

What's Going On inside of Me?

Emergent Female Sexuality and Identity Formation in Young Adult Literature

Growing from a girl into a woman can be a truly traumatizing event. As bodies mature and children become adults, girls are confronted with almost terrifying questions: What is happening to me? What am I becoming? Who am I? Of these changes, the most dramatic may be the growing recognition of oneself as a sexual being. In ways that they have never experienced, adolescent girls begin to see themselves as a gender, feminine in contrast to masculine, part of a distinct group that is markedly different from the other half of the world.

As teenage girls begin to adopt the persona of femininity, the implications of becoming a woman involve a particular kind of vulnerability. In addition to forcing the navigation of identity formation—attempting to adopt womanhood and leave behind childhood—developing sexuality contains the possibility of becoming the victim of sexual abuse. Nearly 11% of all women will be forced into an unwanted sexual experience by the end of high school (Center for Disease Control, 2008).

However, statistics aren't the only indication of this very real danger. Rape as a major concern for young women is evident in the number of recent Young Adult (YA) novels that address the issue. YA literature is exposing the issues of sexual trauma in manners that suggest that it is both a significant concern for adolescent girls and a crucial element in the shaping of their understanding of themselves. From the half-thrill and near-excitement of recognizing that one is no longer in control to the horror of being raped to the guilt and mental breakdown of the abused,

multiple forms of YA literature are detailing the fear and vulnerability of the transition from childhood into womanhood and providing a point of connection for readers experiencing the change.

YA Literature as Therapy

The vast and growing market of YA literature suggests that teenagers can make meaning of their worlds through books. As Feinstein, Bynner, and Duckworth (2006) suggest, engaging in leisure activities such as reading is crucial in helping adolescents make the transition to becoming adults. Logically then, those texts that discuss issues of trauma contribute to identity formation in abuse victims. The content of trauma-texts has

“real life” applications. The concept of bibliotherapy—the utilitarian incorporation of a pathologically significant or sympathetic text—has sanctioned the production of a number of young adult novels discussing sensitive topics such as rape, incest, and drug abuse. (Pattee, 2004, p. 246)

This suggests that the very act of reading can be beneficial for students who have personally experienced sexual abuse or know someone who has. Texts that discuss sexual acts can be a type of “therapy” for readers, and this therapy has pushed forward the publication of these texts.

As part of this movement toward books that openly address sexuality, four texts stand out as significant in shaping young adults' identities: Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), Cohn and Levithan's *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (2007), Anderson's *Speak* (1999), and

McCormick's *Sold* (2008). (Text summaries of these titles are found in the sidebar on p. 7.) These books were selected for exploration here for several reasons, including their popularity, their uniqueness, and the places they have assumed in the canon of YAL. Though they cover a span of nearly ten years, they fall into three significant categories: fantasy, fiction, and reality. These categories are quickly becoming delineated in the realm of YA Literature, especially as this generation of teenagers is showing a prominent preference for fiction regarding the paranormal. These four texts—though they center on the same topic—are distinct in their modes and methods, allowing us a view of the wide spectrum of sexual-oppression literature.

Fantasy

Of all modern young adult novels, few can be said to have the wide-ranging popularity of Meyer's *Twilight* series. At one point holding all top four spots on the *New York Times* bestseller list, these novels explore the story of forbidden love between a human girl and a vampire boy. Isolated, introspective Bella falls in love with mysterious, undying Edward, and together they embark on a journey that pushes both the boundaries of believability and the limits of human (or vampire) emotion. Although the tale presents a number of classic Romeo and Juliet-style tropes, the story doesn't suggest that a consuming passion for another fallible being is an unhealthy or even dangerous occupation. Rather, Meyer's tale seems to indicate that completely losing oneself in a relationship is the pathway to ultimate happiness. Bella, who spends four novels begging Edward to turn her into a vampire, is willing to reject her family, friends, and spiritual connections in order to live forever as Edward's bride.

It is no surprise that a story of such intensity appeals to those caught up in the *sturm und drang* of adolescent sexuality. It is during adolescence that "an individual, for the first time, perceives her/himself as a sexual being"; furthermore, this identity formation is powerful enough to shape "intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social phenomena for all individuals" (Chapman & Werner-Wilson, 2008, p. 508). This emerging super-charged sexuality between Edward and Bella shapes the course of Meyer's *Twilight* saga. Bella desperately wants to make love to Edward, who is resistant both because of his Victorian-era morals

Text Summaries of YA Novels Dealing with Identity

Twilight saga: A four-book series about a vampire, Edward, who falls for Bella, an ordinary teenager growing up in the Pacific Northwest. While Bella wants Edward to make her a vampire as well, joining the two for eternity, Edward struggles with the morality of turning a human into an immortal. The love between the two is passionate, often crossing over to obsessive. Because she is aware of the existence of vampires, Bella becomes a target for others like Edward. She must choose between her werewolf, yet mortal, friends and the life she wants with Edward.

Nick and Nora's Infinite Playlist: Nora, the daughter of a music mogul, meets Nick, a player in an underground garage band, and the two find themselves spending a night wandering throughout New York. As the night progresses, each reveals truths about their inner pain and struggles. While both have been hurt before, their journey draws them together in a way that is both healing and intense.

Speak: The summer before her first high school year, Melinda is raped at a party by an upper classman. Afraid to speak out, both from fear of the rapist and fear of not being believed, Melinda slowly begins to stop speaking, eventually resorting to complete silence. While her parents and friends become more frustrated, Melinda immerses herself in art to try and restore her sense of self and the voice she once had.

Sold: Written in verse, *Sold* follows the story of Lakshmi, a Pakistani girl sold into slavery—supposedly to become a servant, but really to become a sex slave at a brothel. Lakshmi is kept plied with drugs, pulling her into an almost hypnotic state as she is forced to service client after client. As Lakshmi gradually becomes aware of her surroundings, the horror into which she has been forced takes over. Her only hope is an American man who claims he can get her out, but, betrayed by every man she's ever known, Lakshmi's hopes are dim.

(literally, Edward was originally a teenager in the early 20th century) and because the intensity of his desire could injure her. Edward tells Bella, “I have to mind my actions every moment that we’re together so that I don’t hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident [. . .]. If I was too hasty . . . if for one second I wasn’t paying attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your

skull by mistake” (p. 310). Neither the intensity of her passion nor her vulnerability at Edward’s hands seems to affect Bella. Instead, she “dream[s] about being with [him] forever” (p. 498).

That teenagers are enthralled with romantic stories is nothing new. Part of the wonder of becoming an adult is the awareness of the pleasures that can

be had from relationships with the opposite sex. In trying such awareness to reality, Finders (1999) suggests that literature is powerful enough to create “real” spaces for identity formation. The information in the text, through interaction with the reader, allows the reader to apply the meaning from the reading to actual relationships.

Meyer’s work, however, is significant in its acknowledgement that, for teenagers, these relationships can border on the obsessive. These texts validate the all-consuming nature of a girl’s first love. Just as early relationships can seem like the end-all be-all when one is a teenager—drawing hearts on notebooks and swearing “I can’t live without him!”—Bella’s adoration for Edward takes over her life. The potential difficulty of Meyer’s work is that, while the average teenager eventually gains perspective on the nature of the world and the place of relationships within it, Bella and Edward are willing to sacrifice everything for their love and the hope of living happily ever after.

(Spoiler alert!) Through their ultimate success of eternity as vampires, Meyer suggests that such a course is not only wise, it is the way to happiness. Though Bella is perpetually in danger of Edward losing self-control, her recklessness wins out in the end. Girls who identify with Bella’s adoration for Edward

may also feel that total abandonment to the objects of their affection is the appropriate response and act accordingly. In Bella’s case, submission to Edward would be a loss of her own humanity. Unlike the other books discussed here, Bella’s relationship with Edward is not a human one; she loves something with a sexuality entirely different from her own. The fact that Edward is a vampire, a being who traditionally subsists on the murder of humans, is compounded by the fact that his sexuality is much more intense than hers. This intensity forms a bond between them that is paranormal, in the truest sense of the word. It is this that makes the infatuation so strong and that prompts Bella to give up the most ingrained part of her nature—her humanness.

However, be the characters human or inhuman, the danger of thoughtless infatuation is nothing compared to the problems of a relationship constantly hovering on the edge of abuse. Edward spends three novels attempting to avoid hurting Bella with his superior strength and, when they finally do have sex in the series’ final novel, the intensity of his passion does harm her: “large, purplish bruises were beginning to blossom” across much of her body (*Breaking Dawn*, 2008, p. 89). Bella’s response to this is not to become angry at Edward. Rather, she begs him for more. Consciously or unconsciously, the text suggests that if one loves enough, “abuse” can be re-termed “passion.”

Fiction

Unfortunately, the reality of emergent sexuality is that it is often much darker. Other, non-fantasy texts suggest that engaging in relationships or coming into womanhood is as much a dangerous pursuit as it is an exciting one. In *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist*, released as a film in 2008, Rachel Cohn and David Levithan follow two teenagers as they spend an insane and wonderful night adventuring across Manhattan’s underground music scene. As the two come to learn more about each other, they discover that they are “musical soulmate[s]” (p. 181) and invest all of their angsty and repressed teenage emotion in each other.

Though Nick and Norah ultimately find happiness in each other, neither came to this out of positive relationship experiences. Nick had recently been betrayed by his ex, and Norah had been used and dumped by her first boyfriend. For Norah especially, this experience had caused her to be distrustful of

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men. Cohn (who wrote the Norah chapters) indicates that Norah's ex-boyfriend Tal had pushed her into sex before she was ready and had manipulated her emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Norah, who had abandoned herself to Tal in Bella-esque fashion, readily gave into his demands, thinking that Tal was her world. Though her relationship with Tal is over by the night detailed in the novel, Norah has incredible difficulty trusting males and is resistant to giving herself over to her relationship with Nick.

Like Meyer, Cohn presents a girl altered by an obsessive relationship. Cohn, however, details the potential dangers and inherent uncertainty in such activities. Norah, who had effectively defined herself in terms dictated by Tal, lost much of her individuality. Since the activity of reading has "been described as a prime context for adolescents to [. . .] formulate a personal identity" (Coatsworth et al., 2005, p. 361), adolescent readers are likely to understand Norah's position, especially those who have already been injured by a disturbed early relationship. Her hesitancy and regret upon entering into new relationships parallel those emotions experienced by an adolescent's post-first love. Furthermore, the pain that Norah undergoes could serve both as a touchstone for familiarity or a warning to those in similar relationships.

Reality

Unfortunately, the sad reality is that many adolescent girls will be forced into relational and sexual experiences that they don't want. Though the relational danger is presented as thrilling in the Twilight saga and a memory in *Nick and Norah*, the reality of rape and sexual abuse is detailed in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Patricia McCormick's *Sold*. In *Speak*, the emotional destruction that comes post-rape is painted through the story of Melinda Sordino, a ninth-grader who begins high school hiding the secret of her abuse. Melinda's inner turmoil manifests itself in her inability to speak, first about her rape, but as the story grows, about anything at all. Though many of the characters are exaggerated in order to emphasize the intensity of Melinda's trauma, the pain of Melinda's reality is palpable. "My head is killing me, my throat is killing me, my stomach bubbles with toxic waste," Melinda tells the reader. "I just want to sleep. A coma would be nice. Or amnesia. Anything, just to get rid of this, these thoughts, whispers in my mind. Did he rape my

head, too?" (p. 165).

In Anderson's text, Melinda has lost the identity she had before the rape. She is, as Erikson suggested, engaging in selective repudiation, a method by which one identity (Melinda's pre-rape self) has been replaced by another (her mute, post-rape self) due to the incompatibility of the two (Schachter, 2004). The process by which she creates a new identity for herself works both as a plotline in itself and as a metaphor for the struggles of all teenagers engaged in the metamorphosis of adolescence.

Similarly, *Sold* tells of the gradual breakdown and internal destruction of a Nepalese girl sold as a sex-slave in India. From Lakshmi's simple (though not easy) life in a village in the Himalayas, she is taken to the city where she quickly learns a new reality of sexuality—being sold as a prostitute. The horror that she initially experiences gives way to a dejected acceptance as she forces herself to fight for clients, endure the abuse of the madam, and ultimately take the risks that might lead to freedom.

Of all the transitions discussed in this article, Lakshmi's is the most abrupt and brutal. She has no knowledge of her oppressors—she hasn't seen them before and cannot focus her anger or betrayal on a single person. Those around her can't help her as they are all victims of the same abuse. And, unlike the other girls discussed here, Lakshmi has no hope for freedom or for the future. The torture that those girls experience unwillingly once, or twistedly willingly on a regular basis, becomes Lakshmi's entire reality. She becomes nothing but sex.

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ality as an incredibly risky business. As girls develop, their femaleness becomes a liability that endangers them. Though they are not actively seeking relationships, such as Bella and Norah did, Melinda and Lakshmi become victims simply because they are women.

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Both novels suggest that growing up female comes with an inherent liability, making it a fearful event. For readers learning to understand their sexuality, these texts either shape an awareness of current dangers or act as catharsis for those who have already experienced similar events. Fortunately, female readers are not simply looking passively at the texts. Hubler (2000) argues that readers “actively construct the

meanings of the texts that they read,” causing them to reject the concept of passive, powerless females while still allowing female-centric texts to “play a role in their construction of female identity” (p. 90).

Looking to the Future

As we look to the future of teenage girls exploring their sexuality, we must recognize that multiple forms of media are bringing it further into the open. Digital media is removing some of the stigma associated with talking about sex and sexuality. And, fortunately for teachers and readers, this means more YA literature focused on sexual repression and abuse—literature that can, as has been suggested, provide readers with support and perhaps a note of hope. (For a list of suggested titles, see “Additional Readings in YAL” on p. 12.)

With this transparency come texts that look even deeper into highly illicit sexual abuse. In *This Gorgeous Game* (2010), Freitas writes about Olivia, a high school writer taken under the tutelage of a highly published and respected writer who also happens to be a priest. Gradually, the mentor relationship breaks down, as the priest wants far more of Olivia than he should. Olivia’s sexual abuse *appears* to come not only from an individual, then, but with the backing of

the entire church. To stand up and speak out against such an attitude is, for her, nearly as impossible as it is for Melinda in *Speak*.

In Hand’s novel *Illyria* (2010), the ultimate forbidden sexual encounter occurs—a relationship between family members. The magical-realist novel traces the falling in love and intense sexuality of cousins Madeline and Rogan, and his eventual betrayal and rejection of her. By the conclusion, Madeline has wasted her life on the memory of a single sexual relationship, one where her body may have been her lover’s only desire. As the discussion of sexuality as a forbidden object—one that silences—becomes more prominent, fiction will follow.

Implications for Teachers

As teachers, one of the first things we must do is to know our students and be aware of what occurs outside of the classroom. The warning signs of sexual abuse are many, and educators need to be aware of and seek help for students who may be experiencing such violence. (For further information on identifying and helping victims of sexual abuse, see the sidebar on p. 11). However, our literary responsibilities are significant as well. When we suggest novels, we must *know* our students and put the right books in the right hands. While a girl who has never been raped might be able to read *Speak* in an empathetic, albeit distanced, manner, a girl (or boy—males can also be victims of assault, though not as frequently) who has experienced abuse may find that she is not ready to read a book like *Speak*. Another student, having experienced a similar situation, may find in *Speak* the courage and healing to speak out about her experiences. Thus, teachers must be familiar with the nature of their students and suggest books carefully and with great responsibility. It is true that in schools where over a hundred students pass through a classroom in a day, this is a difficult proposition, but it is by no means an impossible one.

We must also temper romance with reality. In our teachings of any book, it is crucial that the celebration of love never take leave of the celebration of rationality. To follow one’s heart is a wonderful message, but it must be tempered with a reminder to always move forward with at least some rational thought. When we book talk, assign reports, or form small groups for

reading, we need to strike a careful balance between upholding the romantic and encouraging critical thought. In a world where darkness seems prevalent, an idealistic escape is a wonderful thing, but we must be careful not to let it turn quixotic, or even dangerous.

In the end, all four novels finish on a note of hope. In an ALAN interview with Laurie Halse Anderson (High, 2010), the interviewer notes that the author has a “moral code of including hope in her stories [and to do so] is a fulfilled responsibility” (p. 71). Bella and Edward live happily ever after; Nick and Norah overcome their hang-ups enough to begin a relationship; Melinda speaks out about her rape; Lakshmi is rescued by an American goodwill association. Whether or not this lines up with the reality of the teenage experience, the “power and terror of changing so fast that your bones literally ache” (Engberg, 2005, p. 1790), must be countered with hope.

Further text-specific research needs to be done to determine quantifiable patterns of female student responses to these novels. What can be suggested is that, regardless of how they arrive at their conclu-

sions, the novels propose that the world is not, after all, a completely dejected place. Despite the uncertainty, pain, and even destruction that may come through sexual development, girls can and will continue to live their lives. Perhaps it is from this that critics may take comfort. If girls are shaping their identities from texts, no matter how dark or dangerous those texts might be, collectively their message is one of survival and, out of survival, hope. At the ends of these novels, and many others like them, we can see the successful transition into femininity and confidence. Girls are able to embrace themselves as sexual beings and let go of the fear and abuse that has been inflicted upon them. They are survivors. And, as we have all experienced, to survive adolescence is all that any of us can ask.

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Resources to Identify and Help Victims of Sexual Abuse

The following is a list of sources provided by the Center for Disease Prevention that discuss sexual abuse—both of students and adults—in detail. They provide descriptions of warning signs and information on where and how to seek help for one’s students:

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network Hotline
www.rainn.org or (800) 656-HOPE

National Sexual Violence Resource Center
www.nsvrc.org

Violence against Women Network (VAWnet)
www.vawnet.org

Prevention Connection
www.preventconnect.org

STOP IT NOW!
www.stopitnow.org

References

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- Center for Disease Control. (2008). Sexual violence. *Center for Disease Control Online*. Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/SV-Datasheet-a.pdf.
- Chapman, E. N., & Werner-Wilson, R. J. (2008). Does positive youth development predict adolescent attitudes about sexuality? *Adolescence*, 43(171), 505–523.
- Coatsworth, J. D., Sharp, E.H., Palen, L., Darling, N. D., Cumsille, P., & Marta, E. (2005). Exploring adolescent self-defining leisure activities and identity experiences across three countries. *International Journal of Behavior Development* 29, 361–370.
- Cohn, R., & Levithan, D. *Nick and Norah’s infinite playlist*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Engberg, G. (2005, June 1). On the verge: Puberty in fiction about girls. *Booklist*, 1790–1791.
- Feinstien, L., Bynner, J., & Duckworth, K. (2006). Young people’s leisure contexts and their relation to adult outcomes. *Journal of Youth Studies* 9, 305–327.
- Finders, M. (1999). Raging hormones: Stories of adolescence and implications for teacher preparation. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42, 252–264.
- Freitas, D. (2010). *This gorgeous game*. New York, NY: Frances Foster Books.
- Hand, E. (2010). *Illyria*. New York, NY: Viking.
- High, L. O. (2010). Cracks of light in the darkness: Images of hope in the work of Laurie Halse Anderson and an interview with the author. *ALAN Review*, 38(1), 64–71.

- Hubler, A. (2000). Beyond the image: Adolescent girls, reading, and social reality. *NWSA Journal*, 12(1), 84–99.
- McCormick, P. (2008). *Sold*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books.
- Meyer, S. (2005–2008). Twilight series. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Meyer, S. (2008). *Breaking dawn*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Pattee, A. S. (2004). Disturbing the peace: The function of young adult literature and the case of Catherine Atkins' *When Jeff comes home*. *Children's Literature in Education*, 35, 241–255.
- Schachter, E. (2004). Identity configurations: A new perspective on identity formation in contemporary society. *Journal of Personality* 72, 167–199.

Additional Readings in YAL

Fantasy

(Books that explore romance and sexuality in a realm outside of the normal world we know)

- Austen, J., & Grahame-Smith, S. (2009). *Pride, prejudice, and zombies*. Philadelphia: Quirk Books.
- Bray, L. (2003). *A great and terrible beauty*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Collins, S. (2010). *The hunger games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Fitzpatrick, B. (2010). *Hush, hush*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Meyer, S. (2010). *The short second life of Bree Tanner*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Pauley, K. (2009). *Sucks to be me: The all-true confessions of Mina Hamilton, teen vampire (maybe)*. Renton, WA: Mirrorstone.
- Stiefvater, M. (2010). *Shiver*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Westerfeld, S. (2011). *The uglies* (Reprint). New York, NY: Simon Pulse.

Fiction

(Lighter works that may or may not address love and sexuality in a particularly dark or realistic manner; includes non-fantasy historical novels)

- Brashares, A. (2003). *Sisterhood of the traveling pants*. New York, NY: Dell.
- Cohn, R., & Levithan D. (2008). *Naomi and Ely's no kiss list*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Dean, Z. (2009). *The A-list: Hollywood royalty #1*. Boston: Hachette Book Group.
- Edwards, E. (2011). *The other countess*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Hopkins, C. (2002). *Mates, dates, and inflatable bras*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Larkin, J. (2011). *Ingenue (the flappers)*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- Shepard, S. (2007). *Pretty little liars*. New York, NY: Harper Teen.
- Von Ziegesar, C. (2002). *Gossip girl #1: A novel*. Boston: Hachette Book Group.

Reality

(Books that describe the dark and realistic side of abuse and sexual oppression)

- Asher, J. (2007). *13 reasons why*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Brooks, K. (2005). *Candy*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Castle, J. (2011). *The beginning of after*. New York, NY: Harper Teen.
- Cupala, H. (2010). *Tell me a secret*. New York, NY: Harper Teen.
- Green, J. (2006). *Looking for Alaska*. New York, NY: Speak Publishing.
- Hrdlitschka, S. (2008). *Sister wife*. Olympia, WA: Orca Books.
- Myers, W. D. (1984). *Motown and Didi: A love story*. New York, NY: Dell.
- Nelson, R. A. (2007). *Teach me*. New York, NY: Razorbill.
- Smith, K. (2007). *The geography of girlhood*. Boston: Hachette Book Group.

Call for 2012 Halle Award Nominations

The NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator honors a middle level educator who has consistently worked to improve the quality of middle school education and middle school educators, especially in the English language arts. Originally established in 1996 by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly, this award pays special tribute to the person who has worked to improve schools and schooling for the middle level—teacher, principal, college faculty, curriculum specialist, or supervisor.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at www.ncte.org/awards/halle and must be submitted no later than June 1, 2012. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the 2012 Annual Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, during the Middle Level Get-Together.
