

Mapping A History of Adolescence and Literature for Adolescents

Greg Hamilton

When I was twelve, my parents called my brother and me into the living room, sat us between each of them on the couch, and explained that they were going to live apart from then on. I remember taking the news matter-of-factly, my stomach churning over and over, but on the surface trying to be a “grown-up,” supportive of their needs by appearing mature. My nine-year-old brother cried. And when I went back into my bedroom, closed the door, and crawled into bed, I cried, too. I cried for me and I also cried for my mother and father. I wondered how they would survive without each other. I thought about each of them living alone, separated, and rising to the challenges that being a couple seemed to protect one from.

On the playground the next day I was terrified and embarrassed that someone might find out that my parents were splitting up. It was 1973, and divorce in Oklahoma was not yet as common as it would soon be in the United States. That was when a classmate, Lisa, who had lost her older brother the summer before in a swimming accident, came over and asked me what was wrong. I told her what had happened as we walked together towards the edge of the playground. I expected her to understand because of what she had been through. She did, or seemed to at the time, and promised to keep my family secret.

Of course, two days later, several of Lisa’s friends told me they were sorry. *Sorry for what?* I asked, wishing I had never told anyone in the first place.

This story is a memory, like many of my adolescent memories, that emphasizes the way adolescents cope, survive, trust, and regret, not unlike adults, who they are in the act of becoming. The roads connecting age eleven to fourteen are long and endless when we are *in the middle*. Looking back on the pit stops, break downs, and side roads that I took during my own adolescence makes me want to forget those days, but sometimes, these memories can elicit important reminders of why I am the adult I am today. Today, as an English language arts teacher of adolescents, I’ve found it helpful to explore the historical terrains of both adolescence and the contemporary fictions adults have created for adolescents. In the following pages, I’ve provided an historical overview of these areas of study for teachers who, like myself, look to the past and the present in order to prepare and imagine possible futures.

Guiding Principles

Nancie Atwell (1998) composes a beautiful narrative on adolescence in her widely received book, *In the Middle: New*

Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning. In her chapter “Making the Best of Adolescence,” Atwell reminds us of the nature of adolescence while encouraging teachers to recognize and act upon three principles that make up the themes of her chapter.

Atwell writes, “first, teachers have to accept the reality of middle school students . . . that adolescence is as special and important a time in a student’s intellectual development as any other phase in a child’s life . . . [and] middle school teaching should be organized so that it helps kids begin to understand and participate in adult reality” (*In the Middle* 54).

In order to develop more thoughtful and effective instructional practices, middle school language arts teachers must recognize the attributes unique to the age group they are teaching. Atwell’s first principle *regarding adolescent reality* is a reminder for teachers who work with adolescents to examine their perceptions of the nature of this age group. In order to understand the reality of middle school students, teachers can draw on their own autobiographies, remembering, like Atwell, the experiences that typified what it meant to be eleven, twelve, or fourteen. Each of the adolescent years is often marked by the sudden and obvious changes in emotional, intellectual, and physical growth.

Historical Perspectives on Adolescence

Understanding the realities of adolescence comes also through popularized theories about adolescence, which are always relational to the philosophical world views, economics, and social conditions that define human relationships to the world at any given time in history. Marcel Danesi, in *Cool: the Signs and Meanings of Adolescence* (1994), re-tells Herodotus’s story of a Sumerian (1700 BC) father, whose description of his son’s ‘insolent’ and ‘indifferent’ behavior confirms a modern day stereotype of teenager as rebellious youth (*Cool*, x). In his comprehensive textbook *Adolescence* (1992) Eastwood Atwater traces the development of Western society’s notion of adolescence forward from early Greek society, where “the major developmental task for attaining adulthood [was] the acquisition of greater self-control and self-determination” (*Adolescence* 7). According to Atwater, Aristotle, the Greek philosopher “recognized the importance of puberty and its impact on human development . . . [when he] . . . proposed three stages of development: infancy, which includes the first seven years of life; boyhood, from about 7 years to puberty; and young manhood, from puberty to age 21” (*Adolescence* 7). During the middle ages, when “children became apprentices in the various trades and went

straight into the world of adults . . . much of the distinction between childhood/youth and adulthood was lost" (*Adolescence* 8). At that time, children were viewed as miniature adults, a perception which lasted as late as the eighteenth century, when Jean Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher, proposed, "treating [children] like miniature adults is potentially harmful" (*Adolescence* 8). Rousseau, like Aristotle, created a developmental framework consisting of four stages with an understanding of 'adolescence' as being split between a 'savage' stage two, 5 through 12 years-of-age, and a more rational stage three, from 12 to 15. The significant difference in these two stages was Rousseau's belief that during the 'savage' stage children "lacked reasoning and should be left relatively free of restrictions to follow their innate developmental tendencies" (*Adolescence*

8) compared to the following stage three, when children were ready for more formal educational training due to the "awakening of their rational functions, including reason and self-consciousness" (*Adolescence* 8). Atwater emphasizes the influence both Aristotle and Rousseau have had on more current notions of adolescence as they relate to societal changes.

In the United States, the agrarian-based economy and social structure of the early 17th to middle 18th centuries and the rise of the industrial revolution from the late 18th century through the 19th century capitalized on American youth, making the "transition to adulthood among the working class . . . brief and harsh" (*Adolescence* 8). The adolescents of wealthier classes were rushed into adulthood as well, sent to college at 14 or 15 and entering into the professions for which they were trained as early as age 17.

By the end of the 19th century, the period of adolescence was extended, in part due to the introduction of compulsory education. "[Public education gave] young people the skills they needed for exercising the rights and privileges of democracy . . . [and] . . . extended the legal power of school authorities over students, thereby prolonging their dependence on adults" (*Adolescence* 10). Other social changes, for example, child labor laws, the concept of juvenile justice, urban growth, and the increase in human longevity helped establish the notion of adolescence as we see it today (*Adolescence* 11). By the beginning of the 20th century these social changes had contributed to the 'invention' of a period of extended development known as adolescence.

During the 20th century, new disciplines have contributed to a more scientific understanding of adolescence. Atwater addresses a variety of perspectives on adolescence (biological, psychoanalytical, social-cognitive, and cultural) that grow out of individual and cumulative studies in and across different disciplines.

Our perspectives on adolescence have certainly been more broadly defined by research stemming from various disci-

plines, however, since the publication of Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* in 1904, and the research on adolescence by Sigmund and Anna Freud (1964), Piaget (1969), Erikson (1980), Kohlberg (1969), Havighurst (1972), and Bandura (1986), each of which relied on a significantly singular group of research participants. In *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*, Janice Irvine identifies the traditional theories of adolescent development by their tendency to divide adolescence into various stages, "with progression toward higher stages leading to a more autonomous, individuated, and independent self" (*Sexual Cultures* 30). Irvine cites Freud's theory of psychosexual development and Piaget's stages of cognitive development as establishing a norm for adolescent behavior biased by its reification of white, middle class male values. Erikson's psychosocial stages and Kohlberg's cognitive-moral developmental theory grew out of the work of Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget and are equally biased in

terms of racial and class prejudice.

In Erikson's sequencing of human development, adolescence is the 5th stage, marked by a boy's rejections of his mother. According to Erikson, once a boy has rejected his mother his sexual energies are directed towards his peer group. Psychologically, separation from the mother positions one to make decisions independently and without guidance from others. Piaget and Kohlberg continued this line of thinking. Piaget recognized the need for the individual to stand outside of something and objectify it in order to understand it, developing what he termed "cognitive detachment." Kohlberg built his cognitive moral development theory on Piaget's work and determined that decisions are made with regard to a universal justice ethic (*Sexual Cultures* 32). We now know that

Kohlberg committed suicide after his critics revealed that much of his research had been fabricated.

Traditional theories on adolescence have for the greater part of the 20th century supported expectations for how young adults should act inside

and outside our language arts classrooms. Education has been secular and knowledge objectified (Myers, *Changing Our Minds* 56). Learning has been viewed as an autonomous and individuated act where each child is a storer of knowledge, expected to *know* and *understand* through memorization, silent analysis, decoding, and objectifying texts (Myers, 1996: 56). But the latter quarter of the 20th century has seen the evolution of social changes that are challenging traditional theories on adolescence, creating broader and more complex expectations for teenagers and their language arts teachers.

Atwater outlines six areas of social change affecting adolescents in the 1990's: technological advancement, new patterns of family life, greater awareness and exercise of personal rights among youth, greater affluence in society, a greater

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emphasis on materialism, and the counterforces at work modifying the effects of the [other] social changes (*Adolescence* 13-15). In addition to social change, Irvine cites the impact educational research has had on our changing views about what it means to be an adolescent, with a focus on gender, race, and class. Irvine emphasizes Carol Gilligan's work with adolescent girls, Nancy Chodorow's exploration of the influence of culture on psychosocial development, and sociologist Patricia Hill Collin's call for an Afrocentric theory of development that takes into account the affects of oppression and racial prejudice (*Sexual Cultures* 32-35). It is also important to recognize, since the 1970's, the push to re-frame our notion of human development has paralleled the revisioning of schools and schooling, and more specifically, curricula and standards in the language arts classroom. Education is diverse, knowledge is interactive, and learning involves the development of multiple perspectives, the ability to translate across cultures and negotiate difference (*Changing our Minds* 56).

As shown above, current research on adolescence (Irvine (1994); Cotterell (1996); Denisai (1994); and Takanishi, 1993) has moved beyond the traditional theories of development established by Stanley Hall, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg to suggest multiple and competing ideological frameworks that broaden and complicate any singular perspective on the nature of adolescence. To go back to Nancie Atwell's first principle, part of understanding the *reality* of middle school students involves going beyond any one specific model of human development. *Whose* reality of middle school students do we accept? Because our society is continually changing, language arts teachers must develop practices that allow for changing definitions of the realities of our youth.

My understanding of adolescence is best confirmed by teachers like Atwell, whose stories of her own experiences surviving adolescence and attending to adolescents emphasize principles of being and learning for both child and adult. Atwell's second publication of *In the Middle* is appropriately re-titled, *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Atwell's revisions maintain that middle school students still value most their friends, like to find out about things they didn't know before, view collaboration as cheating and learning as solitary, and like best the classes that let them talk, play, and have some say about the final product. However, her title suggests that language arts teachers must continually re-examine who and how they are teaching (*In the Middle* 68). Among those educators, writers, and classroom researchers, like Atwell, who define adolescence as a time of "widest . . . range of abilities, problems, attitudes, and levels of maturity" (*In the Middle* 27), Romano (1987), Hynds (1997), Wilhelm (1997), Bomer (1995), Delpit (1995), hooks (1994), and Gere, Fairbanks, Howes, Roop, and Schaafsma (1992) represent adolescence as a "special time" intellectually, physically, and emotionally through the examination of *who, what, why, and how* they teach. Implicit and explicit in the works

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of these teachers/researchers/writers is the valuing of the examination of definitions of adolescence as integral to the work we do with adolescents. The stories these educators tell make explicit Atwell's second and third principles, that adolescence is a significant time in a person's life, and that teachers need to organize middle school instruction in ways that will help kids begin to understand and participate in adult reality. Most language arts teachers would agree that the literary fictions we read with our students often triggers important conversations about adult realities. The changing history of the literary fictions used to educate adolescents is as interesting as the shifting historical perspectives on adolescence.

Historical Perspectives on Literature for Adolescents

In *Adolescent Literature: Response and Analysis*, Robert Probst (1984) writes that:

The adolescent, characteristically preoccupied with self, should be an ideal reader. That is not to say that he *will* read well, or even read at all. He may despise literature, the literature classroom, and the literature teacher, and express great pride in his inability to make sense out of the written word. But unless he is very unusual, he has the one characteristic essential for a reader—an interest in himself. He is concerned about his relationships with peers and parents and his gradual assumption of responsibility for himself. He is growing more aware of the important decisions he will soon have to make. He wants to understand work, love, hate war, death, vengeance, responsibility, good, evil—in other words, he is interested in the themes of the literature that has established itself as worth reading and discussing. (*Adolescent Literature* 4)

For Probst, it is important to emphasize that adolescent literature is a collection of literary works that have been accepted into the canon and traditionally taught historically or critically (e.g., *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Macbeth*, and *Walden*) or are well-worn young adult classics typically read

by adolescents (e.g., *Animal Farm*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Summer of My German Soldier*, and *The Chosen*). Probst recognizes the interest in *self* that generally characterizes most adolescents, and suggests classroom experiences with traditional literature that encourages young readers to develop and trust their own personal responses to the texts we devoured as teens and want our students to read.

Defining and understanding the dimensions of young adult literature becomes an important act for teachers who want to deliberately and thoughtfully consider the nature of the literature they choose to use in the classroom. It is helpful to review the historical experience young readers have had with the fiction (and non-fiction) adults have laid in their paths in order to recognize some of the habits of thinking that have developed with regard to the relationship between young adults and the books they read. With an historical framework in mind, we might be in a better position to ask, where are we going? And, why?

In *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom*, Bushman & Bushman (1997) begin their historical overview

by rejecting the assumption that “the beginning of literature for young people occurred in the 1950s and 1960s with the publication of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967); however, the literature directed to and for young people began much earlier” (222). Bushman and Bushman create a framework for adolescent literature encompassing a roughly 400 year time period entitled “Rules to Live By,” beginning with titles like *A Book of Courtesy* (1477), *Aesop’s Fables*, and Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* to exemplify Middle Age literature written for adults and used to socialize children into the expected adult habits and behaviors of that time. Religious and didactic literature prevailed throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, (e.g., *The King James Bible*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*) during which time children were recognized as “deficient adults who needed all the help they could get” (223). The 1700s saw a slight turning point with the publication of Defoe’s *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, as well as John Newbery’s small books for children, which set the stage for the great children’s books of the 19th century (e.g., *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Black Beauty*, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*).

Bushman and Bushman trace the development of series books and the division of literature into boys books and girls books, competition between publishing houses, and the “shift in the treatment of characters” with the invention of the “bad boys” literature throughout the course of the mid to late 19th century. In “The Development of the Young Adult Novel,” Linda Shadiow (1992) similarly classifies 19th century young adult literature into several sub-groups, including the series books, with formulaic plots and characters shared by multiple writers, “domestic novels,” characterized by their “elevation and celebration of the power of good women to salvage humanity by conservatism and religion” (51), and “dime novels,” or adventure stories with their tales of rebellious and mischievous youth. Clearly, the mid to late 19th century marked an even greater turning point in terms of recognizing, in addition to the classics, new forms of literature that provided entertainment value. But even the “domestic,” “dime,” and “series” books developed plots intended to relate an adult view of the world to young readers, rather than trying to present their own (Monseau & Salvner 58). It wasn’t until the beginning of the twentieth century that the characters in books read by young people were depicted as having their own thoughts about the world around them. Shadiow calls this more personalized stage of adolescent literature “The Inner World” and writes, “[w]ith the appearance of a very personal me within the books, characters did start to explore the church, the home, and other worlds from an internal rather than an external perspective” (Monseau & Salvner 58). According to Bushman and Bushman, early to mid-twentieth century novels for young readers can be grouped by decade, with the Stratemeyer books taking over

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in the 1920s, the historical and “junior books” of the 1930s, and the career novels of the 1940s and 1950s. In general, “[these novels] focused on traditional social behavior: family, jobs, sports, dating, etc. The themes of these novels were moralistic and superficial. However, realism began to creep into the writing of a few young adult writers (e.g., J.D. Salinger and Henry Gregor Felsen) marking milestone in the direction of young adult literature” (*Using Young Adult Literature* 226-228).

During the 1960’s, the movement towards new realism in young adult literature gave rise to the birth of the classic, contemporary young adult novels still being used in classrooms today (e.g., *The Pigman*, *The Outsiders*, *Where the Lilies Bloom*, *Sounder*, and *The Contender*) and welcomed the addition of a plethora of young adult authors, including,

Judy Blume, Paula Danziger, Robert Cormier, and Chris Crutcher, Cynthia Voigt, Gary Paulsen, Sandy Asher, Walter Dean Meyers and M.E. Kerr (Bushman and Bushman 1997, 229-231). Many of these writers are now known for the issues and topics they cover: cultural diversity, historical fiction, child abuse, homosexuality, divorce, eating disorders, and teenage suicide, to name a few. The advent of so many young adult novels with a wide range of subject matter, many of quality and depth of literary value, has created

a fascinating controversy over the use of young adult literature in today’s English classrooms.

In his forward to Monseau’s *Responding to Young Adult Literature* (1996), Chris Crutcher, teen therapist and author of six young adult novels, writes that:

I believe the teaching of literature offers us as educators a chance to make a connection with . . . kids. By sharing our responses to stories about lives like theirs, and by relating our own lives to those stories, we can bring their education home, make it an intimate thing . . . I hope that one day kids will balk at reading—or outright refuse to read—my work because I am long dead and my stories are out of step with “kids today,” and that educators will use contemporary stories to bring my meanings home. That will mean that the world is moving along as it should. It will mean that my work is being passed over, or at least pushed aside, for the work of vibrant new authors, a few of whom might have been inspired by parents or teachers who were themselves long ago inspired by my work (*Responding* x-xi).

Over the past decade, numerous books, articles, and lectures at local and national conferences have supported the use of young adult novels in secondary classrooms (Monseau & Salvner (1992); Monseau (1996); Bushman & Bushman (1997); Small (1992); Hipple (1992); Ross (1995); Abrahamson (1986); Kaywell (1993) and yet up until eight years ago ninety percent of English classrooms used anthologies, traditional classics dominated the literature curriculum, and most English programs made no distinction between literature used for college-bound students and works used for non-academic students (from Arthur Applebee’s *A Study of*

Book-Length Works Taught in High School English Classes, in Gallo 18).

The critics of young adult fiction vary as do their purposes. Many believe there is simply not enough time to teach the required curriculum, let alone *entertain* books that have not proven the test of time. Others wage war with the controversial issues raised in many young adult novels, holding to the belief that the English classroom is not the appropriate environment for students to voice their opinions and concerns over personal and moral issues. There are censors, both conservative and liberal, for almost every issue. In "Censorship and the Young Adult Novel," James E. Davis (1992) outlines some of the objections,

Espousing the state religion of secular humanism, discussion of the Renaissance, discussion of Leonardo da Vinci because his paintings glorify man instead of God, telepathy, the supernatural, discussion of religions, magic, witchcraft, people's power to change themselves, stories about dinosaurs because their existence indicates that the earth is older than the Bible tells us, one world government, feminism, homosexuality, sexuality, vulgarity, violence, pacifism, objectionable language, troublesome ideas about race relations, profanity . . . boys cooking or girls playing baseball (called "improper roles") (Censorship170).

It is difficult for many of us to imagine how stories get read, discussed, analyzed, and processed without touching on the range of human conditions present in most of the novels, short stories, and poems we use in our classrooms. Alongside classics like *The Scarlet Letter* or *Animal Farm*, and certainly next to current young adult favorites such as *Shabanu* or *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, teachers and students need to find ways to share, relate, and validate the personal in a public space. Many of our controversial issues are controversial because we lack the strategies to become part of a community of listeners and learners who will support each other's curiosities, dispel each other's assumptions, and sometimes offer solutions to the problems modern society sets forth. It is never easy, but the search for guidance only comes through a desire to move forward and into the controversial issues.

Every year, I seem to have the same conversation with the principal of the middle school where I have taught for many years. It always occurs near the end of the year when the reading scores for each school in our district are published in the city's newspaper. We bend over the article spread out across the table in the office, and gawk over the number of schools with average student reading scores in the lower quarter percentile. Elaine, the principal, will say, "They must be teaching these students *not* to read. It's next to impossible to have a room full of kids and books and not *get* kids to read."

Getting kids to read is a critical phrase in the conversations of language arts teachers, particularly at the middle school level, and involves questions about what it means to teach reading as well as what it means to *be* a reader. Donald Gallo reminds language arts teachers, "English teachers love literature. That's why most of us became teachers of English. During our teenage years we read voraciously . . . [and we] want students in our classes to react in the same way" (Listening to Readers 17). Gallo's statement is the beginning of an invitation, asking English language arts teachers to consider "how our experiences affect the way most of us teach

literature in classes filled with students who do not (or who *cannot*) respond to literature in a similar manner" (Listening to Readers 17).

When I interviewed for a teaching position at Elaine's middle school I had just come out of a graduate program in English Education. I was ready to be one of *the* English teachers until Elaine told me that *every* teacher in our school teaches literature. I soon discovered that she was speaking literally and not figuratively. Every teacher in Elaine's school teaches literature twice a week, for thirty-five minutes, with a general expectation that books selected by each teacher will be geared towards the kids in their literature group, every student will keep a response log or be required to do some kind of writing and responding to each reading assignment, and class time will be spent discussing the reading assignment with an emphasis on student talk and not teacher talk.

The structure of the literature program in Elaine's school encourages a kind of relationship I want middle school students to develop with the books they will read and respond to. The structure emphasizes small classes (with ten or eleven children in each literature group), a focused discussion on one book at a time, a reading/writing connection, a willingness to listen and learn from peers, and due to the make up of the student body, an appreciation of the perspectives and reading habits of mixed age, race, and gendered readers. The outcomes of this program certainly validate its purpose and its structure has given me the opportunity to reconsider my role and the role of teaching literature in general.

As I have learned to re-think my role as a teacher of literature I have begun to think more carefully about the book choices available for adolescent readers. Part of understanding middle school students is the recognition that they live in the moment and often do their best when the materials we give them are grounded in the realities of their own lives. And yet all too often, getting middle school students to read has been more about helping young readers make connections to literary texts through themes that are superficially related to the lives they live.

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