PROMOTING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: 
THE OTHER "REAL" LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Getting students to read is a common problem in many secondary English language arts classrooms. Many teachers continue to assign only classic literature with novels that have been traditionally used in English language arts classrooms because of the belief in timelessness. There is evidence that the use of young adult literature in the secondary classroom can increase the chances that students will participate in satisfying literary experiences, read more, and become lifelong readers. In addition, young adult literature can better prepare students for the appreciation and understanding of classic literature.

INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous books, articles, and opinion papers written about young adult literature and its position in the high school English classroom. During the past 10-20 years, thousands of academic professionals, English and reading teachers, administrators, and parents have come to recognize the value of young adult literature. They see that it can be effective for supporting the growth of literary understanding, for actively engaging the high school student in analytical reading and
writing, and for creating life-long readers out of reluctant and even poor
readers (Gallo, 2001). Nevertheless, many secondary language arts
teachers persist in assigning only the classics to their students and then
bemoaning the deplorable reading desires and habits of their students.
The term classic literature or classic, as used in this paper, refers to novels
that have been traditionally used in English language arts classrooms
because of a belief in their timelessness, such as Great Expectations,
Huckleberry Finn, and similar works.

Discussion
Many English language arts teachers are determined to make their
students read “real” literature. They want to introduce them to authors
such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Willa Cather. They
yearn for them to appreciate Austen’s satirical diction, Dickens’s poignant
themes, Twain’s marvelous wit, and Cather’s remarkable imagery. They
expect to turn their students, even the skeptical nonreaders, into lovers
and admirers of novels such as Pride and Prejudice, Great Expectations,
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and O Pioneers! They believe that all the
students need is an enthusiastic teacher and a little bit of exposure to
“fine” literary works. However, when faced with such authors, many
students complain, balk, become impassive, and/or fall asleep. Teachers
can become disillusioned and begin to question their own skills and abili-
ties to inspire students. What they often fail to recognize is that many
students do not enter the classroom with strong backgrounds in reading or
with much exposure to different types of reading materials.

Young adult literature can be a vehicle that allows teachers to present
the same literary elements found in the classics while engaging adolescent
students in stimulating classroom discussions and assignments. Unlike
classic literature, it can foster a desire to read. Because it: a) employs the
literary elements of the classics, b) engages adolescent students in
analyzing literature along with themselves and their principles, and c)
promotes and encourages lifelong reading habits Young adult literature
deserves a valued and respected position in secondary language arts
classrooms.

Student Resistance
Students often react negatively to teacher-assigned books. G. Robert
Carlsen and Anne Sherrill (Herz, 1996) report that most of the high school
students they interviewed did not enjoy the “masterpieces” their teachers
assigned because the classic novels were too difficult to understand,
seemed to be written in a different language, were often very confusing, had meanings that were too vague to comprehend, and did not relate to them and their present-day lives.

Because of his own experiences as a high school teacher and because of the results he obtained from a self-conducted research project on reading, Donald Gallo (2001) argued that teaching the classics often creates a dislike for reading. He explained that most teenagers are not ready for classic literature because they do not address adolescent concerns: they are about adult issues and are written for well-educated adults who have the leisure time to read or who are university literature students.

Gallo (2001) asserted that the American school system teaches its children how to read in the early grades and then forces them, during their teenage years, to read literary works that most of them dislike so much that they have no desire to continue to read into their adulthood. He proposed that “the love of reading” be listed as an objective of the English curriculum, an objective that can be met through the use of young adult literature. Gallo’s ideas directly correlate to those of Daniel Pennac (1999) who, in his book, Better than Life, asserted that parents and teachers are at fault for some of the problems related to adolescent dislike of reading because they badger teenagers about reading and take the pleasure out of reading by assigning certain novels, especially the classics, without taking into account the reading interests of most teenagers.

**Why Classics Persist**

Still, many high school English/language arts teachers believe that teaching literature means teaching the classics. Leila Christenbury (2000) pointed out that many English teachers rely on their own experiences with literature, which mainly include the classics, and stand by tradition—that the classics are time-tested works of art. They believe that all students need to read the classics because they will provide students “with exposure to the mainstream culture and the philosophical tenets and ethical values of the Western world” (p. 15) while providing them with a well-rounded education and preparing them for college. Christenbury, however, argued that because the classics are often limited in the American classroom to eighteenth and nineteenth century British and American authors, they provide “nothing more than a curriculum that is an uncritical rehash of the traditional power culture: white, male, Christian, Anglophilic” (p. 15). She said that because of tradition and familiarity, many high school English teachers never read beyond what
they read in college and persist in forcing their students to read what is “best” for them—classic novels that often leave students frustrated, disengaged, and bored and that encourage them to turn to commercial plot summaries and literary analyses, simplified versions of the original, or other similar sources so that they can do anything but actually read the works themselves.

The question remains. Why do many English teachers continue to build their curriculum upon the classics? Is it because of tradition and familiarity, because it is what the public expects and often demands, or because there is a fear that not teaching the classics will create an uneducated society? If teaching the classics does not encourage reading, then why not teach something that does, such as young adult literature? Gary Salvner (2000) explained that many English teachers do not use young adult novels because 1) they are still not considered worthy of their students’ attention, 2) English teachers are worried about losing time by trying to add the reading of young adult novels to their curricula, and 3) teacher guides traditionally do not allow for the use of young adult novels.

WORTHY OF ATTENTION

Are young adult novels not worthy of students’ attention? Diana Mitchell (2002) contended that the breadth and depth of young adult literature are equal to any other genre today and that the recurring life themes of love, death, loss, racism, and friendship contained in the classics are also present in young adult literature. She asserted that because young adult novels make very complex issues concrete and understandable, students can connect them to their lives. Young adult novels can also bridge the gap between school and students’ lives and affirm students, helping to make them feel less invisible, ignored, or “marginalized.”

Sarah K. Herz (1996) in her book, From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges Between Young Adult Literature and the Classics (1996), stated that young adult literature deals with many universal themes, including the eternal questions Who am I? and Where do I fit in? They contain the same themes that the classics do: alienation from one’s society or group, survival or meeting a challenge; social and/or political concerns about racial or ethnic discrimination; social concerns about AIDS, teenage pregnancy, divorce, and substance abuse; problems resulting from family conflicts; fear of death; and the issue of political injustice.

Most young adult literature includes a variety of situational archetypes such as the test/trial as a rite of passage, the journey or quest of the
hero, birth/death/rebirth, and the search for self. Character archetypes such as the wise old man or woman, the sacrificial redeemer, the hero, the matriarch/patriarch, and the innocent child are found in many teenage novels. Herz (1996) illustrated how and why teaching young adult novels is as valuable, and perhaps even better, than teaching only the classics. Good-quality novels written for teenagers contain the elements of literature found in the classics: character and characterization, setting, conflict, theme, point of view, plot, style, crisis, climax, foreshadowing, flashback, figurative language, and so forth. Herz listed numerous young adult novels and their literary elements; and connected them to various classics in order to prove how and why teaching young adult novels is as valuable, and perhaps even better, than teaching only the classics.

Gary Salvner (2000) affirmed Herz's claims. By listing various young adult novels and explaining their value as "fine" literature, he proved why and how course objectives about literary elements and devices can be achieved quickly and coherently with a book that a teenager can read easily. He showed how vivid portraits of character can be located in young adult novels such as Bridge to Terabithia, The Great Gilly, Lyddie, and Permanent Connections. He explained how students can learn a great deal about how effective settings are used to influence characters in novels such as Where the Lilies Bloom, I Hear the Owl Call My Name, Dragon Song, and Downriver. Salvner (2000), described how young adult books depict basic human conflicts that easily carry thematic and symbolic elements in books such as The Chocolate War, After the First Death, Tenderness, and Tuck Everlasting, and he illustrated how point of view can be taught through novels such as All We Know of Heaven, A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich, Nothing But the Truth, and I Am the Cheese. Salvner stated that because teachers are the ones to create school system guidelines, they need to include the teaching of young adult fiction in their curricula. He also proved how using young adult novels can save time in the classroom because most are not as long or as complex as classic novels. Students, in a short length of time, can complete the reading of a young adult novel while also achieving the required literary objectives, and so, have more time to complete other assignments or novels:

Because they (young adult novels) are about adolescents and for adolescents, they put our students at the center of the learning experiences we devise. Because they illustrate for young readers what literature can be, moving them and revealing to them how literature...
builds knowledge and perspective, they use our time effectively. Time well spent with young adult novels may not eliminate our temptation to say ‘I’m late!’ on occasion, but it will eliminate our anxiety about wasting time with literature that fails to speak to our students” (p. 97).

Language arts teachers want literature to speak to their students. They hope to engage their students in reading, discussing, and analyzing literature. They yearn to instill within their students a love of reading. What better device exists to use to attain these goals than the young adult novel? Gallo (2001) explained that what teenagers want more than anything else from novels is entertainment, which is what most writers want their readers to get from their books. Thus, it makes sense to find teachable novels with lively, interesting, and enjoyable stories about how people deal with their problems. He argued that while classics often kill the joy in reading, young adult novels help students feel normal, comfortable, and understood. They engage students. They speak to students.

A Community Of Readers

Virginia Monseau (2000) explained that students need to experience the opportunity of sharing their ideas without the fear of being humiliated and/or ridiculed. She believed that the best vehicle for teachers to use is the young adult novel. She also stated that since engagement is the first step toward literary appreciation, it is essential that teachers give students literature in which they can become involved, thus creating an active literature classroom community.

For Monseau (2000) the key to creating such a community is young adult fiction. She asserted that young adult literature, while engaging teenagers in stories they desire to read, provides them with the opportunity to exercise and develop their critical thinking skills and their own opinions about what they believe is important to them. In other words, it aids students in developing their ability to analyze literature and to evaluate themselves and their principles. It also achieves and maintains a level of trust and respect within the classroom and even helps students view themselves as worthy critics since they feel more able to intellectually discuss young adult literature.

The classics, because of their tradition, their complexities, and their sophistication, do not support a “communal literature class” (p. 71). They do not engage most high school students; in fact, they create boredom: “Boredom need not reign in the literature class, but to create a student-centered environment in which the students are fully engaged with what
they read requires carefully chosen selections, and this is where the young adult novel can play an important role" (p. 77).

Christenbury (2000) agreed with Monseau. She explained that the classics often contain difficult syntax and vocabulary, intricate plots and subplots, the use of multiple characters, unfamiliar geographical settings, and abstruse historical references that require more educational background than most high school students have. Thus, they create struggle and frustration within the young reader. The young adult novels, on the other hand, often contain everyday vocabulary, compressed plots, and a limited number of characters, elements that make them more accessible and understandable for teenagers. In addition, they focus on a young protagonist with issues and concerns that engage and resonate with adolescents.

Some critics may assert that the use of young adult fiction in the high school English classroom will “dummy down” the curriculum. This is not true. The literary elements and devices that are found in the classics can also be found in good-quality young adult novels. The language skills, literary language and techniques, and literature lessons that can be taught through the classics can also be taught through young adult fiction. And, as Gallo (2001) and Christenbury (2000) argued, those who condemn young adult literature have not done their homework. They evidently have not read the better-quality novels written by such authors as Robert Cormier, Chris Lynch, Chris Crutcher, Han Nolan, Jacqueline Woodson, and Gary Paulsen.

Herz (1996) admitted that, for years, she was a literary snob who only considered teaching the classics in her classroom. She believed that most young adult novels were escapist, sentimental confessions with little or no literary merit. However, after dealing with her students’ constant complains while reading Lilies of the Field and after realizing that she was creating a tedious and unpleasant environment in her classroom, she decided to allow each of her students to choose his/her next text. After most chose to read young adult novels, she noticed that the atmosphere in her classroom changed. Her students had positive attitudes, wanted to read more, and craved to share with others what they were reading. Their intense interest and excitement proved to her that her students could be capable, confident, independent readers who took pride in choosing their own literature—literature that engaged and spoke to them. As well, she realized that using young adult literature could be a pathway for her students to discover and appreciate the required classic titles in her school’s curriculum.
Connecting Classic and Young Adult Literature

For those who are still skeptical, there are numerous articles and books written about how young adult novels can be used as bridges or links to the classics. For those who feel the need to include the classics yet desire to instill a love for reading within their students, connecting a classic to a young adult novel is the answer. Christenbury (2000) and Herz (1996) offered extensive examples illustrating how students can better appreciate a classical novel if it is read after or in conjunction with a related young adult novel.

John Bennion (2002), stated that his teenage daughter's ability to read and appreciate Jane Austen's classical novels stemmed from her extensive reading of contemporary and young adult authors. He declared that young people need to read contemporary and young adult literature that maintains the traditions of the classics because they are bridges of understanding to the stories, values, and culture of the greatest writers in Western tradition. He promoted the reading of contemporary and classic novels together and also provides numerous examples illustrating how teachers can incorporate the two types of literature.

One example that Bennion (2002) explained dealt with coupling the novels of Louise Plummer with those of Jane Austen. Plummer, a contemporary author and descendant of Austen's, writes novels about young girls who are faced with the confusion love can create, life's difficult lessons, complicated decisions, and questionable characters and situations. Plummer's novels show young women the difference between romantic obsession and a more self-actualized love. As well, like Jane Austen, Plummer contrasts female protagonists with their foils who have limited vision, seeing only the physical aspect of love instead of its emotional and philosophical complexities. Thus, modern-day young adult novels that deal with young love and that introduce irony and satire, as well as other literary elements; prepare young readers for the classics. Furthermore, Bennion insisted that young adult novels can prove to be valuable tools that encourage teen reading, lead to adult reading, and even initiate lifelong reading.

Creating Life-Long Readers

Can using young adult fiction generate love of reading and a habit of lifelong reading? One research study conducted by Davis, Gorell, Kline, and Hirch (1992) focused on issues in literature instruction, examined undergraduates' attitudes toward the study of literature in a foreign language, and determined what factors affected students' opinions about literature in
The four researchers administered a questionnaire to undergraduates enrolled in introduction to literature courses in French and Spanish college classes. While this particular study did not ask specific questions about young adult literature, its results provide some interesting notations about students' willingness to read because of their introduction and familiarity with a variety of literature, including young adult fiction. The study revealed that students who read for pleasure were more likely to be open to the study of literature in a foreign language. It also connected students' openness to reading directly to the availability of books, to exposure to literature outside the school context, and to the introduction of a wide variety of books, including young adult novels. Students who were allowed to choose what they wanted to read were more likely to continue to read and to register for foreign language literature classes. This study concluded that variety in reading was proven to be an important link to continued reading.

Herz (1996) stated that if teachers remember that their goal is to help students find pleasure in reading and if they foster this goal through student choice and through the use of young adult novels as bridges to the classics, students will develop reading habits that will carry them into adulthood. Furthermore, if teachers support their students' right to choose what they desire to read, they are helping them move through their own personal maturation as serious, committed readers: "By offering students a wide variety of young adult literature—and there is a wide variety in both subject matter and sophistication in today's young adult literature—and allowing them to choose what they want to read, you will begin to see changes in your students' attitudes about reading. For many nonreaders, whether of high, average, or low ability, young adult literature can be a first step in discovering a life time or reading" (p. 6).

Gallo (2001) and Christenbury (2000) continued Herz's argument about how young adult novels encourage life-long reading. By describing his own schoolboy experiences, Gallo explained that he never learned much from classics and certainly did not develop a love of reading because of having to read them. He insisted that if high school students are forced to read literary works that they dislike, they will have no desire whatsoever to continue those experiences into adulthood. In fact, Gallo warned those who advocate that the teaching of the classics is a step toward nurturing love and appreciate of literature that they are actually making the opposite transpire.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The debate about young adult literature and its respected and valued role in the middle and high school language arts/English classrooms will probably continue for years to come. However, teachers who find ourselves in the midst of this debate should bear in mind that, by its very definition as literature for and about adolescents, young adult literature appeals to teenagers and, thus, can play an important role in the study and enjoyment of literature, itself. Christenbury (2000) concurred:

If we honestly care about teaching good literature and, through that process, keeping our students reading long after they have left us and our class, we must provide for them effective ways into reading and understanding. It is not—and never has been—enough to insist that certain works are “good” for students. If we are honest, we know that such adult exhortations never appealed to us as young people, and their power has hardly been enhanced in the succeeding years. We must, therefore, connect those much revered, much treasured classics to something that our students can immediately understand. Natural, necessary, and workable, linking young adult literature to the classics can ensure understanding, enjoyment, and a continuation of lifelong reading. (pp. 28-29)

By using young adult novels, language arts teachers can achieve the goal of fostering within their students the enjoyment of reading. Because good-quality young adult novels allow for choice, contain significant literary devices and elements, and develop critical thinking skills, Of course, this does not mean that language arts teachers no longer support the reading and teaching of the classics. Admiration and passion for the works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Willa Cather have never faltered. However, after accepting that many students are not ready for these authors and realizing that teaching these works may turn more students off rather than on to reading, some teachers are concluding that they should be saved for later—perhaps after students have savored Chris Crutcher, Gary Paulsen, Han Nolan, and Bette Greene. In encouraging students to discover young adult literature, teachers are increasing the chances that students will participate in satisfying literary experiences, read more, and become lifelong readers.

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