

Introduction to Young Adult Literature

Speaker: Ray Slavens

What is Young Adult Literature?

When we think of young adults, we think of people who are in junior high or high school and maybe those just beginning college as well, people who are in the process of discovering who they are and what they want to be in life. More precisely, Alleen Pace Nilsen, et al., define young adult literature as “anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and eighteen choose to read either for leisure reading or to fill school assignments,” as opposed to children’s literature which is for students at younger ages (3). Katherine Bucher and KaaVonia Hinton identify “individuals in the 12- to 20-year-old age group...” as young adults (2).

Kathy G. Short, et al., defines several characteristics that are typical in young adult literature:

- The main character is an adolescent who is at the center of the plot.
- The events revolve around the adolescent’s actions, decisions, and struggle to resolve conflict.
- The events and problems in the plot are related to adolescents, and the dialogue reflects their speech.
- The point of view is that of an adolescent and reflects an adolescent’s interpretation of events and people, rather than an adult thinking back on adolescence.
- The book is written for young adults and marketed to a young adult audience. (3).

While not every book in junior high and high school curriculums fits every one of these qualities, these are a good starting point. Realistically, however, there is little consensus among professionals interested in young people’s reading as to what is or isn’t included within the category. Often books written for an adult market capture many of the qualities of young adult literature, and many classics that were not written with young adults in mind are part of the curriculum for Young Adult Literature courses. *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, and many others do not focus on adolescent characters, yet they appear in high school classrooms on a regular basis. And although *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* focuses on a fourteen-year-old boy as a protagonist, it is unlikely that Mark Twain saw it as a book only for an adolescent audience. The boundaries of this category are loose.

According to Bucher and Hinton, awards for young adult literature may simply ask that a book be “designated by its publisher as being either a young adult book or one published for the age range that YALSA defines as ‘young adult,’ i.e., 12 through 18” (5). The Edwards Award uses a series of questions to determine its awards for young adult literature:

1. Does the book(s) help adolescents to become aware of themselves and to answer their questions about their role and importance in relationships, in society, and in the world?
2. Is the book(s) of acceptable literary quality?
3. Does the book(s) satisfy the curiosity of young adults, yet help them thoughtfully to build a philosophy of life?

4. Is the book(s) currently popular with a wide range of young adults in many different parts of the country?
5. Does the book or book(s) serve as a “window to the world” for young adults? (YALSA, qtd in Bucher and Hinton 5).

For the purposes of this course, a broad definition for young adult literature is used that includes books written specifically for a teenage audience, books that focus on young adults as characters, and texts that may appeal to young audiences for a variety of reasons, regardless of the age of the characters or the intended target audience. The goal is, in part, to open up a discussion of what qualifies a work of literature as young adult literature, and what characteristics might exclude works that might seem to fit into this category.

The History of Young Adult Literature

Literature focusing on what we might today refer to as young adult characters has been around for centuries. William Shakespeare wrote a number of plays focusing on young adult characters trying to separate from their parents and find their own identities in an adult world. Many of his comedies and romances, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *The Taming of the Shrew* focus on daughters demanding their right to choose a mate of their own against the wishes of controlling parents. None of his plays capture this conflict between parents and children better than the tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet Shakespeare was not writing for a young adult audience. His audience was the full spectrum of London society, from the lowliest illiterate working person to Queen Elizabeth, herself. In the 1800s, such classics as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, and Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* all qualify as examples of young adult literature.

However, the term “young adult” apparently was first applied to a specific type of literature defined by its audience in the 1960s and is closely associated with the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (Bucher and Hinton 5). Books in this early period were often problem novels focusing on issues such as “sex, drug abuse, war, suicide, and pregnancy” that had been considered inappropriate for adolescent readers previously (Short, et al. 4). Often seen as poor-quality works, this was the first period in which young adult literature flourished. There was growing media representation of the problems and concerns regarding young adults in the 1970s through the 1990s, with a decline in the publication of young adult literature in the 1980s (Short, et al., 4). Attempts at censorship of young adult books grew in the 1970s and 1980s, and “series books such as *Fear Street* and *Sweet Valley High...*” as well as interest in “fantasy and science fiction, multicultural novels, and poetry” grew during this time (Bucher and Hinton 6). Since the 1990s, young adult literature has grown in popularity and at the same time gone through many changes and developments, including verse novels, graphic novels, books which reflect the digital age, increasingly multicultural literature, and books with more complex plots and narrative structures. Many of these changes reflect what has been going on in fiction and non-fiction books outside of young adult genres at the same time.

Genres of Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature sometimes is seen not so much as a genre, in and of itself, but as a wide variety of genres that are aimed at a particular audience. There are works of literature in almost every literary genre that are aimed at an adolescent audience.

Nilsen, et al., in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, breaks young adult literature into the following categories:

- Contemporary Realistic Fiction: From Romances to Tragedies to Magical Realism
- Fantasy, Supernatural, Science Fiction, Utopias, and Dystopias
- Poetry, Drama, Humor, and New Media
- Adventure, Westerns, Sports, and Mysteries
- Historical Fiction: Of People and Places
- Nonfiction: Information, Literary Nonfiction, Biographies, and Self-Help Books (viii-ix).

In *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation*, Bucher and Hinton identify similar categories:

- Contemporary Realistic Fiction
- Adventure, Mystery, and Humor
- Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror
- Historical Fiction
- Biography
- Nonfiction/Information Books
- Poetry, Drama, and Short Stories
- Comics, Graphic (Comic Format) Novels, Magazines, and Picture Books (xi-xvii).

Short, et al, in *Essentials of Young Adult Literature*, define similar genres:

- Realistic Fiction
- Fantasy and Science Fiction
- Historical Fiction
- Nonfiction: Biography and Informational Books
- Poetry and Plays
- Literature for a Diverse Society (iv-vi).

This course will look at examples of a number of these genres, and some texts that fit into multiple genres, as it moves forward. As each text is discussed, its genre(s) and how it fits into that genre will be examined in more detail.

The Study of Literature

Literature is a difficult term to define and one that changes with time. The earliest literatures to be studied in the western world were the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It is relatively recently that English language literature has been subjected to serious study. As recently as the 1890s,

organizations such as the Committee of Ten were formed to promote English literature instruction at the high school level (Short, et al., 5). Many works originally written for a popular audience gained attention from scholars, such as the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare. Over time, the study of literature became focused on a few works that scholars at universities decided met the qualifications to be studied seriously, on the level of high art and high culture. Starting around the 1960s, however, many scholars and students of literature began to question the boundaries between literary and popular writing, especially along the lines of race and gender. Today, many believe that these boundaries between artistic, literary writing, and popular writing are artificial and reflect the biases of those who control the culture in which the works were produced.

There are many theoretical approaches to the study of literature. Below are a few of the many ways of examining literature using literary theory. These quick definitions are definitely watered-down versions of these critical methods, and all students are encouraged to research and explore these and other critical theories in greater depth.

Moral Criticism focuses on the merits of a work in terms of the lessons it teaches. This theory argues that literature should teach moral and ethical lessons. This is one of the earliest forms of literary criticism, going all the way back to the ancient Greeks.

Formalism examines the form of a work of literature and attempts to ignore the cultural context in which the work was written. Formalists believe literature is to be evaluated on its own merits, form, and such things as symbols and imagery.

Marxism looks at literature as a product of the power structures and distribution of wealth in the culture in which the work was created. It focuses on social and economic class differences and the problems of a capitalist system.

Psychoanalytical Criticism is concerned with the psychological implications of a work of literature, and addresses such Freudian and Jungian concepts as the unconscious, the id/ego/superego, and the collective unconscious.

New Historicism attempts to explain how a work of literature fits into its historical moment, how it is a product of that moment, focusing on how history is being interpreted through the lens of literature.

Postcolonialism is a theoretical approach that attempts to view literature through the point of view of both the colonizer (usually white European) and the colonized (the indigenous people of such places as the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Asia), examining power structures involved in the subjugation of indigenous people, but also the ways in which indigenous authors reflect both the ideology of the colonizer as well as the colonized cultures. This includes questioning the so-called literary canon which has long been dominated by works written by white men.

Feminist Theory examines the ways in which the patriarchy has worked to oppress women but also the ways in which women have resisted the male dominated power structure. It works from the point of view that all literary works are influenced by gender issues.

Gender and Queer Theory focuses on how literary works represent gender inequality and marginalize those who do not fit within traditional gender boundaries: gay and lesbian people, transgender people, non-binary people, and so on. These theorists often question the limitations of binary masculine/feminine discussions of literature.

To understand literature at the most basic level, it is important to know the vocabulary associated with the study of literature. In the Unit I folder, you will find a list of literature vocabulary and definitions that will help you understand and discuss the literature you will read in this class.

Works Cited

Bucher, Katherine, and KaaVonia Hinton. *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation*. 3rd ed. Pearson, 2014.

Nilsen, Alleen Pace, et al. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 9th ed. Pearson, 2013.

Short, Kathy G. *Essentials of Young Adult Literature*. 3rd ed. Pearson, 2015.

© Ray Slavens and Indian Hills Community College