
Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

John H. Bushman

English Journal. March, 1997. 45-40.

Much has been written in the past few years about the importance of meeting the reading needs, interests, and abilities of young people in middle and senior high schools. Accompanying such writing has been the suggestion that young adult literature is suitable for the classroom and, indeed, would serve the students well in meeting these needs. Many writers including John H. Bushman and Kay P. Bushman (1993, 1997), Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson (1993), Rebecca Lukens and Ruth K. J. Cline (1995), Arthea J. S. Reed (1994), and Jean Brown and Elaine Stephens (1995) have argued well that in order to help young adults through the difficult time of being adolescents, teachers must provide literature that speaks to the issues facing our students: problems in their physical, intellectual, moral, and reading development. It would seem that the classical literature (the canon) of which most, if not all, was written for the educated adult community, does not provide the answers that young people are seeking.

What are the special needs and expectations of adolescents? What are the major developmental tasks that confront teenagers? Erik Erikson (1984) suggests that the major task of adolescence is the formulation, or reformulation, of personal identity. Middle and high school students are primarily engaged in the task of answering the question, "Who am I?" James Marcia (1980) describes a series of stages or classifications of identity that could be adopted by teens as they grow into adulthood. Robert Havighurst (1972) outlines developmental tasks for healthy individuals that include a series of tasks that confront adolescents. In his view, the principal needs of adolescence are emotional and social development, rather than intellectual growth. But what is the school experience? Not much attention is given to emotional and social development, but a great deal of attention is given to intellectual development. And what literature is assigned for students to read in the classroom: usually the classics or at least that literature found in the anthology.

The major question that teachers should address is: Do *Romeo and Juliet*, *Great Expectations*, *Julius Caesar*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Odyssey*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Iliad*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Old Man and the Sea* and many others found in the English curriculum meet the needs, interests, and abilities of young people in middle and high schools? Do these works help with the emotional and social development of young people? All who believe that age-appropriate literature is the major criterion for

John H. Bushman

Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

choosing literature for young people would argue that these works are more suitable for adults than adolescents. Those who argue for the importance of cultural and literary heritage may believe that these works are indeed appropriate for junior and senior students in college-bound or honors English classes. The interesting point here is that these works just mentioned are frequently assigned to eighth- and ninth-grade students!

READING QUESTIONNAIRE

During the past spring, I sent a questionnaire to students in grades six through twelve requesting information about their reading and literature experiences in and out of school. It was a small, non-random sampling—only 380 students surveyed, but it did give a range across all seven grades and represented a variety of school sizes and locations. I wanted to secure information regarding the literature that was assigned to students for in-class reading. In addition, I also asked what literature students read for book reports, what literature students read for pleasure outside of the school, and if students read the works assigned or if they used Cliffs Notes, some other published study guide, or teacher study guides or packets. Finally, I asked students what kinds of books they like to read, if they had favorite authors and who they were, and what was their alltime favorite book.

Most students in this survey believe that they read the works assigned to them; they did not use published study guides such as Cliffs Notes (two students in the survey indicated that if they had used Cliffs Notes, their teachers would have “killed” them); however, most, with few exceptions, did use a teacher-generated study guide to use along with the reading of the literature. While most students said that they enjoyed some of the books, they in no way gave total approval to all the books assigned. When asked about classroom procedure in working with the literature, about half of the students said that they discussed the books while slightly less than half said that they listened to the teacher talk about the books. The others said that both procedures occurred in the classroom. More interesting are the results showing what books were assigned and what books were read for book reports and for outside-of-school reading by grade level.

SIXTH AND SEVENTH GRADERS

Sixth and seventh graders were more likely to read young adult literature as assigned reading. The most widely assigned book in sixth grade was *Park's Quest* followed by *Julie of the Wolves*, *Switching Well*, *White Fang*, and *Walk Two Moons*. Other books that were noted by sixth graders included *Bridge to Terebithia*, *The Yearling*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Hatchet*, *Harris and Me*, and *The River*. In the seventh grade, the most commonly assigned book was *The Outsiders* followed by *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *A Separate Peace*, *Roll of Thunder*, *Hear My Cry*, and *The Pigman*.

*I*John H. Bushman

Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

Book Report Selections

When asked what books they read for book reports, sixth graders responded with: *Rimwalkers*, *Jacob Have I Loved*, *The Hobbit*, *Jurassic Park*, *My Brother Sam Is Dead* and *Hatchet*. The majority indicated that their reading in this category was a free choice, not from a teacher-generated list. Seventh graders responded with: *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, *Road to Memphis*, *Slave Dancer*, *Dragon Flight*, and *North and South*. Again, most indicated that they had a free choice concerning the books that they read for book reports.

Outside Reading

Choices made for outside reading, i.e., reading for pleasure not connected with the classroom, were very consistent with reading for the classroom. Both sixth- and seventh-grade students selected from the young adult literature genre. Favorite authors cited were R. L. Stine, Lois Duncan, Christopher Pike, Jane Yolen, Bruce Coville, S. E. Hinton, Anne McCaffrey, Sharon Creech, L. M. Montgomery, Louisa May Alcott, Madeleine L'Engle, Gary Paulsen, and Michael Crichton.

EIGHTH GRADER: READING CLASSICS

However, if this survey is at all accurate, the classics are alive and well in grades eight through twelve in schools in America. With few exceptions, teachers assigned classics for students to read as in-class reading. What was more disturbing to me were the actual titles that students had to read. What was once considered literature for grades eleven and twelve has now filtered down to grades eight, nine, and ten.

The most frequently named assigned books by eighth graders were *Julius Caesar* and *Diary of Anne Frank*. Next in frequency were *Call of the Wild*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Ulysses*, *Great Expectations*, and *Count of Monte Cristo*. Other classics mentioned included *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Pearl*, *1984*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Iliad* and *Red Badge of Courage*. Of the 48 books students cited, six were young adult, and each was mentioned once. They include: *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, *Ace Hits Big -Time*, *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High*, *The Giver*, and *M. C. Higgins, the Great*. Of the 34 eighth graders who responded, 27 indicated that they did not use Cliffs Notes for help in the reading; however, seven did indicate their use of that source. Interestingly, 22 indicated that they used a teacher-generated study guide.

Did these students enjoy what they were reading? Surprisingly, sixteen said that they did, four said they did not enjoy any of the books assigned, and ten indicated that they enjoyed some, but not all. I found one student's comment interesting:

John H. Bushman
Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

I found these works a bit boring. When I read something assigned to me for class, I miss out on the enjoyment of the novel when reading for pleasure. These works were written to where it is hard to understand what they are really trying to say.

One comment perhaps said more about the literature and the curriculum than about the student's understanding:

Yes, [I enjoyed the book] but they were also in some ways hard to understand, especially *Julius Caesar* because we read the Shakespeare version.

Not all comments were negative about the literature. One student thought it was very beneficial to read these works:

Yes, I enjoyed the books that were assigned to my class. I felt that reading Shakespeare was important because we discussed it, and it developed our reading comprehension and analytical skills.

As I read through these surveys, especially after reading about the *Julius Caesar* item above, I wondered if what the students were reading were the "watered down" versions of these classics found in their anthologies. What a shame that teachers force students to read a simplified version of a work in order for them to understand it when the original of wonderful age-appropriate young adult novel is ignored. Most of the time, these versions" are so simplified that readers will never recognize the work when they are older and confront the work again.

Book Report Selections

Students chose similar books when they read literature for book reports. A few young adult novels surface, but the vast majority of the books would be classified as classics or at least traditional literature. Students indicated that they chose *A Light in the Forest*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Candide*, *The Great Gatsby*. One student indicated that he read *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Doctor Zhivago*. A few of the YA novels mentioned were: *Shiloh*, *Rescue*, *The Story of How Gentiles Saved Jews in the Holocaust*, *Eye of the Dragon*, *The Giver*, and *Miriam's Well*. When asked if these were a free choice or taken from a prescribed list, three to one indicated that the books read were a free choice.

Outside Reading

Inconsistency is strong between what was assigned for classroom use-both classroom reading and book report literature and the literature that the students chose to read for out-of-school reading. Students

IJohn H. Bushman

Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

selected the following books for their “pleasure” reading: *The Hiding Place*, *April Morning*, *Driver’s Ed*, *Miracle Worker*, *Old Yeller*, *The Man Who Loved Clowns*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High*, *Call Waiting*, *The Shining*, *Rebecca*, *Blitzcat*, *M. C. Higgins*, *the Great*, *Congo*, *Skin Deep*, *Don’t Look Behind You*, *Nothing But the Truth*, *The Outsiders*, *Go Ask Alice*, *The Firm*, *The Chamber*, *The Thornbirds*, and others.

It seems apparent to me that the literature that is read in the classroom by these eighth graders meets the teacher’s or school’s goal of disseminating knowledge about classic literature and using that literature to teach literary and cultural heritage. Based on comments made by students, I believe that they think this literature is what is best for them. However, when they have a choice of what to read out of the classroom, students choose more age-appropriate literature.

NINTH GRADERS AND ABOVE

I will not go into detail about the results for grades nine through twelve other than to say that the responses are about the same. Readers may be interested in the ten most frequently mentioned books that were assigned for all to read in each grade:

Ninth Grade

Romeo and Juliet
To Kill A Mockingbird
Of Mice and Men
Great Expectations
Antigone
The Catcher in the Rye
The Old Man and the Sea
Tale of Two Cities
Merchant of Venice *Julius Caesar*

Tenth Grade

Oedipus Rex
Fahrenheit 451
The Great Train Robbery
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Of Mice and Men
Cold Sassy Tree
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
The Old Man and the Sea
Lord of the Flies
Moby Dick

John H. Bushman
Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

Eleventh Grade

Grapes of Wrath

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The Crucible

Othello

Hamlet

Moby Dick

Macbeth

Ethan Frome

The Scarlet Letter

The Great Gatsby

Twelfth Grade

Hamlet

Macbeth

Canterbury Tales

Beowulf

Fallen Angels

To Kill A Mockingbird

Pride and Prejudice

A Separate Peace

Lord of the Flies

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

DECREASE IN READING

In addition to being quite surprised by the kinds of literature students in grades nine through twelve were reading, I was shocked to find the number of books read decreased as the students moved from freshman to senior year. The number of book report reading was down as was the number of books read for pleasure outside of the school. One student wrote when asked to list books read outside of school:

None. No extra time to read. Either had to work or do homework 'til real late. I don't have time to enjoy reading. I just get it done in school.

Another eleventh grader wrote:

We read 20 books in AP English, so I don't really have time to read for pleasure. The last pleasure book I read was *All Around the Town* by Mary Higgins Clark and that was two years ago!

The group of seniors who responded seems to fall into two camps: those who really like to read--mostly science fiction as their pleasure reading--and those who do not read.

It seems to me that throughout the school experience, teachers have as their goal to present a knowledge-based curriculum, and when they have finished presenting that curriculum, students stop reading. Teachers don't seem to care if students continue to read or not. They have done what is expected of them (pass along a cultural/literary heritage), and making young people lifelong readers is not a part of the plan.

Nonreading seems to be consistent with what others have found. An article in the *Wichita Eagle* (Kansas) newspaper entitled "Kids Closing the Book on Reading for Fun" (1995) states: "The anecdotal information

John H. Bushman

Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

from teachers and librarians indicates that children, especially middle school and high school students, don't read as much as their parents did" (16A). Statistics from the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey show that students are not carrying the reading habit into adulthood. The survey scored nearly half of all American readers in the lower two of five reading levels (National Center for Education Studies 1993). Others note a decline in the amount of books read by Americans under the age of 21 (Cullinan 1987). Consequently, Bernice Cullinan notes a new term, alliterate, had been established and describes a person who can read and write but chooses not to use those skills very often. In trying to break this cycle of alliteracy, educators may need to look beyond the works of Shakespeare and Chaucer.

BROADENING THE CURRICULUM

In fact, researchers such as Arthur Applebee (1994) have looked for ways to call attention to the need to broaden the traditional high school curriculum. By following English faculty members of a large suburban high school for a year, Applebee charted the choices teachers made concerning curriculum. After completing this study, he found the most successful classrooms for students were led by teachers willing to look beyond the classics. In these classrooms, comic books, rap songs, and young adult literature were as acceptable for study as Shakespeare's *King Lear*. As Applebee noted, these teachers let content determine the material, rather than a list of time-worn literary works.

Perhaps what is best for students in the contemporary classroom can best be described by Joan Cone (1994). While searching for the creative ideas that could spark her students' interest to read a novel by Dickens, Cone said a friend helped her come to a decision:

One Saturday evening in mid-November, during a conversation about teaching, a friend of mine—a computer genius and Tom Clancy fan said to me, "You're having your kids read the wrong books. They're never going to read Dickens when they get out of school. You need to introduce them to authors they will read." (450)

It seems that schools have accomplished just the opposite of what they intend to do: they have turned students off from reading rather than making them lifelong readers. Schools have failed to choose literature that enables students to become emotionally and cognitively involved in what they read. If students are asked to read literature that is not consistent with their developmental levels, they will not be able to interact fully with that literature. As a result, students who do not interact with the literature are left with learning only about literature—information that works well on the television program jeopardy, but that does not help students connect the text with their goals, level of development, and experience.

John H. Bushman
Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

HAVIGHURST'S TASKS AND YA LITERATURE

Young adult literature can serve that purpose well. Certainly Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, *We All Fall Down*, and *Beyond the Chocolate War* reflect the struggle of age-mate relationship, one of the developmental levels described by Havighurst. Emily in Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Nobody's Daughter* not only confronts the problems with homelessness but also how the fact that she is an orphan affects her relationship with her peers. Two additional novels that have an immediate connection to this task are *Deliver Us From Evie* by M. E. Kerr and *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* by Bette Greene. While using both may be problematic if used as a whole class novel—since both have homosexuality as a central theme, and there could be censorship issues if they are taught as one book/one class—these books offer young people a great deal as they struggle with relationships with differing viewpoints.

Young people often struggle with proper masculine or feminine roles. *Out of Control* (Norma Fox Mazer) speaks well to that issue. This book is one of the first, if not the first, to address the issue of sexual harassment. This issue is also addressed in *We All Fall Down*.

In addition, another task so very important to middle and senior high school students is the struggle for that personal ideology or value system that confronts the adolescent almost every day. Students just cannot read about this issue when asked to limit their reading to the classics. *Great Expectations*, *The Iliad*, and most of the other classics just don't allow for those connections that students twelve to seventeen years old need for their development. However, *Crazy Lady* (Jane Leslie Conly) at the middle level works well; at the secondary level Lois Ruby's *Skin Deep* explores the peer pressure associated with the skinhead movement, Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* involves students with issues that they may face in their own lives, and David Klass' *Danger Zone* helps students discover their attitudes toward prejudice, racism, and politics.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND YA LITERATURE

Moral development is also addressed in quality young adult literature and is certainly appropriate for discussion and study by adolescents. Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) suggests that the development moves along a line from self-centeredness, unable to consider the interests and claims of others doing right to avoid punishment to adopting principles for moral reasoning and action, recognizing that these moral principles occasionally conflict with social rules. However, at the top level, decisions are made on what is considered the right thing to do, rather than doing something to avoid punishment. Five books which come to mind that illustrate Kohlberg's moral developmental stages as well as Havighurst's developmental stages are: *Ironman* (Chris Crutcher), *Out of Control* (Norma Fox Mazer), *Crazy Horse Electric Game* (Crutcher), *In the Middle of the Night* (Robert Cormier), and *Downriver* (Will Hobbs). All are powerful; all are appropriate for high school reading. Books appropriate for the middle school level that address the same issues include: *A Day*

*I*John H. Bushman

Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

No Pigs Would Die and its sequel *A Part of the Sky* (Robert Newton Peck), *The Outsiders* (S. E. Hinton), and *A Bridge to Terabithia* (Katherine Paterson),

Young adults experience this moral development of characters as they read other literature as well. They see the growth that takes place with Adam and Miriam in *Miriam's Well* (Lois Ruby), with Tia and Brian in *All That Glitters* (Jean Ferris), with Mark and Randy in *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Alden Carter), with Jimmy in *Somewhere in the Darkness* (Walter Dean Myers), with Freddie in *The Original Freddie Ackerman* (Hadley Irwin), with Bert in *If Rock and Roll Were a Machine* (Terry Davis), with Marie in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Jacqueline Woodson) and with Carla in *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* (Bette Greene).

CONCLUSION

Why are these novels more appropriate for the young adult reader? An adolescent can better relate to the characters and plot of YA novels. A youthful protagonist with an adolescent point of view helps students make connections. The characters are highly independent. They may not seem realistic to adults, but they are very realistic to the young adults. They offer hope to the young reader—hope that things can change, improve, succeed. They give hope to be able to cope with all that seems wrong with being a young adult. They see these novels showing responsibility; i.e., the young adults have to deal with the consequences of their own decisions. And perhaps the best reason for using young adult novels is that they keep young people reading. Teachers need to change the direction that high school students are taking: they must turn kids on to reading, instead of turning them off. The stability and future of our culture depend on it.

Works Cited

- Applebee, A. 1994. *Shaping Conversations: A Study of Continuity and Coherence on High School Literacy Curricula*. Albany, NY: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning.
- Brown, J. E. and E. C. Stephens. 1995. *Teaching Young Adult Literature: Sharing the Connections*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Bushman, J. H. and K. P. Bushman. 1993. *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom*. Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall, Merrill Education.
- . 1997. *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom*, Second edition. Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall, Merrill Education.
- Cone, J. 1994. "Appearing Acts: Creating Readers in a High School English Class." *Harvard Educational Review* 64: 450-473.
- Cullinan, B. 1987. "Inviting Readers to Literature." B. Cullinan, ed. *Children's Literature in the Reading Program*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. 2-13.

John H. Bushman
Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?

- Erikson, E. H., ed. 1963. *The Challenge of Youth*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Havighurst, R. 1972. *Developmental Tasks and Education*. New York: David McKay
- “Kids Closing the Book on Reading for Fun.” 1995. *Wichita Eagle* (Sept. 24): 16A.
- Kohlberg, L. 1984. *Essays in Moral Development. Vol. 11: The Psychology of Moral Development*. San Francisco: Harper and Row
- Lukens, R. J. and K. J. Cline. 1995. *A Critical Handbook of Literature for Young Adults*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Marcia, J. 1980, Identity in Adolescence. J. Adelson, ed. *Handbook of Adolescents Psychology*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. 98-112.
- National Center for Education Studies. 1993. *Adult Literacy in America*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Nilsen, A. P. and K. L. Donelson. 1993. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Fourth edition. New York: HarperCollins.
- Reed, A. J. S. 1994. *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School*. New York: Macmillan.

John H. Bushman

Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?