Does a Need for Values-Based Literature Still Exist in the Changing Nature of Young Adult Literature?

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The nature of the literature read by young adults has changed considerably over the years. For centuries, literature was used to instruct and correct the behavior of young people. For example, Renaissance works like Hugh Rhodes’ Boke of Nurture (1577) brought us such delectable morsels as “Scratch not thy head with thy fingers, nor spit you over the table” (qtd. in Ros 2). A little later, James Janeway’s A Token for Children (originally published in 1676) provided such delicious tidbits as “Take heed of what you know is naught; as lying…and naughty words…and keeping bad company…” (xv). Even after the literature began to move away from overt didacticism, authors were careful to present wholesome, moral examples in their protagonists, who, of course, always overcame evil. By the nineteenth century, “bad boy” protagonists, such as Mark Twain’s Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, occasionally managed to break through the “good guy” stereotype, but these protagonists were usually still likable, with at least some redeeming qualities.

In the middle of the twentieth century, a paradigm shift began to occur in the literature written for young adults. The emergence of reality and problem novels made the “naughty words” and “bad company” James Janeway once warned against commonplace in these works. Subjects that had been taboo became the norm, “bad boy” protagonists were elevated over wholesome ones, and in perhaps the most dramatic paradigm shift of all, evil frequently triumphed over good. These negative trends have carried over into the twenty-first century.
How does the lack of positive literature impact today’s young adults who are faced with a multitude of moral dilemmas and challenges? With the absence of didacticism, young adults can no longer look to literature for inspiration or edification. Furthermore, values, once highly promoted in literature for young adults, are also visibly absent from many of today’s works, creating a void in positive examples for young adults. Given these factors, is there still a place for values in young adult literature? If so, what is that place and how can it be incorporated into today’s literature?

While some critics have argued that it does not matter what type of literature young adults read since it will neither harm nor benefit them, others have argued just the opposite. For example, Karen Cushman, well-known author of such young adult books as *Catherine Called Birdy* and *Matilda Bone*, contends that “…books, like all the media, tell children what they ought to be like. They provide role models for young people constructing their identity” (qtd. in Donelson and Nilsen 231). Cushman also states, “As children are what they eat and hear and experience, so too they are what they read” (231).

Literature does, indeed, influence young adult readers; *therefore, values-based literature has the potential for enhancing moral development, thus enabling young adults to make more positive life choices. Although a return to the extreme didacticism of pre-twentieth century works would likely not benefit today’s young adults, values can be positively presented in young adult literature, filling a need for positive examples for today’s young readers.*

Not only can young adult literature be used to teach values, it is actually a “natural fit” since a key component of young adult literature is conflict. These conflicts often involve moral choices as characters struggle with making decisions between right and wrong. The literature can thus be used to teach, reinforce, underscore, and exemplify values and morals since nearly all the value issues involve struggle and conflict. In other words, the values at stake are often found in the conflict. Watching fictitious characters as they work through various issues and come to a satisfactory resolution of the conflict can benefit young adults in their own moral development.

As presented in Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development, in the Conventional Level, which “appears in conjunction with” adolescence, “moral decision making [is] based on interpersonal activity. Motivation for doing right is based more on caring for others, the Golden Rule, and the desire” to be viewed by others “as a good person” (Bushman and Bushman 12). Peer influence is significant. The goal is to move adolescents to the Post-Conventional or
Principled Level, “generally attained in adulthood,” in which an individual “resolves [conflicts] with principled ethical judgments” (12). Positive examples from literature of decision-making based on values and ethical judgments can be instrumental in moving young adults from the Conventional Level to the Post-Conventional Level.

Although agreement can be reached that young adult literature is beneficial for raising moral development, some disagreement about what values should be taught through the literature may exist. As Karen Cushman points out, “Kids aren’t born religious or polite or cooperative. These are values taught them by adults and the world around them. The world is constantly sending messages….The question is, What do we want those messages to be?” (qtd. in Donelson and Nilsen 231). That is, indeed, an important question. In our diverse and changing culture, it may appear that we have few values in common. But a closer look suggests we have more commonalities than we initially realize. For instance, recent school shootings such as those at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, remind us of the value of human life. Certainly we all respect human life and agree that killing is not a solution to problems. Respect for human life also encompasses respect for others, including authority. Similarly, an emphasis on the values of integrity and honesty could potentially reduce cheating and stealing. And what about courage, a strong work ethic, and altruism (versus egocentrism)?

Stronks and Stronks also discuss what values should be taught, but additionally, they raise an interesting point about those values:

Many values seen as worthy moral standards for a culture derive from the various histories of the people of that culture. At times these values continue to be followed even if the people no longer follow the underlying beliefs that were a part of that history. For example, such moral standards as honesty, respect for individuals, respect for those in authority, self-control, caring for those in need, tolerance, justice, caring for the environment, and stewardship of resources are Christian values. But they are also commonly accepted standards of people of many different beliefs. These standards or values are part of our historical documents, and North American students, whatever their culture, can understand and accept them….These values harmonize with more than one worldview….

(34-35)
Haynes supports this position by claiming that “a quality education must include an understanding of the religious influences that have played a vital role in the molding of our nation (qtd. in Stronks and Stronks 24). He goes on to claim that “omission of instruction and discussion about religious and philosophical points of view in history, literature, and other subjects will give students the false impression that religious traditions and ways of believing are of only marginal importance in people’s lives and that only nonreligious points of view are worthwhile” (qtd. in Stronks and Stronks 24).

If literature presenting positive moral values with real-life consequences showing that good ultimately triumphs over evil instead of showing glorified consequences in which evil apparently comes out ahead is offered to young adults, then they will be able to see how protagonists facing moral dilemmas resolve their conflicts by adhering to a set of moral guidelines. Problems may still arise for the protagonists, who after all remain imperfect, but by demonstrating values of integrity, honesty, courage, and the like, they are able to rise above the conflicts in their lives and depict the positive role models of which young adult literature is so desperately in need.

Another reason for providing young adults with literature depicting positive values lies in the negativity and hopelessness frequently presented in literature lacking those values. In some instances, parents have challenged the depressing nature of the books their children are reading. In her article entitled “Reflections on the ‘Problem Novel,’” Barbara Feinberg notes that her own children were sad and withdrawn after reading assigned works with negative themes and realism. In fact, the negativity became so overwhelming for her son that he would not read alone in his room unless the door was open, because he “didn’t like to be alone with these books” (10). She also cites a young girl as claiming “The [problem novels] give me a headache in my stomach” (12). Feinberg then reflects on the joy reading brought her as a child, noting that she doesn’t “remember feeling anxiety upon opening a book” (16) as her own children do.

For many of us, books have been our companions, even our friends. As Lauren Knutson, a student at Southwest Baptist University, said in a recent statement about Robin Jones Gunn’s Christy Miller books for young ladies, “[Her] books introduced me to a world that I often escaped to as I grew up…. [She] creat[ed] good friends who stuck with me through adolescence….” If we want our young adult readers to “fall in love” with books so that they will become lifelong readers, should they be reading a steady diet of problem and reality works? One
argument in favor of allowing young adults to read realistic or problem novels is that they can learn how to handle their own problems after reading how protagonists handle them. As Sheila Egoff, a specialist in children’s literature from Canada, puts it, the realistic young adult novel actually intentionally “takes the approach that maturity can be attained only through a severe testing of soul and self, [featuring] some kind of shocking ‘right [sic] of passage’” (qtd. in Feinberg 13-14). But do overt images of drug abuse, alcoholism, illicit sexual activity, physical abuse, and the like foster imitation and thus, lead to negative consequences (and possibly a loss of innocence) instead of positive behavior and moral development? Even if the negatives are not imitated, of what benefit is explicit exposure to inappropriate activities? Sherry Garland, award-winning author of over twenty-five young adult novels, including two in the Dear America series, comments about the lack of profanity in her novels: “[I]t is my philosophy that the readers already know profanity and do not need to see it spelled out.” Instead, Garland states, “If a scene calls for strong language, I simply say something like ‘Henry spewed out a stream of profanity that would curl the toes of any sailor’….Without actually using the words, the interpretation is still the same” (137).

Given the connection between reading and behavior, it is understandable that concerns arise regarding the literature we “feed” today’s young adults. To those who question parents’ objections to literature that does not present positive values, R. C. Small, Jr. has pointed out, We have led parents—our former students, after all—to believe that great works contain great truths and that masterpieces are such because of their power to influence. Why should it now be so surprising that parents, discovering curse words, scenes of sexual relations, arguments against the current American social order, questions about the existence of God, believe that we are now pushing those ideas as we formerly pushed the ideas in Silas Marner and Julius Caesar? (qtd. in Bushman and Bushman 208)

So what can be said about specific young adult novels? A look first at some negative examples will serve to illustrate the difficulties of making these works available to young adults. One novel that has been taught in many high schools is Robert Cormier’s The Chocolate War. This work shows no respect for teachers, adults in general, or religion, and evil triumphs over good in the end. Although this book has been at the center of several controversies and is not
taught as frequently as it once was, students who read this work are exposed to negative values in contrast to the positive value of respect.

Another work that has been at the center of a number of controversies is Lois Lowry’s extremely popular *The Giver*. Initially taught at the high school level, this novel is now used more frequently in middle schools. Lowry’s excellent writing skills notwithstanding, *The Giver* presents a dystopian society in which there is no respect for human life in regard to individual rights, plus infanticide and euthanasia of the elderly are regularly practiced. Granted, the book does end with at least a glimmer of hope that once he has learned the truth, the protagonist is able to escape from this life, but the inability of the other citizens to see the horror of their lifestyle remains. The novel is still a good read, but in typical dystopian fashion, the depressing nature of this book can be overwhelming for young readers, depending especially on how they choose to read the ending.

A more recent example of a society gone awry appears in Suzanne Collins’ immensely successful *The Hunger Games*. In this futuristic work, the teenage protagonists find themselves in a fight for their lives, not atypical if this were a traditional adventure story, but in this story successful survival means the demise of one’s opponents—in this case, also teenagers. As with *The Giver*, this novel is extremely well-written, but the hopelessness that pervades much of the novel can leave a depressing taste in the mouths of its readers.

Of course, many works present far more objectionable aspects than those mentioned above. Works presenting graphic sexuality, including rape, incest, and abuse, such as Augusten Burroughs’ *Running with Scissors*, Lauren Myracle’s *ttyl* series, Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, and Sapphire’s *Push* abound, as do texts depicting graphic violence, such as Peg Kehret’s *Stolen Children*, and/or explicit profanity, such as Sonja Sones’ *What My Mother Doesn’t Know* (“Books Challenged or Banned in 2010-2011”). Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* goes so far as to present young adults having premarital sex with multiple partners and planning an *intended* pregnancy.

Fortunately, young adult literature presenting positive values, minus the depressing realism that characterizes many of the works, is readily available. One genre often depicting positive values is historical fiction since young adult writers tend to write about *heroic* figures from history. For example, war literature is filled with heroic individuals. Laura Williams’ *Behind the Bedroom Wall* exemplifies great respect for life and the religious values of others,
displayed in the determination of the adult characters to “do the right thing” by protecting Jews regardless of the cost. In *Number the Stars*, a work contrasting sharply with her *The Giver*, Lois Lowry’s characters display loyalty and courage while valuing friendships, religious beliefs, and patriotism in the face of national persecution during WWII. Other such accounts about World War II heroes abound, as do accounts of heroes from other wars.

Of course, war is not the only historical event to spawn young adult literature since various time periods and major incidents in history provide rich material for authors. For instance, numerous authors have embraced the medieval era as their subject matter. Certainly this time period has its own share of less than sterling characters, not the least of whom is King Henry VIII, but many heroic characters figure prominently in medieval literature. One of these is Lady Jane Grey, who became queen of England for nine days after the death of Henry’s young son, King Edward. Ann Rinaldi, in her historical novel, *Nine Days a Queen*, presents Lady Jane in her youthful innocence as a pawn in the hands of her powerful, throne-seeking family, but also shows the remarkably mature courage Lady Jane demonstrates as she goes to her beheading—even to the point of publically forgiving her executioner.

A more contemporary time period addressed in young adult literature involves racial discrimination and the Civil Rights movement in America. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, although not written specifically for young adults, is often taught in high schools. While protagonist Scout is a precocious nine-year old tomboy, her attorney father is the epitome of integrity and honesty, fighting for justice in the face of racial tension and discrimination, even while he models compassion to mentally challenged neighbor, Boo Radley. The closeness of Scout, her father, and her brother also demonstrates strong family loyalty ties in this single-parent family, even in the face of adversity.

Historical fiction is only one type of young adult literature presenting positive values. Adventure stories like many of Will Hobbs’ novels and Scott O’Dell’s *Island of the Blue Dolphins* depict protagonists struggling against seemingly insurmountable odds and ultimately emerging victorious because of perseverance and courage. *Island of the Blue Dolphins* also demonstrates adherence to religious values even in the absence of moral authority. Sports stories often show the value of hard work and honesty. Teenage romances *can* present healthy relationships minus explicit or illicit sexuality. For example, novels such as those in Robin Jones Gunn’s *Christy Miller* series present young adult protagonists involved in healthy relationships
as they mature through a variety of circumstances. [Gunn’s books do include a Christian perspective and would likely not appeal to male readers; nonetheless, they would make an excellent addition to a lending library.] Coming of age stories can provide positive examples of how to survive and even thrive during adolescence. Even fantasies may provide positive role models who display courage, loyalty, and honesty. In fact, young adult literature of all types, from mysteries and friendship stories to humorous accounts and animal tales, can provide young adults with positive examples of conflict resolution and values.

One final subgenre often not thought of for classroom use but offering positive values for young adults is that of comic books (not to be confused with today’s graphic novels). Professor Greg Garrett argues in his book Holy Superheroes! that we still need superheroes because of the values they represent: “[N]o matter how different the cultures, humans have always needed heroes, real or created, to model behavior, to give hope” (9). For example, Garrett maintains, justice is often clearly demonstrated in “comic book morality….somebody does a bad thing: the Riddler robs a bank….The story line then follows the pursuit of retributive justice: the miscreant is captured, contained, or destroyed…and justice is served” (40-41). As Garrett points out, we can “remember the model for advancement Superman gives us….We can’t all be Superman. But we can be better men and women, working to change the world” (26-27). The current popularity of Superman and other super heroes suggests that Garrett’s claim that we need heroes is correct and further emphasizes the need for positive role models in the lives of young adults. If comic books can supply these heroes, other young adult literature should also be able to provide them as well.

Today’s young adults are bombarded by negative real-life experiences and graphic media images. Since, as we are reminded by Karen Cushman, young adult books “provide role models for young people” (qtd. in Donelson and Nilsen 231), we owe it to our young adults to provide quality, positive examples of values-based literature as an alternative to the negative, “everything is acceptable” attitude exemplified in the works they are so often offered. Problem and reality novels and stories may occasionally have their place on the reading lists of young adults, but failure to provide our young readers with healthy alternatives prevents them from experiencing the benefits that potentially come from reading values-based literature.
Works Cited


