to the student it is most likely not going to affect them. In chapter 3 I will illustrate how one may establish an emotional connection between the text and the student.

Often, literature is taught in a way that creates a gap between the reader and the text. Hennig, claims that in these cases the teacher apply an author- oriented method, where the main focus is on examining the author's life and the literature, history, genre and structure. Although, this can provide valuable information, it can create distance between the reader and the text and in this case the student does not connect on a cognitive level. The challenge is finding a bridge to self -understanding through the text.

A challenge of teaching literature is that all of the demands that young readers meet in school may potentially kill the joy of reading. Many children suffer from low self-esteem related to reading; they fear not being capable of understanding literature or having the competence to read long intricate stories. In this case it is useful to keep in mind that literature is not a demand

but a story, and absolutely everybody is competent to listen to a story. In light of this, it is important as a teacher to create a positive reading experience.

I claim that it is necessary to create a safe and friendly class environment which can provide an open and creative atmosphere where the students feel free to express their personal responses to the text. It is important to try and encourage the students to approach the literature in their own, personal way. The aim of the teaching should be to discuss and reflect upon literature based upon our own personal experiences. If we approach literature in that matter, we are more likely to experience that literature can teach us something about ourselves (Hennig 78-79).

1.5. Four approaches to teaching literature

Teachers' freedom of choosing their learning and teaching methods is generally encouraged. There are no explicit recommendations on methodology, but here is more than one suggested approach to literature, and among the many diverse method of interpretation it is possible to isolate four basic approaches.

A method is according to Skarðhamar one possible way towards the goal (60). We decide which method to apply in accordance to what we wish to discover and accomplish by studying the text. These approaches can be classified between author, context, text and reader- oriented approach, and in the following section I will briefly present the different perspectives with the support of Skarðhamar's approach.

First, the author- oriented approach includes historical-biographical method. The author-oriented approach establishes a direct link between the literary text and the biography of the author (Skarðhamar 60). Context-oriented method, on the other hand, involves Marxist method

and literatures sociological methods. By using this method, the analysis places the literary text in a larger context. The text-oriented approach places the main emphasize on the internal textual aspects of a literary work. A text-oriented approach has been applied in most modern schools and methodologies in literary criticism. Finally, the reader- oriented approach developed in the 1960s is called reception theory, reader-response theory, or aesthetic of reception. According to Skarðhamar this approach focuses on what the reader experiences as relevant in the text, and how the text affects the reader (61). These approaches assume that literature can relate to the reader's own life, culture and community. They mean that all readers have their own personal experiences which can lead to different interpretations of the text. Followers of the reader-response theory regard the reader as an active agent, and they claim that the reader's role in analyzing the text is crucial.

Beach et al. points out that as a beginning teacher, one may feel a pressure to conform to the prevailing methods of the school in which one is working (45). This is not an issue if these methods are consistent with one's beliefs. On the other hand, if the teacher feels as if she has more innovative methods that she has acquired from her program, she should attempt to try these out. Having a clearly defined set of beliefs will make it easier for the instructor to choose what is right for her.

1.6. The social aspect of teaching literature

All the preparation that teaching requires may not always be enough, because teaching is unpredictable and no day is ever the same. Tornberg claims that the real teaching in the classroom happens between the learners in the classroom, and that most of it is unpredictable (68-69). It may therefore be argued that it sometimes is necessary to focus on the social aspect of

learning which means it is important see students as individuals and acknowledge their differences.

To read literature is an individual and unique experience, but at the same time it is a social activity. Both the text and the reader are affected by a specific social and historical space. According to Hennig, who we are determines how we read, which means that the readers individualities as well as their social and cultural background affect the reading (96). This constitutes the literature sociological principle; the idea of understanding literature on the basis of social conditions, including history, culture and community. Further, it is the study of how society and local community influence the production and reception of literature.

On the basis of these ideas, it is important that the teacher possesses the proper knowledge about the different cultures the students are a part of. However, it is challenging for the teacher to be aware of the entire social and cultural context that influence the learners understanding of the text. Therefore, the learners would benefit from creating awareness about their own context and how it affects their interpretation of the literature. This social consciousness is an important aspect of gaining a deeper understanding of the text. The teacher can guide the students to read literature more consciously aware of their cultural and social background, and in turn this could help them achieve a deeper understanding of the text and themselves as individuals. Also it enables them to challenge themselves to read the text unprejudiced. With time they can use the awareness of what affect their reading and ensure it does not block a genuine response (Hennig 98).

From a theoretical perspective, this illustrates the hermeneutics circle, where the students are switching between reading literature and reading themselves, and as a result they end up with a

better understanding of themselves as well as the literature (Hennig 99). In a hermeneutics circle neither the text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another. In other words the hermeneutic circle refers to the idea that the text is understood as a movement between wholeness and parts to understand a phenomenon.

2. Introducing the Author and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

2.1. Selecting literature

Students come to the classroom with very different experiences and circumstances, yet all are expected to transcend those differences, focus on the curriculum, and meet the objectives established by the state. As a teacher we can help the students meet these challenges by using literature which can help their class through difficult situations, enable individual students to transcend their own challenges, and teach students to respect differences and become more self-aware. It is no secret that parents often turn to an educational book in a challenging situation to help explain and to engage the child in a meaningful dialogue. Equally, literature can be used to fill in the gaps in the student's own understanding so as to better address the situation at hand.

Today second language teachers have a solid literature background, yet many teachers are reluctant to use literature beyond the school textbooks. I believe that teachers should try and use their experience as readers, and pick literature that they are enthusiastic about and that they think will benefit their students' literary, cognitive and emotional development. Hennig points out that a literature teacher should be an active reader (125). It is not enough to have literary skills because joy for reading is essential for learning. Students are affected by the teacher's enthusiasm for selected texts. Research implies that students prefer literature which the instructor had a very positive and enthusiastic attitude towards.

Ever since my dad read me and my sister bed time stories from the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, I have been an enthusiastic reader. There is an indescribable feeling to truly find a book which you connect with on an emotional level. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston has that effect on me, and is in my opinion a source of inspiration and it provides valuable knowledge about the lives of young black women in early 20th century America. More

importantly the character Janie moved me deeply and changed the way I see myself. Her journey to self-discovery is a struggle, but it is also beautiful and empowering. Although Janie and I do not share time in history, we share the same need to find love, identity and happiness. Further, this novel covers themes such as identity, race issues and gender roles which students can identify with. I will provide more information about the themes and how they may affect the students in chapter 3.

Since this is a novel, it gives the reader a unique insight and perspective into another person's life (Aase and Nicolaysen 102). In reality people only have access to their own mind, but when reading a novel we have direct access to someone else's life. Also, in a novel, the reader is first and foremost connected to the characters, and it is that bond that we feel to the heroes and heroines which creates an intense and memorable reading experience. If the students identify with the characters, the probability of learning is higher. These imaginary people can change the reader's perception of the world and other people we meet in real life.

2.2. Introducing Their Eyes Were Watching God

In the 1970's, English and American feminists were preoccupied with the idea that women writers had been silenced, and that women's work has been commonly disregarded in literary history. Consequently, a wave of interest arose among feminists to rediscover the lost work of women writers. As a result, a strong female stereotype arose; however, Black feminist critics argued that these stereotypes did not apply to them. Lorraine Bethel, a Black feminist critic, suggests that instead there is a distinctive tradition of Black female writers, "simultaneously existing within and independent of the American, Afro-American, and American female literary traditions" (qtd. in Hull et al. 177).

Accordingly, black women like Alice Walker had to seek out their own traditions, searching for a history for Black women. Alice Walker's research resulted in a collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers Garden*. Even though Zora Neale Hurston, in present time, is considered a valuable Black female writer, she was not always viewed that way among critics. Her most popular novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937, but did not gain widespread popularity until Alice Walker rediscovered Zora Neale Hurston in 1970's, and introduced her to the world through *In Search of Our Mothers Garden*.

Zora Neale Hurston fronts the Black female literary tradition with a variety of publications including folklore collections, an autobiography, novels and various pieces of short fiction and articles. To fully appreciate and understand Hurston's achievements as a writer, Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors like Zora, who try to create literature in the middle of racial and sexual oppression (Hull et al.178).

Firstly, Zora embodied two of the most hated identities, by being black and being woman. This made her extremely vulnerable for cruel and violent hatred. Zora Neale Hurston's achievements are considered astounding as she developed literature of cultural identity, while living in racial and sexual oppression. Naturally, black artists like Zora Neale Hurston had to have a deep understanding and consciousness of their own and other black women's situation to be able to create art of such quality (Hull et al. 178).

Women developed a folk culture and oral tradition to support each other in a sexist community. They challenged the dominant sexist community with a folk culture that is based on the Black female experiences in the society. They created language, symbols and modes of

expression that reflects the life of a Black woman. Unfortunately, not all black women had access to literary expression, which meant that the folk culture lived through memories, and storytelling.

Zora's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was criticized by both white and black men. Jullum, claims Hurston chose to reject racial essentialism; "the idea that there are fundamental differences between people of different racial origins" (55). The only difference between races, according to Hurston was the color of their skin. But Hurston had strong connections to her southern roots, which is evident in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* where she celebrates and documents Black culture. The novel, addresses themes as romance, community rituals, race relations, gender roles as well as women's sexuality and identity. She celebrates the complexities of women which Lester claims that Black women were denied historically, politically as well literary (5).

Hurston's attempt to present the fullness of Black people, but she was misjudged and misunderstood by black people. Hurston was harshly criticized for presenting black people without a purpose, talking and laughing, not doing anything, which according to critics portrays the Black people in a negative way, and a laughing matter to white people. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers in reality a complex representation of Black culture where she is able to show the diversity of Black people.

2.3. Zora in the Harlem Renaissance

Zora is an example of a New Negro, a person who would not accept a subordinate role in society. The term originates from the early nineteenth century as a name for newly arrived slaves (Ferguson 3). Its immediate origins go back only a decade to the militant New Negro movements of the 1910s but the Harlem Renaissance gave the term New Negro a new meaning that included

both violent resistance to oppression and anti- protest orientations of Booker T. Washington, the president of Tuskegee Institute who was a dominant figure in Black politics.

Zora was a proud African American who grew up in Eatonville which was the first self-governing “all negro” town. Zora’s stands out as a rebel woman, with her uniqueness and fearlessness. Hurston was proud of her heritage and chose to celebrate blackness in her literature. Her background gave her a strong sense of pride which is evident in the article entitled *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (1928). Here she declares herself as not a victim:

“But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”(Nordquist)

Zora’s use of language strikes me as very descriptive, colorful and vibrant. She expresses herself with as strong sense of pride and it seems as every word that Zora chooses is specifically selected to solicit the appropriate emotions from her readers. She also has a unique ability to make the reader create a movie inside her reader's mind.

Fergusons approach entails understanding Harlem Renaissance as a braiding of history, memory, and myth (1). First, conceived as history, Harlem Renaissance is a period between the early 1920s and the late 1930s. This was a period when culture came to the forefront of the debate surrounding African American freedom. This period gave birth to various forms of art, including plays, novels, poetry, music and visual art presenting black people from different

social categories. New York City served as the main center of The Harlem Renaissance, but its reach extended to Boston, Chicago, Paris, Africa and the Caribbean.

Second, conceived as memory, Harlem renaissance can according to Ferguson be understood as how African American attempt to transform the “backward- looking story of slavery and the struggles its aftermath into a forward looking narrative of self- possession and possibility” (1) At the end of the period there was a shift of focus, rather than submit to racism, new ideas emerged and gave birth to the New Negro. A new type of black American arose, insisting on full social and political equality. Artists focused on celebrating black life and portraying the black voice as beautiful and resourceful. Black Americans were regarded as a source of economic and political power, and according to Ferguson, Harlem Renaissance proves itself rightful of a place in memory of African American history when “freedom began to feel free” (Ferguson 2).

Harlem Renaissance presents a myth of enduring hope and renewal, in its attempt to start American history again in a time and place unmarked by slavery. This myth of renewal represent the hope that everybody, from all social categories including slaves and former slaves in a nation of free people, may claim their birthright. Even today Harlem Renaissance is still regarded as the symbolic cultural space of African Americans.

There were conflicts about if black artist should be obligated to protest against racism and if Black artists should attempt “high arts” or make use of the artistic forms of folk (Ferguson 23). Alain LeRoy Locke published in 1925, *The New Negro*-an anthology of poetry, essays, plays, music and portraits by white and black artists. Locke saw black aesthetics quite differently than some of the leading Negro intellectuals of his day, most notably W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois

thought it was the responsibility of the Negro artist to offer a representation of the Negro and black experience which might help in the quest for social uplift. Locke argued that the primary responsibility and function of the artist is to express his own individuality. The New Negro (1925) identified the art for art's sake. The New Negro represented a new soul and signs of this were the burst of new aspiring artists like Huston.

Black writers and other artists found inspiration in various ways. Travelling was a common way among artists to seek inspiration. McKay and Hughes were representatives of Harlem Renaissance artists who spent time travelling to destinations in Europe, and Paris was in particular a sought after country (Ferguson 17). People from all over the world were attracted to this city which in 1920s served as a Pan- African and anticolonial activism. Hughes and McKay could find inspiration in people from the negritude movement. Major poets from this movement are Aime Cesaire of Martinique and Leopold Sedar Senghor from Senegal which attempted to convey the essence of black pride, beauty and spirit.

Africa also served as an attractive destination for people in the Harlem Renaissance because this continent was regarded as a symbol of origin, destiny, dignity and hope. Not everybody could make such visit to a foreign country, but they still used Africa as a source of inspiration. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston also went on their own journey of inspiration where they went on a quest for African cultural connections. Hurston returned home to collect folklore which resulted in *Mules and Men* (1935). Even though people had gladly left south for an urban lifestyle, they still kept in touch with and found inspiration in black cultural uniqueness.

The exploration of folk origins during the Harlem Renaissance was connected to the wide interest of blues and jazz. These musical forms shaped the atmosphere which the literature and

visual art of the period developed. Blues was often referred to as healing music (Ferguson 19). The art form Jazz had various associations such as danger and criminality and rebellious artists as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Brown found this music form compelling, and modeled many of their poems on the spirit and form of Jazz.

Another major theme that artists were concerned with was the experiences of interracial people. The focus on race pride and race origins led to a corresponding interest in racial intermixture. Literature of “passing” dramatized the larger psychological costs of American racism which insisted on an absolute line of separation between white and black (Ferguson 18). People who were neither black nor white were pressured to resist sexual contact with black complexioned people. These issues were explored in a literature of “passing” that showed how black people that looked white could easily fit in with whites culturally and socially. But these characters had to sacrifice their relationship to their loved ones and live in constant fear of discovery. Artists such as Mark Twain, William Wells Brown helped establish this tradition in black and American literature.

According to Beach et al., providing the students with information about the author and the historical context within which a story is set is an advantage when interpreting the text (65-66). It enables them to judge whether a character’s actions are typical or atypical because they have a historical overview which will enable them to know how people usually acted at that time and space in history. It supplies them with a set of plausibility measures for possible interpretations.

Without providing students with a historical overview we can get interesting interpretations. Beach et al. points out though that “when we attempt close readings without

historical context, we risk the impositions of contemporary cultural assumptions upon circumstances quite different from our own” (66).

3. *Their Eyes Were Watching God in the Classroom*

Beach et al. asserts “We never just teach the book; we teach the idea the book is about” (69). A classic like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is exciting because the teacher never knows what the students will bring to the book. Students are fascinated by the themes and the situations that this book represents. In this chapter I will present selected themes from the book, in which raise important issues that can help the students understand the world that they live in. The three themes that I believe the students can identify with, and can teach them about themselves and the world are identity, race and gender roles.

I will also take it as step further and see how these themes can be used to address conflicts or issues that the class as a group or as individuals is dealing with. My purpose for teaching literature is to connect the literature with the students’ lives which is one of the foundational principles of a reader response approach to teaching literature (Beach et al. 11). In order to show how this connection can be established I will present an actual class that I will use to illustrate my ideas. I will present one of the classes in which I was so lucky to get to know during my practical teacher training.

3.1. My students

This class consists of 25 students (13 boy and 12 girls). One boy is from Ghana and one girl is a Sami. The boy, whom I will call Tim, struggles socially and he is also a victim of bullying. Furthermore, one student is diagnosed with ADHD, but he is responding well to medication and is functioning rather well in class. I have two other students who struggle academically and emotionally. First, Leo, struggles with learning disabilities and in addition to his academic challenges suffers emotionally because of low self-esteem. Consequently, he is often picked on by his classmates. A challenge for me as a teacher is to adjust the teaching

according to his needs. He is good at expressing himself and is creative and responds well to physical activities.

One girl has extremely low self-esteem both academically and socially. She is the “invisible” and anxious student, who steers away from any kind of attention. This girl hardly has any friends and is very withdrawn, but I have noticed that she finds comfort in art, and she is a very talented drawer.

In general the boys are very competitive academically. The girls, on the other hand, are more concerned about their social status in the class. There are several peer groups that create a competitive dynamic. Finally, this class responds well to group work and class discussions. They are in general very attentive and positive to learning, but the competitive dynamic does create social challenges.

3.2. Identity in Their Eyes Were Watching God

Even though this book is written in a different time and in a different context, I believe it is still possible to establish a connection between the students and the book. A theme like identity is universal and relevant regardless of time and space. To form an identity and a sense of self is important to everyone and it can be useful to use literature as a catalyst to reflect upon, inspire and develop your own self.

As I have mentioned earlier, to find your own voice can be challenging. Choice is often associated with freedom and happiness, but in fact the current abundance of choice young people have can in many cases lead to stress, anxiety and loneliness. Especially the transition from childhood to adulthood proves to be very tough. As a result teenagers are vulnerable to peer-pressure and media which can lead them down the wrong path.

As a teacher I saw first-hand how students struggled to fit in. Teenagers seem to be in a constant shift between different personalities, trying to find out who they are. They are in a vulnerable position where they are changing both physically and mentally and they are expected to deal with their self-image, be a good student and at the same time to be accepted by their peers. Teenagers compare themselves to everyone else, which can cloud their judgment, but in the end, all of the things that make teenagers vulnerable to lose themselves are probably what in the end helps them to find themselves. As an instructor I discovered that I can contribute to creating an environment which allows students to explore who they are as people, and to find their voice in the classroom.

In regards to using literature to help students to develop their identity, Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provides a platform to discuss their own experiences with finding their identity. I think that as teachers we have a unique opportunity to teach children to become independent, individual thinkers. Knowledge about different cultures, values and mind sets can provide a better understanding of who you are and who you want to become.

. We follow Janie, the main character, on what many critics regard as a quest for self-fulfillment. Janie goes through many stages of development to gradually experiencing a sense of self. It is possible to see her development in relation to her three marriages to Logan, Jody and Tea-Cake. Each one of her husbands has a different effect on her ability to find her own voice. Her first marriage to Logan was a loveless one which Janie's grandmother pushed her into primarily out of convenience. Nanny, as Janie called her, did not only hold the title as her grandmother, but she also had the role as Janie's caretaker. Nanny's behavior can be linked to her past as a slave. This was a time where your skin color, family and gender defined you.

Janie found herself married to a man she did not love or feel any connection to and she experienced an inner turmoil, a part of her voice, telling her that she was not leading the life she was meant to. Finally she has enough strength to say "no" and to leave him by running away with Joe. At this point, Janie has found a part of her voice, which is her not willing to be like a slave in her husband's hands. On the other hand, she does not possess the strength to physically voice her own thoughts. This relationship may mirror her inability of expression, yet it reflects Janie's hunger to find her own voice. Janie learns that marriage does not necessarily entail love, freedom and voice. For Janie though, without her ability to express herself she felt incomplete and depressed.

The second marriage to Joe was an act of impulse and a hope of finding true love. In reality though, she trades a physical prison for an emotional one. After they move to Eatonville, Joe appoints himself as the mayor of the all- black- town and he begins to suppress Janie's voice to elevate his own. Janie discovers "the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another . . . took the bloom off of things" (Hurston 43). She identifies that Stark's voice is not enough to achieve happiness and fulfillment in their relationship, or any aspect of life. After a time, Janie "found she had a host of thoughts never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them" (Hurston 72). When Jody dies, one chapter closes and another one begins as she frees her handkerchief and sees her complete self in the mirror and finally recognizes her beauty and strength.

A new younger man named Tea Cake walks into her life. He proves to be the love of her life. He encourages her to think freely and express herself. Although their relationship entails love, freedom and respect, it also involves abuse. Jealousy and fear evokes Tea Cake to act

violently, but she does not blame him, in fact she understands his insecurity, and realizes that the beating is an expression of possessive love and authority.

Eventually, after she is forced to kill Tea Cake in self- defense, she returns back to Eatonville. Here she meets her best friend Pheoby with whom she shares her personal story with. As she starts to share her thoughts and verbalize her feelings to Phoebe she establishes a bond with herself. Also, the main character and storyteller, Janie validates herself to telling her story in her own voice. Porch- sitting is an important ritual that helps the character on the quest of self- fulfillment. The female bonding and sharing is considered to be an important part of Black women's culture, and according to Lester, it is the narrative telling of the story that defines the main character Janie as a woman, and more specifically as a black woman (xv). It shows how Black women are able to define and empower themselves in racist America through talking, sharing and female-bonding. The conversation between Janie and Phoebe frames the novel. The conversation between these two women illustrates some of the ways in which finding one's own voice has been crucial to Black women's struggle against oppression. As Janie tells her story to her friend, she is finally able to express herself through language, she has found her voice, and as Jullum suggests, she is "finally empowered to be the narrator of her own life" (44).

Although Janie and the students live in a different time in history they still have in common the universal need to find their place in the world. If the students draw connections to their own life it might create an emotional connection to the character which fosters learning. The novel can supply the reader with different perspectives on identity, and can develop their empathic ability.

3.2.1. In the classroom- Identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

I will give examples of how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be used to provide the student with a deeper understanding of their sense of self. It is stated in the English subject curriculum, under the objectives of the subject that “Literature in English, from nursery rhymes to Shakespeare' sonnets, may instil a lifelong joy of reading and provide a deeper understanding of oneself and others”. This captures the essence of the thesis- that teaching literature can educate the “whole person” (Utdanningsdirektoratet).

A way to foster personal development in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is through writing. I would use the reader- oriented approach to engage the students in this strategy. This approach enables students to interact with the text on a personal level and create a deeper understanding of the self and the meaning of the novel. The responses are more likely to be original and not a mix of other writers' thoughts and experiences. A way to capture readers' subjective responses is to write journal entries or write logs. I have experience with journal entries and I noticed that this strategy is very efficient because the students feel comfortable applying this writing style. Journal writing is often used to express personal thoughts, experiences and feelings, and the aim is to make students write about literature in the same way.

Journal writing allows students to create a safe space to write and express their thoughts, ideas and opinions. People tend to learn about themselves and their habits when they write about them, so journal writing is a critical activity for fostering personal development in students. To teach the students about identity we could, for example, ask the student to pay attention to how identity is portrayed in the novel when they write their journals. Also, the instructor can provide the students with questions to help them focus their response. For example, the instructor can ask the student to write about events that have contributed to forming their own sense of identity.

The aim should be to enable students to draw connections between the text and their life outside of school. This helps students make a personal connection to the literary work that they are reading. One might ask them to think about places in the novel where Janie's identity is being formed, and have them look at their own experiences that may have been similar or different. Many people might have strong relationships with their grandmothers, a good friend they can confide in, complicated relationships with the opposite sex, etc.

I would use the diary throughout the entire reading process as a tool for developing and documenting thoughts. I would suggest making the students write their journals at home, where they are not constrained by time limits. On the other hand, I would give them a page range to structure their writing.

Journal writing is supported in the following competence aims in the English Curriculum:

- Pupils shall be able to write formal and informal texts with good writing structure and coherence based on themes that interest him/her and which are important for society.
- Pupils shall be able to exploit and assess various situations, working methods and strategies for learning English.
- Pupils shall be able to select and use appropriate writing and speaking strategies that are adapted to a purpose, situation and genre. (Utdanningsdirektoratet)

The teacher can collect the diary entries to retrieve useful information about the students' responses to the text, and Handloff and Golden present a method which enables teachers to identify specific information from students' responses (qtd. in Henning 208). They have developed several response categories which help the teacher identify the information he or she needs. One category is the "personal response", in which the students express how they feel

while reading the book, and includes expressions which signify excitement. Another category is “personal associations”. Here the students draw connections between the text and their own lives. They try to imagine how the character’s life is, and understand how it feels to be them.

When the teacher has retrieved the information in question, the students’ interpretations can be challenged and used to open up for new and different discussion. For example, a teacher searched for “personal responses” and she discovered that her student Pål had expressed that he felt upset when he read about the struggle Janie had to go through to find her sense of self. The teacher then asked Pål if he could explain why he felt that way. Further, she asked him why he thinks it is challenging for Janie to find her identity. These questions can help develop the student’s empathetic skills, which help him understand the character on a deeper level.

Another way to engage students to write about literature is to relate the text to their own lives. For example, to help the student connect with and understand Janie’s search for identity, the teacher might ask the students to write a diary entry about their own life experiences and what they think has created their sense of self. Often students may benefit from relating a theme or a situation from the text to their own lives as a way of better understanding what is happening in the text. It enables them to relate to the characters on a different level, and the students have the opportunity to understand themselves better and expand their perception of the world. The instructor can include talking in class about autobiographical writing as a genre. They could notice what they decide to include and what they leave out, then relate those kinds of choices to the way that Hurston, too, includes certain details and not others.

Often, students find it difficult to trust their own interpretations and it is reflected in their written work. In Norwegian high schools it is common to write analyses with fixed structures

that emphasize elements of narrative such as characterization, plot, suspense, and so forth. Often, students are too focused on what they believe is a set recipe for analyzing texts, and they end up with an uninspiring constructed text which lacks genuine argumentation. Journal writing is one way to train the students to trust their own thoughts and ideas about the text.

3.3. Race issues in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Even when we do not give voice to it, racism still exists. According to Beach et al., many correctly believe that what students should read and how they talk about the texts should embrace a variety of critical perspectives and enlarge students' understanding of issues such as race, gender and class (28). This can be tricky especially when the kids who are most vulnerable in such discussion, are sitting in our classroom. It is a challenge to handle the social and political issues the texts threaten to unleash and the possible damage these discussions may cause.

On the other hand, I think it can be more harmful to turn a blind eye to issues that do exist. We cannot run from the fact that we are becoming more and more global. Society becomes less homogeneous and more heterogeneous which mean that society does not consist of people with similar backgrounds, but of different people from different cultures and backgrounds. There are mixed responses to this development. Many regard this globalization as a profoundly enriching process, opening minds to new ideas and experiences, while others feel as if their own cultural values are threaten. Xenophobia, which is the fear of people from other countries, is unfavorable and may harm society and lead to prejudice and racism. Knowledge about the different cultures and religions might be a way to foster tolerance and understanding. It is, however, clear that meaningful dialogues about race and cross-cultural exchanges create a framework for students to acknowledge and validate diversity. I think it is important to help the students to see that globalization provides an opportunity to embrace changes and diversity. Otis

Grant proposes that all teachers should create a classroom atmosphere that facilitates meaningful dialogue about race (Otis). First and foremost he believes that students have to examine their own beliefs and attitudes to be able to engage in conversations about such a delicate topic.

In schools, race conflicts occur, and racial discourse is powerful because it creates and shapes social relationships. A way to deal with race issues is through literature. To use books written by individuals from a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, which entails issues that touch the lives of people from various racial and ethnic perspectives, is a way to create awareness, understanding and hopefully change. Also, approaching a topic through conversations about race can cause students to re-evaluate their beliefs. My claim is that in a globalized world, educators must teach students to respect human variations. As teachers we should not be afraid of choosing books with strong race-oriented themes, and we should not silence the children who would learn to talk about what many teachers find uncomfortable.

In my class, from day one, I felt an energetic and very competitive dynamic among the students. They were competing for my attention and as a result of that the students who were more quiet and shy were easily overlooked. As I got to know the class better I began to see the individuals, and I learned that even though this class as a group came across as strong and confident there was a lot of insecurity hidden behind these overly confident masks. The reality was that they were simply teenagers who at times felt insecure and struggled to fit in.

As I mentioned in the class description, there were one boy of African descent and a girl who were Sami. It became clear to me when I got to know the class better, that the boy was a victim of bullying mainly because of the color of his skin. In the beginning I had to be attentive to notice it. This boy was a shy but sweet boy. He was the perfect stereotype of an African, with

an afro and dark skin. In a Norwegian classroom he looked different, and I think he felt different too because even though he had lived in Norway most of his life, he had never been treated like one. He was always an outcast, and with time he started to feel like one. I could hear the subtle remarks about his hair, boys, who just for fun placed small paper bullets in his hair. When he found out I could see his smile quickly drop into a sad frown, and I could only imagine how that felt.

Samis are also at the moment exposed to racism. The Samis are a group of people who exist in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Although these attitudes were not in particular present in my class, or at least not acted upon, these attitudes are surprisingly relevant in today's society. Lately, there have been many news articles covering the brutal racism towards these indigenous people.

I believe that this proves that we cannot shut our eyes to the problems and hope they go away. No text alone can speak for a broader representation of culture but *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can contribute to broader understanding of the issue of race, and can help the students re-evaluate their attitudes and beliefs about other cultures.

There is a misconception that since the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is associated by The Harlem Renaissance it is primarily about race. This is not the case; nonetheless it is a theme that is present in the book. Like Langston Hughes and some of her fellow writers, Hurston did not wish to portray blacks as defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized; instead she wanted to present black life, unconcerned with white people and unaware of problems attributed to being black. Hurston wanted to present them as regular people, who

loved, lived and learned. In other words, she does not focus excessively or exclusively on the race tensions. Instead Hurston chooses to celebrate blackness and demonstrate whiteness.

The novel was published in 1937 when there were clear lines separating whites and blacks geographically, and when Jim Crow laws were operating. These lines are clearly evident in the novel. According to Lester, the Jim Crow laws were similar to laws that governed slaves in the antebellum South, and they imposed racial segregation that were extended to all public spaces (90).

Through the character Mrs. Turner in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston portrays the brutal nature of interracialism. Mrs. Turner reveals a distinct class orientation when she expresses her desire to have Janie romantically involved with her light-skinned brother. White features are cherished and black Negro features are lamented (Lester 93). Mrs. Taylor wants black to marry light complexioned blacks to “lighten up” the race. As she presents this topic, Hurston attacks this racist attitude among blacks which she means is just as racist as any white’s racism.

The aspect of race in the text can supply the students with a different perspective, and can hopefully contribute to better understanding of what it entails to be a victim of racism. It can also be interesting to look at how Zora Neale Hurston decided to portray it, and can inspire students to be proud of whom they are, and meet challenges with a positive attitude.

3.3.1. In the classroom- Race in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In the section about the objectives of the subject, in the English subject curriculum it is stated that “In addition to learning the English language, this subject will also contribute insight into the way we live and how others live, and their views on life, values and

cultures”(Utdanningsdirektoratet). *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contributes insight into an African -American community and offers a perspective on the way they lived. The racial struggles African- Americans experienced are a painful part of the American history, and the students can learn about the brutal consequences of racism through the characters in text. I suggest that the aim would be to facilitate a learning environment which can help the students develop racial awareness and foster positive attitudes. I also think it is important to develop the students’ empathy to help them understand how it feels and what it means be a victim of racism.

There are several ways to achieve these goals, but I think that engaging the students in a good literary conversation might be a productive start. Racism is not an easy theme to talk about, but the interaction between the students and the text can foster different perspectives of the theme and help them gain a deeper understanding of racism and its effects. This approach is supported by the following competence aims in the English Curriculum:

- Pupils shall be able to take the initiative to begin, end and keep a conversation going.
- Pupils shall be able to express him/herself in writing and orally in a varied, differentiated and precise manner, with good progression and coherence.
- Pupils shall be able to discuss and elaborate on English texts from a selection of different genres, poems, short stories, novels, films and theatre plays from different epochs and parts of the world.(Utdanningsdirektoratet)

It could be useful to begin a literary conversation about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with students’ responses, where they describe their emotional experiences with the text (Beach et al.188). For example, the teacher might ask what intrigued them and what made them puzzled or maybe even confused. Most likely their responses will be different, and therefore set the stage to honor differences in the students’ responses. The instructor can also encourage the students to

share their autobiographical and intertextual responses (Beach et al. 188). If students cite related autobiographical events to the text they can use these experiences and emotions to better understand the book. For example, there is a possibility that some of the students have experienced racism or have been subjected to a situation where they felt they were treated different because they did not fit in. A student's personal perspective can provide valuable insight. When a student share such an experience, racism gets a face and a name and the text is more likely to affect them emotionally.

To help students become inquiring readers, the teacher can ask stimulating questions that can help them formulate better and become active participants in controlled responses. The purpose of this approach is to awaken students' ability to respond and reflect (Hennig 178). For Zora Neale Hurston's text *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the following questions could be asked to elicit students' interpretation on the theme race:

- How did you feel when you read the text? Explain why you think this text evoked these feelings?
- Did the text evoke memories- of people, places, certain incidences, or feeling and attitudes?
- How do we determine what is acceptable in our own culture?
- Why do you think other cultures and skin colors may be threatening to people?
- How might you overcome your prejudiced feelings towards another culture or race?
- What did you learn about the other group members as the discussion developed?

The beginning level students would also benefit from this approach, especially if we include a few helpful tasks. For example, if we let students engage in quick free writes either

before or during the discussion the students who are reluctant to express their own opinions will feel more prepared and confident about sharing their interpretations (Beach et al.188).

Hennig suggests beginning discussions in smaller groups, whereas he claims that students tend to contribute with a more spontaneous response in comparison with when they discuss in larger groups. Often students fear talking in larger groups, and this can prevent them from expressing their initial thoughts about the literature. A factor that determines the efficiency of collaborative learning is the composition of the group. The groups should consist of individuals with different characteristics. For example, a group should entail both students who have a natural ability to express themselves, and those who struggle to participate in oral conversations. The students who struggle often benefit from being in a group with students who are good at engaging in conversations. I would also give the groups small directions in terms of how to structure the conversation. They will be provided with directions in terms of time, how to start, how to keep a literary conversation going and how to end and conclude.

To share ideas and thoughts about books have always been a natural part of teaching literature. A possible explanation for this is our natural urge to talk about literature that excites us and a natural reaction would be to share these feelings with someone. This natural urge to share opinions, thoughts and even feelings about engaging literature is according to Hennig a perfect starting point to teach literature (174).

To achieve a successful literary conversation the teacher must know her students well with regards to, for example, their interests, reading and writing skills and prior knowledge. Then, to obtain successful learning, the teacher has to be resourceful, have a large tool kit including social intelligence, literary competence and pedagogical skills. An instructor must have

the social skills in order to get along with and connect with the students. When facilitating student responses the teacher must use her social skills to meet the students' need. Pedagogical skills are obviously important to gain successful teaching. The teacher has to choose varied methods in accordance to what fit the learners. In additions the teacher has the responsibility to facilitate a healthy and safe class environment which can foster verbal communication. An instructor has the responsibility to seek new knowledge which will foster learning of new teaching skills.

Usually, most students are accustomed to a literary conversation where the teacher asks the question and the student replies. For example, the teacher could ask the students to give examples of how race is portrayed in the book. The purpose of the question is often to determine if the student has read the book or not. The answer is evaluated and then the process is repeated. According to Beach et al. this method limits the students' responses (178). From a reader-oriented point of view, the questions one asks the students need to be open – ended questions without pre-determined answers. The teacher could for example ask the students how they experience racism in the text. This question does not have a pre-determined answer and provides room for discussion and reflection.

A modern perspective on the literary conversation is to let the students talk together about literature as if engaging in a natural conversation (Hennig 178). In order to engage students in literary dialogues, the instructor needs to equip the students with the appropriate tools and knowledge. It is the teacher's job to act as a role model and provide students the skillset they need to perform these dialogues.

3.4. Gender roles in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Gender roles are encouraged from an early age. They determine how you should dress, speak, act and what to like and dislike. Different social agents like teachers, parents, peers and media reinforce gender roles. These schemes are deeply rooted in our framework and are difficult to change. As a student teacher I saw how boys competed to be best, the toughest and the loudest while girls competed to be the prettiest, the most popular and fashionable. Females are constantly represented in terms of their femininity and sexuality based on idealized images of feminine beauty that objectify women (Beach et al.106). Furthermore, women are often described in terms of their appearance or relationships. Males on the other hand, are represented more in terms of their masculinity, their physical strength and skills. Nevertheless, I did observe that boys were more concerned with fashion and their appearance than what I remember boys did when I was a high school student. I took notice in that boys spent just as much time in front of the mirror as the girls. Equally I notice that girls showed signs of a tougher behavior.

What I am trying to reveal is that gender roles are different in various cultures and are in constant in change in accordance with society. In the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the gender roles are very different from how they are today in Norwegian society. Gender issues are a big part of the novel in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Women did not have the luxury of marrying for love, and life was dictated by their husbands. They had no rights, and whatever life their husband gave them was all they had. They had little to dream of and had limited options. If we turn to the three marriages of Janie, we can easily identify the common gender roles in society, but we can also see that the gender roles are different in the three marriages. Hurston uses gender roles as a key element in the development of the protagonist. Janie is forced into

certain gender roles in her two first marriages, but in her last marriage to Tea Cake she has the power to decide.

Janie's idea of marriage between man and woman is like the relationship between the pear tree and the bee. The bee helps the tree to reproduce, and the flower of the tree gives the bees food for survival, so they could coexist. It becomes evident here that in Hurston's novel, the message about man and woman is clear and strong: they are created equal, and no one should suppress the other. Janie's first marriage to Logan was not like this. He provided for Janie, and was in control over her and their life as a couple. Logan once told Janie that she "ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Get uh move on yuh, and dat quick" (Hurston 31). He expresses his power and masculinity in this statement. There is no question in my opinion that Logan dominates and suppresses Janie. He directs her life and the plot, but she is able to escape him, and is one step closer to free herself from male domination.

Jody on the other hand, wants control over every aspect of their life together and Janie is like a possession to him. When Jody takes her to Eatonville he controls life as well as the narrative. He buys the land, he becomes the mayor and builds the town and he makes Janie tie up her hair. Jody's behavior signifies that Janie's status is an object. Janie is only seen through the eyes and speech of men on the front porch. Janie eventually breaks this pattern and speaks: "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think yo do"(Hurston 75). This is a commentary about the limitations of a male-dominated society, but it is not until Jody dies and she sees her own reflection in the mirror and she discovers that a handsome woman has taken her place, that she gains power and freedom.

With Tea Cake and Janie there is a state of equality. Tea Cake sees her as an equal individual, but still Janie is silenced in situations where she as a woman should speak up. For example when Tea Cake beats Janie, it is entirely seen through the eyes of men. Janie does not express herself after this incident which can signalize that she is suppressed. It is not until she returns to the frame where she speaks to her friend Pheoby that we hear her true voice.

3.4.1. In the classroom – Gender roles in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

There are several ways to teach students about gender roles in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but I would suggest using drama. This is a visual art form which is a common teaching activity. I will introduce my own perspective of how to apply drama in class to develop the students' cognitive and emotional skills. By using this teaching activity we will fulfill the competence aims below:

- Pupils shall be able to exploit and assess various situations, working methods and strategies for learning English.
- Pupils shall be able to select and use appropriate writing and speaking strategies that are adapted to a purpose, situation and genre.
- Pupils shall be able to discuss social and cultural conditions and values from a number of English-speaking countries. (Utdanningsdirektoratet)

To act out dramatically is a challenging but fun task for the students, and it offers a unique perspective of the text. Through the process of visualizing their response, the students develop their emotional and cognitive skills. They have to convey the intricate relationships between Janie and her three husbands, which is challenging for the students to do because they are still developing emotionally. In addition, Janie is from a different historical period, with a

different skin color and a different mind-set. The instructor needs to guide the students to tap into their emotional life, and use their life experiences and emotions to try and understand the character's perspective.

We read books through different lenses. The interaction with the text activates the reader's imagination and we visualize, feel, and create meaning of what we have read. This explains why students can develop their cognitive abilities through visual art forms. Students who struggle to concentrate and focus in a normal classroom setting may benefit from using drama activities because they involve being physical, using images and emotions.

To help students understand the gender roles in the text, the teacher can for example challenge them to interpret a specific scene in the book. There are many dialogues between Janie and the men which the students can dramatize, but it can be difficult for the students to play these roles because they lack emotional and physical experience. To reduce this gap between the characters and the students, we could make the students rewrite scenes, situations or dialogues, and create a modern twist to it. As a result the students could make a connection between their own lives and the text.

Normally, girls play the female role and the boys play the male roles, but I think it would be interesting to challenge the students to try to do the opposite. I think it is harder for a boy to identify and understand another woman's point of view than it is for a girl. Through this twist the students have to act, move, and think like the opposite sex, which provides them a unique perspective of the opposite sex.

In order to educate the student to think independently the teacher can ask the students to create a scene in the book which they later shall dramatize. For example, the instructor can

encourage the students to write a dialogue between Janie and her husband Tea Cake after he has slapped her. In the text, Janie accepts the abuse, and they do not talk about it. I think it would be meaningful to make the students write a dialogue between the two characters about the Tea-Cake's abusive behavior. This gives the students the opportunity to explore their attitudes, feelings and reactions to domestic violence. Alternatively, they can work in pairs, where they dramatize a scène from the text, without a script. They have to make up the dialogues spontaneously, which captures the natural responses of the students.

Conclusion

When I set out to write this thesis, I was clearly inspired by the students I had the opportunity to meet and to get to know during my practical teacher training. As an instructor, I am concerned about educating the “whole” person, and I saw endless possibilities of using literature in the classroom.

In my thesis I reflect on how literature can provide new understandings in regards to how we conceive ourselves and the world. I have directed attention to the need to strengthen students’ response to the cognitive, emotional and aesthetic aspects of the literary text. This thesis shows that literature can be used to address important social aspects which a class might encounter. I illustrated my claims through Zora Neale Hurston’s acclaimed *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I connected issues of identity, race and gender roles from the text with students’ life. It showed that even though the historical context of the novel is completely different from students’ life, it is possible to establish a connection between the students and the text.

I approached the literature from a reader oriented perspective, which focuses on what the reader experiences as relevant in the text, and how the text affects the reader. The thesis show that it is important to establish an emotional connection between the text and the reader .This bridge creates understanding of the text as well as it provides a clearer understanding of who you are as a person.

Connections between reading texts and performance in reading comprehension and writing seem obvious. What is less obvious is that reading narratives also impacts students’ cognitive development and critical thinking, both of which are critical for academic success. Literature helps us to develop our memory, to analyze the text, and can create awareness and lead to personal growth. Students who spend more time reading tend to achieve better in school.

This thesis suggests that reading can be a means of developing intelligent awareness of race and gender issues in the students' own lives. It can also have a therapeutic effect because it provides different perspectives on the issue, and also give the reader a sense of comfort and maybe a sense of reassurance that they, too, can develop their own confident voices in interpersonal relationships, and through writing.

In light of this, the process of choosing literature should not be taken lightly. The literature should be adjusted to the learners need. The text should in my opinion be a text which the teacher is excited about. Enthusiasm for the literature benefits learning. Overall it does help to be an enthusiastic teacher because the students will clearly be positively affected and more motivated to learn about the text.

We should care about our students' personal growth and well-being. If we make our classes more meaningful, and aim to address issues that concern our learners, both the instructor and the student will leave the classroom feeling empowered. In order to achieve this we have to know our students well. We have to map their abilities by for example by applying Hetmar's approach which aims to develop an understanding of students' skills through different activities or performances.

My exploration of different approaches to teaching should not be viewed as the only way, but more as an inspiration. I have presented different approaches to learning literature, where I have reflected on the use of writing, literary conversation as well as visual responses. I believe I have showed that these approaches develop literary skills but also develop students' cognitive and emotional skills.

I used my experiences and observations in the classroom as a starting point for departure in this thesis. When I studied pedagogy I had a fairly strong point of view as a teacher, but after writing this thesis I ended up with a wider understanding of the concepts behind the different approaches. This new acquired knowledge will hopefully make me a better teacher and will benefit my future students.

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