Evaluating Young Adult Literature through Transactional Theory

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by

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Abstract

Young Adult literature (sometimes known simply as YA literature) is an ever-changing genre that has been affected by time and a growing reader demographic, with more adults reading these novels than ever before. Historically, the genre’s definition has differed among scholars, writers, and publishers. With the genre’s increased presence, the attitude about it has shifted. Once condescendingly shelved right alongside picture books and dismissed as “for children,” YA literature has made a name for itself with continued successes like *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Giver*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*. Despite its popularity, the genre also suffers from a lack of diversity in characters and overall narrative structure. Characters are more than likely white, able-bodied, and straight with little to no variation. This paper analyzes a variety of perspectives from authors, editors, scholars, writers, lovers and skeptics of the genre to form a cohesive definition of YA literature using Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory. I argue that the overall theme of identity—searching for it and retaining it—defines the Young Adult genre of the past, present, and future. Analyzing Young Adult books using this broad theme of identity highlights the problems with the overabundance of white, straight, able-bodied characters used to convey this message. My creative project, *Nyx*, was developed in order to approach the theme of identity using diverse perspectives going against the perceived tropes of the YA genre.
Evaluating Young Adult Literature through Transactional Theory

In the past decade, Young Adult (YA) literature has become “one of the book industry’s healthiest segments” (Campbell, 2006, p. 61) and has grown into a “$1.5 billion industry” (DiMassa, 2001, para. 6). Young Adult authors are finding success within the genre with many of them appearing on Forbes’ Top-Earning Authors list in 2014. Veronica Roth, author of *Divergent* and subsequent sequels, ranked 6th with earnings of around $17 million which includes print and ebook sales as well as a portion of the $270 million earnings from the movie adaption (Robehmed, 2014). J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, was recorded at still seeing a healthy turnout of $14 million in earnings (Robehmed, 2014). John Green, author of *The Fault in Our Stars*, came in with an estimated $9 million yearly paycheck (Robehmed, 2014). It is quite clear from these numbers and the predicted book-to-movie adaptations of several Young Adult books scheduled to be made in late 2015 and early 2016—*A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness, *The Scorch Trials* by James Dashner, *The 5th Wave* by Rick Yancey, and *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell among them (Diaz, 2014)—that the Young Adult genre is a dominant force in the literary world, showing lucrative profit and anticipated growth. Young Adult books have bled into our culture and one would be hard pressed to find an individual unfamiliar with the word “Hogwarts.” Because of the increased presence of YA literature in today’s culture, scholars are attempting to review and evaluate this new and budding genre.

But what exactly is Young Adult literature? Before, an easy definition would be “…that if a book is written about teens and for teens then it is Young Adult” (Stephens, 2007, p. 30). To clarify, the age-bracket for Young Adult literature is defined by the Young Adult Library Service Association (YALSA) as books intended for teen readers between the ages of 12 and 18. While this description would describe the majority of YA books, there are also outliers like *The Hobbit*...
by J.R.R. Tolkien (not about a teenager and considered part of the larger umbrella of children’s literature), *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (which features a protagonist of nine), and *Carrie* by Stephen King (which while it stars a teenager and handles adolescent problems, is not shelved under the YA genre). These may be the few exceptions to the rule or there may be a larger problem to analyze here. Moreover, such a definition would imply that the readership of YA books is solely composed of those between the ages of 12 and 18. A study by Nielsen found that “The popularity of the Young Adult category is driven largely by adult book buyers. Readers 18 and older accounted for 79% of Young Adult unit purchases in the December 2012 through November 2013 period […]. The single largest demographic group buying Young Adult titles in the period was the 18- to 29-year-old age bracket” (Milliot, 2014 para. 8). A similar study conducted by Bowker Market Research, *Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer in the Digital Age*, reaffirmed Nielsen’s finding. According to Bowker, “…55% of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17—known as YA books—are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44, a group that alone accounted for 28% of YA sales. And adults are not just purchasing for others—when asked about the intended recipient, they report that 78% of the time they are purchasing books for their own reading” (New Study, 2012, para. 1). This means that a large segment of readers for the Young Adult genre are well outside of the intended age bracket, making definitions like the one above inapplicable to today’s current market segment.

Historically, other genres of popular literature have been defined by common features rather than the age of readers. A genre is “…typically defined as a way of organizing or categorizing literature…” (Kaplan, 2005, p. 15). Genres usually have a set of commonalities that put them apart with “…each genre […] [having] a different audience, purpose, and feel” (Gillis,
2002, p. 58). For example, mysteries have a crime to be solved. Romances follow a couple and their ongoing relationship. Readers keep coming back to certain genres because they like certain tropes. In mysteries, it is the satisfaction of finding out who did it. In romances, it is the thrill of a couple conquering obstacles to be together. What then separates the YA genre from its peers? Many could argue that the YA genre is nothing but an age range—and that is what it might have started out as—but if the books are appealing enough to lure in adult readers, the genre’s definition cannot be limited to its teenage readership. Is the only qualification that the protagonist be a teenager? What are adults as well as teenagers getting out of the genre and what keeps them coming back? Through the lens of Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, a reader response method of looking at literature, I will answer this question by analyzing what readers (both young and old) of Young Adult literature are finding within the genre.

History

The YA genre started shortly after the phrase “teenagers” was invented. Around the time of World War II, teenagers were recognized as being apart from children and adults, with YALSA inventing the term “young adult” in the 1960’s to describe this new age range in literature. The term was made to represent the 12-18 age range—and largely still is. This created a new market for book publishers, Many teenagers were educated enough to read more critical books, stepping away from children’s literature, but not overjoyed with the selection provided. Jean Piaget, a developmental psychologist known for genetic epistemology (the study of origins of knowledge), found that teens had “…the ability to reason, dispute, and theorize on an adult level” (Lee, 2014, p. 92). While adult books had the language and the complexity young adults wanted, teen readers also felt alienated when the books addressed distant or foreign problems. Children’s literature, on the other hand, was too simple and not enough to keep their attention.
Young adult readers were searching for something in-between, books that featured protagonists like them and that handled similar, relatable problems. The first Young Adult book was arguably Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer*, published in 1942 (Cart, 2001). It did not fit the typical children’s mold, but also was not quite enough to entice adult readers. S.E. Hilton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), the book that many argue started the YA genre as we know it, is notable for taking the genre in a more mature and grittier direction, paving the way for authors like Judy Blume and Laurie Halse Anderson.

After the publication and success of the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling in 1997 through 2007, the genre was given more attention. The genre’s potential to appeal to adults was noted as *Harry Potter* was loved by all ages. Another indicator of the genre’s success was the introduction of the Michael L. Printz award (through American Library Association in 2000) and the YARA, the Young Australian Readers’ Award, both of which were made to recognize excellence within the YA genre (Koss & Teale, 2009). Today, “….what was once a fledgling segment of the market, kids 12 and up, has matured into a vital category” (Corbett, 2013, para 1). Presently, the genre continues to see success with books like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *A Fault in Our Stars* accumulating rapid marketing and sales.

Despite its success, the YA genre is only recently breaking free of its children’s books roots. It was not that long ago when Barnes & Noble’s stores grouped teen books and children’s books into the same area. Beforehand, teen books were shelved right alongside picture and chapter books intended for a much younger audience with a limited vocabulary. This sent the “…unwritten message that Young Adult literature [was] not sophisticated enough for teens, especially older readers” (Cole, 2008, p. 59). Few adults and teens wanted to be seen traversing the Lego-infested, noisy play areas often found near children’s books in order to look for their
latest beach read. Many books in the YA genre were not even given a chance to appeal outside of their intended market segment. It was not until 2000 that “…Barnes & Noble (and many other chain bookstores[…]) moved their Young Adult sections away from the children’s area and began treating YA as a special-reader genre like mystery or science fiction rather than an age-segregated literature” (Campbell, 2006, p. 63). Nowadays, the Young Adult books can often be found on a separate shelf far away from the children’s area, grouped right out front or somewhere equally visible within the adult fiction section. Many online booksellers followed their example and “…terms such as “Teen Literature” and “Teen Series” were developed to clarify and magnify the separation of the genres” (Yampbell, 2005, p. 352). This helped recognize Young Adult literature as its own genre and also allowed it to appeal to readers who had not considered the genre before because of its juvenile association.

**Changing Definitions**

The YA genre itself has seen many changes and has adapted to fit its market segment—that being the teenage crowd. As such, the definition of it has changed over time and even still is being debated. Tracing the progression of definitions reveals the shifting tone towards the genre and the confusion that surrounds it today.

Pam Cole, a professor of English Education & Literacy, defined the historical definition of the genre and its requirements in her book, *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*. These traits include:

1. The protagonist is a teenager. 2. Events revolve around the protagonist and his/her struggle to resolve conflict. […] 4. Literature is written by and for young adults. 5. Literature is marketed to the young adult audience. […] 7. Parents are noticeably absent

Cole’s qualifications are dated and no longer fit the majority of Young Adult books. While the absent parents, teenage protagonist, and coming-of-age themes still apply to many YA books, the 300 page limit, and that this literature is by and for young adults, can be called into question. Rowling’s largest book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, weighs in at a grand 870 pages. In the same vein, Cassandra Clare’s *City of Heavenly Fire* amounts to 733 pages and Libba Bray’s *The Diviners* clocks in at 608 pages. Each of these titles sold moderately well, enough to spawn sequels and/or spin-offs. As for the “Literature is marketed for young adults,” Nielsen and Bowker’s studies prove this to be false as a good 50% of YA’s readership are not teenagers.

YALSA defines any book as YA if it is intended for the age range of 12 to 18. Even the age range of YA is debatable with some considering “…those as young as 9 to be in this category, while others include only those 13 and older to be YA” (Curry, 2001, p. 29). Nowadays, some would even claim that the age range has expanded to twenty-five (Avoli-Miller, 2013).

To look at YA as an age range is limiting. Selecting the age of the protagonists to be the only qualification means that any novel written—as long as it has a protagonist between the ages of 12 and 18—is considered a YA novel. Books like *The House on Mango Street*, *Carrie*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, *Romeo & Juliet*, and *Great Expectations* would all fall under the YA category if this proved to be true. Since these books are not and never have been considered YA, the age of the protagonists cannot be the sole defining factor.
Chris Crowe, English professor and author, argues that “The label, whether it happens to be ‘YA’ or something else, exists mostly for marketing” (Crowe, 2001, p. 144). Other scholars like Betty Carter, a professor of Children’s & Young Adult Literature at Texas Women’s University, seconds this belief with publishing labels only existing in order to get books into the hands of readers most likely to enjoy them (Carter, 1997). Young Adult literature, like any genre, is at the mercy of expectations and presumptions of its assumed audience. The intended audience here just happens to be teenagers. Because of this, the strategy to market YA books and the attitude behind them are viewed through the lens that “these books are for teenagers.”

Some scholars define the genre through simplistic qualities because of its teenage audience. Katherine Proukou, a freelance writer and retired educator, sums up the mainstream’s thoughts about the genre: “It is for teenagers; it’s literature about teenagers; it’s stylistic and simplified literature,” (Proukou, 2005, p. 62). Cindy Lou Daniels, author and writer for a variety of literary magazines, agrees with this by citing that YA lit is looked upon a secondary category (Daniels, 2006). Ruth Graham, in her article for Slate magazine, asserts these beliefs wholeheartedly with her statement that “Adults should feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children” (Graham, 2012, para. 3). She goes on to say that the reading of YA is mainly for escapism and enjoyment rather than literary value (Graham, 2012). This viewpoint leads to the misconception that reading for pleasure and reading critically cannot exist within the same novel.

This outlook on the YA genre ignores that, while many popular YA have not endured the test of time yet to see if their impact will last, there are those that have. For example, The Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies, The Chocolate, War, and A Wrinkle in Time are considered
to be Young Adult books as well as classics. Some of these books can even be found within classroom curriculum, analyzed and treated as seriously as any other “adult” classic.

**Transactional Theory: Reader-Response Lens**

I propose that Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory can be applied to create a more accurate definition of the YA genre. In 1978, Louise Rosenblatt, an English professor, published *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work*. This book argues for the importance of the reader within any given text through the reader-response lens, what she called transactional theory. The reader and the text have a give-and-take relationship—being that the transaction of information between the two parties. One cannot exist without the other. The reader, she argues, “…brings to the transaction not only a specific past life and literary history […] but also a very active present, with all of the preoccupations anxieties, questions, and aspirations” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 144). This means that every text within the hands of a reader takes on a different meaning for that individual. Their own experiences and personal history allow readers to view the text through their own lens. It is the reader that provides the meaning and makes a story worthwhile, not the words themselves. The text, in this case Young Adult literature, is viewed as an event, one in which the reader participates. This event can differ between readers, which results in multiple interpretations of the same text. Without a reader, the text becomes meaningless words on paper, the ideas of it never shared or put into practice.

In *Making Meaning with Texts*, Rosenblatt clarifies this position by adding that “…books do not simply happen to people. People also happen to books. A story or poem or play is merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. When these symbols lead us to live through some moment of feeling […] we have evoked a work of literary art” (Rosenblatt, 2005, 62-63). Literary art then is defined by what response it evokes in a reader.
A tragedy evokes the sense of loss. A romance evokes the thrill of the passion. Readers are what define books. Readers decide if what they get out of a book is worthwhile or not. A fantastic story without any readers remains meaningless and does not start a conversation.

What does this mean for the definition of the Young Adult genre? One of the biggest issues with the defining the genre is the readership—the fact that books appeal equally to adults and teens. Adults and teenagers though are perceived to have different needs when it comes to literature. Teenagers are associated with reading for entertainment while adults are often challenged to employ critical reading, to look for a deeper meaning, rather than finding sheer enjoyment in the text. This recalls Ruth Graham’s argument in Slate about adults needing to step away from Young Adult literature and pursue something deeper and more meaningful. The act of reading, while aesthetic in nature, can be (and should be) coupled with critical thought. The fact that the text referred to here is Young Adult literature should not change that. The readership of YA must then have something in common. They must have something that keeps them coming back to genre, with needs being met that are being ignored elsewhere. In other words, “…what is the [YA] genre designed to do?” (Gillis, 2002, p. 58).

A Common Occurrence: The Theme of Identity

Young Adult literature is united by the overarching theme of finding one’s identity rather than its teenage readership. The theme of identity is a common occurrence when dealing with the YA genre and adolescence as a whole.

Jonathan Stephens, editor of Rip Rap Literary Journal and reviewer for TeenReads.com, in his article “Young Adult: A Book by Any Other Name” for The ALAN Review: “As I see it, the label “Young Adult” refers to a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen
voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its “Grownup” peers” (Stephens, 20007, p. 40).

Ann Curry, an associate professor in the School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies at University of British Columbia, in her article “Where is Judy Blume?” for the *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*: “Children and young adults are often looking for *images of themselves, images as they are at that moment*, struggling with parent conflicts, problem acne, feelings of rejection, and raging hormones, and images of what they *might become*” (Curry, 2001, p. 32).

Grace Enriquez, assistant professor of Language and Literacy at Lesley University, in her article “The Reader Speaks Out: Adolescent Reflections about Controversial Young Adult Literature” for *The ALAN Review*: “…adolescence is inherently a time for testing limits and developing individual *identity*…” (Enriquez, 2006, p. 22).

Michael Cart, former president of YALSA, in his book *From Romance to Realism*: “For what is adolescence but a state of continuous change—of *becoming*, not being” (Cart, 1996, p. 110).

Jeffery Kaplan, associate professor of Educational Studies in the College of Education, University of Central Florida, in his article “Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century” for *The ALAN Review*: “The trope that all Young Adult literature has in common is the search for *identity*” (Kaplan, 2005, p. 12).

A study in 2009 by professors Melanie Koss and William H. Teale reviewed over fifty Young Adult books, finding that 85% of the themes featured involved protagonists’ discovering themselves and 34% about finding their identity and/or hiding one’s self (Koss & Teale, 2009).
The theme of identity, while not limited to the Young Adult literature, is prevalent throughout the books of the genre—more so than any other genre. The word “identity” conjures “an image of a bounded, rational, and unitary self—a self capable of agency and autonomy” (qtd. in Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 639). It is a complex thing, full of moving parts and ever-changing values based on the current world or current knowledge. The development of identity never stops. It is not stagnant, and can occur at any age. All that is required is for some value or belief to be challenged. In literature, this could mean a step closer to adulthood, grappling with expectations or values, gaining confidence, solving a problem, finding out more out one’s self, or acquiring a piece to a greater puzzle. It does not necessarily mean growing up or resolving all of one’s problems, but being one step closer to that goal.

Applying this the YA genre means that a defining qualification of Young Adult literature would be that the protagonists struggles with their identity—who they should be or are—and goes on a journey to discover who they are meant to be. The readership of YA then, using Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, sees the satisfaction of this journey and wants to see the protagonist become what is promised—whether that is the chosen one, a hero, a revolutionary figure, or simply an adult. “For the reader,” Rosenblatt says, “the literary work is a particular and personal event: the electric current of his mind and personality lighting up the pattern of symbols on the printed page” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 63). This event, in the case of the Young Adult literature, would be the character attempting to change their identity. As Rosenblatt states, this event is unique for each reader—as shades of their selves are seen in different aspects of various characters. Young Adult novels “…offer hope to the young reader—hope that things can change, improve, succeed” (Bushman, 1997, p. 9). They show readers the act of becoming, of being in one place in setting, beliefs, and culture and moving to another within the pages of a novel.
and/or series. By the end, the character is irrevocably changed in some way or form. Sometimes this means adulthood, sometimes not.

**The Problem with the Genre**

In the past, the YA genre has struggled with credibility and its newness in a changing market. Now that it is mostly regarded as a genre within its own rights (with a few exceptions), scholars also have to acknowledge the problem with the genre—the lack of diversity. While YA has very few limitations and is known to push the boundaries, the genre still is “…primarily white European American, and there is a significant lack of focal multicultural characters…” (Koss & Teale, 2009, p. 569). In 2009, Melanie Koss, a professor at Northern Illinois University, and William H. Teale, a professor at the University of Illinois, compiled a list of over fifty Young Adult books to compare and contrast. Their findings were that 32% of protagonists were European American (white), 90% were of no GLBTQ background, and 75% were non-disabled (Koss & Teale, 2009). In 2014, Malinda Lo, American writer and Young Adult novelist, conducted a similar study by analyzing 2014’s Best Fiction for Young Adults. She found that 85% of the titles had white protagonists, 15% contained characters of color, and only 4% featured characters with disabilities (Lo, 2014). Although efforts at diversifying have been made (the We Need Diverse Books campaign comes to mind), the YA market is still woefully white, heterosexual, and able-bodied. As proven above, the YA genre has little to no restrictions on the characters’ backgrounds, sexual orientation, or race. Within the genre itself are mysteries, romances, adventures, and science fiction—sometimes occurring within the same book. In fact, YA is probably one of the healthiest genres for experimentation with readers’ expectations and narrative structure, as the only requirement is the theme of identity.
The lack of diversity could be the result of a much larger problem within the Western media as a whole. One does not have to look far to find a white, straight, able-bodied hero. These characters are the default. If a story does not call for racial inclusion or diverse characters, then, as many reason, there is no need to have such characters. The lack of diversity could be because “…publishers would feel that money is not to be made by publishing innovative, creatively offbeat, venturesome, risk-taking, and otherwise nonmainstream works of serious literature…” (Cart, 1996, p. 158). Publishers know that stories about star-crossed lovers and dystopian revolutions sell well, so they look for variations on that same formula. Young Adult fiction, like any other genre, is at the mercy of its market and what the publishers deem readers want. When *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* peaked in sales, publishers were scrambling to find the next big fantasy and/or paranormal romance. The market is still saturated with dystopian novels since *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* dominated the scene. This is a limiting view on story-telling as it eliminates the option to have complex, cultural, and diverse characters or viewpoints in order to enhance a story.

This does not mean that the market has to remain stagnant. By identifying a problem, publishers, marketers, editors, and authors can recognize it and work to move past it. Koss and Teale acknowledged that their study was to answer “To what degree is current YA literature fulfilling the needs of adolescents? In what arenas might available YA books contribute to adolescent literacy? What gaps and needs remain?” (Koss & Teale, 2009, p. 564). The gaps and needs remaining are those of more inclusive and diverse fiction. There is no reason for characters to constantly be white, straight, and able-bodied when a portion of their audience is not. Stories are used to tell readers that they are not alone. Young adult literature “…must give faces to all
young adults—straight and gay, black and white and brown, native born and newly immigrant. Homeless, impoverished, endangered, abused, and afraid” (Cart, 1996, p. 277).

An analysis of popular books/classics in the YA genre reveals the primacy of the search for identity theme, and additionally, the lack of diverse characters.

The Books

*Harry Potter Series (1997-2007)*

**Genre: Fantasy, Young-Adult**

Rowling’s *Harry Potter* broke barriers and could be credited with the evolution of Young Adult literature and widening its readership. *Harry Potter* “while it may be considered a children’s book, it certainly is not “childish”…” (Wood & Quackenbush, 2001, p. 102).

Surveyed readers of the series were noted to be between the ages of seven to sixty-two (Wood & Quackenbush, 2001, p. 99). In order to fully analyze the story and Harry’s journey, I will discuss the series as a whole—from *Philosopher’s Stone* to *Deathly Hallows*. In the first book, readers are introduced to Harry, mistreated boy living in a cabinet under his abusive guardians’ staircase. It is not until a series of strange letters and a great, hulking man by the name of Hagrid comes along that the truth is revealed. Harry is a wizard of promising stature and has been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The books follow Harry throughout each year at Hogwarts as he uncovers his own history, his place in this strange, new world, and learns about an even darker power on the horizon—the infamous Voldemort.

**Identity:** The theme of identity easily applies here. The series is ultimately Harry’s journey from awkward child to a wizard who has faced the Dark Lord and is comfortable with his powers and title. In the beginning, Harry has no idea who he is or what he wants out of the world. His focus is purely on survival and the endurance of his family’s abuse. When he finds
out his parents’ tragic deaths and the true reason behind the scar on his forehead, Harry’s world is forever changed. He discovers he is more than the burden, the outcast, that he was led to believe. Each book has Harry facing a specific challenge, all leading up to his final match with Voldemort. As the story progresses, Harry ages—detailing the journey of child to (near) adult and all the struggles that come with it. By the final instillation, *Deathly Hallows*, the mystique and magic that the wizard world promised Harry are gone, replaced by a much bleaker, harsher outlook on life and childhood innocence lost. Knowing that he is the chosen one, the one destined to end Voldemort, does not come with an assured victory and instead asks a greater price from Harry. Readers are right there with Harry as he grows into the role of hero and sacrifices much because of it. The satisfaction then of seeing him defeat Voldemort, of claiming his title and fulfilling the prophecy, is a well-earned one.

**Diversity:** While a few minor characters are noted to be people of color, the majority of the main cast (Harry, Ron, Hermione and friends) is white with no indication of possible cultural backgrounds. All are perceived to be able-bodied—with an exception being a secondary character who is missing an eye. *Harry Potter* is unique in that it does have a character of GLBTQA orientation with Dumbledore, but I am reluctant to count this as representation as it was never canonically stated or even implied within the text. Rowling divulged this information in an interview after the series was already complete. If one were to judge the work by itself with no prior knowledge of Rowling’s intentions, this interpretation could very well be ignored.

**The Hunger Games Series (2008-2010)**

**Genre: Dystopia, Young-Adult**

Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series details the world of Panem, where children are forced to fight to the death in a battle royal as punishment for a past rebellion. Again, I will
analyze the entirety of the series rather a singular volume. The books follow Katniss Everdeen as she volunteers for the games in lieu of her sister. She soon becomes a symbol, the spark of resentment among the lower classes towards Capitol, and is dragged into an all-out war.

**Identity:** While readers do not necessarily follow Katniss all the way into adulthood—the novels only cover an indeterminate amount of months—we do see the journey she faces as a teenager and the effects it has on her. In the beginning, Katniss is not special. She wants her family to survive in the poverty-ridden District 12 and does what she had to ensure that happens. When her sister is chosen for the games, Katniss immediately volunteers, setting into motion a chain of events that leads to war. During the games, Katniss actively resists the Capitol’s attempts to manipulate her. She retains her identity instead of losing herself to the glitz and bloodlust of the games. Seen by thousands, Katniss’s rebellion inspires people and puts Katniss in the unwanted position of becoming a symbol. The world soon comes to revolve around Katniss and what she means to certain groups of people. While Katniss never wanted to be the Mockingjay—the symbol for the resistance—it is the role that she ends up fulfilling. In the last book these two aspects of Katniss’s character are in direct opposition. She wants to return home to care for her mother and her sister. She does not want to be responsible for a rebellion. She does not want thousands looking to her for hope. Yet her sense of morality forbids her from refusing. The role of the Mockingjay takes a toll on Katniss and it forces her to question her beliefs and those of the world she inhabits. She comes to understand what is most important to her, what she is willing to sacrifice, and what she is not.

**Diversity:** Katniss herself is described as having olive skin and black hair, leading to the belief that she is of some racial descent other than Caucasian. Gale is described in the same way. The term “olive” could be used to describe a variety of skin tones and does not necessarily
indicate a character of color. Collins neither confirms nor denies that Katniss is a woman of
color, giving no other information of possible background or confirmed history. Interestingly
enough, Katniss’s sister, Prim, is described as blonde and pale. Representation is muddy in this
case. Characters from District 11 Rue and Thresh are confirmed African-American characters,
with the former having a huge impact on the first book and the story as a whole. Peeta, one of the
male love interests, loses a leg after the 74th Hunger Games and walks with a prosthesis.

*The Chocolate War (1974)*

**Genre: Classic, Young-Adult**

Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* tells the story of Jerry Renault, the new kid at an
all-boys Catholic school. He faces typical peer-pressure and ostracization as he refuses to
cooperate with the school’s culture by not selling any chocolate. This act of rebellion puts him as
a target to the school’s secret society, the Vigils and their leader Archie.

**Identity:** Throughout the novel, Jerry struggles to hold true to his beliefs despite coercion
and outright violence from his classmates. It easy to see the adolescent struggles of bullying
amplified throughout the text. Cormier uses extremes in order to get a point across. It is not
about the chocolate per say, which is merely the excuse, but rather about the power of fear and
control that the Vigils lord over the school. Jerry could have submitted, but he did not. He
chooses to uphold his beliefs and “disturb the universe” despite the hopelessness of his situation.
In the end, it is ultimately a pointless struggle as Jerry is injured and Archie’s power over the
school is implied to be ironclad, but it is the defiance itself that makes Jerry’s character stand
out. It is what makes the other characters wake up and realize just how much control they have
sacrificed. Even when the rest of the school turns on him, Jerry holds fast and maintains his
identity. Readers see Jerry attempting to assert his own identity among a sea of conformers.
While the ending is not a happy one, the satisfaction comes from seeing Jerry stand up to others, teaching a powerful lesson.

**Diversity:** All of the boys presented are perceived to be white and Christian. They are described as going to Mass and confession. No emphasis is given on other possible backgrounds or any racial differences. Girls are mentioned, but they are described as objects rather than actual human beings.

*The Fault in Our Stars* (2012)

**Genre:** Contemporary, Romance, Young-Adult

John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* is about a girl named Hazel Grace Lancaster who is battling Stage 4 thyroid cancer that has spread to her lungs. The novel follows Hazel as she begins to fall for a boy she meets in a support group, Augustus Waters, and deals with her own mortality. Hazel is beginning to come to terms with the eventuality of her own death, but that does not stop her from living her life. Through the romance between her and Augustus she learns to live again and makes new memories for herself, despite her disease.

**Identity:** The theme of identity is harder to pin down in Green’s iconic work because it is, at heart, a tragedy and a romance. The novel deals with death straight-on and there is a melancholy quality to much of Hazel’s narrative. She’s at an in-between stage in her life. She’s not living. But she also is not dying. She is not too sick to go out and experience the world. It is not until Augustus comes along and forces her to interact with the world again that she learns that, while suffering is a part of her life, it is not the only part and it does not keep her from experiencing the good. The theme of identity comes when Hazel realizes she is more than her disease. Hazel and Augustus fear oblivion; they fear dying before they have the chance to live and this keeps them in a loop that prevents them from truly living. Augustus’s driving motivation
is to be remembered. While his heroic act never comes to completion, Hazel realizes that validation does not have to come from being remembered by thousands, but by being loved, known, and remembered by one. Readers see Hazel come to terms with this truth and feel some small assurance that, when her own death does occur, oblivion will not swallow her and everyone she loves whole. The satisfaction of the text comes from the tragic, unexpected ending but also a glimmer of hope as Hazel has been changed for the better.

**Diversity:** Hazel, Augustus, and their friends are perceived to be white. Representation does count for the disabled category as Hazel is affected by cancer. She is described as having to carry an oxygen tank in order to sustain her breathing. Augustus is minus a leg from his earlier bout of cancer. Their friend, Isaac, is blind from retinoblastoma, having lost one eye to the disease earlier and losing the other one during the narrative.

*The Book Thief* (2005)

**Genre: Historical, Young-Adult**

Written by Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* is about nine-year-old girl, Liesel Meminger, who is newly orphaned and lives in Germany during World War II. Liesel faces the horror of the Nazi regime with her new foster family, trying to find some semblance of a childhood amongst a time of turmoil. She and her family are thrust into a precarious position when they agree to hide a Jewish man, Max. Throughout the novel, Liesel is taught to read and learns the value of words during a time when it is safer to remain voiceless.

**Identity:** Liesel is younger than many YA protagonists and it makes her situation all the more horrible. She sees how the world around her is changing, how kindness is being replaced with cruelty, and she could have very well grown up to be a hateful person. She does not though, and through learning to read and her interactions with Max that she comes out of the situation a
better and stronger person when her identity could have been compromised. In fact, many people did sacrifice their beliefs and values in order to feel safer. Liesel, despite her age, did not. Readers see her struggling to come to terms with how humanity could be so cruel, why people are whipped simply for offering bread. She resists with small acts of rebellion, like saving and preserving books. In the end, she comes to understand that the best way to honor her dead family is to go on living a good life—despite the horrors she might face because of her kindness. Readers’ satisfaction comes from Liesel being stalwart in her beliefs and who she is in spite of the political context of the time.

**Diversity:** Liesel and her foster family are perceived to be white. No disabilities or racial differences are emphasized. A major theme of the book is the struggles between religious beliefs at the time of Nazi regime. Max is Jewish and that comes with its own set of conflicts when considering the history. The differences between Max and Liesel—and their similarities—are explored during their time together.

**Results**

John Noell Moore, a master storyteller and a writer for young adults says that “…for Young Adult literature to come of age and “lose its stepchild status” it must be treated as serious literary work” (qtd. in Proukou, 2005, p. 68). With the recent successes, it is a perfect time to be “…not only to be writing but to be studying YAL, to be rethinking and re-conceptualizing YAL as a genre” (Cappella, 2012, p. 2). In order to do this, YA needs to be analyzed for its strengths as well as its faults. The only qualification for Young Adult literature thus far is the search for identity, either in an extreme, fantastical situation, or a quiet, very real realization through every day happenings. Besides the age of the protagonists, Young Adult literature is united by the theme of identity but suffers from a lack of diversity in that identity. Professor of Children’s and
Young Adult Literature, Lee Galda stated that “[…] Reading these books allows us the opportunity for transformation, for a shaping and reshaping of how we view ourselves and the world around us” (Galda, 2013, p. 11). Readers come to YA expecting a transformation—a state of becoming, not being. By considering that Young Adult fiction is less about its appeal to teenagers and more of a search for identity, we can widen our understanding and contemplation of the genre. Characters in YA struggle with who they are and what that means within the context of the world. They are hurtling towards self-actualization. While that may not always be a happy thing (as in The Hunger Games and The Chocolate War) or an easy thing (The Book Thief), it is presented as a satisfying and fulfilling conclusion to the characters’ and the readers’ needs.

None of this excuses the lack of character diversity, especially given our current time period where racial and cultural differences are, for the most part, celebrated. Readers need to see themselves within literature in all aspects of their character. Young Adult literature is unique in that it has very few limitations. Within the genre itself, we have young-adult paranormal, young-adult mystery, young-adult romance, and young-adult science fiction. These books can have various settings, experiences, and characters. As long as they are still about the protagonist struggling with their identity, they can still be considered Young Adult literature. This struggle for identity though has been skewed one way and acknowledges one type of readership only. While I only analyzed five novels for the sake of brevity, these few books illustrate a problematic pattern and are part of the trend rather than the exception. In TIME’S 100 best Young Adult books, only fourteen starred protagonists of a non-white background or with a noticeable disability (“The 100 Best Young-Adult Books of All Time”, n.d). Out of those books from various sections of Young Adult literature, there should be more variation in the characters
represented. In the case of Dumbledore and Katniss, their representation is muddied because of the lack of canonical confirmation within the books themselves. Readers should not have to debate over possible representation. This lack of diversity, while having no bearing on the quality of the story, is troubling simply because of the lack of creativity and implied standards it sets forth to newcomers of the genre. What the united readership of YA—both young and old—are looking for is the theme of identity and a transformation for the protagonist, from static to dynamic. Nowhere in this definition does it say the character has to be white, lacking a cultural background, straight, and/or able-bodied.

**The Answer: Nyx**

There is a mindset that if you do not like something, go out and make your own. *Nyx* is my attempt at that. The goal for my second part of the project was to tell a story that was both engaging and meaningful as well as entertaining and inclusive of characters of all backgrounds. The diversity was used to enrich the story—not detract from it. Set in the very distant, fantastical future where Greece is now the epicenter of the world, Greece has been at war with its sister-city, Atlantis, for well over four hundred years. In the midst of fighting (and losing to) fiends once only thought to be real in legends, the Greeks decide to launch a new program where soldiers are crafted into the images of their ancient gods. The story follows a young, Pakistani girl named Dawn who has recently been diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig’s disease). In a desperate act of self-preservation, she enlists and ends up sorted into the lowest sector with the highest death toll, the 13th Division. There she meets a ragtag group of underdogs who, together, just might make something of themselves. The main cast consists of Hermes, a genius Japanese girl; Hector, a Greek pilot; Arachne, a Latina archer; and Set, an
Egyptian martial artist. There seems to be more to these individuals than meets the eye as Dawn begins to uncover parts of their backstory.

Dawn knows exactly whom she is and what she stands for. When she enlists and takes up the mantle of the primordial goddess, Nyx, she has no problem being a hero. Her conflict comes in the form of the society she lives in and their expectations. She cannot be what everyone needs. The fact is that she joined to save herself, not her country—a common theme among the members of the 13th Division. The soldiers’ program essentially fixes an individual to make them the perfect weapon, curing any physical limitations or disabilities for the duration of their service. The world of Nyx, while racially inclusive, is very prejudicial against the sick and disabled. From a logical standpoint, this makes sense. Greece is looking to rebuild after decades of war and wants to do so with the strongest gene pool. People are judged solely on their physical attributes and what they can bring to the next generation in the way of genetics. While it is not stated directly, the narrative strongly implies through the world’s operation that the society want the disabled and the sick gone. Things like research divisions, charities, government aid, and possible scientific discoveries that could be used to help these people are obsolete due to the Olympian Act—a government-sanctioned movement that rerouted funds from such areas so that it could be used for the war effort. The social thought behind this move was that the money for the war had to come from somewhere since citizens were tired of the increasing taxes. This has left many individuals, like Dawn and her teammates, with two options: enlist and “fix” what was wrong with them or suffer through whatever illness or disability has befallen them.

Dawn becomes aware of this as the story progresses. Even though, as Nyx, she is cured of her ailment, she is not totally happy and content. Dawn realizes that the problem was never solely with her, but in the way the world around her operates. Once made aware of something it
is nearly impossible to feign ignorance. Individuals, for better or worse, do not exist in a vacuum and have to interact with some sort of society in order to function. *Nyx* covers the story of those that choose to enlist and “fix” their problem. But they are also not ignorant to the ones that did not choose this path. Dawn recognizes that the world she inhabits is not perfect. While Dawn is capable, willing, and trained (which is more than could be said for some of the soldiers), she is also painfully aware that, underneath it all, she is just like them and the world would not be celebrating her if they knew the truth. The crisis of identity that she faces is one of the world’s perceptions and Dawn’s own view of herself. The public views her as great, as Nyx, because she is able to fight the creatures of myth. Dawn knows that it is all smoke and mirrors and, if it weren’t for the soldiers’ program, she wouldn’t be able to lift a sword, much less fight for her country. While she struggles with this, her teammates mirror her experience. They are written off because of physical limitations and they wonder, “Is society right?” At the same time numerous people, both able-bodied and not, join the soldiers’ program. Some of them go on to achieve great things, others do not. If the program is what makes them great, then why are all soldiers not able to achieve this? At the end, the true question remains, what makes a hero?

*Nyx* is designed to go against the common YA tropes. With a diverse cast, characters with both mental and physical disabilities, no romantic plotline, and a twist on the theme of finding one’s self, *Nyx* offers a unique experience while staying true to the heart of Young Adult literature. The transformation that readers so often seek in the genre comes in the form of Dawn. As Dawn moves through the novel, becoming Nyx and the leader of the 13th Division, she struggles with being this world’s hero and what sacrifices that would entail. She grapples between two roles—that of the hero and that of another sick, desperate girl. By the end of the novel, she comes to terms with how much of herself she is willing to give to these people and
who exactly she is willing to fight for. And maybe, despite what the world is telling her and her body’s physical limitations, she can do something great.

**Conclusion**

Why is the Young Adult genre so important? Why are scholars, authors, and publishers scrutinizing and debating on the genre’s definition and its lack of diversity? How has a genre that was designed to appeal to teenagers gain so much notoriety and attention from an older demographic?

In short, because its theme of identity is universal.

As of now, Young Adult novels are prominent in our popular media and are unavoidable. They have seeped into popular culture and captured readers of various age groups, baffling some critics and purists. Young Adult literature offers readers something that they cannot find anywhere else. Here is a place where a boy can become a wizard, where a girl can start a rebellion, where two sick teenagers can find love. Here is place where teenagers have a voice. Here is a place where teenagers are no longer invisible, but instead are front and center, going on epic quests, slaying dragons, and saving entire nations. Gayle Forman, author of *If I Stay*, points out that, “Reading about everyday fictional teens rising to the occasion (and, spoiler alert, in YA books they almost always do) allows actual teens to imagine themselves doing the same, within the lower-stakes conflicts and contexts of their own lives” (Forman, 2015, para. 16). Young Adult novels say to them that they are not alone. Marketers and publishers have noticed this pulsing target demographic and have latched onto it. What they did not expect was the widening appeal. Adults saw teenagers devouring these books, saw the commercials for movie adaptations, noted their constant presence on bestseller lists, and, as with any phenomenon wondered what all the fuss was about. They borrowed the books from sons and daughters—or even went out and
bought themselves a copy—and were soon swept away by the experience as any reader is. Just as students can relate and empathize with adult characters, adult readers can relate and empathize with teenage protagonists. The two experiences are not mutually exclusive.

This interest in identity is at its strongest when one is a teenager. Everyone remembers what it was like to be a teenager—whether one was popular or an outcast. The experience of feeling uncomfortable in one’s skin, of being unsure of one’s place in the world, is universal. By reading, writing, and evaluating these books, readers bring validation to this experience. “One way, I think,” Nancy Garden, author of *Annie on My Mind*, states on the matter, “to help ensure that at least some of those dreams and some of that idealism will last and to ensure that the loneliness and pain will be noticed and even eased is to reinforce and acknowledge their existence through fiction” (Garden, 2000, para. 35). Viewing this through Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, the transaction that is taking place here is one of satisfaction of seeing one’s self—or a version of one’s self—being heard, credited, and valued. One does not have to be a teenager to appreciate this notion. The main theme of Young Adult literature, of going on a journey to contribute to one’s identity or find one’s self, while mainly speaking to the teenage experience, can be experienced throughout one’s life and is not limited to a set number of years.

That being said, the protagonists in these novels favor a narrow demographic. Again, this could be part of a larger problem with Western media, censorship, and the publishing industry as a whole, but, speaking from a storytelling perspective, it makes for boring narratives and shallow limits on creativity. The problem is not that a lack of diversity leads to a bad narrative, but that there are few to little alternatives if readers want something different. If I know right from the go what type of hero I am going to experience, why read it? Why read about the same people with very little variations going on the same magical quest? This is especially troubling when the key
component of the genre is all about finding one’s self— whoever that may be. Young Adult literature and fiction as a whole “…gives us not only and external view of another life, however, but an internal one as well, through its empathic immediacy, the emotional rapport that it offers the readers; it enables us, in short, to eavesdrop on someone’s heart” (Cart, 1996, p. 269). That view, thus far, has been limited. Unconsciously, this sends the message that one kind of identity is okay, that this kind of discovering is normal while others are not. In Nyx, there is no reason for Dawn to be of Pakistani descent, but there is also no reason for her to be white. Giving variation where there was none can improve a story’s depth and creativity just by answering unconscious readers’ needs and surprising them. The genre’s appeal is universal. It has no limitations. Do not, then, impose ones on it. The readership of YA is broadening by the day. The books in the genre need to reflect this, too.
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