

## Acting Adolescent?

Critical Examinations of the Youth–Adult Binary in *Feed* and *Looking for Alaska*

In mainstream and educational discourses, adolescence is typically understood through biological and psychological perspectives that view it as an inevitable stage of life with natural expectations. For example, thinking of adolescence as a time of “storm and stress” and rife with difficulties—particularly due to biological shifts such as “raging hormones”—is fairly commonplace. Similarly, it is typical to think of adolescents as incomplete people who are “coming of age” along a more or less standardized developmental trajectory. However, many of these dominant ways of knowing young people have been critiqued by recent scholarship that reconceptualizes adolescence as a construct (e.g., Austin & Willard, 1998; Lesko, 2012; Lesko & Talburt, 2012; Vadeboncoeur & Patel Stevens, 2005).

This scholarship demonstrates that the way people experience the time in life commonly referred to as *adolescence* varies widely and is generally more dependent upon sociocultural, historical, and ideological contexts than on biological and/or psychological influences. Like gender or race, understanding adolescence as a cultural construct exposes how ideas of adolescence, rather than being normal, natural, or fixed, are produced, circulated, strengthened, challenged, and subverted through social and cultural practices, policies, and texts.

As cultural artifacts, young adult literary texts both emerge from and affect broader social, cultural, and ideological understandings of adolescence/ts, and, thus, participate in the process of developing, propagating, and/or critiquing ideas of adolescence/

ts. In this article, we provide analyses of two popular young adult novels, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson (2002) and *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005), to demonstrate how young adult literature interplays with dominant ideas of adolescence/ts. Specifically, we explore how these texts both critique and re-inscribe normative distinctions between adolescents and adults and examine how such distinctions affect the subsequent relations between youth and adults.

Given their status within biological and psychological discourses as “incomplete” and “emerging toward adulthood,” youth are often positioned as inferior to and dependent upon adults. In this way, adults not only embody the destination and goal of adolescence, but also are called upon to guide youth in their proper development toward adulthood. The responsibility of youth, in this model, centers on accepting and abiding by adult-set rules and guidelines and improving the mind and body in the movement toward adulthood.

Through this framing, youth may rebel against such standards as part of their overall “normal” development (e.g., Trites, 2000). In many respects, the image of the rebellious teenager constitutes one of the hallmarks of commonsensical ideas of adolescence. Perhaps the quintessential embodiment of the idea can be found in the iconic figures of Holden Caulfield from J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Jim Stark, James Dean’s character in the film *Rebel without a Cause* (Weisbart & Ray, 1955). As in these depictions, youth are often understood to be in opposition to adults and adult authority, preferring to find ac-

ceptance and understanding within their distinct peer culture, thereby reinforcing the “confident characterization” of peer-orientedness in teens (Lesko, 2012).

Such views reinforce the perception of differences, however arbitrary, between youth and adults and the idea that these differences involve sharp demarcations between these life categories. However, viewing adolescence as a cultural construct denaturalizes these

normative expectations by asking questions about what constitutes adulthood and adolescence and how these definitions and distinctions get developed and perpetuated. In other words, a denaturalized view of adolescence does not take as inevitable the typical ways youth and adults are positioned in relation to one another or the designations assigned to each category. In our analysis of M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* and John Green’s

*Looking for Alaska*, we emphasize how these texts play into and/or push against normative expectations for youth and the resulting depictions of and relations with the adults around them.

Specifically, our analysis of *Feed* focuses on how the novel disappoints and disrupts our social expectation that adults serve as mature guides to youth, thus deepening the critique of society’s dependence on information fed to us through the media and even school. By disrupting normative youth–adult relations, Anderson relegates “adolescence” not to a particular group of age-bound people, but rather to anyone—youth and adults alike—who embody particularly puerile ways of being in the novel. By divorcing age from the concept of adolescence, Anderson employs stereotypical adolescence as a metaphor in the service of his themes against passive consumption and not thinking critically about the world. In this way, adults are not the guides for youth development; rather, their juvenile acts are as much the subject of critique as are those of youth in this dystopian text.

Our analysis of *Looking for Alaska* focuses on how the novel both re-inscribes normative understandings of youth–adult relations (e.g., youth in

opposition to and rebellious toward adults) even as it offers possibilities for rethinking these relations by offering a spectrum of divergent depictions of youth–adult relations, some of which counter hierarchal, adversarial positioning. By offering this cross section of relations, the novel demonstrates how adolescence does not cohere around a set of natural behaviors, but rather as a set of performances shaped, in part, by the expectations established by adults (and the subject positions, or how people identify themselves and their roles in a particular space, available to adolescents in relation to these adults).

By looking across these two novels, our analyses reveal how designations of age, distinctions between adolescence/ts and adulthood/adults, and expectations for youth–adult relationships are contingent upon and constitutive of the contexts in which they occur, rather than functioning as a set of norms emerging intrinsically from a naturally occurring stage of life. Through these analyses, then, we are making a case for how young adult texts function ideologically as cultural artifacts—that is, how they work to reinforce and/or critique broader cultural ideas of adolescence/ts. These analyses exemplify a particular approach for reading, interpreting, and teaching young adult literature that focuses on exposing and disrupting how ideological norms tied to common ways of understanding adolescence/ts circulate within these texts. In our conclusion, we further explicate this critical approach—an interpretive method that we refer to as a *Youth Lens*. A *Youth Lens* joins an emerging body of scholarship (e.g., Sarigianides, Lewis, & Petrone, 2015; Thein, Sulzer, & Schmidt, 2013; Waller, 2009) that centralizes questions tied to the representations of youth and conceptions of adolescence within young adult literature.

We selected *Feed* and *Looking for Alaska* for specific reasons. First, we chose these two particular texts for their popularity and critical acclaim: Green’s novel was honored with the Michael L. Printz Award, and Anderson’s novel was a finalist for the National Book Award. Award-winning and award-recognized texts typically get extra exposure among readers, especially those in schools, so examining representations of youth in these texts allows us to see the kinds of images of adolescents circulating within popular and educational contexts. Second, we chose these two novels for their distinctive representations of adolescence/ts, especially as they relate to adult characters—

depictions we will take up in our specific analyses below. In other words, these texts do not necessarily represent emblematic instantiations of a certain phenomenon present in the entire genre of young adult literature. Rather, the utility of these texts lies in their ability to illustrate a distinct interpretive move for literary analysis—namely, how young adult literature can perpetuate and/or subvert normative ideas of adolescence through depictions of adolescent–adult relationships. Furthermore, while both novels have been lauded for their contributions to young adult literature, little scholarship has examined their portrayals of adolescence/ts. Finally, these two texts have been particularly fruitful for exposing our preservice and inservice teachers to literary analyses focused upon representations of youth and adolescence. Therefore, our hope is that this article provides fresh readings of these two texts and, in doing so, draws attention to how reconceptions of adolescence as a cultural construct can help illuminate new interpretative possibilities for young adult literature and offer secondary students and teachers ways of reading representations of youth more critically.

### **Critiquing Adults and Youth as “Adolescents” in *Feed***

In *Feed*, Anderson’s futuristic satire, adolescence functions literally and figuratively. Although the novel is populated by school-age youth, behaviors “confidently characterizing” adolescence (Lesko, 2012)—vanity, vacuity, fleeting interests in fun, and peer-orientedness—designate youth *and* all but one of the adults depicted in the novel. In this way, Anderson untethers the presentation of adolescence from age, and in doing so, utilizes the social category metaphorically to satirize any “adolescent” who matches its thin, familiar set of behaviors and uncritical frame of mind. In other words, the adults are adolescents, too. Hence, Anderson’s novel reveals adolescence rooted not within biological imperatives and expectations or available only to a specific age-bound group of people, but rather the donning of certain behaviors (available to anyone) within a particular sociocultural context. *Feed* challenges commonsensical understandings of adolescence that view it as a life stage automatically shed through a person’s natural maturation.

*Feed*’s future setting includes technology that permits individuals to embed an Internet connection

directly into their heads so that they need not talk to communicate. Instead, they can speak through their feed devices, competing for banner space with corporations and government organizations also bombarding them with messages and advertisements.

To show the result of such technological development, the novel opens with a group of school-aged youth trained on texting who speak in minimized slang devoid of figurative richness: “‘I’m so null,’ and Marty was all, ‘I’m null too, unit’” (p. 3). To keep from being bored, the group fervently seeks out sources of entertainment in the form of advertisements about places to visit while on a moon vacation, and they remain persistently preoccupied with the products “bannered” to them.

Through these opening scenes, Anderson appears to mock young people’s blind consumption of products, their vain interest in their appearance, and their lack of interest in political or ecological matters of weight.

Expecting to see adults enter the scene as the wise authorities in juxtaposition to youthful folly, readers are surprised: Anderson depicts most of the adults through equally, if not more, diminished language and preoccupations. The protagonist, Titus, and his friends get hacked and end up in the hospital while on a moon vacation over spring break. When Titus’s father arrives to visit him after the hacking incident that shut down their feeds, readers await his responsible answers to Titus’s questions about what happened to all of them during this traumatic experience. Instead, he replies: “‘This is . . . Dude,’ he said. ‘Dude, this is some way bad shit’” (p. 55). Wired to the feed himself, Titus’s dad has to be reminded to speak to his son “in the air” rather than through the feed. He is as much beholden to the feed for his ideas about ecol-

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ogy, politics, and norms of socializing as is his son; neither was ever taught the importance of thinking

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critically about social messages relayed through their feeds.

Titus's father also reveals his "adolescence," as defined by stereotypical immature behaviors, in his relationship with his son. For example, at the end of an argument over suing the nightclub that caused the malfunction of Titus's and his friends' feeds, the father tells his son that he is acting like a brat; yet his behavior could be construed as being at least as brattish as his son's. He says,

"Now maybe you better take the girl home. In the new up-car. With the keys I just held out in my palm like a gift. Oh, because it was a gift."

My father got up all pissy and took the dishes into the kitchen. He rattled them against the rim of the junktube as he threw them away. They crashed down into the thing, the incinerator. (p. 105)

Through his text-based word choice, sarcastic tone, and "pissy" behavior, one might hardly consider the father's handling of the argument as following adult expectations, or expectations socially defined as exemplifying mature responses to a confrontation. Rather, most readers would probably ascribe the way the father storms away from the table and intentionally creates a disturbance with the dishes as "adolescent" responses to losing an argument. In this scene, Titus acts similarly, dismissing his parents' desire to sue the nightclub with a curt "whatev" and ending the argument by calling "quits" (p. 105). Both Titus and his father use language and take on characteristics society tends to associate with adolescence. Therefore, the interaction reveals how socially constructed identifiers function to label anyone, no matter his/her age, as an adolescent. In all of these depictions, both youth *and* adults are vulnerable to and enact tendencies typically marking adolescence.

In Anderson's hands, stereotyped adolescence is a state of being that threatens the natural, political, and interpersonal world; it must be avoided for this world to survive and to flourish. Anderson demonstrates this point through politically savvy Violet, Titus's new girlfriend. She and her father refuse to accept what the mainstream feeds of news and corporations tell them, insisting on knowing other languages and following alternative news sources to take up a resistant and critical position in relation to corporate society. With his wife, Violet's dad decided to homeschool Violet as a child and to keep her unplugged from the feed so that she could think for herself and analyze the world thoughtfully. Only when he sees how disadvantaged he was professionally, and how difficult it was for him to secure work in this technologically wired environment, did Violet's father succumb to get Violet "wet-wired" so that she could have a more "normal" life. In the novel, this late wiring is what causes her feedware to malfunction, and her patterns of resistance to advertisements and failure to purchase in response to ads ultimately cast her as unworthy of assistance. The corporations allow her to die. A dangerous thinker who intends to take action against the corporations, Violet cannot be permitted to survive. In Anderson's text, individuals alone cannot fight a culture of feed-dependency or corporate dominance. Rather, in the novel's closing words, "everything must go" to effect a change that is widespread enough to reach all of its citizens.

By denigrating "adolescent" acts as thoughtlessness regardless of the character's age, Anderson critiques the behaviors attached (by adults) to youth and shows them to be avoidable rather than inevitable. But even more, by showing the homogeneity of both adolescent-aged youth and adolescent-behaved adults, all connected by the feed of corporate media, Anderson presents adolescence as a set of behaviors resulting from a passive acceptance of how feeds tell people to think, to believe, to look, and to be, clearly illustrating how adolescence is a category created as much by outside sociocultural forces as by internal biological imperatives. Therefore, adolescence remains undesignated by a biological stage, functioning instead as a frame of mind that humanity is suffering through at this time, but not by necessity. Anderson warns us that "adolescence"—as a constructed set of behaviors resulting from the onslaught of messages directed at all of us—must be resisted.

## Rebellion and Respect in Relation to Adult Social Roles in *Looking for Alaska*

Whereas *Feed* breaks conventional designations and expectations for adolescence and adulthood, as well as the relationships and hierarchies between adults and youth, *Looking for Alaska* adheres to many of the designations and expectations typically ascribed to youth and adults. At the same time, however, the novel offers more nuanced relations between youth and adults wherein many of the typical oppositional and hierarchal attributes of these relations either do not exist as powerfully as we might typically expect or do not exist at all. *Looking for Alaska* demonstrates how adolescent behaviors have as much to do with adult expectations of them as they do with any “natural” need for rebellion or opposition. Through the depictions of these varied adolescent–adult interactions, Green’s novel, similar to Anderson’s novel, establishes adolescence as a performance of identities informed by external expectations, relationships, and circumstances rather than as an intrinsic and normative set of imperatives. Furthermore, *Looking for Alaska* shows how ideas of and expectations for adolescence constrain and open up possible subject positions available to both youth and adults in their interpersonal relationships. In this way, Green’s novel both supports and subverts dominant understandings of youth and adolescence.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Green presents a story about a cohort of high school friends—primarily Pudge, the Colonel, and Alaska—enduring tragedy at their boarding school, Culver Creek. As these young people ponder existential questions about death and build interpersonal relationships, they also interact with several adult characters, each of whom is positioned uniquely in relation to the adolescent characters and with whom they interact differently. The most stereotypical adult character, The Eagle (a rather ironic nickname because the man sees little), is the dean of students at Culver Creek. In general, he exemplifies an understanding of youth as rebellious. In his introduction to Pudge, for example, he says, “Welcome to Culver Creek, Mr. Halter. You’re given a large measure of freedom here. If you abuse it, you’ll regret it. You seem like a nice young man. I’d hate to have to bid you farewell” (p. 21). In this pithy statement, the Eagle establishes strict parameters on the “freedom” given to the students and that expulsion for breaking

these parameters is a real consequence. The characterization of the Eagle as an adult who understands that adolescents need rules and discipline because they are inherently incapable of maintaining their own growth re-inscribes notions of youth as lacking a certain level of maturity and capability.

Of course, this characterization is particularly ironic in Green’s novel because the main adolescent protagonists—while enacting certain transgressive behaviors (e.g., drinking, smoking, sexual promiscuity)—are all talented individuals who are self-motivated to do well academically

and, in many instances, defy normative expectations of youth regarding maturity. Yet throughout the novel, Pudge and his cohort of friends consistently break the rules set by the Eagle—more because they seem to be following certain norms of the school that state students should break rules and pull pranks than because they are enacting some inherent trait of adolescence. We argue that this rule-establishing

by the Eagle (the responsible adult) illustrates the larger social understandings about youth as rebels, and it is against this social norm that the adolescents seemingly rail. In this way, the role of the Eagle defines certain ritualized performances—available both to the students under his purview and to himself—which, in this case, conform to commonsensical notions of adolescent–adult relationships.

In contrast, Dr. Hyde, the religious studies teacher, offers a more complex depiction of an adult character in relation to youth. On the one hand, Hyde typifies the stereotypical authoritative teacher: he refuses to provide his first name (actually making a point of asserting this during the first class), utilizes a transmission-oriented pedagogical approach, and dismisses Pudge for daydreaming during class. In general, he makes himself inaccessible to the youth, and they do not view him as a possible role model. Instead, they refer to him as the “Old Man” and ridicule him for both his age and health issues. Even Pudge, who confesses to Alaska that he admires Dr.

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Hyde's brilliance, maintains his interpersonal distance from Hyde rather than embracing him as a personal or professional mentor. In these ways, Hyde attempts to hold to rigid, normative adult-youth hierarchal relationships.

At the same time, Hyde identifies his students as passionate learners who have the capacity to answer complex existential questions; consequently, he extends intense challenges to them, inviting them to grapple with religious spirituality. In many ways, Hyde's teaching facilitates Pudge's inquiries and his journey of selfhood in a way that honors his ability to find his own answers to life's most difficult questions. In fact, Hyde centralizes youths' ideas and interests in his curriculum by integrating Alaska's question from the midterm ["How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (p. 158)] into the final exam to help the students process their suffering. This multifaceted dynamic between Hyde and his students reveals how adolescent-adult interactions need not lead to adversarial relationships (as seen with the Eagle), but can result in a relationship in which youth and adults, while perhaps involving some mockery and interpersonal distance, show respect for one another and demonstrate the need for each other as part of sustaining healthy lives.

In comparison to the Eagle and Dr. Hyde, the relationships in the novel between young people and their parents offer non-normative depictions of youth-adult relations. In both the relationships between Pudge and his parents and the Colonel and his mother, normative hierarchical expectations of adults guiding youth do not exist. Both Pudge's and the Colonel's parents respect their sons, trust their decisions, and at different times "cover" for their children so they can maintain their good standing at Culver Creek. While neither the Colonel's mother nor Pudge's parents completely understand their sons (the Colonel's mother does not understand her son's intellect; Pudge's parents are oblivious to his social isolation prior to attending Culver Creek), they honor and support them and, by and large, have good, non-adversarial relationships with them.

These parents expect their sons to engage in behavior and pursue endeavors beneficial to their academic and social status. For instance, when covering for or being complicit in their children's pranks and transgressive behavior, these parents reveal their understanding that their children are self-motivated

and would not engage in activities that would hinder their opportunities at school. When Pudge asks his father to play a part in their "Alaska Young Memorial Prank," his father momentarily worries about Pudge getting into trouble. Yet, it only takes Pudge to declare that he will avoid any trouble or any danger for his father to agree to lie to the Eagle as part of setting the stage for the prank. By collaborating with rather than restricting his son, Pudge's father opens a different expectation for adolescent-adult interactions—one based upon a respectful understanding for the creative and industrious capabilities of youth. Again, this event follows a long tradition of student pranks at Culver Creek, illustrating that engaging in such behavior is not inherent to adolescence but, rather, to the school's traditions for its adolescent students, thereby reinforcing the ways that institutions carve out "adolescent" expectations that youth fulfill.

By looking across the depictions of adults within the text, as well as the expectations for youth tied to each of them, Green's novel reveals a spectrum of possibilities for youth-adult relationships, some of which reveal adversarial relationships and some of which reveal collaborative, non-hierarchal relations. In showcasing these various possibilities, *Looking for Alaska* demonstrates ideas about and experiences of adolescence as context-dependent—how these youth characters take up or embody being an adolescent varies, depending upon their relations with adults and the expectations and roles available within those relationships. More significantly, though, the novel reveals how dominant ideas of adolescence/ts (as represented through the relations between the Eagle and the youth) constrain—and help to recapitulate—adversarial, oppositional, and ultimately diminishing relations between youth and adults, whereas non-dominant ideas of adolescence/ts engender more equitable, respectful, and mutual relations between youth and adults. Green's novel, then, reestablishes and problematizes commonsensical understandings of both adolescents and the adults who hold a prominent presence in their lives.

## Implications for Reading and Teaching Young Adult Literature

Joined analytically by their emphasis on youth-adult relations and normative designations and distinctions between adolescence and adulthood, these two analy-

ses illustrate how expectations for such relations and designations—for example, the interrupted expectation for adults to take on the role of wise authorities in *Feed*—both afford and constrain particular subject positions and ways of relating available to both adolescents and adults. In addition, these analyses demonstrate that contextual factors figure more significantly in the possibilities open to adolescent–adult relationships than do biological and psychological capacities typically associated with adolescence and adults’ roles in adolescents’ lives.

Further, by examining these two texts for their representations of adolescence/ts, our analysis exemplifies ways teachers and students can reconsider their own readings of young adult literature by questioning the explicit and implicit messages about youth that the genre imparts. For example, simply reading *Looking for Alaska* as a coming-of-age story about adolescents contending with the death of a friend unnecessarily devalues the capacities of the Colonel and Pudge to consider the ramifications of death and dying as two youth *already* of age. Also, by not exploring youth behaviors in relation to adult expectations, assumptions that these characters are simply being “typically rebellious” adolescents could easily be reinforced. Similarly, ignoring the way *Feed* employs stereotypical adolescence as the means to offer a scathing critique of a lack of criticality in relation to “feeds” in the world results in an incomplete understanding of the novel’s commentary on the passivity of *all* consumers—adolescents and adults alike.

Ultimately, this approach to engaging young adult literature leads us to a way of interpreting texts that emphasizes critical questions about representations of youth, the effects that contexts and identities have on young peoples’ behavior, and figurative uses of “adolescence” in texts. Although in recent years many scholars within literacy education have closely analyzed young adult literature for its representations of social categories such as gender, race, and disability (e.g., Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Curwood, 2013; Kokkola, 2011), an essential aspect of interrogating young adult texts—namely, examining representations of adolescence/ts as a distinct social category—is still missing within literacy education. To address this gap, our analyses of these two texts employ a distinct critical lens for interpretative examinations of young adult literature, an approach we term a *Youth Lens*.

Elsewhere, we have explicated further the many dimensions and possibilities of this lens (Petronne, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2015). Briefly, this lens both explores how texts depict people labeled *adolescents* and circulates ideas about the stage of life known as *adolescence*. Implementing this lens provides avenues for resistant readings of young adult literature by secondary-aged students and complicates critical, multifaceted approaches to literature curriculum for middle and high school English language arts classrooms. As well, we concur with Trites’s (2000) argument that youth need to be equipped with tools (i.e., a poststructural perspective) to help them resist the normative messages that young adult literature propagates.

We see a *Youth Lens* as being just this tool for its emphasis on how depictions of youth and adolescence create ways in which students (and teachers) can more critically examine how literary texts—as well as broader cultural texts, practices, and discourses (including schools and curricula)—name and figure them as youth. For example, secondary students could be asked to list typical “adult” behaviors next to typical “adolescent” behaviors in a Venn diagram. They could then be invited to consider which behaviors could be moved to the overlapping space based on personal experiences or textual evidence from fiction. In such an activity, students might offer that adults are more responsible than youth, yet be able to indicate examples of peers or fictional characters who keep regular jobs and contribute to the family income. Based on this beginning, students could be tasked with studying several young adult texts for how the stories depict not only youth but also the adults in the novel, considering questions such as: Are youth presented as fundamentally different from adults, or do some youth and adults share traits? What messages about being a youth do the texts seem to propagate?

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An extension or complication of this activity might involve an analysis of the fluctuating ways that both adults and youth behave in terms of maturity or responsibility. Similar to the way that queer theory offers readers a means of understanding that gender expression might fluctuate in individuals or characters from context to context, for example, so, too, might readers be invited to consider a nuanced analysis of real adults and youth and how their “mature” behavior shifts in response to a range of factors. Again, students might be invited to list behaviors typically considered “adult” and those typically regarded as “adolescent.” They might then be tasked with studying scenes of exchanges in their lives and taking notes on when adults and youth act “adult” and when both might act in ways generally regarded as “adolescent.” After discussing this more nuanced tapestry of behavior, readers could turn to young adult texts featuring adult–adolescent relations to examine when they reinforce stereotypical expectations of these relations and when they break with such expectations.

Thus, a *Youth Lens* promises literacy educators a powerful way to not only reread young adult literary texts, but also to engage their students in literary analysis and cultural critique that creates new possibilities to imagine more empowering subject positions—spaces in which to enact particular identities and/or roles—for both adults and youth.

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