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The Importance of Violence in Young Adult Literary Fiction

Overview

Recent young adult novels have sparked controversy about whether the amount of violence the novels display is good for young adults to be reading. Kathleen T. Isaacs argues that the violence that is portrayed in young adult literature is not typically present in the average adolescent and by reading this violence in young adult novels they receive a false message about the amount of violence that is actually in the world. Judith Franzak and Elizabeth Noll disagree, stating the violence in the literature accurately portrays the violence in real life because in quality young adult literature violence is portrayed as multifaceted with a variety of functions, experiences, and levels. They go on to say that the violence in young adult literature can actually help adolescents understand the violence in reality when exposed to a wide variety of violence through literature (663).

In order to completely understand the argument certain terms need to be explained first, starting with adolescence. According to Oxford's *Dictionary of Sociology* adolescence is a stage in the human life cycle between childhood and adulthood usually characterized by persons from age 11-18. The definition goes on to stress that this is a time of emotional turbulence when the person can be especially vulnerable to environmental or emotional dangers (McCallum).

According to Robert Havighurst this is also a time when adolescents in modern Western society

must undergo certain tasks to pass safely into adulthood. He recognized eight tasks total: discovery and adjustment to culturally acceptable sex roles, development of new and satisfactory relationships with peer groups, achieving an easy relationship with member of opposite sex, acceptance of physical change in the body, changing relationship with parents, earning money, finding life's work, and becoming aware of their own morals and values (Abrahamson 4). Richard F. Abrahamson later added exposure to and acceptance of death as an additional developmental task (5).

Young adult literature is also a special category of literature that must be defined to avoid confusion. According to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* young adult literature generally refers to works that are written to address ages thirteen and upwards. It can also be defined by its narrative strategies, genres, themes, and subject matter. Young adult literature has been around since the middle of the 19th century but until the later part of the 20th century it was not widespread. Some of the most instrumental young adult novels that started it all include: *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger), *The Chocolate War* (Cormier), and *The Outsiders* (Hinton). Allene Phy-Olsen describes the characteristics of young adult fiction as: protagonists are generally young and the narratives are first-person, with their point of view prevailing over pitfalls. Plots also deal with adolescent dilemmas and problems are usually resolved in a positive light at the end of the novel. She goes on to cite the genres of young adult fiction as: family life, ethnic literature, supernatural, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, adventure, sports, and series books. Young adult literature is important to adolescent lives' because it can serve a variety of roles. Richardson and Miller cite four reasons to use young adult literature in a classroom including to "aid students in understanding reality" (Butcher and Manning 18). Bucher and Manning assert that there are a variety of purposes and benefits that young adult

literature provides including: teaching young adults about a world beyond their own community and the diverse people in that world, demonstrating a range of human emotions that adolescents can experience vicariously, reveal realities about life, focusing on the “essentials” that will maintain order in a world of chaos, and illustrates the functions of institutions in society (10). They also state that while younger adolescents initially use young adult literature as a starting point to significantly think about literature, eventually they use young adult literature as a guide to investigate problems in society and determine what their role is in this world (9).

Violence is something that surrounds society in modern times. Unfortunately sometimes it is hard to define because of its’ ability to present itself in a myriad of ways. According to the *Dictionary of Public Health*:

The simplest definition of violence is behavior causing harm by the use of force. Two types are unintentional violence, which occurs in the workplace or domestic settings, or may be traffic-related or recreational; and intentional violence, self-harm, and harm caused by others. The latter includes domestic violence and violence at the hands of strangers, assault, and robbery with violence, violence as part of civil disturbances such as riots, sports-related hooliganism, etc. An additional large category includes all forms of war and violent armed conflicts.

The definition clearly describes the complexity of violence and how hard it can be to accurately identify violence in certain instances. Intentional or unintentional violence is something that absorbs the modern society. Young adult literature adequately reflects the variety of violent acts that are present in society by describing a mixture of the types of violence. Some of the types of violence that are displayed in young adult literature include: domestic, physical, verbal,

emotional, situational, and sexual violence, as well as war and bullying. There are a variety of examples of violence in young adult literature of all genres. The recent science fiction *Hunger Games* series (Collins) has sparked controversy because of the violent murder scenes. The fantasy *Harry Potter* series (Rowling) also depicts murders and war. Many young adult novels that are very commonly used in U.S. classrooms include *Mississippi Trial 1955* (Crowe), *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros), *Staying Fat for Sarah Burns* (Crutcher), and *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper). Each of these novels listed deals heavily with some sort of violence ranging from bullying, rape, domestic violence, suicide, and child abuse.

It seems that it is hard to shield adolescents from every type of violence out there because modern culture is saturated with it. The question then remains, is it really bad for them to be exposed to violence? If it is, where should the line be drawn? Is all violent exposure bad? If not, what violence is okay, and what is not?

Literature Review

Although the debate about violence in young adult literature is a fairly new topic, discussions about violent literature in general have been taking place for years. According to Dowling Campbell sometimes the violence is natural such as depictions of hurricanes, floods, or earthquakes, but the most popular type is disaster caused by humans such as war, crime, abuse, and torture. Campbell advocates that the reason for violence in literature is because authors usually offer a redeeming message in these images of violence. There is not a celebration of violence that takes place within these works but rather it is used in the hopes that by reading about these violent acts humanity will choose to cease future violent actions. He goes on to claim

that it should not come as a surprise to see violence in literature because writers reflect onto the page what they see, hear, and experience.

The research into violence in young adult literature and its' effects on adolescents is not nearly as complete as that of violence in children's literature and its' effects on children.

American psychologist Bruno Bettelheim analyzed fairy tales using Freudian psychological techniques in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* and determined that the violence used in fairy tales allows children to grow and strengthen their emotions which better prepares them for their inevitable violent future and reality. He goes on to claim that fairy tales provide a place for children to deal with their fears in a way that is distant and symbolic. He argues that by reading and interpreting these fairy tales in an individualized way would give children a greater feeling of meaning and purpose. Megan Creasey argued in an article for the *Oneota Reading Journal* that violent situations depicted in children's stories can be easy to relate to and can be used to teach children how to avoid violent solutions in their own lives. In her article she cites Moustakis who asserts that aggression is a natural occurrence in children, therefore it seems difficult to believe that aggression and violence amongst children could be solved by simply removing it from books. Creasey goes on to explain the "exposure theory" that is in recent trend which argues that children should not be sheltered from violence, but rather exposed to it because according to Kenneth B. Kidd, "we no longer have the luxury of denying the existence of or postponing the child's confrontation of evil." Creasey advocates that because violence is often either already present in a child's life or will be inevitably in the future, exposing them to violence through literature provides options on how to cope in various violent scenarios. In addition it helps them make sense of these violent scenarios when they take place.

Although statistical studies for the effects of violence in literature on readers have not yet been extensive, there have been a lot of studies regarding the effects of violence portrayed on television. The National Institute of Mental Health concluded in 1982 that there is an increase in the likelihood that some viewers will become more violent if there is excessive violence on television. However a study in 1978 concluded that, “children’s violence is not influenced by media violence when the values and norms about aggression are clear” (Hopkins 353). Unfortunately, these studies seem to show little about the effects of violent literature on readers because as Campbell asserted earlier, the majority of literature makes clear the “values and norms about aggression” therefore literature should also fail to influence violent tendencies in readers. Unfortunately there is no statistical study to prove this educated extension.

There have been studies that have shown positive effects of using violence in young adult literature as a bibliotherapy of sorts. Ronald L. Young and A. Terrell agree that although there are a strong number of books that display a large amount of violence in them they believe that they serve a purpose for children to be able to identify with the characters (whether it is the victim or perpetrator) and then they are able to gain insight into the problem that is associated with the violence through the novel which allows for catharsis release. It also allows them to deal with these issues from the distance of a third person. They assert, “opportunities for vicarious learning about bullying and victimization are so plentiful through the medium of children’s literature.”

Although there are not “hard” studies of the effects of violence in young adult literature on adolescents, there are a lot of case studies done by teachers detailing positive effects. Brozo, Walter, and Placker used literature as a way to look at violence and masculinity in real life by having students reflect on everyday experiences with boys/men who accept violence and self

critique their own attitudes about violence. The students then brainstormed alternative nonviolent solutions to violent events in the novels. Baer and Glasgow used literature to examine the different roles that people play in violence including the bystander so that students understand that they are in the “best position” to stop bullying and violence. Stacy Miller presented a unit on violence in young adult literature that starts with helping students understand violence and its origin and moves to students critically thinking about and evaluating violence in real life before determining possible strategies to prevent or eliminate violence. Each of these studies showed remarkable improvements in the understanding of violence and the use of nonviolent solutions.

Argument

The genre of young adult literature has been flourishing since the 1950s and has served as both pleasure reading and instructional materials for adolescents. Violence is a subject that has been present in the genre throughout the decades but there are worries that the current young adult novels contain too much violence for the targeted age group. There is concern that this exposure to fictional violence could lead to violent actions by young adults in real life when really this fictional violence could prove beneficial to young adults by providing them a way to experience and understand the violence that surrounds the adult world without being a direct part of it. In addition, vicarious experiences could transfer into their real life to help them meet certain developmental tasks and learn how to deal with violence properly. This idea could further be applied to the current debate regarding violence portrayed in movies, television shows, and video games.

The violence in young adult literature reflects real world issues such as murder, rape, abuse, bullying, torture, and much more. Adolescence is a stage in between childhood and

adulthood so it is a natural time for adolescents to start exploring topics that they may not completely understand in order to gain a better understanding of the world. Literature is a source for these adolescents to utilize to gain this knowledge and engage in real world problems. Richardson and Miller agree, believing that young adult literature is a great tool to teach adolescents about the realities of life (Butcher and Manning 18). Andrew Clements, author of *Frindle* reminisces, “By grade six or so, I was becoming more aware of the world. I began to realize that all was not sweetness and light.” He went on to say, “My literary appetite was whetted for stronger meat.” He believes that the trendy stories of today that are riddled with darkness and violence are due to writers and readers alike becoming more knowledgeable about the devastating events that occur in the modern world. Although history reveals that these horrible events have always happened, he believes it is becoming increasingly evident due to our “media saturated” lives that fill us full of live-action images of the devastation. Paolo Bacigalupi, young adult author of *Ship Breaker* agrees saying that teens crave the sort of brute truth-telling that these novels deliver. “The truth of the world around us is changing and so the literature is morphing to reflect it,” Bacigalupi says. Rosemary Stimola, the agent that represents Suzanne Collins and *The Hunger Games* agrees with Bacigalupi pointing out that the current population of young people cannot remember life without the U.S. being at war, so it makes sense that they want literature that allows them to explore good and evil, violence, and great loss (Corbett 21). She is right in that young adults do not remember a time when there was not a television or computer to give them immediate access to real-time violence like the war against terror, Hurricane Katrina, or cannibalism in Florida. “Teens want to read something that isn’t a lie; we adults wish we could put our heads under the blankets and hide from the scary stories we’re writing our kids,” explains Bacigalupi. Even in their everyday life adolescents see violence as

an everyday occurrence at school or home whether it is a physical fight at school, arguments with a friend, fights with teachers, parents, or administrators, partner abuse, or bullying. This is why Gail Giles, author of *Shattering Glass*, does not like to present a “happily ever after” view of the adolescent world. In her novels she asks her characters to reflect the real and sometimes grim world where events can spiral out of control quickly (Lesesne 57).

Although most agree that this is a good demonstration of the real world there are those who disagree and believe that literature hypes up the violence. *Time* magazine quotes University of Calgary professor Roderick McGillis saying, “We’re developing in our culture... a kind of siege mentality. A lot of these books reinforce this; make it sort of normal to think that the world is a place in which violence can erupt at any moment” (P Campbell) Although this could be a side-effect of the violent novels that are published today, the real purpose seems to be more to enlighten young adults about violence so that they can be more apt to understand and deal with violence properly. Kathleen T. Isaacs, a faculty member of Edmund Burke School, is also appalled at the violent books that seem to be multiplying each with more “disturbing” detail. In her article for the *School Library Journal* in 2003 she surveyed many students at her school, most of which she claims prefer not to read these books. The tide for this may have turned due to the fact that according to *Entertainment Weekly* the *Hunger Games* series has sold over 30 million books in the U.S. which is thought to be the most violent young adult novel to be published recently. Isaacs also goes on to argue that the violence does not appeal to young adults because the majority of young people’s lives are absent from violence. She claims that physical fights are rarely seen in their “sheltered, supervised” lives; therefore their only understanding of violence comes from books and television. Although this is very possible, it seems hard to believe that a young adult has never witnessed violence first hand whether in public or at home.

Even if that was the case, it makes it all the more important for adolescents to experience violence vicariously through novels so that they can learn about something that consumes so much of our society today in order to be able to handle the inevitable future of its' existence. Butcher and Manning assert that a purpose for young adult literature is to expose adolescents to the world outside their community and its' diverse people (10). If violence is not present in their community it is important that they be exposed to it through the safe confines of a book in order to understand the world and the violence within. In addition she states that these "gritty and raw books" do not represent reality and goes on to list statistical data that shows the crime rates between 1993-2003 dropping. According to Bureau of Justice Statistics the crime rates seem to be at a plateau since Isaacs's article however, there is still crime and violence in the world. When students in Stacy Miller's AP literature class were asked how violence surrounds them they described how they are observational learners who absorb the desensitization by the media broadcasting details about the war and news. In school they are subject to bullying, derogatory dialogue and gossip, and tagged bathroom stalls and hallways (90). Professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School stated in an interview with *Now*:

On the one hand we know that we can be annihilated and everybody around us by terrorism, by the incredible weaponry that this world now has. And yet in another part of our mind we simply go through our routine. And we do what we do in life, and we try to do it as well as we can (Fanzak & Noll 663).

Clearly massive amounts of violence are weighed upon the people of the world every day and as long as violence exists young adults have to learn and experience violence in order to understand it.

Due to these violent actions in young adult literature reflecting real life, it is even more crucial to learn about these events and how to deal with them. It can be easy to pull away from violent depictions in literature because there is a stigma that the reader of these violent illustrations in some way support the violence, when actually that can be very false. “Most novels do not glorify violence but rather try to get their reader to aspire to love and tolerance,” asserts Claudia Mody. Although in *The Hunger Games* Katniss is forced to kill other teens in order to survive the games, she is not glorifying the violence that is portrayed. On the contrary, she is actually very appalled at what she has to do. In fact, all of the characters who do glorify the violence and what the games represent (“The Careers”) actually end up dying in the end. Collins further tries to advocate for love and tolerance in her novel by the refusal of Katniss and Peeta to kill each other at the end of the games. According to Judith Fanzak and Elisabeth Noll, violence in literature can help deepen what these stories have to offer readers (663). If it weren’t for the violence in *The Hunger Games* it would simply be a very dense love story. Once the violence is mixed in it raises questions about morality, the role of government, and how to deal with death. Fanzak and Noll believe that violence in young adult literature reflects the violence we see in social, political, and economic domains and that adolescents can more deeply understand violence when exposed to a range of violent examples (663). Because violence plays such a large part in the world today and is not likely to be eradicated it is important for adolescents to read about violence in literature so that they can understand the violence in their own world and are more apt to deal with it.

Young adults can also identify with characters in novels that are victims of violence in order to recognize violence in their own lives. Because adolescents have a limited knowledge of the world it is often hard for them to identify violence in their own lives. If someone has never

explained the variety of forms violence can take it is hard to identify it, just like anything else. It is also hard to explain to a child that they are part of an abusive household or relationship because often they are too close to see it. Literature provides the young adult an opportunity to be an objective third person that is peering into a story. At this point of view it is much easier for them to recognize violence and create judgments from a safe distance. Clements notes that literature often is a way that allows us to put events in our lives into perspective. Jay Parini author of *The Passages of H.M.* recalls the novel *1984* (Orwell) forcing him to realize the violence in his life: “A story that spoke to my own sense of world where violence was not only prevalent but glorified...[I] knew several replicas of Dim, the muscular thug who lived only to crush those around him”. Courtney Summers, young adult author of *Fall for Anything* recalls, “As a teen I often looked to books to gain perspectives about stuff I wasn’t ready to talk about with friends and family” (Iyer 20). Sue Ellen Bridger, writer of *All We Know of Heaven*, which is about domestic spousal abuse, argues that there is a strong role for young adult literature in making sense of destructive relationships. She believes that characters can also be there for young adults when a friend, parent, or teacher is not as effective (72). Bridger explains that the first step to allowing literature to help is admitting that the abuse is occurring which can often be triggered by a character who witnesses, provokes, or endures violence. The admittance through literature allows young adults to approach the problem subtly instead of head on allowing them time to process it on their own. They also are free to various reactions without feeling judged (72). Bridgers was once approached by a mother who thanked her for writing *All We Know of Heaven* which made her daughter realize the abusive relationship she was in and get out (73). Fictional pieces have tremendous powers to allow the reader to freely explore so many different

topics in order to understand them and evaluate how they fit into their life. No one is absent from violence and it is just another topic that should be explored through literature.

Violence in young adult literature can also act as a vicarious experience that allows adolescence to release their built up anger. One student in Miller's classroom suggested that viewing violence can cause the viewer to project their "inner darkness" or inner feelings of anger and aggression that are not able to be acted on in real life but can be vicariously acted out through the fictional lives of others (90). Literature can work in the same way. Jay Asher's recent novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* details a girl who has committed suicide but before she does makes recordings detailing the people who had done something to make her want to kill herself. In the back of the book there are comments from readers who have stated that they had thought about suicide but after reading the novel had decided to choose life. Similar to the main character Hannah, these readers also had aggressive feelings towards themselves and others around them that were making them think about suicide. Through reading the novel these adolescents were able to release the aggression that they had built up by living vicariously through Hannah. Butcher and Manning agree that one of the purposes for young adult literature is to provide young adults with a range of human emotions that adolescents can experience (10).

Violence in young adult literature can also serve as a deterrent for young adults to pursue violent actions for fear of the consequences. Creasey argues that if children are shared stories that show violence resulting in unpleasant consequences for the victim and the perpetrator they are less likely to act violently to solve a conflict in real life. The same can be true for young adults. With a novel the reader usually has the advantage of witnessing the planning of the violent act, the actual violent act itself and then the result of the act in a short period of time without any harm being done in real life. In life young adults unfortunately can only see one step

at a time. The luxury of flipping to the next page to see what happens does not exist. Prior knowledge must be relied on to fill in the gaps and predict what will happen next. If adolescents are exposed to a wide variety of violent acts that end with negative consequences they will remember the events and choose to act nonviolently in order to avoid the negative consequences.

Violence in young adult literature can also serve a very important role in helping adolescents meet certain developmental tasks. Patty Campbell agrees stating that violent thrillers “speak” to adolescent developmental needs. She goes on to say that they present a framework that satisfies the hunger of young adults for answers to “eternal” questions, such as “What will happen to me when I die?” One of the first tasks that Havinghurst recognizes is discovery and adjustment to culturally accepted sex roles. Through the role of violence in literature adolescents can recognize that although in life sometimes it seems that the role of a man is to take a violent stance on situations that does not have to be the case. Brozo, Walter, and Placker used the young adult novel *Scorpions* (Myers) and its details of gangs and illegal use of firearms to help adolescents evaluate the true role of a man. Adolescents are also expected to develop new healthy relationships with other peers. *Shattering Glass* (Giles) is a great novel to evaluate the true role of friendship and what makes a healthy friendship because the main character is thought to be befriended by the high school jock but in reality it is just a prank that turns to violence. Bridgers’ *All We Know of Heaven* could help adolescents determine what makes or does not make a satisfactory relationship with a member of the opposite sex due to its’ detailed descriptions of domestic violence and spousal abuse. Young adult literature can aid in the development of any of these tasks by giving descriptions of what constitutes a good and bad friend, partner, and self. Often the violence in the literature can serve as a starting point for the

adolescents to determine whether their relationships are healthy and if not, how they could change that.

Violence in young adult literature can be especially helpful in the development of Havighurst's last task, the development of values and morals. Violence in literature forces the reader to think about their values and moral development. The violence opens the reader up to question the thoughts, actions, and motivations of the characters. The reader is faced with situations where they must ask themselves, is that right? Should this character fight back even though they are being attacked or should they be the bigger person? Is it self-defense or just a reason to act in a violent manner? Who determines what is right or wrong? Should there be lines drawn? If so, where should they be drawn? Who should draw them? All of these questions can help guide adolescents to develop their own moral system and each one can be stimulated through violence in literature. Answers to these questions will help the adolescent build their own moral standards. Violence in literature can also help readers recognize the value of something they may have taken for granted or have not thought of before. Many teenagers take everyday liberties for granted because they are unaware of anyone being without such liberties or have not experienced those restrictions. By living vicariously through the violence in *Milkweed* (Spinelli) a historical fiction novel about WWII could force a young adult to realize the value of freedom of religion. Young adults might learn the value of equality while reading *Mississippi Trial 1955* (Crowe) after they witness the horrific events that led to Emmett Till's death. Young adult novels put adolescents in a variety of positions to allow them to determine the morality and value of said situations in an environment that is protected and free of judgment.

One of the developmental tasks that can be more clearly achieved through violence in young adult literature is Richard F. Abrahamson's exposure to and acceptance of death. Many

young adult novels that contains violence also contain some death. In *The Hunger Games* (Collins) there is the death of Rue and Katniss' father. In the *Harry Potter* series there is the death of Sirius, Dumbledore, Severus Snape, Voldemort, Hedwig, Tonks, Fred Weasley, Remus Lupin, Dobby and more. In *Mississippi Trial 1955* Emmett Till's murder is detailed. The list of young adult novels that contain death could go on and on. Clearly by reading certain young adult novels adolescents will be exposed to death and will have to learn how to deal with it. Death is a natural part of life that no one can escape and therefore it is crucial that adolescents learn to master this task. At that age they often have not experienced death first hand yet. Quite frequently it does not happen until their first grandparent dies with the exception of accidents or unusual incidents. This is why it is important that young adults first deal with the task that is arguably the hardest to tackle through the safe confines of a novel. Experiencing death through a novel is real enough to break your heart but it is not so devastating that it will sink an adolescent into depression. Although losing a character in a fictional novel is not like losing someone in real life, it can be pretty close. As a reader goes through the novel they start to become attached to the characters they encounter. They get to know these characters very well and it can be hard to let go, especially in a series. Although the blow may be just as hard when it is experienced in real life if an adolescent has not been exposed to death in a novel, reading about death in young adult literature can help the adolescent understand what death is and often there are coping mechanisms offered in the novels that an adolescent can imitate to get through that difficult time in their life. For example, in the *Harry Potter* series when Dumbledore, the beloved headmaster is killed Harry turns to his friends for comfort and support. Adolescents can also learn what not to do through novels. In *Tears of a Tiger* Andy is not able to cope with his friend Robbie's death and turns away from his other friends then ultimately commits suicide. Accepting

death is very hard to do especially during adolescence, but young adult literature offers many options for young adults to utilize when dealing with these issues. Adolescents are also made aware of the harmful effects that destructive coping mechanisms provide.

This is a pressing issue with everyone not just those who work with children or have children. Young adults will become the leaders of this world one day and it is important that they have experienced and learned what is necessary for them to succeed in this world. Violence has been an essential part of culture since the beginning of time and in order to become leaders of a nation that is at risk of losing their spot as the world leader these young adults have to become more prepared to step into the adult world and that means experiencing more of it through literature. In addition with the U.S. literacy rates falling behind other civilized countries it is crucial that these appealing books are utilized for teen development in literacy as well as adolescent development.

As of current research there is nothing saying that there is a direct correlation between violence in young adults and the violence they read in young adult literature. Although violence has been present in literature for many years there does seem to be a higher demand for it recently. With the violence that surrounds us, in part because of the availability to communications through the internet and television, it is no surprise that there is a demand for violence in literature as well. Despite critics appeals violence serves an important role in adolescent development and can positively impact young adults by allowing them to explore violence in a safe manner in order to gain a better understanding and learn how to properly handle the violence in the real world. Patty Campbell urges, "It is up to the critics and adults who work with young people to stop wringing their hands and get busy finding constructive ways to take advantage of the appeal of these books for teens."

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