

Bridging the Gap:
An Argument for the Use of Adolescent Literature
in the Secondary School Classroom

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis:

The intention of this essay is to, first of all, present a sound argument for the use of adolescent, or young adult, literature in the contemporary secondary school classroom. Much research supporting this argument for such implementation is included. More specifically, the primary premises are that adolescent literature can be an effective tool for captivating student interest, and that this general literary interest can be utilized to prompt students to read, and hopefully enjoy, the established "classic" literature of the canon. In addition to this general argument, the adolescent novel The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton is alluded to in the form of what most closely equates a case study. In other words, this young adult work is examined in several ways in which it might be incorporated into the English / language arts curriculum.

Adolescence has often been dubbed a period of "storm and stress." Not only is this true on a biologically developmental level, but in regard to other factors as well. During adolescence, children are confronted with multitudinous obstacles as they diligently search for their own sense of identity. Closely related to this is the increasing importance of independence. After all, adolescence is a period of rapid physical, emotional, and social growth, during which young people begin to forge their way into adulthood. In this sense, as University of Colorado graduate student Garth Lewis points out in his article entitled "Rites of Passage," "The transition from childhood to adulthood is not an easy one. Young adults are adrift on a tumultuous sea of development tasks in search of the solid ground of adulthood" (41). Lewis continues this line of reasoning by posing some rather thought-provoking questions in pondering, "How do they [adolescents] know when they have finally landed on that shore? When do they say to themselves, 'I am no longer a child, I am an adult now?' Do they come to this conclusion by what society is telling them or by how they feel about themselves?" (41). These are, in fact, very legitimate questions, questions that should be considered by contemporary American educators, especially those who work with adolescent students on a daily basis.

Vested concern about adolescence was initiated by G. Stanley Hall in 1904 with his two-volume book entitled Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education. Hall's discussion of adolescence as its own distinct stage of development subsequently became a topic of interest to many. In fact, further research and insight into the motivation and development of adolescents has been captured in the work of such individuals as Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Marcia, and Carol Gilligan, just to name a few.

These individuals, along with many others, have invested considerable amounts of time studying the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and moral development of adolescents. In a general sense, adolescence has come to be regarded as "a culturally and socially defined period of life which has its base in biological changes" (Appleby 40).

It is, however, important to note that, currently, adolescents have to face obstacles of magnitudes that were virtually unheard of by the youths of previous generations. In other words, "teenagers in the United States and most industrialized nations confront challenges that are far more numerous and complex than those of adolescents in other cultures and at previous times during history" (Berk 602). More specifically, young people are no longer expected only to develop morality, responsibility, and self-control as imposed by societal standards. They are also confronted with such problems as alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, family conflicts, peer pressure, teenage pregnancy, gang violence, and interracial tension. In a similar sense, learner individuality results from many factors which include- -but are certainly not limited to- -intelligence, socioeconomic status, gender, and culture (Eggen and Kauchak 21-22). With the increasing prominence of such detrimental adolescent problems, the corresponding responsibilities of educators become notably heightened.

After all, when one considers all of the potential problems to be faced by contemporary youth, it appears self-evident that they would have little interest in indulging in the prescribed literature of the established canon. That is not to say that these students do not have the capability or desire to read. It simply means that the classic literature of the canon is often too far removed from their experiences and, as a result, succeeds only in alienating them. Although the traditional manner of studying language as an artifact is

important because it aids in the development of a more generalized cultural literacy, or common body of knowledge among students, it also has a tendency to neglect the individual learner (Gere et al., 97-98).

This neglect of individualized student needs has the potential to be quite devastating in the context of the classroom. Perhaps the most overt problem resulting from this is that of aliteracy, which basically means literate students choose not to exercise their reading abilities due to lack of motivation or feelings of alienation. In most cases, "the[se] seeds of aliteracy are planted when reading lessons become drudgery; when the books students must read are uninspiring or have little connectedness to their real-world needs, concerns, and interests; and when reading is perceived as a separate subject instead of as a functional tool for intellectual and personal growth" (Brozo and Simpson 199).

One such example surfaced during my own personal student teaching experience this past fall. The scenario developed as follows: A student in one of my classes remarked that she would complete the reading assignment if she had time that evening. Considering this a rather snide comment, my supervising teacher approached her with the reply, "Now, what could be so important that it would not allow you to complete such a short reading assignment?" Needless to say, my supervising teacher was rather taken aback when this young woman replied, "My son."

Tragically, such exchanges are not uncommon in the arena of education in this late twentieth century. The important distinctions to be made in the context of this particular scenario are that, first of all, this student was fully capable of reading; however, the material did not prompt enough interest for her to make a concerted effort to complete the assignment. Therefore, in regard to this and other similar situations, "One wonders if in the teaching of

literature we don't destroy the joy of reading since we remove the experience of reading from the self to make the response social rather than individual" (Appleby 43).

In this instance, the problem basically amounted to one in which the student felt alienated from the literature and, as a result, responded in an aliterate manner. Many times, as was true in this case, adolescent students simply necessitate that teachers "show genuine concern for them as individuals with real-world needs and problems" (Brozo and Simpson 303). In this sense, the simple act of making connections to students' lives can exert tremendous influence on reading motivation (Eggen and Kauchak 463). In fact, although researchers have discovered that teenagers quickly lose interest in material they find difficult or boring, they have also found that when students view reading material as being pleasurable and interesting, they are more likely to be motivated to read and possess a positive attitude about reading in general.

Although such assertions appear self-evident, they are often overlooked by contemporary American educators. After all, as is adequately summed up by Sharon Stringer in her article entitled "The Psychological Changes of Adolescence: A Test of Character," "The challenge for teachers and writers is to foster strength of character in education as we bridge theory and practice. Understanding the conflicts and changes of adolescence moves us closer to that goal" (27).

An equally important point is made by professor of English Education Marjorie Kaiser when she asserts that many educators, "lovers of literature themselves, begin teaching filled with expectations that students in *their* classes will excitedly read any literature they present if only they themselves are enthusiastic enough about it" (32). Unfortunately this is not necessarily

the case. In fact, it is students such as the one previously mentioned who require that we, as teachers, reevaluate the current prescribed canon and its potentially devastating restrictiveness. In regard to this existing body of "classic" literature, John Pfordresher proposes, "We must always be ready to doubt old favorites and to look for new ones. Only in this way will any canon, and its individual elements remain alive and valid" (29).

Let me clarify my point of view on this issue. I am, by no means, suggesting that we abandon the established literary canon for a more all-inclusive one that caters to the needs of each and every one of our students. In an ideal world, in an ideal scenario, this might be possible. However, we do not, even in the remotest sense of the term, live in a utopia. Nevertheless, it is disheartening to think that for those enthusiastic young teachers aforementioned by Marjorie Kaiser, "Being faced daily with readers who have very particular and restricted tastes or those who only go through the motions and are genuinely interested in 'nothing at all' puts quite a damper on their enthusiasm" (32). Thus, it is my proposition that we incorporate adolescent, or young adult, literature into our English classrooms with the intention of using it as a tool to spark student interest in reading. Then, we may consequently utilize this basic interest as a "springboard" of sorts into the more classic literature of the previously established canon. Essentially, Jackie E. Swenson mirrors my philosophy on this subject in stating, "I have always viewed the literature anthology as a point of departure, not a destination" (83).

Is the use of adolescent, or young adult literature, in the classroom justified? This is a question that is often heatedly debated in current educational circles. Some consider this genre of literature completely justifiable, while others argue that it possesses no "substance" or literary merit. I personally believe that both sides voice valid arguments on the issue.

After all, as is pointed out by Pamela Sissi Carroll in her article entitled "Posing Questions About Young Adult Literature," "Even for those of us who recognize that YAL [Young Adult Literature] has a valid and valuable place in these classrooms, there are myriad questions to be asked and answered about the genre and its relationship to the teaching of English / language arts" (51).

Let me begin by clarifying exactly what I mean when I refer to adolescent, or young adult, literature. Drawing from the definition presented by Anne Ruggles Gere, et al. in the text Language and Reflection, this genre of literature contains "books and stories [that] are written specifically for a teenage audience, taking up issues of interest to adolescents" (128). William G. Brozo and Michele Simpson further specify this definition in stating:

For our purposes, *young adult literature*, *adolescent literature*, and *trade books for young adults* all refer to books (a) written or marketed primarily for teenagers; (b) with main characters similar in age to the teenage readership (approximately young adults between the ages of 12 and 25) and to which teenagers can personally relate; (c) with relatively uncomplicated plot lines; (d) that match the interests, needs, and concerns of teenagers; and (e) not specifically targeted to young adults but that attract a young adult readership. (178)

When considering the opposing sides of this argument, on the one hand, "Students know that the traditional literature we teach has been classified as great literature: it's in the 'lit' book, their moms read it when they were in school, and Monarch Notes are available. But with young adult literature, they don't have readily available information on whether the novel, short story, or poem is good or not" (Nugent 5). In a similar sense, "It could be that YA [Young Adult] lit is generally more sociological in orientation

(and therefore, less 'literary') in the teachers' perceptions" (Anderson and Katcher 37).

While it is true that many adolescent, or young adult, novels are not exactly "literary," it has also been proven that adolescent readers, especially those who are not likely to possess an inherent love of reading, are more likely to take interest in the subject matter breached in such works. In this regard, as is pointed out by Paul Eggen and Don Kauchak in the text Educational Psychology: Classroom Connections, "we all know that we're attracted to anything that relates to us personally," which is "more concrete for us than distant or abstract information" (463). Furthermore, "Purposes for reading that emanate from the students themselves are more apt to focus their attention. Such purposes grow out of students' natural desire to learn something new; to make discoveries about themselves and the world around them" (Devine 16).

Likewise, because adolescence is a period wrought with multitudinous questions, it seems only appropriate that adolescent student interest would lie in materials that are concerned with their own questions, those about the adolescent experience. In this regard, "Books can make a significant difference in young adults' lives, their way of viewing a problem or relationship, their strategies for coping with a personal difficulty, or their interest in knowing more about a topic" (Brozo and Simpson 303). After all, "They [the motivations and purposes students possess for reading] most often manifest themselves as readers look for answers to questions they want answered" (Devine 16).

In addition, "By connecting abstract content to students' daily lives teachers can promote interest, involvement, and learning (Eggen and Kauchak 463). Likewise, Brozo and Simpson offered the following suggestions:

The content areas deal with interesting, vital information; but if you rely on textbooks as your sole teaching resource, you may render this information dry and lifeless. Use trade books in conjunction with texts to help assure that students are more actively involved in learning and that the vitality and spirit inherent in the content-area material are kept alive. (207)

In a similar sense, it is important to note that adolescent, or young adult, literature often deals with "stories about a 'rite of passage' or 'coming of age'" (Lewis 42). Ultimately, given the information available regarding adolescence, it seems obvious that such literature could help adolescent students in their own quest for a sense of identity. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind the assertion made by English teacher Sharon Hurwitz, which proposes that "We, as teachers, have an opportunity and a responsibility to help young people work through some of their problems" (33).

I do not assert that the incorporation of adolescent literature should be exclusive, rather that it should be used as a means of sparking student interest in reading in general and, ultimately, in reading more "literary" literature. Through extensive research, I have discovered that many others share this, or a similar, perspective. For instance, Paul Zindel, the highly revered adolescent author of such works as The Pigman and The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, when asked in an interview what he considers to be the role of young adult literature in the classroom, responded, "Young adult literature has a firm place in the schools. In a sense it is like a young person choosing a friend, a friend his own age, a friend who talks to him in a way he can understand, a friend who talks to him about living, loving and surviving in a world that he finds himself" (21). Zindel continued by

saying, "It [adolescent or young adult literature] prepares the very foundation of loving books. It shows a reader that reading can be exciting and can give information . . ." (21).

Furthermore, as was proposed by Susan Monroe Nugent, "Young adult literature has always provided both teacher and reader with an abundance of opportunities to engage in critical thinking" (4). This includes, but is not limited to, the fact that one of the most important attributes of utilizing this genre of literature rests in the fact that through it "we can offer them [adolescent students] experiences that will force them to assess situations and hone their decision making skills" (Hurwitz 33). Without question, this is an important attribute of adolescent literature. In a similar sense, as I will later demonstrate, the use of adolescent novels in the classroom may, in fact, lend themselves to traditional literary study. For instance, "These books can act as a bridge to more sophisticated reading materials" (Brozo and Simpson 201).

On the most basic level, there is a pointed distinction between reading for pleasure, or ludic reading, and that which is assigned. Although both types of reading are different from one another, neither one is inherently more important or justified than the other. In fact, each type of reading simply requires a different thought process. For instance, "One of ludic reading's greatest attractions is its effortlessness" (Appleby 43). In this sense, although we, as educators, do not strive for complete effortlessness in the assignments we give our students- -in fact, quite the contrary- -it is, nevertheless, important that we capture the interest of these young minds before we attempt to mold them. After all, in the most basic sense of the term, "Readers must pay attention to a text before they can comprehend it" (Devine 15). This is an important point that needs to not only be asserted, but also internalized, by teachers of adolescent students.

When considering such an idea, it is important that we examine some of the preconditions for being a ludic, or avid, reader. These stipulations were set forth by Bruce C. Appleby in his article entitled "Is Adolescent Literature in its Adolescence?". First of all, in order to take pleasure in the act of reading, or in order to find intrinsic gratification in a literary activity, a reader must be skilled in reading ability. In other words, a student must be able to read. Hopefully, this first precondition would have been established at the elementary school level. However, this is not always the case. Therefore, we, as educators, must first and foremost, insure that our students can, in fact, read. A second precondition, as proposed by Appleby, concerns the importance that lies in "the expectation that reading will be a pleasurable experience" (44). Therefore, it is not only important that we, as educators, find the reading enjoyable, but also that our students perceive and expect the act of reading to be pleasant. In addition, Appleby advocates the importance of selecting appropriate literature for our students to read. This third precondition might appear self-evident, but often it is not. In fact, the selection of proper literature is probably the most important task of the classroom teacher.

As a means of illustrating my points, one can consider a frequently read adolescent novel such as The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton. Following the proposed theory of utilizing this novel in the classroom, any or all of the following approaches might be implemented. First of all, a teacher might choose to incorporate this work on a purely thematic level. If this approach were chosen, one might opt to focus on the manner in which "warfare. . . between the social classes" is presented (Hinton 13). This subject, which quite obviously consumes the characters in the novel, is also one often faced by contemporary adolescents.

On the other hand, a teacher might choose to focus on characterization in the novel. When one considers Ponyboy Curtis, the novel's protagonist, it becomes evident that characterization holds an especially important place in this novel. The most notable character trait exhibited by Ponyboy is that he, despite his less than favorable socioeconomic and social conditions, possesses genuine interests in reading and private journal writing. In a stereotypical sense, one does not expect a character like Ponyboy, a poor white male from the "wrong side of the tracks" who has lost both parents and is being raised by his two older brothers, to have such avocations. Nevertheless, these attributes are established very early in the first chapter through Ponyboy's own words:

I'm different that way. I mean, my second-oldest brother, Soda, who is sixteen-going on seventeen, never cracks a book at all, and my oldest brother, Darrel, who we call Darry, works too long and hard to be interested in a story or drawing a picture, so I'm not like them. And nobody in our gang digs movies and books the way I do. For a little while there, I thought I was the only person in the world that did. So I loned it. (Hinton 5)

Ponyboy goes on to discuss his cognitive development, another important milestone of adolescence, by saying, ". . . sometimes I just don't use my head. It drives my brother Darry nuts when I do stuff like that, 'cause I'm supposed to be smart; I make good grades and have a high IQ and everything, but I don't use my head" (Hinton 7). This revelation might likewise prove comforting to adolescent readers who, because they are experiencing such rapid intellectual growth, find it difficult to always "use their heads." The simple fact that this statement establishes a sense of commonality between the adolescent reader and a "genuine" literary character such as Ponyboy makes

the trait seem less strange or bizarre, thus lending to a greater sense of normalcy.

In a similar sense, throughout the course of the novel, Ponyboy often refers to his struggle for independence, and his corresponding desire for a more adult status. One such instance occurs when he speaks of his somewhat troubled relationship with his older brother and guardian Darry through the statement, "[He] treat[s] me as if I was six instead of fourteen" (Hinton 6). This overriding emphasis on acceptance as an equal also surfaces when he discusses his relationship with his other brother Sodapop by saying "Soda doesn't think I'm a kid" (Hinton 12). Obviously, this concept is one of primary importance to Ponyboy, just as it is imperative to all young people as they strive to attain adult status in a society that has a tendency to alienate its adolescent citizens. On this same note, as is correctly asserted by Appleby, "We [adults and adult teachers] still see adolescence as a state of becoming rather than a state of being" (41). This seemingly simple distinction is really rather important, especially to those adolescents who are struggling with such dilemmas.

The adolescent experience is also adequately summed up by Cherry Valance when she tells Ponyboy, in one of their heart-to-heart conversations, "It seems like we're always searching for something to satisfy us, and never finding it. Maybe if we could lose our cool we could" (Hinton 36). Such statements, which appear to adult readers as nothing more than conventional wisdom, have the potential to be very influential upon their adolescent counterparts. After all, many adolescents are often, quite simply, looking for someone who "feels the same way." Ponyboy furthers this premise by describing the discrepancy between the role of adolescent and that of adult in the statement, ". . . most grownups don't know about the battles that go on

between us" (Hinton 95). Again, this is an important point, and one that we, especially those of us who are educators of adolescent students, should not take lightly.

In regard to linking this work to others, it can be approached as a potential bridge to some of the more commonly accepted literature of the canon. After all, several "great" literary works are mentioned within the text itself. Such simple mention of these works might, in and of itself, be sufficient to spark reader interest or curiosity in such pieces of literature. However, Hinton, through the voice of a rather "cool" protagonist, goes on to illustrate how these works relate to the life of one adolescent in the course of her text and, on a larger scale, to the lives of adolescents in general.

For instance, Ponyboy discusses the relevance of a classic work by Charles Dickens in stating, "I had to read Great Expectations for English, and that kid, Pip, he reminded me of us- -the way he felt marked lousy because he wasn't a gentleman or anything, and the way that girl kept looking down on him" (Hinton 17). Here, Ponyboy relates the experiences of a literary icon to his own simple, everyday existence. In other words, through the use of an analogy, he makes a tangible, meaningful comparison. Consequently, it seems only logical that adolescent readers could see a similar relevance as well.

Another such example is carried throughout the whole of the work with the incorporation of the Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay." This poem is both literally and figuratively used as a unifying thread throughout the larger plot of the story. On a literal level, it is repeatedly mentioned. Figuratively, it comes to serve as symbol of the potentially devastating lifestyles of the characters in the novel as they each, in turn, lose their respective innocence. In other words, the characters themselves are equated

with "golden" objects that, over the course of time, lose their "shine" or inherent purity.

Likewise, Gone with the Wind, an unmistakable classic novel and film, is repeatedly mentioned and used to tie the larger whole of the text neatly together. It, too, serves as an integral bond of friendship between Ponyboy and Johnny. Another interesting item to note about this novel is that Ponyboy and Johnny not only discuss the work and its inherent content, but also reap much personal enjoyment and satisfaction out of reading excerpts from it to one another. In addition, Hinton, again through the voice of Ponyboy, illustrates the parallelism that exists between the action presented in Gone with the Wind and the recent death of Dallas Winston, one of the characters in The Outsiders. Here, Ponyboy states, "Southern gentlemen go riding into sure death because they are gallant. Southern gentlemen with big black eyes in blue jeans and T-shirts, Southern gentlemen crumpling under street lights" (Hinton 136).

Another such reference to a piece of "classic" literature is made by Ponyboy, when he describes his experience of reading the novel The Carpetbaggers. In essence, through relaying his encounter with this work, he captures the idea that reading is a developmental process. More specifically, Ponyboy states, "he'd [Darry] told me I wasn't old enough to read it [The Carpetbaggers]. I thought so too after I finished it" (Hinton 153). As such, the reader witnesses not only a recollection of a character's experiences with a piece of literature, but also a character's development of metacognitive awareness, or the ability to think about his own thinking.

On a further literary level, an educator might opt to address the author's employment of a variety of additional literary techniques within the novel. This approach could potentially make even what some consider to be lacking

in literary merit more "literary." Such literary devices include, but are not limited to, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, description, flashback, foreshadowing, setting, and point of view. For instance, in the context of The Outsiders, a pointed example of a simile occurs when Ponyboy is describing how his best friend Johnny looks after his death. He states, "You read about people looking peacefully asleep when they're dead, but they don't. Johnny just looked dead. Like a candle with the flame gone" (Hinton 130). In the classroom setting, this simile could be studied on a variety of levels, as could any of the above literary devices.

In a similar sense, Ponyboy alludes to the importance of being able to spell and possessing a good vocabulary after receiving a letter from his older brother Sodapop. Allusion to these, and other facets of the language arts curriculum, promotes correct usage. Likewise, it furthers the premise that "bringing young adults into contact with trade books is an effective means of helping them learn language, extend vocabulary, and come to grips with new and complex syntax" (Brozo and Simpson 256). In this particular scenario, these elements are not only introduced, but also discussed, lending to a greater sense of metacognitive awareness on the part of readers, an integral facet of adolescent intellectual development.

Another avenue an educator might choose to traverse when studying this novel would be to examine the relationship of the novel to its author. In this case, it is important to note that S. E. Hinton is a female author- -although most adolescent readers are not aware of this unless explicitly told so. Likewise, Hinton wrote this novel when she was only sixteen years old. In the minds of adolescent readers, this might give the book more credibility because the author was not simply someone writing about the adolescent experience but someone writing from this experience.

To further enhance the curricular rationale for teaching an adolescent novel such as The Outsiders, an educator might use it as a springboard into student-generated writing, one of the four basic facets of the language arts curriculum. This supports the premise advocated by professor of education John M. Bushman in his article entitled "The Reading / Writing Connection: The Role Of Young Adult Literature." In that context, Bushman states, ". . . young adult literature may be an effective source to show how published writers begin" (45). This is especially true within the context of The Outsiders, considering the facts that not only was S. E. Hinton a semi-disguised female writer, but a young adolescent writer as well. In addition, the novel itself is written as if comprised of the thoughts and recollections of the protagonist Ponyboy as recorded in his own personal journal.

Therefore, this novel can be viewed as a model, not only for formal, published writing, but also for more personal, private writing. This particular approach codifies the premise that "The connection between reading and writing must be strong in every English classroom" (Bushman 46). Furthermore, as Bushman asserts, ". . . it would seem that as students make meaning of what they read and what they sense in the world around them, they are eager to do something with this meaning when they write" (46). The cyclical nature of these various facets of reading comprehension is beneficial for teachers and students alike. On the one hand, it promotes a classroom environment in which there is an emphasis on relationships between diverse instructional elements. At the same time, it provides students who are experiencing the "storm and stress" of adolescence with a sense of necessary order.

As illustrated throughout the course of this examination of the use of adolescent literature in the classroom, with specific reference to the young

adult novel The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton, it becomes virtually self-evident that adolescent literature has a very solid and justified position in the secondary English / language arts curriculum. In fact, as alluded to above, the possibilities are essentially limitless. For instance, the use of adolescent, or young adult, literature advocates critical thinking on the part of students. Likewise, it supports writing instruction. Furthermore, assuming that adolescent students can read, young adult literature is potentially an avenue in the direction toward learning the pleasure of reading. In other words, it provides a legitimate way to promote positive lifelong reading habits. In addition to inspiring interest on the part of the adolescent reader, this genre of literature can be utilized as a means of building background knowledge. In turn, appropriate adolescent selections offer opportunities to examine literary conventions and to spring into literature from the canon. Ultimately, "The contributions that young adult literature can make to the teaching of subject matter are limited only by [our] own sensibilities, for the union of trade book [adolescent novel] and textbook seems to rest on firm theoretical underpinnings" (Brozo and Simpson 179).

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