

Rough Flight:

Boys Fleeing the Feminine in Young Adult Literature

From *Catcher in the Rye* to *Hatchet* to *Harry Potter*, many young adult novels focus on the coming of age stories of male protagonists. Numerous books and articles have been written, mostly in the last fifteen years, about representations of masculinity in young adult literature. For example, [Hollindale \(1988\)](#) discusses the patriarchal ideology inherent in many novels, while [Stephens \(2002\)](#), as well as [Bereska \(2003\)](#), address boys' gender constructs in children's literature. Scholars centering their attention on boys and the literary constructions of masculinity seem to agree that masculinity and manhood are traditionally defined by one's toughness, individuality, strength, and emotional reserve ([Stephens, 2002](#); [Connell, 2000](#); [Pennell, 2002](#)). While masculinity is not static—our definitions throughout history tend to shift—traditional ideas of masculinity remain entrenched in our literature, our media, and in our world. Though [Nodelman \(2002\)](#) notices how many young adult novels focus on the main protagonist, a young boy, “seeing through the conventional constructions of masculinity and learning to be more sensitive or more loving . . . or less caught up in the pleasures of aggressive bullying,” (11), few novels challenge the conventional construc-

tions of masculinity. Instead, many young adult novels show how boys learn to navigate within these constructions in order to ‘come of age.’ In novels such as Louis Sachar’s *Holes* (1998), Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974), and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), boys must accept the conventional constructions of masculinity and learn to master socially acceptable forms of male power. For the characters in these novels, masculinity, and essentially manhood, becomes what [Kimmel \(2004\)](#) calls a “relentless test” and a renunciation of the feminine

(185). Moreover, Kimmel notes that the hegemonic, traditional definition of manhood is a “man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” (184). In fact, Kimmel claims, “We equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control” (184).

The importance of this definition of masculinity is that it relies on the underlying assumption that being a man means being **unlike** a woman. [Kimmel \(2004\)](#) writes at length about the idea of masculinity as the “flight from the feminine” (185). In order to attain power—that is, to become masculine—Kimmel argues that boys must renounce the feminine influences around them and within themselves (186). When Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger admonishes Republican opponents

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as “economic girlie men,” (2004 Republican National Convention) he reminds us that the threat to men, not only boys, of being labeled feminine is vividly illustrated in our political as well as social culture. Reynaud (2004) adds to Kimmel’s argument stating that in order to be fully masculine, man must establish dominance over and, metaphorically, kill off his feminine impulses and influences (144). Therefore, masculinity and manhood in these novels are defined by what they are not—soft, feminine. Thus, the portrayal of a boy coming of age, or at least maturing into a young adult, is signified by his acquisition of the gender constructions of a man—hard, competitive, and able to use his strength to attain respect and power. Moreover, men must flee from any feminine characteristics. This lifelong quest never ends; boys must prove they are men and men must continue to prove they are men.

Holes, *The Chocolate War*, and *Lord of the Flies*, demonstrate how these definitions and underlying assumptions about masculinity play out in young adult novels addressing readers of various ages. Although *Lord of the Flies* may not fit perfectly into commonly accepted definitions of young adult literature, its considerable presence in school curricula, its position adjacent to books like *The Chocolate War*, and its influence in informing teenage boys’ concepts of masculinity cannot be ignored. Furthermore, these novels represent increasing complexities and maturity of similar masculine themes: coming of age, and more importantly, coming to terms with a gendered identity. In addition, these novels are widely read in middle and high school classrooms. In other words, boys and girls read these texts, and the textual portrayals of gender constructions affect, and perhaps influence, both.

Holes

Louis Sachar’s *Holes* (1998) a well-known favorite among both teachers and students, and its movie adaptation attests to its place on many young adolescent’s reading lists. The movie version, however, alters many significant details relevant to a reading of masculinity. For example, in the film, Stanley is a young, good-looking, *thin* boy, which is contrary to Stanley’s depiction in the novel, where he is portrayed as overweight and bullied at school by a

boy smaller than he. Early in the story, we find Stanley paying for a crime he did not commit—or so it seems. Throughout most of the novel he blames his bad luck on his “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great grandfather’s” curse. But, Stanley’s real crime is not being a man, or more to the point, exhibiting feminine characteristics. From the beginning, Stanley appears soft, flabby, and lacking agency. He passively accepts his fate. Sentenced to Camp Green Lake, a juvenile delinquency work camp, for stealing shoes, Stanley undergoes a series of tests before emerging harder, in control, and free from his grandfather’s curse.

While serving his sentence, Stanley unwittingly fulfills his great great grandfather’s promise to Madame Zoroni, who cast the original curse on the Yelnats men, by carrying the runaway, ailing and thirsting, Zero, another young delinquent, up a mountain (it turns out that Zero is Madame Zoroni’s great great grandson). More importantly, Stanley figuratively climbs into young manhood by claiming agency and taking action. Throughout the story, Stanley’s transformative acts move him from a soft, feminized boy towards a more mature young man.

Sachar introduces the reader to Stanley as a poor, “overweight” boy who “didn’t have any friends at home” (7). Although he is big, Stanley does not use his size and weight in a traditionally masculine way. A bully smaller than he intimidates him, and when Stanley complains, the teachers chide him for letting a smaller boy pick on someone his size (23). Thus, Stanley first appears as a boy unable to recognize his own strength and act in control of his environment. Stanley arrives at Camp Green Lake and meets Mr. Sir. Clad in a cowboy hat and always wearing sunglasses, Mr. Sir appears as the quintessential manly man, even chiding the boys with the refrain, “you’re not in the

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Girl Scouts anymore” (13). Mr. Sir reminds Stanley, and the reader, that Stanley’s transformation will begin by separating himself from the feminine—the girl scout. Stanley’s soft body sets him apart from the other boys. In addition, he writes letters to his mom, linking him to the maternal, or at least, the need for the maternal. This maternal link contrasts [Kimmel’s \(2004\)](#) assertion that in order to acquire a masculine identity, a boy must repudiate his mother (186). Thus, Stanley, by embracing his mother, remains a boy, not a man. Furthermore, Stanley’s position in Group D is at the bottom, ahead of only Zero, the boy who does not speak.

At camp, Stanley must dig holes five feet deep and five feet wide. This physical labor helps Stanley shed pounds and develop a fit body. Yet, even after he’s spent several weeks at camp he does not possess the physical or mental strength and confidence to confront the other boys. Resentful of Stanley and Zero’s deal (Zero digs Stanley’s holes in exchange for reading lessons), ZigZag starts a fight with Stanley, and Stanley never stands up for himself. As his face presses against the desert floor, “all he could do was wait for [the fight] to be over” (135). Only after he takes action by running away from camp in search of Zero does Stanley begin to recognize his transformation from a “girl scout”-like boy to a young man. Here, the elements and Zero’s incapacitated state, force him to take control and complete the final act of separating himself from the feminine.

While Stanley is not yet a man at the end of the novel, the reader recognizes a progression from a soft, ineffectual boy to a stronger, self-actualized young man. In this physical respect he shows a flight from the feminine. He is no longer guilty of his one true crime: being unmanly. Sachar gives the reader hints that Stanley is now on the right track to manhood. The fulfillment of one’s duty, and the attainment of

He is no longer guilty of his one true crime: being unmanly. Sachar gives the reader hints that Stanley is now on the right track to manhood. The fulfillment of one’s duty, and the attainment of manhood, reaps rewards: money, power, and friends. Yet it is important to note that these rewards are benefits of hegemonic masculinity, and enjoyed by men.

manhood, reaps rewards: money, power, and friends. Yet it is important to note that these rewards are benefits of hegemonic masculinity, and enjoyed by men. In fact, in the final scene we see Stanley surrounded by adult men and women, still learning the rules of the (patriarchal) game. During this scene, Clive Livingston puts his hand over his wife’s mouth to keep her quiet. Clive asks Stanley to take his place in his wife’s silencing while he goes for more soda, passing on a role of male dominance. Thus, the rights to power and privilege become available to men only, and to boys who actively and successfully seek dominant masculine ideals by escaping the feminine.

The Chocolate War

Considered a young adult classic, as well as a perennial teachers’ and librarians’ favorite, Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*

(1974), appears on annual ‘must read’ lists—often at the top. *The Chocolate War* placed number one on Ted Hipple’s list in 1989 and 2004 ([Hipple & Claiborne](#) 99). The novel also appeared in [Donelson’s \(1997\) Best YA Books of the Year: 1964-1995](#) (44) and was listed among *Voices from the Middle’s* top fifty books “with lasting appeal” (Lesesne 54). Yet, the book clearly purports traditional masculine ideals. These ideals represent the power relationships between boys, men and ultimately between boys/men and girls/women.

The novel’s main protagonist, Jerry Renault, is a freshman recovering from his mother’s death, coping with living with his distant father, trying to make the football team, and wondering whether he should “dare to disturb the universe” (129). Unwillingly, Jerry finds himself carrying out an order from the secret and unofficial student-leaders of the school, The Vigils. The order is simple; for ten days he is to refuse to sell chocolates during the school’s annual fundraising drive. Jerry fulfills the Vigil mission, but resolves to

continue refusing to sell chocolates, despite the Vigils' orders to begin selling and the school's interim headmaster's disapproval. Jerry's defiance leads him to a battle against the Vigils, the administration, and the entire school.

The reader meets Jerry trying out for the football team. He is young, only 145 pounds "soaking wet," and, according to the football coach, needs more "meat" on his bones (4). Though he is slight of build physically, Jerry is still a tough boy. He suffers through football tryouts—getting smashed and tackled by bigger, older guys. In addition, during his defiance of the Vigils and the school fund-raiser, Jerry never wavers in his decision not to sell chocolates. In fact, he forms a new sense of individuality and self-pride in his action, stating to himself and before his classmates, "I'm Jerry Renault and I'm not going to sell the chocolates." (177, 207) Importantly, the only time Jerry 'loses his cool' is when the bully Janza accuses him of being a fairy:

" . . . you're a fairy. A queer. Living in the closet, hiding away."

Vomit threatened Jerry's throat, a nauseous geyser he could barely hold down.

"Hey, you're blushing," Janza said. "The fairy's blushing . . ."

"Listen . . ." Jerry began but not knowing, really, how to begin or where. The worst thing in the world—to be called queer. [. . .] "I'm not a fairy," Jerry cried.

"Kiss me," Janza said, puckering his lips grotesquely.

"You son of a bitch," Jerry said. (212)

Jerry gets beat up by a gang of kids, orchestrated by Janza and Archie, who want to psychologically intimidate Jerry. Referring to the "queer pitch," Archie says to Janza, "If you want to get under a guy's skin, accuse him of being something he isn't." (222) Being homosexual is aligned with being feminine; therefore, Jerry's assertion and reaction against Janza's accusation demonstrates the often violent flight from the feminine. Indeed, [Kimmel \(2004\)](#) argues the flight from the feminine is often "angry and frustrated" (185).

Young male protagonists in these coming of age novels are continuously engaged in a contest with other males. Their rank, status, and acceptance by other boys and men determine their actions and outcomes. [Kimmel \(2004\)](#) notes the important rela-

tionship that exists among men: "[Men] are under constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, and grant our acceptance in to the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance" (p. 186). Success becomes contingent on their performance of traditional masculine conventions and others' approval. More importantly, many of these novels show how 'passing' the test and having other boys, and men, "grant" acceptance in to the realm of manhood leads to male power and privilege.

Several characters in *The Chocolate War* comment explicitly about being admired and "ranked" by other males. Throughout the novel, we see how the school-boys constantly evaluate themselves, and each other. Obie hates and fears Archie, yet he also admires him (7, 9, 148). The Vigils admire Archie (36) and Archie in turn enjoys their praise (241). Archie also admires and evaluates Brother Leon (23). In addition, he admires Emile Janza's handiwork (51-52), and he is "fascinated" by him (106). At the same time, Emile spends his time trying to impress Archie (105) and admiring Archie's "genius" (222). Jerry tries out for the football team, not just looking for a place on the squad, but also for the coach's approval (78). Brian Cochran admires Carter for his muscles and agility (98), and he "beams" and "melt[s]" when Archie's praises him (163, 236). Enjoying the admiration he receives for refusing to sell chocolates, Jerry "blush[es] with pleasure" and asks, "who didn't want to be admired?" (126). This evaluation and admiration among men marks the boys' immersion in a patriarchal structure that defines man as "strong, capable, reliable, and in control." ([Kimmel 184](#)). Within this structure men maintain power over other men and over women. By maintaining this power over each other and women, the boys are fleeing the feminine for a more male-dominated sphere.

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Boys operate under the hierarchy of power, with some men being more powerful than others (Kimmel 185). Although Jerry has qualities of the traditional man (he has strength, courage, is tough, an individual), he lacks power. In the end, he loses, finding that he can not escape the relentless test of masculinity—the ongoing battle to prove oneself a man, and more importantly, not feminine.

Lord of the Flies

Broad definitions of young adult literature include “works written for an audience between the ages of about eleven or twelve to about seventeen or eighteen” (Hipple & Claiborne 100). Additionally, most scholars mark the publication of *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) as the beginning of the “golden age” of the young adult literature genre. Written in 1954, and

appealing to adults and adolescents, Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, falls outside the American category of young adult literature. Yet, *Lord of the Flies* is a classic novel, and a standard part of the curriculum, read by young adults. An analysis of *Lord of the Flies*, demonstrates how young adult literature mirrors more traditional texts in its underlying assumptions about masculinity.

The reader meets fair-haired Ralph first grinning, he exclaims “No grownups” to the “fat boy” Piggy while the two frolic in the warm water (7-8). Ralph’s smile is both the first and last, or nearly so, of the novel, as most of the boys, led by the devilish Jack Merridew,

descend into a savagery of painted faces and ritual hunts that leave two dead and the rest wounded, both physically and mentally. The details of this descent

reveal much about, as Wordsworth would say, “man’s inhumanity to man,” and do serve as a social and psychological critique of the British public school system. Just as importantly, the events in *Lord of the Flies* artfully reveal the boys’ struggle to define their masculinity.

In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding explores various ideals of masculinity but focuses mainly on the conflict between the ideals of civilized masculinity and barbarous masculinity. Importantly, Golding links the ideal of order with the feminine Piggy and somewhat effeminate Ralph, and the ideal of violence with Jack and Roger. As Ralph and Piggy’s more effeminate world of common-sense clashes with Jack and Roger’s masculine world of hunting, Golding shows that in order to become men, the boys must flee and ultimately establish power over the feminine.

It is no coincidence that Ralph and Piggy meet first, for as the novel progresses, they develop a nearly unbreakable bond. Physically the two could not be more different. Ralph is handsome, “fair-haired,” the tallest boy, who “might make a good boxer” (10). At first, with angelic looks and strong physical build, he seems a model of burgeoning masculinity, especially when he is voted chief. Piggy, in stark contrast, is fat, bespectacled, and suffers from asthma. With his almost Rubenesque physique and his multiple handi-caps, he is void of masculinity and represents more of a doughy femininity. The boys lose no time in recognizing Piggy’s lack of manliness, as they tease him mercilessly. Reynaud (2004) argues the body is the instrument of masculinity (141); therefore, by teasing the feminine Piggy, the boys illustrate their flight from the feminine. The boys continually reject Piggy, subjugating him to ‘feminine’ roles, such as taking care of the “littluns.” Interested in more conventionally masculine exercises like hunting and exploring, the boys heed Piggy’s advice only when Ralph, who often echoes—or steals—Piggy’s ideas, speaks it. But more deeply, the boys ignore Piggy because his body and upbringing represent femininity. Piggy has no patriarchal figure (he mentions his father is dead), and he continuously refers to his auntie who has raised him. In the boys’ eyes, Piggy might as well be a girl. Women, Reynaud (2004) argues, are flesh with no brain (143). Therefore, even though Piggy’s reasoning may be correct, when he, for instance, insists on keeping the fire going, he sounds to the boys like an

old aunt pleading with them not to go out in the rain without their Wellingtons. As ‘masculine’ boys, they have no reason to listen to Piggy. Furthermore, if they were to listen to Piggy, they would risk being associated with the feminine themselves.

In contrast, Ralph has a naval commander for a father, is tall and strong and good looking, and throughout the first half of the novel, most of the boys, save Jack and his hunters, applaud Ralph’s words because, as Yeats would say, of the “manly pose” he strikes. Reason itself is not un-masculine—[Reynaud](#), for instance, states that part of masculinity is based on strength of reason (142)—but reason becomes un-masculine when the body voicing the reason has the form of a woman. By rejecting the feminine Piggy’s words of reason, the boys further illustrate Kimmel’s point that masculinity is, at least partly, the flight from the feminine.

Ultimately, the boys end up fleeing from everything associated with the feminine, for they do not just reject Piggy, but they reject Ralph, as well. Ralph is not just the only “biggun” who listens to Piggy, but he is the only one who has compassion for him (117). Ralph defends Piggy against Jack’s ruthless savagery and worries about him when he leaves Piggy alone. Ralph’s compassion for Piggy does not exactly fit the mold of masculinity, particularly when Ralph’s ideas are so parallel to Piggy’s. To a certain extent, Ralph’s compassion for Piggy can be seen as homoerotic, a notion which illustrates Ralph’s more feminine sympathies. The other boys, particularly Jack, do not lose sight of Ralph and Piggy’s ‘different’ relationship, teasing Ralph about how he worries about his precious Piggy (117-18). Ralph is also a daydreamer. Throughout the novel, he finds difficulty embracing the more primitive way of life the boys lead on the island, imagining peaceful, innocent times at his family’s country home (112), something which is in direct contrast to Jack and Roger who seem as if they would be perfectly happy if they were never rescued. [Reynaud \(2004\)](#) would argue that Ralph’s nostalgia for innocence represents a kind of femininity (142).

Regardless, Ralph is by no means as ‘feminine’ a boy as Piggy. He certainly displays more physically masculine traits than Piggy. He participates a few times in the hunts and in the various exploratory adventures on the island. The lure of the hunt even excites him (113). Yet, many of Ralph’s tendencies

align him with the feminine. . Importantly, Ralph’s concern with keeping the fire going shows how much he wants to escape, not just from the island, but from what [Kimmel \(2004\)](#) argues is masculinity’s “relentless test” (185). By prizing rescue over all else, Ralph subtly reveals that he is not up to the task of survival on the island and that he needs relief from the masculine burden of leading the boys in living there. Here Ralph’s flight is from the masculine. Even if the boys agree it is important to take steps to be rescued, they need a leader who will keep them alive on the island and ultimately reject Ralph as their leader in favor of the hunter, Jack. Though Ralph is by no means entirely un-masculine, he does embody many feminine traits. By rejecting Ralph, the boys take their final flight from the feminine.

Even more than just fleeing from the feminine, the boys establish more and more power *over* the feminine. No one on the island represents physical masculinity more than Jack Merridew. That he is the only character to have his last name known shows his portent. Red-headed, ugly, and freckled (20), Jack, with his band of choir-boys-turned-hunters, almost entirely rejects the ideal of heroic masculinity that Ralph at least partly represents and fully rejects the feminine role Piggy and Ralph embody. Golding’s physical description of Jack alludes to his inner character. His red hair connotes his fiery

temper, and his freckles reveal a lack of inner purity. With his ugliness and black cloak, he symbolizes a kind of adolescent Satan, and his choir, always in lock step behind him, becomes not unlike fallen angels. Though Jack is not elected chief, he, like a Marine sergeant, has control of the boys from the beginning (20). During the first pig hunt, Jack hesitates to kill a piglet “because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh” (31). Here, he

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realizes the enormous moral leap into the realm of violence, shrinking away from his masculine duty of killing the pig. But though he misses his chance, he already dreams of the “next time” (31). By making this choice to spill the blood of the pig, by becoming the

lead hunter, Jack firmly roots himself as the archetype of masculine strength and violence. He also does what he can to disrupt the ordered world of Piggy and Ralph. He continually questions their decrees and leads a hunting party instead of keeping the firing going (68). Importantly here, by not keeping the fire going, the fire being their one hope of rescue, Jack shows that he does not really want to be rescued, that this savage state fits his ideal of himself as a man. In this same scene, Jack hits Piggy, breaking his glasses. Piggy’s glasses had been used to start the fire, and they stand for

order and the hope of rescue. They also symbolize part of Piggy’s femininity. Kimmel (2004) argues that the “pre-oedipal boy identifies with mother, he sees *the world through mother’s eyes*” (187). By destroying Piggy’s glasses, Jack repudiates the feminine vision that handicaps him in his quest to become a man. Jack’s action not only furthers the point that he does not want to be saved, but it also illustrates his rebellion against the ideal of order and more crucially his revolt against the ‘other’—that is, the ideal of femininity.

The most notable example of the boys destroying the feminine occurs when Roger kills Piggy by pushing a boulder onto him. “Trapped behind the luminous wall of his myopia” (169)—that is both literally and figuratively—Piggy clings to his idea of order, shouting like his old auntie for the boys to stop “acting like a crowd of kids” (180). He is so far removed from Jack and Roger’s barbarous masculinity that he does not

see that the power of his precious reasoning, like the signal fire, died long ago. As the mayhem continues, Roger “with a sense of delirious abandonment” (180) cements his masculinity by crushing Piggy with a giant boulder. Reynaud argues that man “does his best to reject the ‘feminine’” (142). There can be no greater rejection than homicide.

Importantly, more than a symbol of heroic masculinity, Ralph survives as a symbol that the masculine flight from the feminine is continuous. As the boys cry at the end—a feminine reaction to their circumstance—the reader senses that the conflicts between masculinity and femininity that plagued the nameless island are not going away anytime soon. The boys, still not yet men, have yet to fully stifle all of their feminine tendencies. Even the officer who finds them continues to flee from the feminine. When hearing the boys’ cries, he is “moved and a little embarrassed” and then turns away so the boys can pull themselves together (202). The fact that he is moved shows a glimpse of his femininity. And by turning away from the crying boys, the officer illustrates his own flight from the feminine. Golding reveals here that as long as man survives—no matter his age—he must continually flee the feminine in order to keep his masculinity intact. The conflict is as unending as the sea surrounding the island, and the island’s anonymity itself suggests it could be any place and that the conflicts depicted there will happen again somewhere else.

Bushman and Haas (1997) tout the use of young adult literature in the classroom as “imperative;” it “serves young people in their struggle with identity, with their relationships with adults, and with their choices” (25). Thus, young adult literature acts as a guide through their journey into adulthood. Most often, according to Anderson, successful young adult literature contains themes that mirror the developmental interests and goals of student readers (as cited in Bushman and Haas 3). Citing Havighurst’s developmental tasks for individuals as a guide for themes in young adult literature, Bushman and Haas list “achieving a proper masculine or feminine social role” as one of the key developmental interests for young readers (8). A careful reading and analysis of *Holes*, *The Chocolate War*, and *Lord of the Flies* will allow students to learn how, traditionally, male coming of age has been portrayed as a flight from the feminine.

Students will, ideally, begin to debunk some of the standard ideals of masculinity, thereby achieving a more dynamic perspective of themselves and our society as a whole.

Nodelman (2002) asks a very important question about getting boys to analyze assumptions and conventions underlying the construction of masculinity. He writes, "How can this [analysis] occur when. [. . .] the act of seeing beyond almost inevitably demonizes what so many boys already have so much invested in?" (14) One must first begin to understand the dynamic nature of societal gender conventions, and be willing to explore how these conventions operate in literature. Nodelman suggests that by making masculinity "appear," that is to recognize its constructedness, we are on the way to thinking about and revising its implications (14). Thus, by using young adult literature and 'classic' texts, such as *Lord of the Flies*, that speak overtly to assumptions and conventions of masculinity, teachers and students can engage in dialogue that addresses the complex nature of being a boy/man and being a girl/woman. Rather than seeing gender as binaries, these texts help demonstrate how constructions of male and female depend on each other.

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