The Value of Young Adult Fiction: 
YA as a Gateway to the Classics

The publication of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* in 1967 revolutionized the concept of the young adult novel. It was not the first work to feature adolescent characters or depict them smoking, drinking, and getting into trouble, but it was the first novel about those themes and characters specifically intended for an audience of teenagers, not adults. In more recent years, the popularity of young adult novels written for and about teenagers has grown remarkably. Series like J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* have captured the rapt attention of middle and high school students. John Green, while sticking to more realistic portrayals of modern adolescence, has garnered a following comparable to that of movie stars with his young adult works. Yet, this favorable opinion of the young adult genre is rarely coming from the serious and academic literary community. “Young adult” is often written off as trite, something purely for entertainment; it’s viewed as inferior and impossible to categorize as literature. However, recent informal studies conducted in the classrooms of university English education professors reveal that this mindset is inaccurate; YA fiction can stand side-to-side with long-respected works of literature and some members of the academic literary world are emerging to fight for the value of YA fiction. Inspired by their methodology, I draw a brief comparison between J.D.
Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* using some traditional methods of literary analysis. This not only demonstrates how the classics and YA fiction can be paired in classrooms to serve as gateways for teenage readers to approach canonical literature, but also that young adult novels have value beyond entertainment as serious literature and deserve respect as such in the literary community.

The first step in talking about young adult literature is deciding what exactly defines the term “young adult.” It is this phrase that turns many away from the genre, even without fully understanding what it means and without considering the broad range of works it includes. Michael Cart, for the Young Adult Library Services Association, determined that when the term “young adult literature” became more commonly used during the late 1960’s, it indicated works that were of interest to 12- to 18-year-old readers. Imogen Russell Williams, for *The Guardian*, made a similar observation but considered two popular terms: “Teen” and “YA” essentially address the same age range, but “teen” is sometimes more specifically targeted to a 12-14 age range, while “YA” aims higher toward the 14- to 18-year-old range.

Williams also found that, almost across the board, writers at London’s Young Adult Literature Convention agreed that an adolescent protagonist is a key characteristic of YA books, and YA author John Green suggested the same in a February 2014 speech at his alma mater, Kenyon College. So a good starting point to define YA is a book about teenagers intended for an audience of teenagers. But this is just a broad framework for a large range of subjects and categories within the genre. Some of these books *about* teenagers for teenagers may be purely plot-based and meant for
entertainment, but others, according to the definitions that Cart, Williams, and Green have suggested for YA literature indicate that this is not true for all YA novels. For Green, a young adult novel possesses an “insatiable appetite for big questions,” a “consideration of ethical matters,” and “teachable ideas” (Green, “Kenyon College”). For Cart, young adult literature “welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking” while “fostering understanding, empathy, and compassion” (Cart). In many ways, young adult novels that tackle the big questions and moral dilemmas are essentially coming-of-age novels. They are a continuation of the classic idea of the bildungsroman, which we have accepted as valuable literature for decades (The Catcher in the Rye is a blatant parallel here). To pretend that young adult novels don’t or can’t address topics in a valuable way like The Catcher in the Rye or other classic coming-of-age novels is essentially to suggest that 12- to 18-year-olds are not dealing with the same ethical matters or asking the same difficult questions that adults face.

Topics of sex, drugs, and body image are common in young adult fiction, as are themes often related to the search for identity and learning to navigate within the world at a bizarre and often confusing stage of life. The worlds created around these elements make it easy for teenage readers to relate to these works, even when they simultaneously feature magic wands or focus on a girl fighting her government in a futuristic dystopia, and even when there are sparkly vampires. The worlds of young adult novels are often relevant to their adolescent readers.

“Relevant” is one of the most important words to consider in a discussion of young adult fiction. Many critics and teachers will agree that young adult fiction is
relevant (in spite of the unreal aspects featured in a number of them) to its audience of 12- to 18-year-olds, but only a handful of those critics and teachers would probably also agree that there is merit in young adult fiction beyond relevance. “Some still believe that YA literature is merely a secondary category of childlike storytelling—didactic in nature—and unworthy of serious literary evaluation, when, in fact, it is really an overlooked and underappreciated literary genre,” Cindy Lou Daniels argues in her ALAN Review essay, “Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies” (Daniels 78). These critics don’t disagree that these books are enjoyable stories for their teenage readers, but seeing the phrase “young adult” almost immediately severs the work from the serious literary community in their minds.

Right away, there is a major issue with claiming relevance as the downfall of YA literature: relevance is simply a matter of an author knowing his or her audience. In a Q&A printed at the end of a 2008 edition of The Outsiders, S.E. Hinton said, “One of my reasons for writing it was that I wanted something realistic to be written about teenagers. At that time realistic teenage fiction didn’t exist. If you didn’t want to read Mary Jane Goes to the Prom and you were through with horse books, there was nothing to read. I just wanted to write something that dealt with what I saw kids really doing.” Hinton’s goal was to be relevant to her readers, which is the goal of every author. There is no point in writing about big questions, complex issues, moral dilemmas, and discovering oneself in the midst of them if the reader (no matter his or her age) doesn’t connect with the story. Relevance, therefore, is not a wholly negative characteristic. A novel that is relevant to its readers is more likely to
engage a larger number of them. If it invites them to engage in intellectual thought and consider complex issues while simultaneously being enjoyable, then those same readers might also be more apt to approach other books that previously seemed less accessible to them.

As the popularity of young adult fiction has grown, proponents from within the academic world of English literature have been speaking up about the genre’s value beyond relevance to a teenage reader. Many, including university-level English and education professors, are recognizing that a young adult novel can also contain elements of complexity and address the same topics as the classics we teach in high schools. In fact, many of the classics we teach could arguably be classified as young adult if they were written and marketed today. To prepare their students for the Advanced Placement Literature exam, high school literature teachers sometimes reference a list of titles that have appeared most often on tests since 1971. Included on this list are many classics that could double as young adult: Between 1971 and 2014, Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has been referenced 15 times and is one of the most frequently cited titles; Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima has been referenced 8 times; Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird and J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, which most certainly would be marketed as YA if it were published today, have each appeared 4 times. And if we want to consider age of the protagonist as a signal of relevance, we could also add Great Expectations (18 references), Jane Eyre (16), Pride and Prejudice (7), and Romeo and Juliet (4) to the list of possible young adult classics. Keeping in mind these classic novels, their themes, and the literary theories with which we approach them, it is not far-fetched
to consider that young adult novels could act as a more accessible entry point into these literary works.

If so many classic works of literature could potentially be classified as young adult themselves, then where does this divide between literature and young adult come from? The literary community has shaped a definition of literature that teachers and students have come to accept as truth, the evidence of which can be found on the “AP Literature: Titles from Free Response Questions since 1971” lists. In a 2009 *ALAN Review* essay, “Beyond Relevance to Literary Merit: Young Adult Literature as ‘Literature,’” Dr. Anna O. Soter, then a Professor of English Education/Young Adult and Children’s Literature at The Ohio State University, and Sean P. Connors, then a Ph.D. candidate in English Education at The Ohio State University, made observations on this topic:

“Theyir perceptions of what ‘counts’ as ‘Literature’ have been shaped largely by the texts they read as high school and university students, the majority of which, not surprisingly, were canonical and written for an adult audience. That literature for adolescents might be stylistically complex, that it might withstand rigorous critical scrutiny, and that it might set forth thoughtful social and political commentaries has simply not occurred to them” (Soter and Connors 63).

Teachers and students have been conditioned to believe that the definition of true and valuable literature is canonical and rather highbrow. These current classroom practices make many of the classics seem inaccessible to the teenage reader; they then close their minds to what they are being assigned to read, and interpret what they learn about literature in the classroom to also mean that the works they enjoy reading outside of the classroom are not worthy. Altogether, it creates a negative relationship with literature and casts an inferior light on YA
novels. In their essay, Soter and Connors recount the results of an informal experiment Soter conducted in her Young Adult Literature and Literary Theories classes to challenge the thinking of her students. Soter gave her students a list of 20 excerpts, ten of which were taken from canonical literature and ten from young adult novels. All excerpts were presented without author or title and they were selected for their lack of clues to the protagonists’ age or circumstances. “The intention is to have students focus exclusively on the texts’ stylistic aspects—sophistication of insight, depth in treatment of character, thematic complexity, and fine, incisive writing that lures readers in. Given the students’ strong literary background, she assumes that they have reasonably strong beliefs about what does and does not constitute ‘quality’ literature” (Soter and Connors 63-64). From this list, Soter asked her students to identify which texts were from the YA novels and which were canonical. She found that most students tried to guess based on inferred clues about protagonist age; they were rarely able to make their choices based on style alone (that is, one excerpt being more simplistic than the other was not a helpful indicator). Although it was an informal experiment, it is anecdotal proof that the generally accepted definition of literature, the definition we are teaching our students, has become rather biased against young adult novels under the assumption that they cannot be stylistically or thematically complex and worthy of attention.

The truth of the matter is that young adult novels can withstand the same literary examination as many of the canonical works. “There is absolutely no reason to avoid the serious scholarly study of YA literature. These are works that have
significance to all of us, regardless of which age category we fall into, because they speak to the human condition” (Daniels 79). Many readers and critics have found similarities in the protagonists of J.D. Salinger’s 1956 novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and Stephen Chbosky’s 1999 novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. *Catcher* has received acclaim (and criticism) in the nearly 60 years since its publication; it is widely regarded as a “classic novel” and is often taught in the classroom. *Perks*, on the other hand, has received popular attention, and a 2012 film adaptation starring Emma Watson renewed its status, but it is rarely viewed as literature in the academic sense. By pairing and comparing *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, it is possible to witness two arguments in the defense of young adult fiction unfold: First, contemporary young adult books can stand up as literature next to the classics because they can be analyzed with many of the same traditional methods of literary theory. Second, because similar approaches can be used, YA novels can serve as access points to connect young adult readers to the classics.

In his work *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler provides a brief introduction to the modes of theoretical analysis that have had the biggest impact on literature:

“Three theoretical modes whose impact, since the 1960s, has been the greatest are the wide-ranging reflection on language, representation, and the categories of critical thought undertaken by deconstruction and psychoanalysis; the analyses of the role of gender and sexuality in every aspect of literature and criticism by feminism and then gender studies and Queer theory; and the development of historically oriented cultural criticisms” (Culler 121).
From this brief introduction, numerous approaches can be applied to both novels, the first method being that of a psychological lens. Although a psychoanalytic approach in this instance is less related to the Freudian and Laconic theories that initially formed the method of criticism, approaching these novels through this lens still allows for an examination of the protagonists’ psychological construction and development as they face ethical dilemmas. Both protagonists, Holden Caulfield and Charlie, share their stories as if they are speaking directly to the reader, which allows the reader to understand the world from their points of view and their teenage mentalities. Holden carries on a conversational narrative in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and while the novel has been criticized for the narrator’s unreliability, the thoughts and digressions he shares with the reader offer a look straight into his mind and present a psychological approach to examining the world of a 1950s teenager, even if he is on the outskirts of society. He is skeptical of so much around him and finds that the world is full of “phonies.” Yet in his skepticism, the reader still senses his concern for the well being of others, especially when he talks about his deceased brother Allie and his younger sister Phoebe or considers the fate of the ducks in Central Park, and even when he talks about the prostitute who comes to his hotel room—“It made me feel sort of sad when I hung it up. I thought of her going in a store and buying it, and nobody in the store knowing she was a prostitute and all. The salesman probably just thought she was a regular girl when she bought it. It made me feel sad as hell—I don’t know why exactly” (Salinger 107). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is written as an epistolary novel; Charlie opens his story by addressing a “dear friend” whom he does not know:
“Dear friend,
  I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn’t try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have. Please don’t try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don’t want you to do that… I don’t want you to find me. I didn’t enclose a return address for the same reason. I mean nothing bad by this. Honest.
  I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands and doesn’t try to sleep with people even if they could have. I need to know that these people exist…
  So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I’m still trying to figure out how that could be” (Chbosky 2).

This personal and conversational relationship that he immediately sets up with the reader allows for a narrative that feels honest and open. In both Holden and Charlie, the reader witnesses an idealism that is representative of people this age as they navigate the ethical situations with which they are faced and as they try to determine how they fit within a world that presents them with these dilemmas.

Gender criticism provides another strong connection between Salinger and Chbosky’s novels. From Holden’s interaction with the prostitute to his thoughts about eventually getting married, Holden’s viewpoints offer a rather skewed vision of the women in his life. The preppy boarding school boys, who primp and act tough, are phonies in his opinion, but he gets uncomfortable, even panicky, when faced with the stories that his acquaintance Luce tells about “flits and Lesbians” and with Mr. Antolini “patting [him] on the head and all,” which made Holden “[think] he was making a flitty pass at [him]” (Salinger 158, 214). Even more so than Catcher, The Perks of Being a Wallflower makes a particularly strong case for analysis from a gender criticism lens. Charlie is a “sensitive” boy who cries a lot, a detail that would typically place him outside of traditional gender roles, but, in general, he is
respected by his friend group for this trait. Even so, when his father and grandfather cry, they treat it as though it should forever be kept a secret. Mary Elizabeth offers a feminist voice within the group of friends, yet Charlie still notices that she changes when boys tell her she is pretty, and Charlie's sister respects her boyfriend more after he hits her because “he stood up to his bully. And I guess that makes sense” (Chbosky 11). Chbosky’s novel also deals with homosexuality, and sexual abuse is a critical aspect in the storyline, providing more points for gender analysis.

This approach of pairing a canonical work with a more contemporary young adult novel and employing accepted methods of analysis to compare the two applies to more than just The Catcher in the Rye and The Perks of Being a Wallflower. The Hunger Games could act as a gateway to 1984, and The Outsiders connects to Great Expectations. After all, Ponyboy himself remarked, “I was still thinking about it while I was doing my homework that night. I had to read Great Expectations for English, and that kid Pip, he reminded me of us—the way he felt marked lousy because he wasn’t a gentleman or anything, and the way that girl kept looking down on him. That happened to me once” (Hinton 15). Applied in high school classrooms, this practice would not only legitimize the genre of young adult fiction and allow it to be viewed as serious literature, but it would help high school students (especially those who have difficulty approaching canonical novels because of the highbrow connotation they carry) read classic novels, relate to them more strongly and understand them more clearly.

Claiming that young adult fiction does not receive enough of the serious recognition it deserves is not to say that middle and high school students should not
be assigned books like *Great Expectations, Wuthering Heights*, or *The Great Gatsby.*

Neither is it to say that they should be reading *Twilight* in their English classrooms in place of the classics. Within the realm of young adult novels, there are admittedly some that are more solely for the purpose of entertainment and might not have much to offer in terms of depth or points for literary analysis, but the same can be said for adult fiction; lack of literary value is not a sweeping characteristic exclusively belonging to young adult books. Many young adult books, in addition to being relevant to today’s adolescent, are capable of tackling complex themes, while employing complex literary techniques and achieving a level of artistry that few people have been willing to grant them in the past. Used as a complement to a more traditional reading list, young adult novels have the potential to engage a broader range of students and act as a guide to approaching more classic works of literature.
Works Cited:


