

Reading Pop Culture and Young Adult Literature through the Youth Lens

This article describes activities and assignments for using a youth lens to critique dominant images of adolescents/ce in young adult literature and pop culture texts.

I begin a whole-group discussion by writing the number 16 on the whiteboard and asking students, English teacher candidates, to tell me what 16 looks like (Sargianides, Lewis, and Petrone). They list “driver’s license,” “tenth grade,” “dating,” and “sweet sixteen parties,” to name a few. They also list “horny little buggers,” “emotional,” “acne,” “obsessed with technology,” and “rebellious.” In an effort to turn the discussion in another direction, I ask the students to tell me what they imagine 16 looked like in 1850. They list “marriage,” “children,” and “working on the family farm or for the family business,” for example. They observe that 16-year-olds had more responsibility at that time. “What changed?” I ask. They conjecture that developments in compensatory secondary education, laws related to child labor, and changes related to the industrial revolution contributed to the evolution of 16. I add that “adolescence” was actually invented in the early 20th century; G. Stanley Hall first used the term in a publication in 1904 in which he characterized adolescence as a time of emotional and behavioral confusion contrasted to the stability of adulthood.

Through this discussion, we begin to explore the idea that “16”—symbolic here of “adolescence” more generally—is not a taken-for-granted biological fact. Rather, what it means to be 16 has changed over time and varies from context to context. What it means to be 16 has been shaped by social institutions, such as schools (“tenth grade”) and laws (“driver’s license”). It is also shaped by social class

and culture (e.g., sweet sixteen parties versus a quinceañera or bar/bat mitzvahs). This discussion also begins to suggest that many of the things often associated with an ideal adolescence are privileges of a middle-class experience. In other words, this example begins to illustrate the central concept of the course: that adolescence is a social construction.

These students’ initial comments reflect many common, deficit ideas about adolescents/ce—that adolescents are irresponsible, out of control, controlled by hormones, materialistic, technology-obsessed, and susceptible to peer pressure. Scholarship in critical youth studies (CYS) critiques these assumptions as problematic, emphasizing that they contribute to negative expectations for youth (e.g., Lesko; Trites; Vadeboncoeur and Stevens). For example, in English education, deficit thinking about adolescents/ce has reductive effects on the pedagogical possibilities English teacher candidates imagine for their future students, as well as for themselves as future teachers (e.g., Finders; Petrone and Lewis).

To counter problematic assumptions, I integrate a semester-long exploration of adolescents/ce in a young adult literature (YAL) course for English teacher candidates. Drawing on scholarship in CYS, students and I critically analyze popular culture and YAL texts in ways that make visible dominant and deficit ideas about adolescents/ce and help teacher candidates imagine alternative expectations for their future students, as well as for themselves as future teachers. In this article, I describe activities and assignments that have worked well. Although the course is designed for the college

level, the activities and assignments described could also be used or adapted for secondary English classrooms. Critiquing dominant images of adolescence with secondary students is important for its potential to empower students to question underlying ideologies of texts, reflecting on—and perhaps resisting—ways they, as adolescents themselves, experience limiting notions of adolescents/ce in their own lives.

Perspectives on Adolescents/ce

Within the first few days, I hand out blank paper and markers and invite students to “draw an adolescent” (Lewis, Martin, Petrone, and Sarigianides). I project the drawings one by one on a screen so we can respond to them together (see Figures 1 and 2). I place Figure 1 on the projector, asking students to describe what they see. They notice that Figure 1 is a close-up of an adolescent with acne, a sober expression, and what the artist called a “Justin Bieber” haircut. Similarly, Figure 2 depicts an adolescent with a shadow of a mustache, a generic “band T-shirt,” and headphones. Beyond the objective details, I encourage students to evaluate whether these portrayals are positive or negative and what messages they send about adolescents/ce.

FIGURE 1 Adolescent with haircut



Students observe that their collective depictions of adolescents are not flattering, that they reflect a relatively low opinion of people of that age group.

As we move through the drawings, I call attention to different perspectives on adolescence—namely those circulated by psychology, biology, and pop culture. First, the acne in Figure 1 and the mustache in Figure 2 suggest that the adolescents in these drawings are going through physical changes associated with puberty, categorized as a biological perspective. Second, the sober expressions in both drawings are suggestive of what is often referred to as “teen angst,” or the emotional upheaval associated with “coming of age” or “finding one’s self,” categorized as a psychological perspective. Third, the Justin Bieber haircut, generic “band T-shirt,” and headphones reflect what I refer to as the pop culture perspective, which encompasses the ways music, clothing, media, technology, and entertainment, for example, construct adolescence. Later in the course, we complicate this third category by exploring the ways youth use and create pop culture to also subvert dominant notions of adolescence.

I find it useful to acknowledge and distinguish these different perspectives early on because students often resist the idea of adolescence as a social construction, saying, “But people *do* go through

FIGURE 2 Adolescent with headphones



physical and hormonal changes during puberty.” Or, “But people *are* moody and insecure at this age.” They often cite examples from the Adolescent Psychology course they typically take a semester or two before this course, such as the idea that an adolescent’s prefrontal cortex is not yet developed or that adolescents are just beginning to think abstractly. I emphasize that while biological and psychological perspectives may be helpful for understanding some aspects of the transition between childhood and adulthood to some extent for some individuals, they can also be problematic when they are used to generalize adolescence for all individuals, suggesting that all young people experience adolescence in predictable or universal ways. Moreover, these perspectives become problematic when they reduce, pathologize, and “other” adolescents.

I have described the way I use this drawing activity with English teacher candidates. It may be compelling to see what images secondary students, as adolescents themselves, would portray in their drawings as well. English teachers might lead a debriefing discussion by asking the following questions: What recurring themes and messages do you notice? To what extent do these images reflect your experience with adolescence (or not)? Do these drawings reflect stereotypes? Where do stereotypes come from and what consequences do they have? To what extent do these images create norms and expectations for youth? After introducing different perspectives on adolescents/ce, English teachers might ask students to consider what, if any, difference it makes to know that “adolescence” may not be the biological or psychological inevitability it is often assumed to be.

Adolescents/ce in Popular Culture

In my next pedagogical move, I introduce the youth lens (YL) defined by Robert Petrone, Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, and Mark A. Lewis. The YL, also described in the introduction to this issue, is a tool for learning to apply principles of CYS to analyses of texts, especially YAL. The YL asks, “How does the text represent adolescents/ce?” and “What role does this text play in reinforcing and/or subverting dominant ideas about adolescence?” (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis 8). (See also Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis for a full description of the YL,

including specific guiding questions.) With attention to specific literary elements, including characterization, setting, plot, theme, and metaphor, the YL offers guiding questions, such as, How are adolescent characters portrayed

and how do characterizations of adolescent characters contrast those of adult characters?

How does the text represent adolescents/ce?

What are the settings of the novel, and how do those settings position adolescents?

To get comfortable applying the guiding questions, we watch and analyze an Allstate Insurance commercial, which features “Mayhem,” a recurring character portrayed by an adult male actor. In this commercial, Mayhem appears as an “emotionally compromised” teenaged girl driving a pink SUV. The girl texts with a friend while driving, growing increasingly emotional about whether “Johnny kissed another girl.” Ultimately, she crashes into a parked car and drives away. An adult woman standing in the parking lot is left looking incredulously at the damage to her car.

Using the guiding questions, students quickly observe that the main character is portrayed as spoiled, superficial, irrational, and “not that smart.” She is so self-absorbed that she pays no attention to the damage she does to another person’s car. The conflict is frivolous; adults might consider her boy problems to be typical teen drama, not something most rational adults would lose emotional control over. Ultimately, students conclude, this text contributes to stereotypical notions of adolescents, especially adolescent girls, as immature, irresponsible, and incapable of being trusted. As one teacher candidate noted, the gist of the commercial is that responsible adults should purchase insurance to protect themselves from irresponsible adolescents.

Next, we apply the YL to the film *Mean Girls*, a movie about Cady, an adolescent girl who enrolls in a typical American high school after living in Africa with her parents, who are anthropologists. To this point, Cady has been homeschooled; therefore, she views a typical American high school as a foreign culture with which she must become familiar. Prior to starting school Cady is a smart, rational girl with a good relationship with her parents. After enrolling in the school and hanging out with the popular clique of mean girls, she begins to pretend she is not smart to impress a boy and develops

a more strained relationship with her parents. Ultimately, when one of the mean girls betrays her, Cady begins a revenge plot against them, thereby becoming a mean girl herself.

Using the guiding questions, students point out the stark contrast between the two different settings in the movie, between Cady's life in Africa and her life in a typical American high school. In Africa, Cady is a happy, well-adjusted young adult. She is treated with trust and respect. She is given responsibility and works in equal partnerships with adults. In the American high school, she grows increasingly preoccupied, even anxious, about social dynamics in the school. She has to adjust to reduced freedom and responsibility. In one scene, she is surprised to find that she has to ask permission to visit the restroom. Essentially, the contrast between these settings emphasizes that adolescence is neither universal nor inevitable; rather, Cady performs a certain kind of adolescent identity in response to the norms and expectations of her new social setting.

Analyzing *Mean Girls*—or any other “teen” film (e.g., *Freaky Friday*, *13 Going on 30*, or *Clueless*)—would be rich at the high school level as well. In fact, secondary students may find it thought provoking to turn the YL on their high school. English teachers could lead students on a tour of their school, teaching them to read the building as a text through the YL (Borsheim and Petrone). English teachers might ask students to consider the organization of space, posters on the wall, rules and codes of conduct, organizations and opportunities, and language used in daily announcements. Students might explore, Who does this school—administration, teachers, other students, and parents—think adolescents are? What underlying goals and/or fears inform policies and practices of the school? What freedoms/restrictions or responsibilities/constraints do adolescents experience and why? How do levels of freedom and responsibility compare across school, home, sports, and work? In what ways does the school perpetuate or subvert dominant ideas of adolescence? This activity could lead to an exploration of the myriad ways the institution of school contributes to (or constructs) norms and expectations of adolescents/ce.

Next, I invite students to bring in texts they notice in their daily lives that reinforce stereotypical images of adolescents/ce. They bring in music videos,

examples of programming on the Disney channel and MTV, and commercials for products such as acne medication, to name a few. In one case, Marne called our attention to language directed toward prospective students that appears on a university home page: “You’ll gain crazy amounts of knowledge, discover your future and make friends who will have your back forever.” Students felt that the use of slang phrases such as “crazy amounts of knowledge” and “have your back” were condescending and conveyed surprisingly low expectations for current high school students and entering first-year college students. In response to this activity, students have often commented on their heightened awareness of images of adolescence in popular media, noting that they see these images “everywhere.”

In secondary English classrooms, the YL could provide an excellent focal point for a media literacy unit in which students deconstruct images of adolescents/ce in movies, commercials, magazines, and music to better understand the ways media perpetuate ideological messages about what is “normal” and possible for youth. A media literacy unit focused on images of adolescence might culminate with students composing their own multimedia texts that parody or talk back to dominant images. For example, students could parody a scene from *Mean Girls* or an ad for acne medication to satirize messages about adolescents/ce. Or, students could write a screenplay for a short film that challenges characterizations, plot lines, and themes of typical teen movies.

Adolescents/ce in YA Literature

But this is a YA *literature* course, and so far I have not mentioned literature! In addition to analyzing popular culture texts, we also apply the YL to popular YAL titles that we read together in class. As students grow increasingly adept with the YL, I ask them to do more independent analysis by writing individual analysis papers. One of the first novels they read and analyze is Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In the book, the main character, Arnold (aka Junior), is a teenager living in poverty on a Spokane Indian Reservation. With a push from a teacher, Arnold decides to leave the reservation school to attend a predominantly white school in Reardon, a farming

community 20 miles down the road. His decision to attend the “white school” sparks tension between him and his best friend, as well as some racial tension in the community.

Applying the YL with a specific focus on setting, one teacher candidate, Austin, highlighted the contrast of “adolescence” on the reservation with “adolescence” in Reardon. Whereas Arnold and other young Native American people on the reservation deal with poverty, alcoholism, and racism—issues Austin characterized as “adult”—white students at Reardon are more focused on academics and peer and romantic relationships—issues Austin characterized as more typically “adolescent.” In other words, Austin argued, when Arnold left the reservation school to attend Reardon High School, he had a more stereotypical adolescent experience, falling in love with a popular girl, going to prom, and hanging out with friends. Austin explained, “Reardon became the setting where there was an idealized vision of adolescence and everyone, including Arnold, was part of what it meant to be an adolescent.” Austin’s analysis highlighted the idea that adolescence is not universal; it varies from context to context. Moreover, he emphasized one’s experience of adolescence is often related to race and social class, that typical notions of adolescence often reflect a white, middle-class worldview.

We also read and analyze *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. In the novel, Clay Jensen receives a package of audiotapes from Hannah Baker, a teenaged girl who has committed suicide. Before she died, Hannah Baker recorded 13 audiotapes describing her experiences with 13 people who contributed to her decision to end her own life. It is important to note that most of the “events” that led to Hannah’s suicide are unwanted sexual encounters with male peers that leave Hannah feeling powerless. Ultimately, one central message of the book is that Clay—or any one of the 13 featured characters—could have intervened in Hannah’s decision to commit suicide by standing up to bullying.

Although popular attention on the novel often focuses on the anti-bullying theme, a YL analysis led students to focus on underlying messages about sex. For example, a focus on characterization highlights the portrayal of male characters in the book as sexual predators: Hannah is objectified or victimized in almost every encounter with an adolescent male.

One teacher candidate in my class, Andrea, was most disturbed by the ways these sexual encounters reinforced a double standard related to sexuality—including notions of adolescent males as controlled by their raging hormones and adolescent girls as needing to protect themselves from the dangers of sex. At this point in the semester, we also read Trites’s analysis of power dynamics between adult authors of YAL and YA readers. Applying Trites’s ideas to this novel, we are reminded that it is not Hannah or Clay telling the story; it is Jay Asher, a 38-year-old male author. This focus on the adult, male author led students to explore how the book was less a reflection of what adolescent characters thought about sex and/or bullying and more about what Jay Asher thinks adolescent readers should learn about sex and bullying. Ultimately, many students concluded that *Thirteen Reasons Why* communicates didactic and problematic messages to adolescent readers about sexuality and gender (Trites).

Re-thinking YAL


Our semester-long investigation of adolescence constitutes an eye-opening experience for many students. Our analyses make visible the social construction of adolescence, the ubiquity of problematic images of adolescence in media and popular culture, and the ways YAL often communicates didactic messages to adolescent readers about conforming to social expectations. As such, our analyses complicate many teacher candidates’ thinking about YAL. Luke explained, “I used to honestly look at YA books as things teens read to fill their time and that weren’t very complex. This course really changed my mind. I now look at YA books and think about the underlying messages, the adults who wrote them, and why they chose to write about that topic for teens to read.” As a result, our analyses also influence many teacher candidates’ thinking about how they envision approaching YAL in their future classrooms. Most teacher candidates express the view that the YL would be an important tool for their future students. Jenna explained: “Every YA book reinforces stereotypes about teens. I would like my students to enjoy YAL but never be so ignorant as to be swept away by the subtle stereotypes that surround them. I hope to use the YL to point out dominant images of teens in books

to enable students to be independent thinkers and readers.” Others echo Jenna’s view, acknowledging the empowering potential of reading against dominant ideas about adolescents/ce with secondary students. Lauren noted, “By making these images visible, students may not feel as much pressure to play into the stereotypes; they may feel more in control of their own choices.”

To those ends, many teacher candidates express enthusiasm for implementing ideas and activities from this course into their future secondary classrooms. Additionally, they see opportunities for applying the YL not only to contemporary and classic YA texts but also to canonical works featuring adoles-

cent characters, such as *Romeo and Juliet*. Other ideas include reading YA novels and watching the film adaptations to analyze both versions through a YL; focusing an exploration of adolescents/ce within a genre, such as dystopian YAL; and using the YL to organize

inquiry units—or even entire courses—around the concept of adolescents/ce as a social construction.

I do not wish to argue that students walk away from this course with their conceptions of adolescents/ce fully transformed. In fact, I have experienced many instances in which students question dominant images of adolescents/ce in one sentence and then say something stereotypical about adolescents/ce in the next. I attribute these contradictions to the fact that ideas about adolescence are deeply ingrained not only in students’ worldviews but also in dominant discourses of society. For most students, this course constitutes an introduction to the idea that adolescence is a social invention; therefore, the course is just the beginning of an ongoing process of interrogating assumptions about adolescence in pop culture, YAL, in secondary English education. 

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