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Perception and Reality:

Examining the Representations of Adolescents in Young Adult Fiction

Young adult literature is not yet fifty-years old, and already, it has led to many different permutations and variations in the presentation of reading experiences for young people. From contemporary realistic novels to pure flights of fantasy, young adult fiction has transformed the landscape of what it means to be a teenager, and more importantly, how teenagers are perceived by themselves and the wider public. Particularly, their parents and teachers now view youngsters between the ages of 12 and 18, quite rightly, as adolescents just coming into their own and seeking an identity that speaks beyond their immediate chronological age.

What follows are three studies that demonstrate that the image of adolescents, though ever changing, is most reflective and enduring in the works of young adult fiction. Whether the books in question are depicting female protagonists, classic adolescent stereotypes, or vivid illustrations of adolescent behavior, this still emerging literary genre has much to say about how young people are conceptualized in

both fiction and nonfiction, and naturally, as well, in the real world. Thus, in reviewing these three important studies, we can learn much about what good secondary teaching can and should be.

On Representations of Young Adult Female Protagonists

In "Examining Representations of Young Adult Female Protagonists through Critical Race Feminism," 363-374), Eliane Rubinstein-Avila analyzes the ways in which most adolescent literature represents female teenagers. For the most part, the female protagonists are still overwhelmingly "white, middle–class and heterosexual." Yes, although young adult authors, writes Rubinstein-Avila, ascribe to their heroines such strong descriptors as "strong," "gutsy," "feisty," and "independent," the expectations of these female characters are still embedded within the expectations of a socially conservative and sexist patriarchy. More explicitly, the author insists, sexism is discussed only in isolation and not

as a factor related to race, class, gender and sexuality. "The broader social structures in which sexism is embedded and reproduced are often ignored," (Rubinstein-Avila, 363).

Young adult literature has evolved considerably since its early

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1950s beginnings, distinguishing itself from children's literature with less predictable and more complex plots. Issues such as identity formation, tensions in relationships among youth or between youth and adults, substance use and abuse, love, social justice, and more recently, crime, racism, sexuality, and teen pregnancy abound in young adult novels, lending them a relevancy and immediacy that is seldom seen with such prevalence and urgency in children's literature. Truly, as Rubinstein-Avila asserts, young adult literature, and thus, indirectly, adolescent protagonists have come into their own in recent years and in turn, the examination of their actions and reactions to twists and turns in their daily lives as revealed on the printed page. Still, while "professional literature has continuously explored the role of female protagonists in children's fiction over the years," the author writes, "far less attention has been given to the representation of older adolescent female protagonists," (Rubinstein-Avila, 363).

The expansion of young adult literature, as Rubinstein-Avila writes, has led to the rise of several subgenres—for example, young adult novels about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered protagonists. The result, as the author insists, is the representation of female protagonists in compartmentalized subgenres (Rowbotham, 1989; Hayn & Sherrill, 1996; Johnson et. al., 1999). Unlike the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which was dominated by white, middle-class, heterosexual women and largely "ignored the plight of non-mainstream women—that is women of color,

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poor women, lesbians, bisexual women, and women for whom several of these categories overlap," (Rubinstein-Avila, 365), today, many young adult novels deal with these non-mainstream women directly.

Still, an examination of professional literature about young adult literature, as examined by Rubinstein-Avila, reveals that a majority of female protagonists recommended across the professional literature (literature by scholars, educators, and reviewers) are still white and members of the middle class. Moreover, Rubinstein-Avila found a lack of intersection between gender, class, race, and sexual identities across all the recommended young adult

subgenres. Simply, she writes, the female protagonists are either of color or gay, but seldom both (Rubinstein-Avila, 366).

As Rubinstein-Avila reveals, in a review of young adult literature, Jenkins (1998) found that only about 3% of the thirty-four gay/lesbian novels published between 1993 and 1997 addressed issues of race, ethnicity and class. Novels such as *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), in which the central plot revolves around the adolescent male protagonist's black mother and her sexual relationship with a white woman, is the rare exception even across the LGBT genre (Jenkins, 1998). In fact, Rubinstein-Avila underscores how in her research she discovered that publishers are reluctant to publish adolescent novels that deal with multiple, complex, realistic issues such as race relations, prejudice, discrimination, and homophobia, which are deemed of limited marketability (Taxel, 2002, 179).

More explicitly, Rubinstein-Avila demonstrates that of the many young adult female protagonists who are "hailed across the professional literature as "strong," "feisty," "hardy," and "risk takers"(Karp, et. al, 1998), few, if any, threaten patriarchy or challenge mainstream societal norms," (Rubinstein- Avila, 367). Moreover, she writes, most of the female protagonists recommended across professional literature "do little to transcend, stretch, or blur acceptable, mainstream gender boundaries and traditional societal expectations," (Rubinstein-Avila, 367). The majority of female characters depicted in young adult

novels, she writes, still "dutifully walk along narrow and restrictive gender boundaries," (Rubinstein-Avila, 367).

As Rubinstein-Avila writes, the definition of femininity as explored in young adult literature has always been a perplexing question. Didactic literature of the late 1880s provided explicit definitions of femininity. Being a woman was a "career" in itself (Rowbotham, 1989, 12). In their analysis of young adult sports fiction published between 1970 and the 1990s,

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In their analysis of young adult sports fiction published between 1970 and the 1990s, Kriegh and Kane (1997) found that tensions around femininity appeared as a dominant theme. Even with female names shortened to appear as masculine names (Mike for Michelle, Bobby for Barbara), teenage girls in young adult sports fiction were still more likely to worry about being viewed as androgynous—that is, not feminine enough.

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Questioning female protagonists' sexual nature and sexual orientation, insists Rubinstein-Avila, is certainly not new, Citing Kane (1998), she writes that the pressure to affirm young adult female protagonists' heterosexuality is similar to those faced by female athletes in the real world of sports. Initially, she writes, women in sports who were lesbians often protected themselves by feigning amorous relationships with men in order to ward off any "concern" of lesbianism.

Simply, while young adult female protagonists may no longer be depicted as "damsels in distress" (White, 1986), a great many, asserts Rubinstein-Avila, are still portrayed as "selfless beings who conform to expected gender-appropriate roles, even at the expense of their own desires," (Rubinstein-Avila, 368). She points out that Younger (2003) draws a direct correlation between particular types of female bodies and certain personal characteristics as shared by female characters in young adult novels. For example, Younger writes that female protagonists who are thin (i.e. attractive) are more likely to be portrayed as responsible, ethical (i.e. monogamous), powerful and assertive (sexually), while heavier females

are more likely to be viewed as promiscuous, sexually passive and powerless (Younger, 2003).

In her examination of scholarly research on young adult literature, Rubinstein-Avila concludes that, with few exceptions, most contributors to the professional literature fail to "talk back" (hooks, 1989) or to question sexism. As she indicates, the model that most academic research highlights is definitely still white, middle-class, and heterosexual and is still expected to demonstrate acceptable behavior for a young woman within a conservative patriarchy. With few exceptions, Rubinstein-Avila concludes, "my analysis reveals that this body of work privileges a traditional version of female subjectivities," (Rubinstein-Avila, 371).

Rubinstein-Avila's findings illustrate that sexism, in both young adult literature and in professional literature, is most often discussed in isolation from racism, classism, homophobia, and gender discrimination. "Sexism across the professional literature is addressed most uncritically—as an individual rather than a structural phenomenon— and thus ignores the institutions through which sexism is reproduced," (Rubinstein-Avila, 372). Few reviewers of young adult fiction, the author concludes, are critical of the large institutional obstacles young female protagonists face, and fewer still highlight in any substantial discussion the cumulative discrimination faced by female protagonists of color, especially those who are poor, working class, and/or queer.

Finally, Rubinstein-Avila insists the task for educators who promote

young adult literature is to recognize that simply reading books that promote diversity is only helpful in exploring ethnocentrism, racism, and sexism when these works are read and discussed within context. "Engaging directly with youth requires that we reflect upon how our backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, funds of knowledge and ideologies shape our social constructions and subjectivities so that we recognize how these factors affect the types of texts we select and recommend, the types of discussions we promote and the research questions we pose," (Rubinstein-Avila, 372). Certainly, this is a point worth considering.

On Institutionalizing S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*

The Outsiders is often cited with marking the emergence of young adult literature. It was written by Susan Hinton when she was fifteen-years-old and was intended to represent honestly the difficulty faced in many young adult lives. In "Institutionalizing *The Outsiders*: YA Literature, Social Class, and the American Faith in Education" (*Children's Literature in Education* 38 (2007) 87-101), Eric L. Tribunella argues that despite the novel's provocative critique of the problems of social class, *The Outsiders* was readily institutionalized as part of school reading lists and educational curricula throughout the United States. Suddenly, the author asserts, the power of "its punch" was muted by its social acceptance.

Tribunella attributes the novel's universal acquisition into the secondary education curricula

because it offers a "palliative to the problems it depicts" (Tribunella, 87). The protagonist, Ponyboy, Tribunella writes, "represents the novel itself as an intervention into those problems, but it works to reaffirm a notion of rugged individualism and a faith in American education," (Tribunella, 87). These lessons, the author contends, ultimately soften the novel's class critique and render it safe for educational institutions.

The popularity of *The Outsiders* is firmly realized as one of the best-selling young adult novels of all times. *Publisher's Weekly* ranks *The Outsiders* second to only E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* in its list of all-time bestselling children's paperbacks (*Publishers Weekly*, 2007). Its longevity is the result, no doubt, of its frequent inclusion on summer reading lists and its ever-present use in secondary school classrooms. The novel's accessibility to young adults—its straightforward language and plot and acceptably sanitary references to sex and violence—undoubtedly increased its appeal to secondary teachers. You could teach *The Outsiders* and feel safe that you would not offend.

Yet, Tribunella argues, *The Outsiders* appeal on school reading lists suggests "something about the blunted edge of its class critique," (Tribunella, 88). The novel, Tribunella insists, tantalizes audiences with its acknowledgement of social class as a problem, but does little to question the reasons for social class in America. Social ills are seen as teenage problems, not societal problems, and they can be overcome by hard work, gritty determination, and

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unmitigated compassion.

Tribunella insists that the push to represent the realistic problems of adolescents led to young adult literature that is "caught up in the lure of didacticism," (Tribunella, 89). Responding to the lack of realism in fiction for adolescents, Hinton and others began writing novels in the 1960s that they thought would embrace the honest difficulties faced by young people. In other words, focusing on social problems and how to deal with them was adopted as a strategy both to appeal to young adults and to distance YA fiction from the romantic and benign writing of the preceding three decades (1940s, 50s, 60s).

Thus, the new realism of young adult literature, Tribunella asserts, also ushered in novels that propose 'solutions' to the very social problems they reveal. *The Outsiders* became emblematic of this new

genre. In fact, as the novel ends, we learn that Ponyboy, the novel's brooding and perceptive adolescent protagonist is submitting the story we have just read as make-up work for his English class. Thus, Ponyboy's moral urgency to share the lessons he has learned through his experiences becomes the story of the novel and not the underlying problems of social class and economic injustice that the novel obliquely depicts.

To be sure, Tribunella writes, *The Outsiders* has had a significant impact on adolescent reading and young adult literature. At the time of its release, S. E. Hinton opened social wounds that had rarely been portrayed in fiction geared for adolescent readers. Decades before the rash of school shootings in the late 1990s, Hinton was showing the terror that some children and adolescents were living with because of conflicts between rival cliques and between youths who occupy different class positions.

Physical and emotional trauma, underscores Tribunella, is coupled by *The Outsiders'* more insidious and overwhelming depiction of the alienation of young people in an age of modernity and capitalism. With their parents dead, the teenagers in this story who are brothers that live together, existing in a constant state of anxiety as they must grapple with adult problems and decisions with little or no emotional and financial support. The circumstances of the family unit (comprised of Darry, Sodapop, and Ponyboy), asserts Tribunella, means that these boys live with the increasingly inescapable force of the law. Still, as Tribunella notes, no representative

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of the law directly appears in the text, despite the murdering of teenagers in the novel's storyline; rather the law remains a shadowy force that "trails the boys, that pervades the events of the narrative, and that structures the relationships of these young adults," (Tribunella, 92).

Thus, as a result, *The Outsiders* is not, "a terribly threatening novel," (Tribunella, 95). The novel presents a social dilemma, young boys resorting to violence to grapple with their own fear, insecurities, and alienation with modern life and the problems associated with an underprivileged social class, without "raising any serious flags about radical social reform or revolution," (Tribunella, 95). The social cure, as Pomyboy demonstrates, is to return to school and turn his "social nightmare," the death of his parents, friends, and enemies, into an educational

assignment, and what he composes turns out to be the novel itself.

The ending becomes, as Tribunella insists, cathartic, but not realistic. After all, as Tribunella writes, "this individual catharsis does not itself address or intervene in the larger social processes at work to produce or sustain the problem of class inequality and alienation," (Tribunella, 96). True, the reader might read the novel and become aware of something to which he or she was previously unaware, but this simple awareness, does not address the real underlying social ills that pervade *The Outsiders*. "The novel at its conclusion elevates the figure of the individual," (Tribunella, 96) within a particular social-economic system that itself is so toxic.

Put simply, Tribunella writes, *The Outsiders* glorifies "getting a good education" as the answer to society's problems without discussing the reasons for such social inequities. *The Outsiders*, as the author insists, has been folded so comfortably into the secondary school curricula because the novel advocates, indirectly, the maintenance and reproduction of the social order (Tribunella, 99). The novel is "an endorsement of American education and that the obfuscations of the novel work to mystify further the problems it seems to expose," (Tribunella, 99). Hinton does not involve the particulars of the boys' social circumstance and/or the legalities of their desperate circumstances, either as past events or as events unfold, but instead, presents the social dilemmas in emotional and real terms with little or no social commentary.

This is not to diminish *The Outsiders* as a powerful read and its rightful place as the progenitor of young adult literature. It will continue to be enjoyed by readers of all ages for many years to come and remain a mainstay of the secondary curricula. Yet, what Tribunella argues, the work must be seen for what it is, a young adult problem novel that addresses a social ill, but does not question the social order. Instead, in its own way, the work asks important questions about the lives of adolescents and how their individual problems magnify the social inequities of our times.

On Analyzing the Relevance of Graphic Novels

With the emergence of technology (from early video games to sophisticated Internet social networking), much has been written about the decline in reading, and naturally, the troubling emergent readers in today's ever pressing "I must have it now" generation. In "Reinventing the Book Club: Graphic Novels as Educational Heavyweights," (*Knowledge Quest* 36.3 (2008): 44-48.), Jonathan Seyfried writes that trying to impart the joy of reading to adolescents feels like "pushing religion onto perfectly content worshippers of American Idol," (Seyfried, 45). Yet, as Seyfried notes, as if responding to a distress call, a new kind of book has emerged on the literary scene: the graphic novel. "This revitalized genre has not only saved the day for recreational reading," proclaims Seyfried, "it has also turned out to

be a heavyweight in the teaching of advanced themes in literature and visual literacy," (Seyfried, 45).

With graphic novels sales estimated at $300 million in 2006 (*Publishers Weekly,* 2007), a group of teachers at Brandeis Hillel Day School in San Francisco conducted a case study on the use of graphic novels as an elective curriculum alternative for middle school students. The study depicts in great detail how the author introduced his students to the graphic novel, its relevance to developing reading comprehension skills, and its viability and relevance as a legitimate body of reading material.

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school students, a few did not know what the term "graphic novel" meant, while the rest were known for spending their weekends hanging out at their local bookstore, devouring the Japanese form of graphic novels best known as *manga.* Manga is the Japanese word for comics and print cartoons. In Japan, manga books are widely read by people of all ages and thus include a broad range of topics, including action-adventure, sexuality, romance, comedy, mystery, sports and games, historical drama, science fiction and fantasy, and of all things, commerce and business. Manga has become increasingly popular worldwide; in the year 2006 alone, the United States manga market earned $175–200 million.

Knowing its popularity, Seyfried proceeded to select a graphic novel that he felt would be appropriate for his middle school students. As he sorted through recommended lists and talked with the staff at a local comic book store, he found himself in a quandary as to what graphic novel to choose. Most, he learned, were too gruesome and graphic for his younger students. Finally, Seyfried selected *Persepolis*, a popular graphic novel that contains violent imagery, but depicts the violence in a more cartoonish style.

At the outset, Seyfried recognized that his students understood immediately the impact of graphic novels. Using pictures alone, Seyfried's students were able to discern that a comic book's tone is distinct from prose fiction. Unlike prose fiction, comic books show the passage of time visually, as the reader moves from one panel to the

next. As a result, his students constantly amazed him at how quickly they responded to the graphic novel's jokes, innuendoes, and conclusions. To Seyfried, it seemed that the immediacy of the pictures enabled them to connect to the story, more so, than he had ever seen, when his students read text alone.

To supplement his study of the graphic novel, Seyfried continued to

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use readings, primarily from *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993) and its companion *Making Comics* (McCloud, 2006). In both works, McCloud outlines a theory of comics as an art form and a mode of storytelling while modeling them in compelling drawings. Seyfried had "animated discussions about the cultural and social implications of these texts" (Seyfried, 46). Students were most intrigued with the role of visual storytelling in our visually saturated culture. As they examined the graphic novel *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003), Seyfried's students discussed how the novel's graphic images contributed to what was being presented to the reader.

Beyond discussion of *Persepolis*, Seyfried's students studied Gene Yang's National Book Award-nominated graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (FirstSecond, 2006). In this graphic novel, the main character, Jin, is frustrated with being a cultural outsider in suburban-America. Jin begins to see himself as an alter-ego, the blue-eyed, blond-haired, All-American boy, "Danny." In turn, this character is haunted by a character named Chin-Kee, a cousin of his who embodies all the stereotypes of the Chinese people. Seyfried contends that the mere visualization of the characters, Jin and Chin-Kee, through the graphic illustrations impacted how his students felt about how these principle characters are depicted and represented, an important aspect of visual literacy. As Seyfried writes, "I was stunned that my students could learn to deeply question how cultures are shown and seen," (Seyfried, 47).

In addition to being an excellent exercise in the understanding the presentation of race and ethnicity visually, Seyfried writes that his students' reading of *American Born Chinese* enhanced his readers' "observation skills." This graphic novel consists, as Seyfried indicates, of three separate and intertwining narratives which, together, build a complex and extended metaphor, resulting in a poignant and defining ending to this seemingly straightforward read. Seyfried encourages his students to read "graphic novels slowly" so as to read and absorb all the nuances of the text. "Successful readers of graphic novels learn that rereading and slow reading support close

observation, a necessary skill of visual literacy," (Seyfried, 47).

Finally, as a culminating activity, Seyfried assigned his middle school students to work on their own individual, forty-panel graphic novels. The intent was to have students apply their understanding of the basic elements of the visual storytelling to their own graphic narrative. Using computer software (Mac OS), they created their visual stories, enriching their experience and consolidating what they had learned as readers.

For these middle school students, graphic novels provided a rich and rewarding literary experience at a time when the duration, vocabulary, and style of prose narratives often cannot. "My students crave stories that they can relate to," writes Seyfried, "written in a language they can understand, with jokes they can get, and metaphors that are clear to them," (Seyfried, 47). As one of his seventh graders marveled, "We didn't just read the story; we read the story behind the story," (Seyfried, 47).

Conclusion

All three studies examine the perceptions of adolescents and adolescent stereotypes through the lens of young adult literature. With care and precision, the researchers demonstrate that what often is perceived to be true, is sometimes quite contradictory, and thus, results in depictions of young adults as we would like them to be, and, not as they really are. Only close examinations of young adult novels, in historical, psychological and social contexts, can begin to

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underscore the power of young adult novels to illustrate both the commonplace and the exception. For this alone, these studies are worth considering.

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